

**Statement by Nicholas Olson, Outreach / overdose prevention and response worker
Re: Encampment Health and Safety (COVID-19) BC Ministerial Order M128**

May 2, 2020

I'm writing to convey the negative impacts of BC Ministerial Order M128 and ask that you rescind the order or, at the very least, substantially extend the timeframe.

I have been working with homeless people for 8 years and in my current job I provide harm reduction services to hundreds of people, with 1:1 close support relationships for around 30 individuals. The people who I support live outside at various locations, including several hundred at Topaz Park tent city and Pandora tent city, with additional clients at other outside locations and at emergency shelters including motels.

At the two tent cities at Topaz/Pandora, which have been ordered to be cleared by May 9, I do harm reduction outreach and support as a staff member of a local agency. My work includes distributing harm reduction supplies, operating overdose prevention sites, updating people about available services, attempting to connect people with prescribed alternatives to street drugs (safe supply) and housing options, referrals to other organizations / support workers / programs, advocacy, crisis intervention, and emotional support. I also have been working outside my paid hours because the combined impacts of the COVID and overdose crises are so intense right now and people need more support than the chronically underfunded harm reduction agencies can provide. I am volunteering with a local organization to do outreach and delivery of survival supplies to homeless people at multiple locations.

When the COVID public health emergency was declared and shelters started to close or reduce their spaces, people who were already homeless abruptly found themselves living outside. People were first directed to multiple parks in the city, then only to Topaz Park (including in some instances people being directed there by police even after Topaz was at capacity), and now to motels. None of this involved any consultation with those experiencing displacement and homelessness. The people who I support have never been asked by government what kind of housing or services they want and how that should be set up.

The impacts of the May 9 deadline to clear the camps

We are only a week away from the May 9 deadline to clear Topaz and Pandora, and there is high anxiety and uncertainty. Several people who I support have said they think it impossible to get everyone indoors by that date, and expressed concern about what will happen if people are still outside then. For many others, the May 9 deadline is not their main concern either because they have to prioritize their safety and survival which hasn't allowed them to consider the implications of this date, or in some cases because they haven't been given information by BC Housing so they don't really know what the situation is.

At this point nobody knows what will happen to anyone who isn't moved inside by May 9. There aren't that many other spaces with bathrooms where people can camp, and none are near food services or showers. I've heard people with very high stress and anxiety asking where they are going to go after May 9, and how they will find out about the status of their hotel application if they can't stay at the tent cities. Living outside and with drop-in services closed to COVID, even people who have phones (and many don't) don't have a reliable way to charge their phones. Some people are talking about going back to alleys or other parks. Others discussed the possibility of going up-island to try to camp somewhere else, but they aren't sure how to get there.

The May 9 deadline also means that people are being put in situations that are unsafe. There are significant safety risks at hotels regarding overdose, due to the isolated nature of hotel rooms and lack of harm reduction and peer support on site. People have reported that rooms have security/privacy latches on the insides of the hotel room doors, which can only be opened from the inside, and that some of these latches are loose and close accidentally. The hotel is not willing to remove these, making it a serious hazard in responding to overdose or other emergencies. Hotels are not fully staffed yet, and many hours, especially overnight, there are still no housing agency staff let alone support workers. Staff are enforcing strict cleaning measures that require tenants to keep their rooms extremely tidy upon risk of eviction, however are not supporting people who need assistance in maintaining room cleanliness. Realistically, the lack of community and splitting up of loved ones means people will not spend time isolating in hotels and risk using their rooms to host others, thereby risking their placement and also limiting their ability to physically distance.

BC Housing doesn't have things lined up to properly shelter people and can't get that in place by May 9. They don't have enough rooms for everyone at Topaz Park and Pandora, so to cram in as many people as possible by May 9, some people are being put in rooms together rather than people having their own living space. Government promised that a housing agency worker would be onsite 24/7 but that isn't happening yet. People aren't always getting enough food or clothing, laundry and health care are sometimes non-existent, harm reduction and overdose prevention services aren't in place yet. Safe storage for belongings was promised but isn't yet consistently happening. People are not able to bring their bicycles into the building, in many cases their only form of transportation, and bicycle storage options have not been offered. At one site computer access has been promised so people can access information and talk with loved ones, but it's insufficient and computer time is not being distributed fairly or evenly leading to resident conflict.

As a harm reduction worker and overdose response worker, I feel highly stressed and concerned about trying to get people set up with safe supply before they are moved indoors or displaced elsewhere, especially when access to safe supply has been restricted significantly and I haven't heard of anyone getting set up with safe supply for several weeks. I don't know what ways I'll have to contact, support, and do outreach once people are displaced or put into indoor hotel situations with no-guest policies. My job has constantly been changing since COVID

started and I am uncertain about my job security. The looming May 9 deadline most impacts people living outside but it is also causing me a lot of stress and anxiety.

Right now I'm supporting around 50 people who are living outside in locations other than Topaz/Pandora. These people are also impacted by the May 9 deadline and the way this sheltering plan is working in general. People are upset they can't even apply to be on the motel/hotel waitlist. People are concerned about their access to food, washrooms, showers, and other services. There are concerns about what will happen to their camps before, during, and after May 9.

While the most helpful thing to do would be to remove the enforcement order altogether to give time to find out what people want and need, and set up housing and services appropriately, at the very least a significant extension to the May 9 deadline would make a big difference. It would mean reduced stress caused by the current impossibly tight deadline and fears of police enforcement and criminalization. An extension would mean that people would be able to be placed in housing/hotels that are safe and appropriate for their situations, that people would be more likely able to be connected with safe supply, that adequate supports and services would be in place at the hotels once people moved in, that plans around evictions or room changes/transfers would be in place, and that people who cannot move into hotels are able to find workable alternatives.

Intake process needs to change

The reality is that BC Housing can't even do all the intakes by May 9 let alone get everyone placed by that date. Of the five days I have worked at Topaz since the evacuation order was announced, three of the days they were no longer doing intakes for people transitioning to hotels. It's unclear who is doing intakes, when they are doing them, and where to find them when Topaz campers ask. One day BC Housing had one person at Topaz doing intakes, the next day they had one person who ran out of intake forms, and then a group of 3-5 workers from PHS and BC Housing on site for approximately an hour. Many camp residents have not yet gone through any kind of intake.

I have found the intake process to be largely ineffective, lacking communication and coordination. Many people at Topaz have not filled out an application, others have filled it out several times because of confusion about the different between BC Housing application forms, Island Health assessment forms, the GVCEH (managing Topaz) camp census, and BC Housing application forms that were filled out prior to the evacuation order (BC Housing changed the form after the evacuation order).

Also camp residents have expressed serious issue with the uncertainties of whether they would be placed after filling in an intake form, and how to find that information out. One intake process that I witnessed required the applicant to have a working phone number which was difficult to obtain. It's not realistic to expect that everyone have a phone especially when

there's no way to charge phones when you're living outside and libraries and other spaces where people used to be able to do that are all closed because of COVID.

Placements aren't working

Already 10-15 people who I support 1:1 have been moved to motels and overall that hasn't gone well. The May 9 deadline is making all of this happen in an even more haphazard, abrupt, and chaotic way. For example, at around 7pm one person got confirmation that they have a room and needed to get there before the end of the night otherwise the room would be given away. Upon calling the hotel we learned they could not check in after 8pm when BC Housing workers (the hotel staff said 'nurses') had left for the night. People have felt rushed to ensure their place isn't given up, but unsupported in how best to get there.

The government promised in their announcement that street families would be kept together but my experience is that people's family, health, and safety needs have either been neglected at intake time, or not given adequate priority when placed into housing. One elderly person was housed in a hotel, however their partner, also elderly, was not housed with them for over a week despite explicitly listing their relationship on the intake form, and only after significant advocacy and a lot of work tracking her down on Pandora and Topaz.

Just like housed people, homeless people's relationship situations can be complicated and this isn't being taken into account either. One person who I supported was moved into a hotel with their sibling. After just a couple days this placement became unworkable, and the person I supported ended up spending several nights unsheltered again until we could advocate for a new arrangement. There was also a situation of a person being placed in the same hotel on the same floor as their domestic abuser and support workers on-site were unwilling to ameliorate the situation. Tenants are reporting a strict "one warning rule" that can see them evicted for smoking or guests, and the potential of being evicted for room untidiness after several warnings.

Fences need to come down

The fencing is not helping the situation. People feel that the fences are encroaching on their personal space and feel uncomfortable with police and fence / demolition crews hovering around waiting to fence off certain areas when people leave. This is creating a siege mentality at the parks. People are scared that if they leave to access services that aren't available onsite, or even to go for a walk like a housed person could, that if they come back their tent will be gone and their site considered abandoned.

The fences are also getting in the way of people who are newly homeless, or becoming homeless again, having safer shelter. One person who was living at Topaz went to Detox before the April 25th announcement was made. Before that time they had already filled in the BC Housing application for earlier spaces. When the May 9th deadline was announced, staff at Detox told this person to leave and go back to Topaz otherwise there might not be an

opportunity to get a motel room. But because the camp was already being fenced off and no “re-camping” allowed, they were not allowed into the site at Topaz and became unsheltered again. In the meantime the Detox space was filled by someone else on the waitlist for that service so they couldn’t get back in there.

Another person gave up their tent upon being told they had been accepted at a hotel. He arrived after dragging all his belongings to the hotel on his own (no moving company as promised). But upon arrival at that hotel, housing agency/hotel staff demanded to look through everything. Staff wouldn’t allow him to keep certain items and said he had more than the allowed 2 bins. Storage wasn’t offered as an option so he was told he’d have to discard many of his personal belongings. He was not willing to throw away his things and after an argument ensued was told he was not allowed to stay at the hotel any longer. When he returned to Topaz his tent was gone and the area was already fenced in, so he was left wandering the streets for several nights as he no longer had a tent to sleep in. Now he is staying in a tent structure with several other people, making physical distancing impossible.

Issues for people who use illicit drugs

I’m a harm reduction worker, so 95% of people who I support have told me they use illicit drugs. Because of stigma, shame, and discrimination against people who use drugs, people may not be telling some random stranger from BC Housing who’s doing intake what their substance use is, but the reality is that every housing site needs to address this. In many cases the lack of clarity about the substance use policies at the hotels is causing people to hide their substance use during their intake and putting them at significant risk of overdose. I’m extremely concerned that without safe supply, harm reduction workers, peer workers, or overdose prevention sites, and with the increasingly toxic drug supply, people are at significant risk of overdose. I feel tent cities are safer than hotels in regards to overdose because of the communities built within the encampments, and the prevalence of support workers or peers with access to naloxone.

People who I support very much want access to safe supply, but thus far few people can get it. Barriers include not having a GP, the GP refusing to prescribe safe supply, inaccessibility of doctors in general (especially those prescribing safe supply), inability to connect with street nurse who can connect them with doctor, limited spaces in managed alcohol programs, outreach workers untrained on how best to support and advocate in accessing the safer supply program, inaccessibility of the safer supply program to the street community, and previous trauma experienced through the medical system.

All sites need safe supply, ideally run by peer workers and harm reduction workers. If that’s not possible, then there needs to be nurses and doctors on site to be able to ensure people have access to safe supply upon their first day of staying at hotel. This is imperative. Overdose prevention rooms/sites are also key.

What government should do

First and foremost government needs to actually consult with people living outside about how to set things up. The kinds of sheltering options available right now don't meet everyone's needs. People have expressed concern about lack of community in hotel settings and therefore lack of safety. There are concerns about the increased likelihood of contracting COVID-19 indoors, as people know that COVID outbreaks has been happening in shelters, prisons, and care homes. People are concerned about a possible lack of harm reduction supports once inside, including peer-based overdose prevention and support which is available 24/7 at the camps. There are concerns about curfews, surveillance, privacy, and unknown rules of hotel or indoor living situations. People are worried about being placed in hotels and don't want to leave partners, friends, or other loved ones outside, which puts them at risk of breaking guest rules.

People shouldn't be punished for this bad process. Those who want it and are ready to go right now should have rapid access to motels/hotels, not have their placement grind to a halt. But if the existing inside sheltering options don't work for people then they must be allowed to shelter in place where they feel safest – including Topaz or Pandora – without the threat of a looming deadline for enforcement. There must be timely and adequate assessment of needs to ensure they are moved into a situation that is safe and appropriate for their situation. People who say they need support services on-site to be safe should not be moved until real 'wraparound' services are put in place, with those services as requested and determined by the people who will be living there. This needs to be made available to everyone who is homeless, not just people at Topaz/Pandora.

Access to safe prescription alternatives to street drugs (aka "safe supply") is a huge issue as the current street drug supply is highly unpredictable and often cut with multiple agents including fentanyl, benzodiazepines, and synthetic cannabinoids. Overdose prevention in these circumstances is not just a matter of giving people naloxone kits and hoping for the best. At tent cities peer witnessing is much easier to do than when people are behind locked doors and being encouraged to self-isolate, and prohibited from having guests. People need to be connected to safe supply in a way that works for them and can be easily adjusted going forward. Such a safe supply system must be done without the barrier of accessing an exclusive list of prescribers or overly restrictive pharmacy guidelines.

I and other outreach workers have been working in incredibly difficult conditions trying to keep people safe, with long hours, constantly changing conditions, and supporting people who are being treated really badly. But at no point has government consulted with me or collaborated with me in any of their planning. It's extremely frustrating and exhausting that frontline workers and people who are displaced and experiencing homelessness were not consulted in this process. I hope that the government changes its approach by rescinding the order to clear the camps by May 9, and engaging in a process that is more respectful and that actually has a hope of meeting people's needs.