

March 30, 2020

Re: COVID-19 planning to support underserved (homeless) populations

Dear Local Government Leader,

This letter is in follow up to information provided from the Provincial Regional Emergency Operations Centre to Municipal Emergency Operations Centres on Friday as well as Island Health's phone calls to local governments last week.

The COVID-19 situation is changing quickly and strategies are evolving to keep people safe in communities. Collaborative work is already underway in some communities to support underserved, homeless and marginally housed individuals. The purpose of this letter is to accelerate this work across all communities to reduce the risk of transmission within underserved populations, and to ensure the population has access to the services and supports they require.

While housing and sheltering-in-place is the preferred approach, this is a significant challenge for those who are homeless and/or staying in shelters. In these situations, the immediate considerations for individuals who are homeless need to focus on disease transmission principles: social distancing, hygiene, handwashing, respiratory etiquette, and isolation of those with respiratory symptoms.

The Province has suspended local states of emergency specific to the COVID-19 pandemic that may have been implemented in the Vancouver Island region. Municipal councils have been provided the ability to hold more flexible meetings to expedite decisions. Such meetings may include coordinating with BC Housing and Island Health to explore the potential use of local publicly owned facilities, like community centres, for self-isolation, testing, medical care, warehousing and distribution.

Local governments can support this by putting forward community facilities for shelter overflow such as closed recreation centres or libraries, or, as a last resort, encouraging camping in designated areas and enabling isolation within these areas through adequate spacing to discourage high density encampments. Access to toilets and handwashing facilities can be provided through portable set ups or by municipal facilities.

It is recognized the approach to local planning will vary accordingly to local population needs.

Areas where Island Health is able to provide support and assistance for the underserved population include:

- access to credible, current sources of information (see below);
- infection prevention and control;
- screening and testing in alignment with provincial criteria and priorities;
- disease surveillance and monitoring; and,
- provision of health care services, including harm reduction, mental health and substance use services and primary care (as available/appropriate).

Through our Medical Health Officers, Environmental Health Officers, Public Health and Mental Health and Substance Use Services, Island Health is partnering with BC Housing to explore non-camping solutions to shelter, and to better support isolation of individuals who may have been exposed to COVID-19, or who are positive with the disease.

Island Health is pleased to support local governments' planning. Local staff have been identified to act as contacts and liaisons for local governments and to provide support in developing plans in partnership with BC housing, public health and others to support underserved populations.

| Name | Community | Vulnerable Populations Health Contact Information |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Jess McConnell | Comox and Campbell River | Jess.mcconnell@viha.ca |
| Mary Morrison | Victoria | Mary.morrison2@viha.ca |
| Amanda Lemon Stephanie McCune | Nanaimo | Amanda.lemon@viha.ca Stephanie.McCune@viha.ca |
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| Krys Sciberras | West Coast Tofino | Krys.sciberras@viha.ca |
| Leanne Komm | Nanaimo | Leanne.komm@viha.ca |
| Kelly Reid | Southern Gulf Islands and Victoria | Kelly.reid@viha.ca |
| Lisa Murphy | Oceanside and West Coast | Lisa.murphy@viha.ca |
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Thank you for your commitment and partnership as we respond to COVID-19.

Finally, we recognize this is a challenging time for everyone. As such, we wanted to share some resources that you might find valuable. We have included these at the end of this letter.

Best Regards,



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Chief Medical Health Officer, Island Health



Keva Glynn, Executive Director
Mental Health Substance Use,
Child Youth Family, Public Health and
Priority Populations, Island Health

Recommended Resources:

- Government of Canada resource for planning for underserved/homeless populations: [“Guidance for providers of services for people experiencing homelessness \(in the context of COVID-19” \(www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/homelessness.html\)](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/homelessness.html).
- Joint City of Victoria, Coalition to End Homelessness, Island Health and BC Housing initial plan to support COVID 19 response for the City’s underserved population: <https://victoriahomelessness.ca/covid19-responseplan>. This resource could be applicable with adaptations to meet the unique needs of other communities in the Vancouver Island region.

BC Centre for Disease Control: www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19

- “4 Key Ways Local Governments and Indigenous Communities can Prepare for COVID 19” (www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/COVID-19-4-Key-Ways-to-Prepare.pdf)
- Information related to People who are Unsheltered: (www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/vulnerable-populations/people-who-are-unsheltered)
- Information related to People who use Substances: (<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/vulnerable-populations/people-who-use-substances>)
- Information for People with Chronic Conditions: (<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/vulnerable-populations/people-with-chronic-conditions>)

Public Health Agency of Canada: www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html

- “Community-based measures to mitigate the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Canada” (www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/public-health-measures-mitigate-covid-19.html#cbm)