

Briefing note: Extreme weather response in the Capital Region

June 19, 2026

Context and history

BC has been legally required to provide additional shelter to people living homeless during periods of extremely weather since 2009, when the Assistance to Shelter Act became law.

The creation of the act was prompted by a tragic incident in December 2008, when a homeless woman named Tracy burned to death in a downtown Vancouver alley after using a candle to try and keep herself warm.

Her death followed another similar incident at the start of 2008, when Darrell Mickasko was living homeless and burned to death after a candle accidentally ignited his tarp during a winter freeze.

Those deaths led to public pressure on the province that culminated in the passing of the act in late 2009. The act establishes processes for communities to put together their own Extreme Weather Response (EWR) plans that will be funded by the province, and grants local police and RCMP the authority and responsibility of transporting people to emergency shelters during periods of extreme weather if police conclude their life is at risk.

Homelessness has increased significantly in the 17 years since the Assistance to Shelter Act was created. Deaths among people living homeless have also grown, to the point that it's hard to imagine a time when two deaths were enough to bring about a new law.

Deaths of people living homeless tripled in BC between 2020 and 2024 (most recent figures), with 507 people dying in 2024. That year, more people died while homeless in the Island Health region than anywhere else in BC. This health region accounts for 15 per cent of BC's population, but 25 per cent of the deaths of people living homeless.

BC Housing has overall responsibility for EWR and is the primary funder. The agency once led every EWR callout, but since the pandemic, has relied on communities to enact and manage their own responses. In this region, that role is filled by Victoria Fire Department, which hires a community coordinator every year for the seasonal task of opening more shelter for people living homeless over the fall/winter.

The Assistance to Shelter Act lays out dates and details for EWR. In the absence of a community plan, the act establishes that a temperature of -4 C or lower is the point when EWR kicks in, though weather warnings of wind, snow, rain etc in addition to cold temperatures are also taken into account.

Most BC communities have developed their own plans that are approved year to year by BC Housing. In the City of Victoria, the trigger point for the 2025-26 plan was 0 C., or “feels like zero” when wind, rain, snow or sleet were also expected.

The temperatures set in a community plan (or by default, the act) determine when a Level 1 response is required – the opening of a designated number of emergency shelter mats. In Victoria, that’s 30 mats at the Salvation Army site.

In the event that all mats are full at a time when temperatures are 0 C or “feel like 0,” a Level 2 response kicks in and allows for the provision of warming tents, warming buses, or the opening of community centres if that’s what the community plan calls for. This Level 2 response is not funded by BC Housing, but by the Ministry of Emergency Response and Climate Readiness.

The EWR “season” is set within the act and does not change from community to community. EWR can only be invoked from Oct. 15 through April 15 in any given year, during the hours of 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. All plans are valid for only one season and must be resubmitted to BC Housing every fall.

The temporary nature of the program means that all staff hired and trained to manage and operate a particular winter’s EWR response in a community will be laid off every spring.

How a community EWR plan is developed

Communities wanting to develop their own EWR plans are expected to bring together a local committee, typically with representation from various community organizations, the police department, the fire department, municipal government, etc.

In Victoria, the overarching responsibility for EWR rests with the fire department, which puts out a call to local organizations around August or September every year to develop the plan for the coming winter. The fire department reaches out to everyone from the previous season and emphasizes that any community organization interested in being part of the conversation is welcome to participate. Each winter’s plan is then sent to BC Housing for approval.

Locally, the committee has set temperature recommendations using Island Health’s own emergency management group. The current criteria of 0 C or “feels like 0” is based on conditions known to be health risks for anyone unsheltered outside.

Unfortunately, the emergency management group currently has no research into the health impact of extremely heavy rain/wind in the fall and winter months, when temperatures could be well above 0 C. but the effect of the wind/rain still puts people’s health in jeopardy. The fire department notes that any changes to the EWR plan to add in heavy winds or rain will still need

to be tied to some kind of temperature trigger, so that winds/rain in warmer months aren't resulting in EWR being invoked.

Under the Assistance to Shelter Act, police have the responsibility in periods when an EWR is in force of assessing whether anyone they see outside is at risk of "suffering physical harm or is at risk of suffering physical harm because of the extreme weather conditions." If so, police must at a minimum encourage the person to seek shelter, or transport them there, presuming there are spaces available.

Police do have the authority to take someone to shelter against their will. However, Vancouver Police established in the first year of this act that they would not be forcing anyone to go to a shelter, but would try "minimal non-forceful touching" to encourage people. Once at the shelter, a person has final say over whether to go in.

If all emergency mats and shelter space is full on a night when EWR is in force, then two warming tents become available in Victoria, and there is a warming bus as well if there is still insufficient beds for demand. Were demand to ever be greater than could be accommodated even then, Victoria Fire Department would be notified to find more shelter for that night.

Process for invoking the protocol

The EWR community coordinator for the last two years in Victoria has been the Salvation Army. They have the responsibility for notifying organizations that EWR has been invoked, and the process is outlined below.

Once it's known that night-time temperatures are likely to hit the "feels like 0" mark, the coordinator sends out an email to all participating organizations of a Level 1 response. Victoria Fire Department also sends out a note telling organizations to notify the department if their shelter beds are full so that Level 2 services - warming tents/bus – can kick in.

As noted earlier, BC Housing covers the cost of a Level 1 response, but the Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness covers the cost of Level 2. They will only provide this funding in the event of both a hazard (cold weather) and a gap (all existing shelter beds are full).

It was relatively rare in years past to see all shelter beds full in the city. In the event that a Level 1 alert did have to be called, the 30 emergency mats at Salvation Army and 15 more at Rock Bay Landing were generally sufficient to meet additional needs. After the pandemic, a shortage of shelter beds emerged as a growing concern, and the need for a Level 2 response became more common.

The fire department tested the opening of community centres initially as a Level 2 response. But that required arranging transport to those centres and preparing temporary staff/volunteers at those centres to work with a population they weren't used to.

In the 2024-25 season, the fire department replaced the use of community centres with warming tents/bus under contract with two street-serving non-profits: Solid Outreach, which operated a warming tent on Mason Street; and Lookout Housing and Health Society, which operated one at the foot of Johnson Street.

The warming tents bring services close to the areas where the majority of people live homeless, but must be set up and torn down every night by the fire department, at significant cost.

This past winter, Rock Bay was no longer participating with extra mats in the Level 1 response, and the only designated emergency mats were the 30 mats at the Salvation Army, and another 20 emergency mats at Broad View United Church. But the church is 5 kilometres away from the downtown core where most people living homeless are located.

In the winter of 2023-24, Solid Outreach began operating a seasonal shelter in the lower hall of St. John the Divine, which provided an additional 30 mats for the period of October to April. This seasonal shelter was extended to a year-round shelter at the end of its first season based on high use and need for more low-barrier shelter spaces. The shelter is an arrangement between Solid, St. John the Divine and BC Housing directly, and operates separately from the overall EWR plan. Victoria Native Friendship Centre also operates its own seasonal shelter, with free transport from downtown locations but not wheelchair-acceptable.

A Level 2 response (warming tents) was activated five times during periods in December, January and March this past winter. However, some service providers believe warming tents were actually needed on many other nights in terms of keeping people safe from the weather.

Victoria Fire Department introduced a new service this winter, sending out "wellness teams" of two firefighters to travel around the city from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. on the nights when a Level 2 response was in effect. They handed out hot chocolate and hand warmers, and made sure everyone knew there were warming tents available.

The department reports that this service was really appreciated by people living homeless, but is costly to operate because it requires two firefighters for an 11-hour shift.

While the public perception is that people urgently want shelter on cold nights, the fire department found that people who were outside on a Level 2 night preferred to stay where they were, but did appreciate the outreach service with hot beverages and hand warmers. Were a local non-profit able to provide this kind of outreach instead of the fire department, costs would be reduced. Level 2 service costs are initially covered by the city, which then gets reimbursed by the Ministry of Emergency Response and Climate Readiness.

Further, the number of individuals requiring assistance but unwilling or unable to access indoor shelter beds (for various reasons such as having dogs, wanting to stay with partners, needing to use drugs through the night, feeling claustrophobic in indoor spaces) suggests that the Level 2 tents may be even more necessary and useful than the added shelter beds, and that judging whether the added shelter beds are full on a given night may not be the best indicator of the need for the Level 2 warming tents.

EWR from an agency perspective

The seasonal and irregular nature of the EWR program is problematic on a number of levels. It is difficult to find willing community partners to take on these roles, as hiring, training and staffing for the few nights EWR is called - typically around 12 times a season - isn't worth the effort and coordination.

Agencies who have participated in EWR in years past suggest that more openings, or availability every night in the coldest period from December to February, would better meet people's needs and make it more likely that community partners would want to participate.

The last-minute nature of the program leaves organizations that are contracted to provide emergency mats scrambling to find the necessary staff for those mats to be able to open at 8 p.m. on whatever night the EWR has been invoked.

"You're paying to have a coordinator to answer a call every day whether it's on or not," said one provider. "Then you hire and train the staff, but they may or may not get used. And the call is so arbitrary - it can be a really brutal day when it's rainy and windy and you're thinking you're going to get the call, but then you don't. Everything about it was designed for a different era and is a very inefficient use of funds and employee time and resources."

That uncertainty affects communications as well. Email is the primary way that organizations are notified that EWR has been called, but whether an individual staff person is paying attention to their email in a particular hour on a particular day is unpredictable. If word doesn't get out soon enough to organizations, they won't know when a Level 1 or 2 response is underway, and neither will the people they serve.

The people who need the services are profoundly affected by the uncertainty of it all, left to rely on outreach workers as winter dark sets in to know whether there are extra mats somewhere, how they might get there, or whether there will be warming tents set up.

Because everything must be done last-minute with zero predictability, labour costs are high. One organization that no longer participates in the EWR callout said it was necessary to pay \$60 an hour just to interest people in working unplanned 12-hour overnight shifts with a few hours' notice.

Having firefighters setting up and tearing down warming tents whenever a Level 2 is called is also costly, as is staffing an overnight outreach team with firefighters on those nights. People who are familiar with the region's EWR challenges believe that permanent seasonal shelters would be better and more affordable approach, and that warming tents could also be made more regularly available in cold/wet periods for those who can't or won't access shelters.

Responding to changing times

Much has changed in BC in the 17 years since the Assistance to Shelter Act became law.

Climate change is intensifying rain and wind storms, and making seasonal weather patterns much less predictable. Many more people are experiencing homelessness, which has more than doubled in BC since 2009 when the act became law.

Shelters themselves have changed, shifting to more of a "reserved bed" system that means fewer beds are available for same-day access when the weather suddenly turns cold, wet and windy. EWR has not adapted, however, as local examples from this past winter highlight.

In October 2025, for instance, a storm brought winds of up to 80 km/hour, and more than 100 millimetres of rain over four days during that stormy week. The storm hit during the EWR season (October to April) but temperatures weren't even close to the 0 C. necessary to trigger the response.

Nor was a response triggered when 60 millimetres of rain fell over a string of days in mid-December, but overnight temperatures were around 8 C. Similarly, an atmospheric river poured down on Jan. 12, 2026, but overnight temperatures never dipped below 8 C.

Hypothermia can set in within an hour or two at temperatures of even 15 C if someone gets soaking wet, as occurs routinely for people living homeless during a wet West Coast winter. Yet even the heaviest winter rainfall does not typically trigger EWR unless it's determined that the combination of rain/wind and temperatures "feel like 0 C."

A response to extreme heat is increasingly becoming a need as well, yet is not mentioned in the Assistance to Shelter Act.

During the June 2021 heat dome, the majority of the 619 deaths in BC happened indoors, with just three deaths among people living homeless. However, people living in social housing died at 15 times the rate of people in other forms of housing.

Some 17 per cent of the heat-dome deaths involved people with diagnoses of schizophrenia or schizo-affective disorders – conditions that are significantly over-represented in the street community. The need for a more organized response to extreme-heat events is clear.

Communities are empowered under the act to develop plans that suit the needs of their region. For consideration for the winter of 2026-27:

- The plan should incorporate into its criteria the new realities of climate change and growing homelessness, as well as the unique micro-climate of Victoria where heavy wind and rain can be more significant threats to health than temperature.
- Permanent seasonal shelters (October to April) should be explored with BC Housing to alleviate the massive effort and cost required to quickly staff additional mats and set up/tear down warming tents one night at a time. This would allow effective use of trained staff to do regular hours, and at wages that are still generous but still less than half the cost of current emergency wages to meet what we already know is an ongoing need for shelter even on non-emergency nights.
- Feedback from the Victoria Fire Department on the enthusiastic response to their overnight outreach on Level 2 nights highlights that:
 - o An overnight community outreach team could step into this role and fill a major need at a more modest rate than required to pay firefighters
 - o That whether all extra shelter beds are full isn't an effective or accurate determinant of the need for Level 2 warming tents
 - o That there are many unhoused individuals whose needs aren't being met through the current sheltering system, and whose needs and safety would be better met through warming spaces that are more accessible and low-barrier than traditional shelter mats.

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