

Statement by Justin Sawyer, Harm Reduction Counsellor, AVI Health and Community Services

Re: Encampment Health and Safety (COVID-19) BC Ministerial Order M128

May 3, 2020

I'm writing to convey the negative impacts of BC Ministerial Order M128, and to ask that you revoke this order or at the very least significantly extend the deadline. In order to protect and care for the people I support, I ask that the government remove the May 9th deadline, work with community agencies and service providers, and listen to what the community wants. Thus far the government hasn't contacted me for collaboration whatsoever. I hope they will listen to what I am saying in this statement.

I have been working with the street community for 6 years. In my current position as a Harm Reduction Counsellor I primarily work 1:1 with around 30 clients to provide emotional support and crisis/suicide intervention; facilitate referrals to temporary shelters/housing, detox, and substance use treatment services; assist with system navigation; advocate to resolve income assistance and PWD issues and to prevent eviction from shelters or housing; supply survival basics to the extent possible (e.g., limited food, water, harm reduction supplies and information); support people fleeing abusive relationships; and support people accessing safe drug supply. My clients live in a wide variety of locations including the Topaz Park tent city, Pandora tent city, other outside tenting locations (parks, alleys, sidewalks, etc), vehicles, emergency shelters, and transitional housing. Some of my clients are precariously sheltered through couch-surfing, or are currently in facilities such as hospital, detox, or jail but have no housing to return to.

Due to short staffing and urgent immediate needs for overdose prevention, I also do some hours at AVI's overdose prevention site, which provides services to many more people. Prior to COVID this overdose prevention site was located at AVI's downtown office and accessed by people living in a variety of locations, but with the COVID crisis has been relocated to Topaz Park and is accessed primarily by people living at that location.

At no time in this process has government engaged with my clients to ask them what housing and services are needed and to seek their input on how that should be arranged. The government, to my knowledge, has had no communication with people who are homeless about what their needs are or what care and safety looks like. The least that could be done is to listen to and organize with the Topaz/Pandora community of people living on the streets. Right now decisions are being made top-down without any understanding of how people are being impacted.

Impacts of the May 9 deadline

My clients describe an impending sense of doom and profound confusion about what is being done and why. Hope exists because they are hearing that people are advocating for positive action, but fear predominates because they have experienced a lot of disappointment in the past from housing organizations and police-facilitated relocation initiatives.

The fencing around and within the two tent cities, and heavy police presence, make people feel like they're being treated as if they were animals. It's creating physical and emotional disconnection between individuals because of the physical fencing and policing of areas and the fencing is blocking access to crosswalks, forcing those in the areas to cross dangerously. People are experiencing the situation as a version of ghettoization on the level of camps seen in POW situations or internment camp scenarios.

The fencing and enforcement regulations have created a situation where I can't find my clients reliably. People may be being relocated to a hotel room, or they've chosen, perhaps, to relocate to a different fenced-in zone, or they've fled completely in a bid to resist what they perceive as a threatening, untrustworthy, police-led scenario. I'm unable to support or advocate for clients without transparency or clarity in this process. Who is supposed to fill out the intake and assessment forms, who qualifies, where are they being placed, who are my contacts with BC Housing and at the hotels? None of this is clear to me and this is the information which forms the basis of my ability to support and help make sure people are safe. Due to this lack of clarity, communication, and safety planning I have been unable to properly support people fleeing from domestic abuse who are staying in the temporary housing/hotels. I have been unable to effectively communicate with clients and offer support when there is threat of eviction or barring, resulting in people I know and care about being put back on the street again.

At this point, if the hundreds of people still living at Topaz and Pandora aren't moved into hotel rooms by May 9th, the terms of the order suggest they will be forcibly removed. The goal of the Victoria Police Department and BC Housing seems to be to return those areas to "normal", where laws and bylaws about tenting and occupation will apply and be enforced.

This is causing massive anxiety for my clients, and for those who care about them. Nobody knows what they'll do if they don't get housed in the next 6 days. Some people talk about leaving town, but realistically people don't have anywhere else to go and the situation is no better in any other location. Many will have to continue tenting under the stress of displacement.

The May 9 deadline is hard too on my clients who are homeless and living in areas other than Topaz and Pandora. They tell me there is a general increase in police presence and they are afraid that they will be left behind and not get housing.

A substantial extension of the May 9 deadline would be positive because it would create time to receive feedback and participate in a dialogue with clients and other service providers and with the government. This dialogue is necessary to make our work safer and help meet the needs of others.

The intake process needs to be changed

Right now the situation for my clients is that government has failed to keep the promise that BC Housing, non-profit and health authority staff, provincial community-integration specialists and municipal staff would work directly with people at Topaz / Pandora to transition them into safer accommodations. BC Housing shows up sporadically and then disappears without engaging meaningfully or consistently with people living at the tent cities.

As someone who's been involved in doing motel/hotel intake, the intake process has been really frustrating. BC Housing gave us forms and told us that if we don't help people complete them they won't get on the list for housing, but there's been no discussion about how the whole triage process works. I can't inform people about how to properly fill the forms out without an inside perspective of how filling the form informs the administration at BC Housing. I don't know what happens to the paperwork after I've sent/submitted it, at that point I'm cut out of the process and no longer sure if any of the people who I've helped complete intake forms are or will be accepted. I don't know if the paperwork is even being looked at or if it's just sitting on someone's desk in a giant stack. I'm unaware of whether or not people will be filtered into various categories of need after having filled out the paperwork. And it is insulting that with no discussion we were expected to facilitate this process for BC Housing on top of already doing crisis support, overdose prevention response, and other emergency situations.

There is no meaningful assessment of people's substance use needs as part of BC Housing's intake process. People who I work with who use illicit drugs were concerned about putting that on the BC Housing intake form. There is a very real fear of stigma and discrimination. These fears are well-founded as I've seen that motel and hotel staff are not being trained or supported and they have power to evict my clients. I've also seen that people who were honest about their substance use were considered to have needs that were "too intense" to reflect the current limited resources and people who were considered more "socially acceptable" were prioritized by BC Housing for initial placements.

People are currently being placed in unsafe situations

Because the intake process has been ineffective in assessing safety needs and on-site service planning isn't realistic, the accommodations people have been put in are not safe. People are being housed with their past and present abusers without any supports being provided to assist them. With the increase number of overdoses and overdose related deaths in recent weeks as the result of a more unpredictable and toxic drug supply, the lack of planning regarding onsite harm reduction services means that people will very likely be harmed or die.

Many people do want to be moved inside into housing that meets their needs. But for some people, living in tent cities feels safer than temporary motel/hotel spaces. People I have spoken to who wish to continue tenting say that it allows them access to community. It's unclear what resources will be available in hotel situations or how much people will be moved around as these are all temporary options. Going through many transitions with uncertainty is hard, whereas familiarity creates a sense of safety. Also, being stuck in a hotel room doesn't give you options if you need to leave. People have a right to not be moved into a hotel room with their abuser. Some relationships demand other options and those needs must be taken into account.

The reality is that tent cities not only feel safer, but are potentially safer for some people. It's been a struggle at Topaz and Pandora, with the police presence and lack of services, but communities do come together and care for one another in a tent city scenario. AVI has been able to work with other agencies to provide overdose prevention resources at these sites so far. It is unclear what we will be able to do for those moved into motels/hotels.

In the April 25th press conference, sexual assault at tent cities was stated as the rationale for implementing the order to clear the tent cities. Government said it would address sexual violence and protect survivors. I have not seen any positive measures taken to address sexual violence. Rather, I have seen further harm done to survivors of sexual violence throughout this process. Everything needs to slow down so that people can be properly supported. This would require collaboration with individuals and service providers for a plan to be put in place so that people's safety and well-being are considered.

Before COVID, some of my clients were youth. But since the pandemic started I don't know where they are. I worry about them and don't know how this enforcement order is impacting them or whether anything is being done to meet their needs. I know that involving the Ministry of Children and Family Development is not going to make housing or services accessible to youth who experienced trauma as a result of MCFD breaking up their family, taking them away from caregivers, or putting them in unsafe group homes or foster care situations.

Impacts of a badly planned rapid relocation

It's been hard to keep track of what's happening to my clients but I'm only aware of five people being placed at motels/hotels thus far. For all of these people the transition has been abrupt and disruptive. Specific safety concerns or people's health have not been taken into consideration. People that I have supported did not have basics they needed when they moved in, it was only through the efforts of frontline outreach workers in community agencies, and volunteers securing donations, that we were able to fill some of the gaps. There is still a distinct lack of in-house support being provided for people who were placed earlier.

None of the promises government made about what would be provided at the hotels/motels are being kept. Onsite health care, harm reduction services, overdose prevention, 24/7 housing agency workers, are often missing for people who have already been moved in. People do not always have their own living space, and access to laundry is sporadic. Not everyone is getting enough food. There's minimal resourced peer support, no counselling services, and it has been hard for clients to contact family, friends, and service providers from their hotel rooms. Cultural safety isn't part of the service model or planning.

Of the people who I have supported who have been placed in motels/hotels, several have had to leave under traumatic circumstances. Their health and overall situation is worse now than before they were placed in motels/hotels.

One person was barred for defending himself when attacked by another person. My client ended up in the hospital. He accessed supports and attempted to go into detox in order to remain in his hotel room. The hotel told us that this wasn't sufficient. He is now trying to stay in another shelter but the process of being barred has further demoralized him so his substance use has gone up. Due to this he has been denied at the shelter. He is preparing to go back to the streets.

Another person had to flee their abusive partner. They contacted me for help and I began calling and emailing BC Housing, the hotel, and many other services in town attempting to find them

another room they could go to. I was unable to reach anyone through BC Housing, and the housing support worker at the hotel seemed unsure if they would be able to assist in moving them. The individual ended up sleeping in a storage locker for several days, then returning to their abusive partner feeling there was no other alternative. They did not know the housing support worker nor feel safe talking to them about what was happening.

There has been a threat of eviction looming over another individual, whom I have been desperately trying to support and keep housed.

I am extremely concerned about risk of overdose deaths for people living in sites that don't have proper support services. I have already had people I know and work with die since COVID started, and the fear that there will be an increase once people are alone and unsupported in hotel rooms is very real. All of the sites where people are being placed need harm reduction services and resources, including overdose prevention sites and peer workers to help facilitate.

People who I support want access to prescribed alternatives to street drugs. Access to a predictable drug supply would greatly help reduce overdose risk. But there is limited access and there are many barriers, including 1) lack of doctors 2) lack of information 3) lack of healthcare planning, so as to get medication to people 4) overwhelming workloads put on the few doctors and nurses providing these services and 5) risk-averse attitude of the health authority. These are problems that can't be fixed by BC Housing, but the push to rapidly house people before this is addressed is creating more chaos and risk.

Being a frontline worker in this situation

This entire situation is most impacting my clients, they are the people who I work for and who we all should be accountable to. But the government's actions, especially the May 9 deadline, also creates a great deal of concern and stress among me and my coworkers. It's a feeling of powerlessness, both for the people we support and for ourselves and each other. We have already because of COVID had to constantly adapt and change. Our services are being reconfigured every week and our work hours constantly changing.

There has been no clear communication about what our jobs will be after May 9, though there have been some talks about possible hotel locations where we might do outreach. There has been no clear communication about what our roles will be, or how harm reduction or overdose prevention factor into the plan to move people into hotel rooms. This situation is exhausting. It doesn't have to be this hard, if government would actually work with us on a plan.

No clear planning or communication makes it impossible for essential workers in this field to organize our lives around a plan of action. As far as people who will supposedly move into these rooms, there is a lot of confusion and fear that go along with pre-existing safety concerns resulting from failures in the system as it has been implemented so far. The difficulty of the situation as it stands and the lack of communication creates a sense of dread among myself and my coworkers.

I hope that this statement will be taken seriously and that the government will shift its approach.