

**To: Vancouver Fire Rescue Services**

Darrell Reid, Fire Chief  
Rob Renning, Deputy Fire Chief  
Raymond Bryant, Assistant Fire Chief

January 10, 2020

Dear Fire Chief Reid,

**RE: Heating Solutions at Oppenheimer Park Tent City**

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We write concerning the dire lack of heat sources at Oppenheimer Park Tent City.

During a meeting on December 9, 2019 with representatives from Vancouver Fire Rescue Services (VFRS), Vancouver Parks and Recreation, and Oppenheimer Tent City, Deputy Fire Chief Rob Renning indicated VFRS would identify and report back on a heating solution for Oppenheimer within three weeks' time. It has been over four weeks since that commitment was made, and Oppenheimer residents have yet to receive a response. **Can you please advise a heat source that is appropriate for residents of Oppenheimer Park Tent City?**

At this time, residents' health is severely compromised by a continued absence of in-tent heaters, communal warming tents, and other heating options. Earlier this week, residents told us that persistent cold and dampness has caused illness; exacerbated existing health conditions; and undermined their ability to rest, travel to and from the encampment, and perform daily activities.

The Coroners Service reports that between 2007 and 2016, cold exposure accounted for 4% of accidental deaths of homeless individuals.<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include deaths that took place in hospital or under the care of a physician. A person who contracted pneumonia while living on the streets and died after admission to a hospital, for instance, would not be accounted for.<sup>2</sup> We can assume then that this percentage is an understatement of the brutal health toll of cold weather on unsheltered people.

The urgent request for heat sources is not new. Residents have long been asking VFRS for in-tent heaters and communal warming tents to survive increasingly cold temperatures and continued rainfall.

These requests were stated during numerous in-person meetings at VANDU and Oppenheimer Park, as well as in correspondence you received on August 7, 2019 and August 15, 2019. On December 9, 2019, Pivot circulated a list of potential in-tent heating options. Pivot also requested VFRS's attendance back in Fall 2019

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/homeless.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Paige Zhang et al, "Cold-related injuries in a cohort of homeless adults" (2018) Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless 120. This study examined cold-related injury among a group of homeless individuals in Toronto and described frostbite, hypothermia, and other cold-related health effects. The study clearly demonstrates that homeless populations are at greater risk for cold-related morbidity in comparison to income- and gender-matched controls.

at two separate roundtable discussions with Pivot, tent city residents, public health experts, and the Chief Medical Health Officer to discuss fire safety in tent cities. VFRS did not respond to our invitations.

The collective aim of these initiatives was to proactively develop a strategy that would protect residents' health and safety well in advance of inevitable temperature drops; in other words, to safeguard against the inhumane conditions Oppenheimer residents now face some four months later.

We understand VFRS has made repeated reference to the City's "Emergency Weather Response" shelters and "Warming Centres" as a viable alternative to sleeping outdoors. These are intermittent, temperature-dependent solutions that do not provide bedding. EWRs open at or below "feels like" 0°C.<sup>3</sup> Warming Centers open at or below "feels like" -5°C.<sup>4</sup> There is no medical evidence supporting the stance that homeless people only need access to warmth at below these temperatures. In fact, expert opinion indicates that half or all homeless deaths from hypothermia occur when the air temperature is above freezing.<sup>5</sup>

Tent cities like the one in Oppenheimer Park are a critical and life-saving response to a state-driven housing crisis. That residents are being further penalized for this miscarriage through a denial of basic necessities such as heat is inconceivable and demonstrably risks the life, liberty, and security interests guaranteed under the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*.

We ask that you please respond immediately with a heating solution for Oppenheimer residents.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Shane  
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CC: **City of Vancouver**  
Mayor & Council  
Abi Bond, Managing Director – Homelessness Services & Affordable Housing Programs  
Sadhu Afochs Johnston, City Manager  
Paul Mochrie, Deputy City Manager

**BC Housing**  
Dominic Flanagan, Executive Director – Strategic Initiatives  
Stephanie Allen, Associate Vice-President – Strategic Business Operations and Performance  
Will Valenciano, Senior Manager – Coordinated Access and Assessment

**Vancouver Park Board**  
Camil Dumont, Board Chair – Commissioner  
Howard Normann, Director of Parks  
Linda Koehler, Community Recreation Supervisor

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.test.hsa-bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Extreme-Weather-Response-Resource-Guide-2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/winter-response-shelter-strategy.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Affidavit of Dr. Stephen Hwang, sworn January 4, 2029 in B.C. Supreme Court file no. S-175088. A copy can be provided upon request.