

BC Housing is coordinating with your regional health authority and the Ministry of Health to monitor and respond to the current situation with COVID-19 (Coronavirus). We recognize that our homelessness and transitional housing service providers serve some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, many of whom have higher rates of health concerns and who may be at greater risk if exposed to the virus.

This information is primarily intended for those providers where clients share living space and meals, such as shelters, transition houses/safe homes, Single Room Occupancies (SROs), and supportive housing operators. We will work with our health partners to provide updated information regarding COVID-19 as the situation evolves in a timely and accessible manner.

PROVINCIAL UPDATE

BC Housing recognizes the unique challenges facing many homelessness service providers – especially shelters and transition houses – in preventing the spread of COVID-19 due to the building environment and communal living where people are living and eating together.

We are working with health authorities and municipalities to plan how to support those service providers who have limited or no space to help isolate those who may have been exposed to the virus.

The plans will be designed to meet the unique needs in each area. We will continue to keep you updated.

COVID-19 Testing Criteria (as of March 15)

Current guidelines for testing COVID-19 are as follows:

- Symptoms compatible with COVID-19:
 - Fever
 - Cough
 - Difficulty breathing
- **AND** have travelled within 14 days of symptom onset to an [affected area](#)
- **OR** have had close contact with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19
- **AND** no clear alternative diagnosis

Health authorities are requesting that Community Health Centres and Urgent Primary Care Centres focus on assessing patients who have higher risk exposures and have the symptoms above. Please monitor the Regional Health Authority COVID update pages for updates re. testing guidelines:

- [Vancouver Coastal Health](#)
- [Fraser Health](#)
- [Interior Health](#)
- [Island Health](#)
- [Northern Health](#)

PREPARE

The following have been developed to provide practical steps to help your organization prepare.

Have a Response Plan

- Monitor your local health authority website for updates on COVID-19.
- Identify a plan for employees or staff who might have a higher risk due to complex health conditions. Employees and/or volunteers at high risk for COVID-19 (i.e., seniors and those with underlying health conditions) should not be caring for clients who may be sick.
- Report suspected COVID-19 cases to your local health authority, as well as to your BC Housing representative.
- Develop a mitigation plan to help minimize the potential risk to employees. For example:
 - Use physical barriers to protect employees who will have interactions with clients with unknown infection status (e.g., check-in staff).
 - Install a sneeze guard at the check-in desk or place an additional table between employees and clients to increase the distance between them.
 - If employees are handling client belongings, they should use disposable gloves.
 - Any client with a cough or sneeze who is being transported in a car must be provided with – and wear – a mask or use a tissue to contain any particles.
- Plan to have extra supplies on hand in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak, including:
 - Soap
 - Alcohol-based hand sanitizers for employees who have no access to soap and water
 - Tissues
 - Disinfecting wipes
 - Trash baskets
 - Gloves
 - Disposable masks to use *for people who are sick*
 - Paper plates, disposable cups and utensils

We recognize the challenges that many service providers are having in accessing supplies. Please notify your BC Housing regional representative if you are having difficulty finding supplies.

For More Information

- [Information for Patients with Chronic Health Conditions](#) (BC Centre for Disease Control)
- [VCH Pandemic Response Planning Checklist for Homeless & Housing Service Providers](#)
- [CDC Interim Guidelines for Homeless Shelters](#)
- [WHO Formula for DIY Hand Sanitizer](#)

Promote Prevention Practices

- Encourage proper hand washing with soap and water. Post [hand washing](#) signage in the common areas.
- Encourage employees to use hand sanitizer when a sink and soap are unavailable.
- Follow good respiratory etiquette. Post [cough etiquette](#) and [STOP 2019 Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) poster](#) in common areas.
- Encourage employees to stay home if they are sick. If they have symptoms like coughing, shortness of breath, fever or sore throat, encourage them to call their primary care provider, local public health office or call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC).
- Post signs at entrances instructing visitors not to visit if they have symptoms of respiratory infection.

Plan for Employee Shortages

If you have not already developed plans for employee shortages, now is the time to consider the following:

- Develop clear guidelines for when employees and volunteers are expected to stay home and when they can return to work. Staff (and volunteers) may need to stay home when they are sick, caring for a sick household member, or caring for their children in the event of school/daycare dismissals. Employees should not be asked to provide medical notes during this time.
- Identify critical job functions and positions, and where possible plan for alternative coverage by cross-trained staff members.
- Implement a training plan for your employees on COVID-19 and risk prevention measures. This may help address employee concerns and help avoid additional employee shortages due to fear of exposure.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Communicate with employees and clients on prevention instructions and public health updates:

- Describe what actions you are taking to protect them.
- Answer questions and explain what they can do to protect themselves, fellow clients and employees.

PREVENT – STOP THE SPREAD

The primary focus is to prevent the introduction of COVID-19 and its spread throughout the shelter, transition house, SRO or supportive housing. The following operational considerations are designed to help minimize the spread of COVID-19.

The [BC Centre for Disease Control](#) (BCCDC) website is a good resource for information on the symptoms of COVID-19 and how the virus is spread.

Monitor

- Designate someone to monitor clients, employees and visitors for symptoms: fever, cough, difficulty breathing.

Screening and Intake Procedures

- **For those buildings that may have visitors**
 - Post signs at entrances instructing visitors not to visit if they have symptoms of respiratory infection.
 - Consider restricting visitors to essential personnel only, which should include health care staff (pharmacists, home support workers, ACT Teams, etc.).
 - Consider limiting access to shelter facilities to those currently staying at the shelter (rather than allowing drop-in access to services).
 - If someone is showing symptoms of COVID-19 when they arrive, such as coughing, shortness of breath, fever or sore throat:
 - Ask them to wear a mask or use a tissue (if a mask is not available) to prevent transmission to other people.
 - Try to keep them separated from other clients by six feet (approximately 2 metres).
 - Call the local public health office or call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC).
- **Implement hand washing protocols**
 - Remind people to wash their hands when:
 - They arrive and before they leave.
 - Before and after they work with a client.
 - Before and after eating, etc.

Social Distancing Recommendations

- **Temporary reconfigurations to allow for social distancing**
 - Sleeping arrangements foot to head, instead of head to head.
 - Maintain a minimum distance of 2 metres (6 ft) between individuals whenever possible.
 - For transition houses, avoid women sharing rooms, if possible.
- **Meals**
 - For those programs that offer shared meals, eliminate buffet-style eating.
 - Consider temporarily close dining rooms and communal eating spaces. Create temporary closure and protocol signage.
 - Consider using paper plates, disposable cups and utensils.

- For supportive housing, consider closing dining rooms and delivering meals to residents' rooms.
- If it's not possible to shut down communal dining spaces, consider staggering mealtimes or providing one full meal and meal supplements (bars, Ensure, sandwiches) that clients can take away, so clients don't travel to multiple agencies to eat.
- Discuss arrangements with your kitchen and/or food supplier to package individual meals.
- Run dishwashers at the highest temperature settings.
- **Harm reduction**
 - Ensure harm reduction supplies are available to eliminate the sharing of supplies for persons using substances (i.e., pipes, needles).
- **Educate clients about what they can do to help prevent the spread**
 - Ask clients to increase distance and refrain from touching, kissing, hugging, handshaking.
 - Encourage hand washing and proper cough etiquette.
 - For transition houses / safe homes, talk to clients about identifying a temporary caregiver for their children if they get sick.
 - Talk to [children about the virus and precautions](#) they can take.
 - Support clients with [managing stress and keeping calm](#)

Minimize unnecessary gatherings

- Limit gatherings to only those that are critical in nature and where social distance is possible (under five people in a large, well-ventilated space).

Entering Suites

- For supportive housing and second stage housing:
 - Minimize entry into client suites unless it is an emergency.
 - Wellness checks can still be done, but staff should stay in hallway.
 - Employees should wash their hands before and after visiting a suite to prevent the spread of viruses in order to protect the residents.

Transporting Clients

- Ask clients who may have a cough or sneeze to wear a mask when transporting them to appointments.

ENHANCED CLEANING PROTOCOLS

To minimize the risk of spreading the virus, we recommend prioritizing enhanced cleaning and disinfecting of common areas where people gather and high touchpoints (i.e., elevators, common amenity spaces, door handles, countertops, and bathroom surfaces) a minimum of three or more times a day. Cleaning floors, walls, and windows should be secondary at this time.

- To properly disinfect the common areas, follow the product directions. For most products, the proper procedure is to first clean the area with soap and water, then apply the disinfectant and let it sit in place for about 10 minutes before wiping it with a clean cloth. This is in addition to regular cleaning, which must continue to take place.
- For disinfection, any of the following should be effective:
 - Most common EPA-registered household disinfectants
 - Alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol
 - Diluted household bleach solution

More information on disinfectant products effective against COVID-19 is available on page 9 of the [2019 Novel Coronavirus: BC Public Health Guidelines for Schools and Child Care Programs](#).

Helpful tips:

- Follow any manufacturing instructions for the application and proper ventilation.
- Remember to check the product is not past its expiry date.
- Never mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser.
- Unexpired household bleach will be effective against coronaviruses when properly diluted.

ACT – SUPPORT PEOPLE WHO MIGHT HAVE COVID-19

People who are homeless may be more likely to have underlying or chronic health conditions. Some people with chronic health conditions have a higher risk of becoming severely ill if they have COVID-19. Additionally, elderly clients also have a higher risk of becoming severely ill if they have COVID-19.

If someone may have been exposed to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and is displaying symptoms (fever, a new cough or difficulty breathing), please:

- Contact local public health office or call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC). If the person has a health provider, contact them by phone.
- Ask the person to wear a mask to prevent transmission to other people; if a mask is not available, provide tissues for them to cover their mouth and nose.
- Ask the person to wash their hands with either:
 - Liquid soap and running water, and dry with paper towels; or
 - Alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- If it is not possible to [self-isolate](#):
 - Move the person to a separate area of the building or, if weather allows, to a sheltered place outdoors, where they are at least two metres (six feet) away from other clients and staff.

- Consider using privacy screens, if available.
- Contact your BC Housing representative to discuss options.
- If the client is in distress, call 9-1-1. Signs of distress include:
 - Shortness of breath, rapid breathing, or difficulty catching breath.
 - New/worsening chest pain.
 - Cyanosis (bluish discolouration of skin) or general blue discoloration.

Quarantine Considerations

Discuss the situation with BC Housing and your local health authority to develop a plan for this individual. In the meantime, if there is no room available for someone to self-isolate, here are some options to consider:

- Consider using privacy screens between beds.
- If possible, dedicate a washroom that is cleaned and disinfected after each use.
- Deliver meals whenever possible.
- Move the person to a separate area of the facility where they are at least two metres (six feet) away from other clients and staff.
- Check with BC Housing to see if a designated site or hotel/motel space is an option.
- Notify other facilities prior to transferring the client with acute respiratory symptoms to another facility for a higher level of care.

Management of Clients with Suspected or Confirmed COVID-19

For clients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and ***are not in distress*** consider the following. If they are in distress, call 9-1-1:

- Maintain separation from other clients and staff by 2 metres (6 feet).
- Ask them to wear or continue wearing a mask. If you do not have masks, provide tissues and ask them to cover their mouth and nose.
- Ask them to wash their hands before and after eating.
- Contact BC Housing to determine if a designated site or shelter for clients with fever or respiratory symptoms has been set up.
 - If a designated site or shelter has NOT been set up, consider designating a separate area in the existing site(s) for clients with such symptoms.
 - If moving the client to another site is NOT an option, beds or sleeping mattresses for clients with fever or cough should be spaced at least two metres (six feet) from other clients.
 - If possible, provide a designated washroom or toilet and sink/shower area.
 - If possible, serve food in a different area than other clients.



- Consider whether to increase cleaning of commonly-touched surfaces in the shelter.
- Be prepared to provide shelter on an on-going basis for the client until they are feeling improved and no longer have fever or cough. The health care provider may also advise on other steps that may help in the person’s recovery from COVID-19.
- Limit contact with staff and other clients as much as possible. Ensure anyone who touches the client or provides them with food, etc., washes their hands before and after.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check out the [BC Government Public Health Alerts](#) web page to access the latest updates on COVID-19.

Information Resources

Monitor BC Housing COVID-19 page for updates, including contingency resources in case of outbreak <https://www.bchousing.org/COVID-19>

Provincial / Federal	Local Health Authorities	BC Housing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BC Centre for Disease Control • HealthLink BC • Public Health Agency of Canada 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vancouver Coastal Health • Fraser Health • Interior Health • Island Health • Northern Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BC Housing COVID-19 • General inquires can be directed to communityrelations@bchousing.org

Key Contacts

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