

Statement by Corey Ranger
Re: Encampment Health and Safety (COVID-19) BC Ministerial Order M128

May 2, 2020

I am writing as a nurse who has worked with the street community for seven years, to express my grave concern about the process that has unfolded since the BC Government's April 25th announcement about an enforcement order to clear three tent cities by noon on May 9th.

I currently work with around 200 homeless people. Many are sheltering outside at various locations in Victoria including at Topaz Park, along Pandora Avenue, outside Rock Bay Landing, at Beaconhill Park, and at Stadacona Park. I also work with homeless people who are provisionally sheltered in facilities (detox, hospital, etc.) or transitional housing such as the recently leased motels.

On April 29 I was asked to attend a committee intended to rapidly triage housing candidates from tent cities into temporary shelters that BC Housing is working on securing. Below is an email I sent to BC Housing in response to their request that I and other health and housing workers participate in the rapid decampment process currently underway in response to the public safety order. In it I set out my concerns. Peers and nurses have been openly expressing our concern to decision makers without being heard. I hope that by providing this statement you will see the impact your decisions have had and that you will change direction.

Sincerely,

Corey Ranger RN BN

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Corey Ranger** <cranger.rn@gmail.com>
Date: Thu, Apr 30, 2020 at 12:42 PM
Subject: Re: Encampment placement committee meetings
To: Lois Gabitous <lgabitous@bchousing.org>
Cc: Mike Glossop <michael.glossop@viha.ca>, morgan.boc@viha.ca <morgan.boc@viha.ca>, jconnolly (jconnolly@coolaid.org) <jconnolly@coolaid.org>, Christine O'Brien (cobrien@coolaid.org) <cobrien@coolaid.org>, Bernice Kamano <Bernice.Kamano@phs.ca>, Westmacott, Lauren P <Lauren.Westmacott@viha.ca>, Hartwig, Christine <Christine.Hartwig@viha.ca>, Sandie Mashon at Pacifica <SMashon@pacificahousing.ca>, Grantham, Kim SDPR:EX <Kim.Grantham@gov.bc.ca>, Johnston, Brent <Brent.Johnston@viha.ca>, LeahY@ourplacesociety.com <LeahY@ourplacesociety.com>, Louw, Kristin <Kristin.Louw@viha.ca>, Jeni Temple <Jeni.Temple@lookoutsociety.ca>, Evans, Jodie <Jodie.Evans@viha.ca>, carlie.patterson@viha.ca <carlie.patterson@viha.ca>

Good Afternoon,

Given your acknowledgement of this group's exceptional understanding of health and supports, I have to take this opportunity to express my tremendous concern in the current and planned process--where is our lived and living experience voice in this dialogue? Advocates have been saying for over a month that we haven't incorporated the voice of those impacted by our decisions nearly enough to warrant an informed strategy. We are all very good at echoing the statements of 'nothing about us without us' but once again are at risk of tokenism in our approach. The approach that was taken at SIC/courthouse was one that campers recall as traumatic and oppressive. To duplicate this process amidst the dual crises of overdose and COVID19 would be to create even further harms. Yesterday, a large group of police escorted a large group of workers putting up fencing around people. This is not an anti-oppressive lens. Nobody is opposed to housing unsheltered people during a pandemic, especially those who want to access those services. If it comes via enforcement, then will generate more harms than our current situation. The presence of fencing has already resulted in an exodus of people from Topaz to other unspecified locations.

First and foremost, we need to be strongly pushing back against the May 9th timelines and the public safety order. Enforcement being incorporated into the decamping process is another way of criminalizing people for their homelessness. There are many on Pandora and Topaz that do not want to access temporary hotel shelter and we should honour their right to shelter in place. When I ask organizers what will happen to people who choose to not leave, I am told "they don't have to go to hotels but they can't stay here". This sounds like it is being driven under the guise of perceived public safety issues, or more notably, people not wanting to see visible poverty in their backyard. If that weren't the case, we would see pushes to house vulnerable populations in other locations, like Rock Bay and Stadacona. Topaz park is not the same as the courthouse encampments; the courthouse encampments were a grassroots initiative whereas Topaz park is a state-run park where people were encouraged to move to. Now we are going to emphatically displace them again. According to PIVOT Legal Society "The right of unsheltered people to occupy public space in order to take care of their health and safety needs has been recognized in the courts". We still have no guarantee that people won't be evicted from hotels once they get in. I have seen firsthand the harms of housing someone and then evicting them shortly after. It fosters mistrust in an already tenuous relationship between service providers and service users.

Next, without rapid upscaling of safe supply we will see increased deaths in hotels. As someone who has responded to 28 overdoses in the park since the first tent was there, the risk is rising exponentially. After seven overdoses on Sunday, and verification from drug checking, it is clear we are dealing with way higher overdose risk and toxic drug supply. If we can't guarantee safe supply then we are merely isolating people even further. As a registered nurse, and public health professional, I am openly cautioning that hotels without safe supply is a death sentence to many.

If key decision-makers are willing to revisit timelines, use of enforcement, fencing, safe supply, and ensuring we have the appropriate supports in place prior to increasing their isolation and subsequent risk, then I would be happy to participate. If we are committed to repeating the mistakes of our past and ignoring public health tenements, then I wish you good luck.

Warm Regards,
Corey Ranger RN BN