



**HOMES
FOR
ALL**

SHELTERS ARE NOT HOMES

HOMES FOR ALL
NATIONAL PROTOCOL FOR ENACTING
HOUSING IS A
HUMAN RIGHT
NAMEGANS NATION
WE ARE ALL ONE

HOMES FOR ALL: EVALUATING THE RIGHT TO HOUSING IN VICTORIA

THE HOUSING JUSTICE PROJECT, MAY 2024

Hay šxw q̓a kʷən's nəcəməāt helə ʔi? cə Ləkʷəŋən xʷilŋəxʷ.
It's good that you (we/they) are one together with Lekwungen people.

Məkʷ h̓ə s̓i? cə s̓əl̓il̓əq̓.
We all love the children (every child matters)

EXPLANATION OF THE REPORT COVER ART

“Reconciliation and Homelessness Cannot Co-Exist,” Cheri Jacobs, member of the Housing Justice Project

The pole is called Kwakatiutl Bear and was carved by Henry Hunt, of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations on Northern Vancouver Island. It was raised in 1966 “to commemorate the Centenary of the Union in 1866, of the colonies on Vancouver Island, and the mainland as British Columbia.” [3]

The legislature site was once an Indigenous village but the people were moved from the area [5]. “The land was originally set aside as a reserve in 1854 by Gov. James Douglas, who then took it back for the legislature site without obtaining a surrender of the reserve.” Over 150 years later, in 2007, the Songhees and Esquimalt (Xwsepsum) Nation ratified a settlement with the governments of and Canada B.C. for a claim to land in downtown Victoria, including the legislature.

In 2023, lək ʷəŋən and English language signs were installed seven messages about ancestors, warriors, settlers and children permanently bolted to the building's stone sidewalk perimeter. Among the messages on the legislature signs are: “It is good that you settlers are one together with the lək ʷəŋən people,” and “We all love the children. (Every child matters).”[6]

Cheri Jacobs, a member of the Housing Justice Project says, “Reconciliation and Homelessness Cannot Co-Exist.” To truly heal relationships with each other, we must bring about an end to this era of mass homelessness, which disproportionately affects Indigenous people.

The cover art was a collaboration by the members of the Housing Justice Project, with photo contributions by Pete Rockwell, Martin Girard, Clifford Skin, Jen Bradley and Bruce Livingstone.

This cover image symbolizes the past, present, and future.

The past:

It tells us that colonial policies and laws ranging from land displacement to the Sixties Scoop drive and shape Indigenous experiences of homelessness.

This building has represented a worldview and vested interests that has prioritized profits over people, and treats land as a commodity to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, rather than provide safety and security for people and all living things.

The present:

We are at a crossroads. Mass homelessness did not exist when most of the law-makers in this building were children. We place these tents in the legislature to remind the legislators to carry the hopes and dreams of the unhoused with them to this house. When will they pass laws and policies that protect everyone from homelessness?

The future:

We survivors of homelessness, the members of the Housing Justice Project, invite the members of this building to partner with us as equals. Only by working together will we ensure dignity, human rights, and housing for all.

EVALUATING VICTORIA'S HOUSING SYSTEM

The Housing Justice Project

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Dedication:

We dedicate this report to everyone we have lost to homelessness and to everyone currently experiencing, or facing down, homelessness.

Acknowledgement:

Tessa Cardy and Laura How, University of Victoria 4th year Nursing Students who facilitated development of key definitions and assisted with compiling publicly accessible data. We also gratefully acknowledge Susan Martin for their administrative support and assistance with analysis, and Amanda Farrell-Low for her work laying out this report. This work would not be possible without funding from the Vancouver Foundation Participatory Action Research Grant.

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Website:

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən (Lekwungen) peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, whose relationships with the land we work on continues to this day and into the future.

We also acknowledge the WSÁNEĆ, Tsartlip, Tseycum, Pauquachin, Scia'new, Tsawout and T'Sou-ke Nations historical, present and future relationships to Southern Vancouver Island.

We acknowledge the land was never surrendered or acquired under any legal or legitimate matters. The treaties, conflicts, and negotiations over rights to use the land and resources are ongoing.

"The development of a modern city makes it more difficult to experience the landscape that is home to the ləkʷəŋən. However, footprints of traditional land use are all around us, and this land is inseparable from the lives, customs, art, and culture of those who have lived here since the beginning." — Songhees Nation.[7]

We are grateful for the stewardship and efforts to protect and restore the land as it provides us with the safety and security we all need to live.

We feel it is important to acknowledge that we do this work on the land of the ləkʷəŋən people, in the same way you would acknowledge the host when you go to someone's house.

We also feel that writing a land acknowledgement provides an important opportunity to learn more about the land and people and thus our land acknowledgements will continue to evolve as our relationships and understandings continues to deepen.

We are committed to Indigenous people's reclamation of their land, sovereignty, and right to self-determination.

THE HOUSING JUSTICE PROJECT

Who we are

We have 156 years of experience with homelessness.

We have survived and escaped all forms of homelessness. We are Indigenous, we are racialized, we are settlers, we are women, we are men, we are non-binary, we are single mothers and parents, we live with disabilities, we are seniors and we are young.

Many of us are not far enough away from our experience of homelessness to have survived it. Many of us live in fear of becoming homeless again because of the lack of safe affordable homes in our community. We hold space for those currently experiencing homelessness and those who did not survive homelessness.

What are we fighting for?

Homes for all.

Housing is a Human Right.

What we do

The Housing Justice Project meets weekly to share expertise and learn together how to utilize human rights, community organizing, community-based research including storytelling practices to advance the right to housing in our community, Greater Victoria.

This report

In the pages that follow, we assess the living options available to people attempting to survive, escape, or recover from homelessness using publicly available data and testimony of lived experts. We assess housing options using International Human Rights Standards and the right to housing set out in Canada's National Housing Strategy Act 2019.

This report is about the realities of trying to access adequate housing not what is promised or what is on paper. Throughout this report, you will see quotes from members of the Housing Justice Project which were generated by individuals as part of our research together. Importantly, this report provides a clear line of sight to glaring gaps on the reality of the right to adequate housing in Victoria, B.C.

We are making urgent calls to action for the Victoria Housing System to be oriented to a right to housing that prioritizes the needs of people trying to exit or prevent their own pending homelessness. People must actively be involved in policy and program decisions that impact their lives.

Call to Action #1:

There must be direct and meaningful involvement of people affected by homelessness as partners and in employment roles.

INTRODUCTION

HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA: OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Homelessness in Victoria is often invisible and too many government responses focus on keeping people out of sight and out of mind, rather than moving people into housing that meets human-rights standards.

The most recent Greater Victoria homeless count, also known as the Point in Time Count & Homeless Needs Survey, estimated there were 1,665 people in Greater Victoria experiencing homelessness [1]. This includes people who are unsheltered, in emergency shelters, couch-surfing, and in public institutions like treatment programs and transitional programs.

Not everyone who is couch-surfing or in a transition program is considered homeless. People residing in temporary situations are considered homeless or at risk of homelessness when it is unlikely or impossible to acquire a secure tenure.

Homeless counts are estimates and known undercounts. Many people are hard to find if they are couch-surfing or living in vehicles. Some are intentionally avoiding homeless-specific services and keeping out of the public eye. This is especially true for women, girls and gender diverse people who avoid homeless services to avoid violence, or loss of their children [8]. Homelessness may be hidden out of sight by individual choice or by government-led responses that warehouse people for years in shelters.

Further, many people are at risk of homelessness and paying too much for housing, or struggling to make ends meet. In the Capital Regional District, 32 per cent of households are living in housing that costs more than 30 per cent of their income, is not suitable, or is in need of major repairs [9]. For these households, housing is unaffordable and for some the housing is unsuitable and inadequate.

When asked in the Homeless Needs Survey, most people want permanent housing (87%) but said that rents are too high, incomes are too low and there is a lack of available options.[1]

“When they moved us from Super Intent City to 844 Johnson Street they just wanted us to disappear.” (J. Bradley, Housing Justice Project)

STATEMENT ABOUT INDIGENOUS HOMELESSNESS

Over half of the members of the Housing Justice Project identify as Indigenous and we are committed to make visible Indigenous experiences of homelessness, to examine homelessness from an Indigenous worldview, and to consider decolonization an important part of implementing the right to housing.

The Canadian government and the public need to recognize that mass homelessness is caused by ongoing colonial policies and programs. Colonial practices rob Indigenous peoples of their identity and support systems like land, family, culture, and language. One third of people experiencing homelessness are

“

The systemic failure started before I was ever homeless. My grandmother was married at age 14 to escape residential school. My mother survived the Sixties Scoop. Her and her 12 siblings were taken multiple times into extremely religious, neglectful, and abusive homes. (S. Dasta, Housing Justice Project)

”

Indigenous despite making up only five per cent of the population of Victoria [1]. Affordable housing is critical to ending violence against Indigenous women and girls. Affordable Housing (including safe and affordable housing) is mentioned 361 times in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [10] with specific recognition that Indigenous women and girls are being denied rights to housing. Ending mass homelessness in Canada is a necessary act of reconciliation and is the legal responsibility of the federal government. Homelessness was not a phenomenon on these lands prior to colonization.

“

As a survivor of the impact of intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism, residential school and the Sixties Scoop, I feel compelled to help everyone, especially my people, and ensure this doesn't happen again. We are the Housing Justice Project and our aim is Homes For All. (S. Dasta, Housing Justice Project)

”

Government of Canada policies including the residential school system, the 'Sixties Scoop,' and the current child welfare system, are the most common and significant contributing factors to Indigenous homelessness

THE RIGHT TO HOUSING IN CANADA

In 2019, Canada passed the National Housing Strategy Act and committed to the human right to housing, as follows:

“It is declared to be the housing policy of the Government of Canada to

- (a) recognize that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law;
- (b) recognize that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person and to building sustainable and inclusive communities;
- (c) support improved housing outcomes for the people of Canada; and
- (d) further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” [11] p. 4

There are international agreements which outline that these rights are owed to everyone [12]. The City of Victoria supports the right to housing in their 2016-2025 Housing Strategy [13]. This is what is said on paper.

The National Housing Strategy Act clarifies that governments are expected to demonstrate progress on affordable and adequate homes for all. Thus far, both the provincial and federal governments have failed to demonstrate progress as evidenced by ongoing homelessness and persistent encampments throughout B.C. and Canada.

Senior governments have failed to release plans and policies that transparently light a pathway to homes for all. Despite a flurry of housing announcements, we see no end to rising rents, limited investment and ongoing losses of subsidized housing, and new people becoming homeless while others are faced with dead ends in exiting homelessness. There is no clear pathway to claim your right to housing in Canada if you have a low income or find yourself stuck in the bottleneck of Greater Victoria's homeless-serving system.

Peoples' lives depend on immediate action to end homelessness and upholding the legislated right to housing in Canada. Housing is a building block for physical health, relationships, safety, belonging, self-esteem and realizing one's potential [14]. Homes are like oxygen or water — utterly essential for human life. In B.C., if you do not have a home, your life expectancy is about half that of the average British Columbian [15]. The BC Coroner reported that prior to 2020 there were 143 deaths per year of homeless persons and that this number jumped to 305 per year in 2021 and 2022 [16]. People are dying due to lack of adequate housing. Homelessness is happening today. Every day we wait for adequate housing has impacts on health, productivity and life itself.

WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING?

Members of the Housing Justice Project reviewed definitions and elements of the right to adequate housing to develop the following definition of adequate housing. This definition is meant to inform Greater Victoria’s and British Columbia’s efforts to respond to homelessness.



The Housing Justice Project Definition of Adequate Housing
 Housing must be safe, in good repair, affordable to our incomes, provide connection to family (in its many forms), community, and culture; and located in walkable neighbourhoods, close to schools, health care, library, employment and community amenities. Tenants must be protected from forced evictions and profit-driven rent increases.

There are seven key elements of the right to **adequate housing** quoted below in United Nations Housing Rights standards [17]. For each dimension defined by the United Nations High Commissioner, we added important local considerations.

Human Rights Standard	United Nations [17]	The Housing Justice Project
Affordable	“Housing costs should not be a barrier to meeting other basic needs such as food, and costs should be protected against unreasonable increases.”	This means monthly rental costs should be at BC Housing Shelter Rate [18] or no more than 30 per cent of income.
Security of Tenure	“Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.”	There should be a residential tenancy agreement in place. If not, there should be protection from displacement and written eviction procedures and rules including dispute resolution.
Accessible	“Housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account.”	Housing should be accessible to people with disabilities and housing should be available for women, families, youth, Indigenous people, 2SLGBTQI+, seniors and veterans.

Habitable	"Housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, other threats to health and structural hazards."	Housing should have a door that locks, protection from the elements and be free of threats to health and safety.
Provision of Basic Services	"Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal."	There should be access to working bathrooms and showers with locking doors.
Location	"Housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health care services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas."	These services should be within walking distance.
Culturally Appropriate	"Housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity."	There should be access to Indigenous-led housing and/or Indigenous cultural programming.
Availability	The UN does not identify availability as a key dimension in the right to adequate housing, but we had to include it in our report, because the other elements are irrelevant if housing is not available.	Adequate housing must be readily available without wait lists.

Availability is not one of the key elements identify by the United Nations. Availability is a precondition for a functioning housing and homelessness system and there must be spaces available for those existing or at risk of homelessness. In this report, we evaluate the Greater Victoria housing and homelessness system on above dimensions of adequate housing. The Housing Justice Project identified sheltering they lived in and are important to people who are trying to exit homelessness. The living conditions of each sheltering type was assessed using selected elements of the framework above.

It is beyond the scope of this report to evaluate every dimension and element. For example, analyzing the location element would require mapping.

EVALUATION OF THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING IN VICTORIA

THE STREET OR ENCAMPMENTS

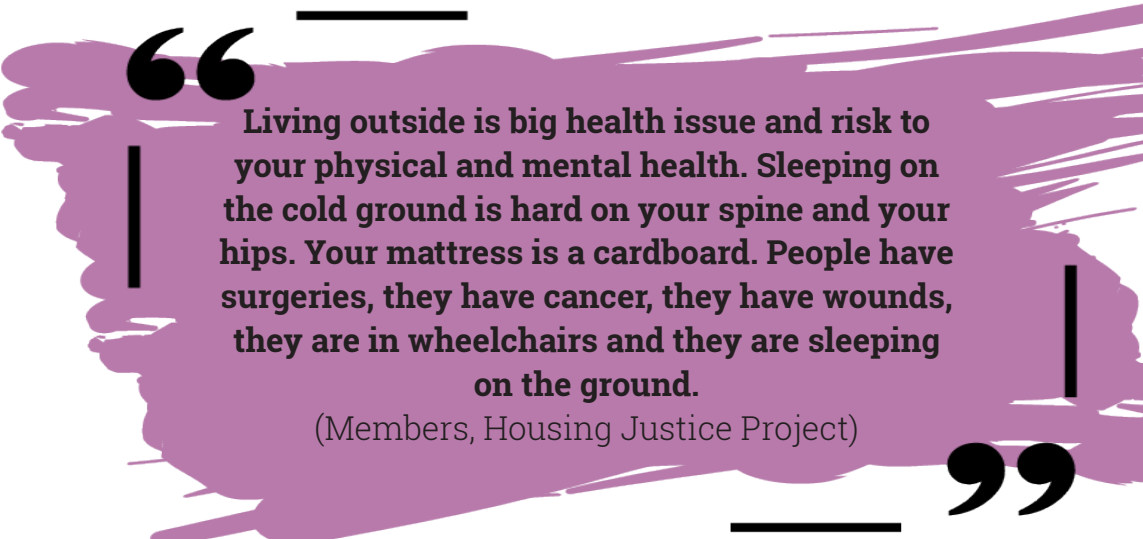
Homelessness is a *prima facie* or “at first sight” violation of the right to housing; it does not need to be proven. Sheltering outdoors or in encampments are clear signs of homelessness. There is no security of tenure, no protection or physical safety, threats to health and limited access to basic services.

Availability

Sheltering outdoors or in an encampment may be the only option when housing is not available or shelters are inaccessible, full or considered unsafe. However, there are increasing restrictions on sheltering in public parks in the City of Victoria. Currently, sheltering is restricted to five parks, with plans to ban sheltering in two more parks within the City of Victoria by August 1, 2024.[19]

Security of Tenure

Living in a doorway, park, sidewalk, boulevard, or in an encampment means constant displacement and forced eviction. In the City of Victoria, bylaws regulate daily displacement from 7a.m. to 7 p.m. [20, 21]. This generates a cycle of displacement and a loss of belongings such as tents, food, clothing, sleeping bags, and blankets as well as items like phones, mobility aids, glasses, dentures, medications and personal treasures like photos. The displacement process disconnects people from services and makes people even more vulnerable to injury, overdoses, pain, suffering, damage, disablement, afflictions, trauma, torment, exclusion and discrimination [22-27].



Living outside is big health issue and risk to your physical and mental health. Sleeping on the cold ground is hard on your spine and your hips. Your mattress is a cardboard. People have surgeries, they have cancer, they have wounds, they are in wheelchairs and they are sleeping on the ground.

(Members, Housing Justice Project)

Habitability

Sheltering in a tent does not provide protection from the cold, heat, damp, rain or wind or other physical threats.

Basic Services

Sheltering outdoors means a lack of basic services such as clean water, toilets, hygiene, power, heat, ability to cook, or garbage disposal. It is an assault on one's dignity and health. While there are public washrooms and running water in the few parks where sheltering is allowed, there is a lack of basic services.

The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate has stated, "The conditions in encampments, coupled with the underlying failure of governments at all levels to ensure people can access adequate housing, are a violation of fundamental human rights, including the human right to housing" [28].

Leilani Farha, Global Director of the Shift and Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing in the National Protocol on Encampments, states, "While encampments are not a solution to homelessness, it is critical that governments uphold the basic human rights and dignity of encampment residents while they wait for adequate, affordable housing solutions that meet their needs." [29] p. 2

You can have one bad night while homeless and have PTSD for the rest of your life.

(R. de la Rosa, Housing Justice Project)

All forms of homelessness are dangerous.

(Members, Housing Justice Project)

All forms of homelessness can be solved with safe, affordable, adequate homes.

(Members, Housing Justice Project)

Both of these leaders give clear guidelines for ensuring protection of human rights of encampment residents when housing is not available. [29, 30].

Call to Action #2:

Until there is adequate housing for all, end displacement of people living outdoors. Work with people in encampments to protect their human rights and provide basic services such as running water, electricity, bathrooms, sanitation, and garbage disposal.

Stop Displacement, Stop the Sweeps.

SHELTERS

Shelters are not homes. Although the numbers fluctuate, there are six year-round emergency shelters for women, men and youth including one Indigenous specific shelter operating in Victoria [31]. There are also temporary seasonal and extreme weather shelters that are open during the winter. Shelters are designed for short-term, emergency stays and do not have the elements of adequate housing. Shelters are not homes. However, in Victoria, some people live in shelters for many years [32]. Shelters do not meet standards for availability, security of tenure, habitability, and basic services.

“ You have to surrender your work tools, your instruments, your source of making income [to stay in a shelter].”

(R. de la Rosa, Housing Justice Project)

Availability

Shelters can be difficult to access.

Imagine for a moment that you are homeless and you have all your belongings with you. Imagine you have a cell phone, but nowhere to charge the battery, and you can typically afford to buy minutes 15 days out of the month.

Imagine you have a list of emergency shelters, and a fully charged phone with minutes. It is 7 a.m. and you have just packed up your tent and all your belongings. It is almost too cold to use a phone. You did not sleep much and you are tired.

You call many different shelters. Some tell you the waitlist is full. Others tell you to call back later and others tell you to show up at a set time. You don't have a pen, but you try to keep it straight in your head. You choose one of the shelters to walk to at the set time. You're exhausted and walking with your tent is not easy. Everyone stares at you. You get there but the shelter is full. That's the last time you try to access shelter.

“

There are too many hoops. Had to call every morning for weeks to finally get a bed. You might be waiting for mat on a floor and miss a meal at another agency.

(B. Livingstone, Housing Justice Project)

”

“ Shelters are inaccessible to people who need it the most!
(R. de la Rosa, Housing Justice Project)

“ If you don't get there at the right time or don't have a cell phone you can't call, you have to find an outreach worker to call for you. Sometimes they aren't open if there are not enough staff.”
(Member, Housing Justice Project)

In Greater Victoria, there are many different processes to access a shelter bed [31]. For some shelters you have to call ahead to get on a waitlist, then show up at a set time. The women's shelter, requires a phone call at 7 a.m. to request a spot and call back at 12:45 to confirm [33]. Another shelter asks you to start calling starting at 6 a.m. and if you secure a spot to show up at 9 p.m. Some shelters just ask that you show up at a set time to wait in line and take your chances.

To access an emergency shelter, you need a phone, a place to charge the phone, and money to buy minutes. You need to be physically able to travel to the shelter with all your belongings.

In Victoria, more than half of people experiencing homelessness who have accessed a shelter report being unable to stay in a shelter because it was full [1]. More than one-third said they could not get to a shelter.

Security of Tenure

Shelters are intended for temporary stays and tenants are not protected by the Residential Tenancy Act in BC [34]. Yet, too many people reside long-term in emergency shelters in Victoria [32].

Habitability

The living conditions in shelters in Victoria vary greatly from shelter to shelter. A temporary seasonal shelter may provide a mat on a floor in a communal space. Other shelters have bunkbeds, pods or cots in a dorm-style room or gymnasium with access to communal hygiene facilities. Showers may have limited hours of operation or not be working and bathrooms may not be hygienic. In the Greater Victoria Point in Time Homeless Count & Survey, a third of those who had stayed in emergency shelters feared for safety and had concerns about cleanliness [1].

“ You shouldn't have to risk your health, life or dignity to take a shower.”
(J. Johnson, Housing Justice Project)

Basic Services

In Victoria, many shelters close during the day leaving people with nowhere to go and nowhere to securely store belongings in order to find housing, food and other services. There is nowhere to store, prepare or cook food. There are no private spaces.

Shelters do not make people feel safe and do not provide a springboard into housing stability. Daily lockouts contribute to cycles of homelessness.

Shelter should not be used as a substitute for adequate housing. They do not meet the standards for adequate housing and on many elements violate human rights to adequate housing. There is a tremendous lack of autonomy and dignity in shelters. They are dehumanizing. The Capital Region acknowledges that Housing First is the best approach[35]. The pathway to housing is housing not shelters.

“
While still at the shelter, and two months into my search [for housing] I had my teeth knocked out during a robbery by a guy with a golf iron. That started a five-year journey of teeth-pulling and denturists. To this day, I don't try to eat with them. If I yawn they pop out. And it's just a lot of grief, these things that happen to us when we're at homeless shelters.

Member, Housing Justice Project)

”

“
I went to a women's shelter and I only lasted there one night because the following morning all I wanted to do was sleep and recover from the surgery, but they made us leave first thing in the morning. So I ended up just going back to Tent City.

(J. Bradley, Housing Justice Project)

”

Call to Action #3:

Eliminate long-term stays in shelters by moving people into permanent housing within 30 days.

TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS

Transitional programs are temporary residential programs intended to transition someone to permanent housing. Transitional programs — like shelters — are used as a substitute for permanent housing. For women’s transition housing rent is set at 30 per cent of their income or, if the resident receives income or disability assistance, they pay the shelter allowance, which in April 2024 is \$500 for an individual [36]. Thus, they are affordable.

They fail to meet the standard for secure tenure and for this reason alone should not be used as a substitute for permanent homes. Women should never be evicted into homelessness because their time at a transition program is up.

Security of Tenure

There is no security of tenure for residents of transition programs [34], including long-term residents who have no opportunity or resources to transition to permanent housing and who are known to be displaced into homelessness. Unlike residents of seniors care homes or rental apartments, residents of transitional programs are not protected by legislation such as the Seniors Care Act or the Residential Tenancy Act [34]. This means there is no avenue to dispute an eviction — to prevent your own pending homelessness — when your only connection to housing is a program agreement.

**“
You redo your program agreement every six months. This is a constant reminder that they have power over you and you could lose your housing.
”**

(M. Ferris, Housing Justice Project)

**“
I went through a few 30-days-in and 60-days-out cycles in their dorm rooms before I was offered a transitional room which had a two-year limit. It was a means of surviving at least. As I was getting close to the two-year limit, I started to get the sinking feeling that, as bad and crazy as life was in the shelter, that what was coming next was going to be much more horrible.
”**

(B. Livingstone, Housing Justice Project)

Every transitional program has a different set of rules (eligibility, partners, pets, children, illicit drugs, sobriety, curfews, room checks). Program agreements leave people vulnerable and worried and do not contribute to the stated goal of stability.

Between April 1, 2022 and Feb. 28, 2023, 89 women were displaced into homelessness from Women's Transitional Programs in B.C. [37]. If there is no affordable housing available to transition to, the result can be a return to homelessness or languishing in temporary programs.

“

Now I'm in a second stage transition house and at this point I have two years of sobriety. I still have my daughter. A lot of the steps that were required to get to the point where I'm at now were just out of my capacity. We still haven't found our forever home and we're still trying to get over having to live a life of surviving rather than thriving. I've been on the BC Housing waitlist for six years.

(Member, Housing Justice Project)

”

Call to Action #4:

End evictions from transitional programs into homelessness. Move people directly from homelessness or transitional programs into permanent, adequate housing that costs no more than one-third of income, or the shelter rate with security of tenure.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

There are so many different structures called affordable housing, that the term has become meaningless and a source of cynicism and mistrust. Here we outline three types of affordable housing: affordable rental housing for people who do not qualify for subsidized housing, subsidized social housing, and supportive housing.

Affordable Rental Housing

According to BC Housing [38], “Market rent units are known as affordable housing, below-market, or lower-end of market housing. The rents are equal to, or slightly lower than, average rents in the private market.” Market rent is not based on amount of income.

According to the Capital Regional Housing Corporation, affordable rental housing is “for people who have a low-to-moderate income, but may not be eligible for subsidized housing” [39]. To apply, people must meet minimum income requirements. These income requirements are often higher, and even much higher, than the median incomes of local residents[9]. Put simply, affordable housing in Greater Victoria is often for relatively rich people. It has all the same qualities, as subsidized housing except it is not accessible to the people who need it the most and requires a separate application process.

The public and the media must know that ‘affordable housing’ is generally not affordable, and therefore not accessible, to those who need it most.

Subsidized Social Housing

Subsidized social housing refers to housing that is affordable to very low and low income households at no more than 30 per cent of their income [40]. Subsidized housing provides security of tenure. Tenants are protected by the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and have access to transparent processes to dispute an eviction [41]. Landlords are not motivated to turnover units to seek profit which makes it better than market housing. Subsidized social housing is affordable to seniors, single mothers, and people with disabilities to name a few of the groups that have been marginalized by the housing system.

“

If I got a job at the CRD I would not make enough money to move into CRD Housing. I am a single mother with two children and housing rules dictate that they each must have their own bedroom. To rent a 3-bedroom in CRD housing, I need to make \$82,000 per year, but an entry-level admin position pays about \$52,000 a year.

(T. Love, Housing Justice Project)

”

Subsidized housing meets all of the elements of adequate housing, except it is not available. Many of the issues raised in this report would be solved with an abundance of subsidized social housing.

Availability

Subsidized social housing is not available.

“

Being at the top of the BC Housing waitlist doesn't mean you are next in line. If you are not considered a fit for a building then you wait. I was on the high emergency list for 1.5 years. I called in constantly. I harassed them. I was told it was not up to BC Housing. It is up to the housing provider to make the choice. So you can be recycled over and over. If I didn't advocate for myself and call everyday, I would have been homelessness. Some people can't advocate for themselves.

(M. Ferris, Housing Justice Project)

”

In April 2024, there were 3,595 households on the waitlist for subsidized social housing in the Capital Region¹ [42].

There is no regular, transparent reporting of the average number of years individuals wait for subsidized social housing. In the absence of transparent, accountable reporting, members of the Housing Justice Project tell you about their length of wait. Many of these years were while homeless.

“

I waited five years.

(J. Bradley,
Housing Justice
Project)

”

“

I waited six years.

(J. Johnson,
Housing Justice
Project)

”

“

I have been on the list for 11 years and I am still waiting.

(B. Livingstone, Housing
Justice Project)

”

¹ BC Housing requires applicants to update their file every six months. The waitlist numbers are an inaccurate reflection of need. People have barriers to keeping files updated from neurodivergence to lack of access to a cell phone. They may be homeless, moving daily and get lost in the system.

In addition to the wait-lists for subsidized and supportive housing, there are nearly 18,000 households in the Capital Region that need homes that rent for approximately \$1,000 per month to be considered affordable [43].

The Regional Housing First program, announced in 2016 under the Capital Regional Housing Corporation (CRHC), has an aim of 2,000 affordable housing units with funding allocated over five years [44]. As part of the 2,000 affordable housing units, there was a promise for 400 shelter rate units [35, 45]. Based on a review of the projects and housing provider websites, we found that 238 shelter rate units have been added since the program started. However, this number does not account for units that were considered redevelopment of existing programs. So, while we can count new units we also have to be transparent about those lost.

We have a scandalous shortage of subsidized social housing that is affordable to low income and very low income families and individuals. This type of housing is essential to provide adequate housing for those in core housing need and those living outdoors and long term in shelters. We must add to the supply of subsidized social housing to prevent and end homelessness. We can no longer rearrange the deck chairs as people will continue to fall into homelessness.

How did we end up with such deficits?

In 1982, about 14 per cent of new units built were social housing, and by 1998 it was less than two per cent [2]. In the early 1990s funding for social housing was completely cut with downloading of the responsibility for social housing to provincial and territorial governments. For the past 30 years investments in social housing have been almost nonexistent while the need for social housing has cumulated year after year [4].

Call to Action #5:

In Greater Victoria alone, we need 2,000 net new deeply subsidized and shelter-rate homes constructed annually for the next 10 years to prevent and end mass homelessness in our region.

Supportive Housing

Supportive housing is a form of subsidized, social housing. According to BC Housing, supportive housing is subsidized housing with on-site supports for single adults, seniors, and people with disabilities at risk of or experiencing homelessness [46].

Supportive housing meets some human rights standards for adequate housing. Generally speaking, supportive housing should be affordable and habitable. The rents charged are within the \$500 shelter rate provided to individual recipients of income assistance[18]. However, the elements of supportive housing vary greatly from site to site in Victoria making conclusive statements about the implementation of human rights standards difficult. There is a lack of availability. Some lack basic services and many do not provide security of tenure as they operate under program agreements.

Availability

Supportive housing is not readily available. The most recent publicly available data, from March 2021, shows that in addition to, and separate from, the subsidized housing registry, there are 1,524 active applications for supportive housing [32]. There is a need for supportive housing, but good quality data about supportive housing need is missing. Transparency in supportive housing targets is also missing. At the time of writing, we can find no plans articulating annual targets for a sustained supply of supportive housing.

Since 2021, 230 supportive housing units at the \$500 shelter rate have been built in the Capital Regional District with another 56 to open in Spring, 2024 [47]. This amounts to less than 100 units per year since 2021. The majority of people moving into these new homes are transitioning from temporary hotel sites that were opened during COVID 19 to people who were homeless. This is far short of the number needed to house people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness as per the Greater Victoria Point in Time Homeless Count & Survey [1].

Security of Tenure

Security of tenure is not guaranteed for many residents of supportive housing in Victoria.

Supportive housing is supposed to be governed by the RTA [34]. However, housing operators frequently use 'transitional program agreements' rather than 'residential tenancy agreements' with tenants. Program agreements enable housing providers to argue they are providing transitional housing; and therefore are not subject to the Residential Tenancy Act, and have complete authority to determine eviction policies and procedures. Thus, each individual housing provider determines the level of security of tenure for their tenants.

According to guidelines provided by the Government of B.C., supportive housing is governed by the RTA [34] even if a housing provider requires tenants to sign program agreements. However, the ability of tenants to access dispute resolution is challenging and RTA arbitrations and court decisions have gone different ways, sometimes upholding residential tenancy rights and sometimes not [48-50].

If tenants of supportive housing are protected by the RTA, they have access to procedural fairness. The RTA provides, in writing, clear steps to fight an eviction and consistent, transparent processes to resolve other disputes [41]. If tenants of supportive housing are not protected by the RTA they do not have access to procedural fairness. Based on a review of websites, the main providers of supportive housing have not published eviction policies for their transitional housing program agreements online.

The Government of B.C. has recently proposed exempting supportive housing providers from three sections of the RTA [34, 51]. These exemptions restrict tenants rights to quiet enjoyment, guests, and restrictions on wellness checks, but provide access to security of tenure. Whether or not government supports housing providers to phase out program agreements and enforce the use of residential tenancy agreements remains to be seen.

In sum, supportive housing does not provide security of tenure for many tenants where housing providers use transitional program agreements rather than residential tenancy agreements.

Basic Services

Some buildings considered to be supportive housing by BC Housing offer tenants apartments with private kitchens and bathrooms and others have communal showers or no kitchen facilities. They may or may not have shared kitchens prepare food.

People exiting homelessness need to know they are in their permanent forever home. We must end the cycle of trauma through evictions into homelessness.

“

Some supportive housing is a hotel room without a kitchen and where electric appliances like kettles or microwaves are not allowed. Even when kitchens are available they are not functional because there is no electricity to appliances.

(Members, Housing Justice Project)

”

Call to Action #6:

Provide everyone who is exiting homelessness with adequate housing as defined by The Housing Justice Project. Adequate housing aligns with human rights, and includes security of tenure which cannot be found in program agreements.

Culturally Appropriate

In March 2023, almost half of the Indigenous participants in the Greater Victoria Point in Time Count have been waiting more than 2 years for on reserve housing [1]. A third have been waiting for more than a year for urban Indigenous housing.

“

We need help to guide Indigenous youth to culture and language. I, myself, fell through the cracks of the government homes and ended up living under the Bay Street Bridge and in Salvation Army Boxes to stay dry and warm, with no community supports. Taken from my Indigenous family, land, and culture at the age of 10.

(J. Johnson, Housing Justice Project)

”

Ending homelessness is an act of reconciliation. More than thirty per cent of people experiencing homelessness in the Capital Region identify as Indigenous [1] and all of their experiences are shaped by government laws, and policies like residential schools, Sixties Scoop, foster care and separation from land, language, culture and people.

In Greater Victoria, there are several Indigenous-led housing organizations providing critical subsidized social housing, supportive housing and cultural connections, but more is needed.

Call to Action #7:

Reconciliation includes ending homelessness for Indigenous people with Indigenous-led housing and culture as healing.

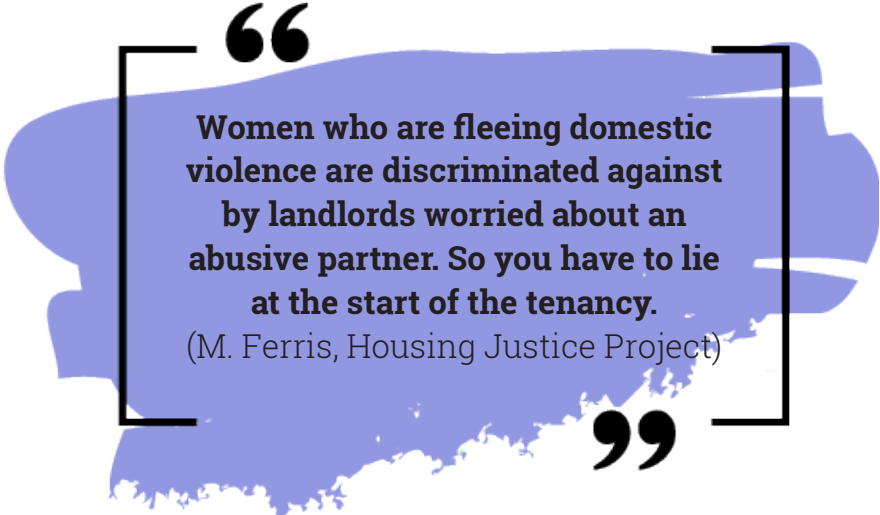
MARKET HOUSING

Market rental housing refers to competitive rental market homes, where tenants and landlords enter into a Residential Tenancy Agreement.

Availability

The Victoria vacancy rate for rental homes in January 2024 was 1.6 per cent [52]. The vacancy rate for the cheapest 25 per cent of two-bedroom apartments is 1.3 per cent [53].

Low vacancy rates mean landlords have dozens and sometimes hundreds of potential tenants to choose from. People exiting homelessness don't have a chance. Discrimination is easy.



“Women who are fleeing domestic violence are discriminated against by landlords worried about an abusive partner. So you have to lie at the start of the tenancy.”

(M. Ferris, Housing Justice Project)

Security of Tenure

Market housing is regulated by the Residential Tenancy Act [41], thus providing some protection from forced evictions. However, recent studies show that B.C. has the highest eviction rate in the country. From 2016-2021, one in 10 renters in B.C. experienced an eviction [54]. The high rate of evictions in B.C. are driven by landlords' motivations with the tenant bearing no responsibility for the forced move.

Of concern, people with disabilities and young people are over-represented amongst evictees [55]. Almost one-third of those evicted identify as having a disability; more than double the proportion of people with disabilities in the general population. Nearly half of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria receive provincial disability assistance [1], compared to 2.6 per cent of the general population [56].

Market housing provides security of tenure for the majority of renters. However, market housing is not secure for people with disabilities and is a driver of homelessness.

Affordability

Average rents in cities in B.C. have risen between 10 and 23 per cent each year since 2019 [57]. The average cost of all one bedroom apartments in Victoria is \$1,427 per month [52]. However, the actual cost to rent a one-bedroom home today is \$2,120.00 [58]. This is more than someone on disability would receive for income for the entire month, four-times more than the shelter rate for an individual of \$500 per month, and almost the total monthly wages of a full-time, minimum-wage worker.

Rental subsidies or rent supplements for market rentals are important programs to prevent or end an individuals' homelessness.

Rent supplements are available from Island Health or BC Housing and the amounts vary wildly from \$200 to up to \$600. The amounts are sometimes enough to secure an apartment, but rarely enough to meet the affordability standard.

The Income/Rent Calamity

for individuals who rely on provincial disability assistance

\$1,950 · Gordon Head GARDEN SUITE - 1 bed, 1 bath, \$1,950
CA\$1,400 · 1 Bed 1 Bath Apartment Saanich, BC
\$1,350 · Ground level bachelor in Fernwood home
\$1,200
\$1,325 · Bachelor Suite for rent ***
\$995 · QUADRA/CLOVERDALE, studio apartment garden level

Government of British Columbia	31 / 03 / 24
DISABILITY ASSISTANCE	
SUPPORT	\$983
SHELTER: RENT	\$500
TOTAL	\$1483

CA\$1,700 · 1 Bed 1 Bath Apartment Langford, BC
\$2,150 · Victoria BC, IBD 1BA, Energy Efficient Appliances
\$1,090 · A Fully Furnished Master BDRM /3 min walk to Uvic
\$1,675 · 1 Bedroom Suite at Verinda Manor
\$1,300 · Lower 1 BR Suite in Sooke!

Make this math work!

Rent subsidies are not universally accessible to all who meet the program criteria. When the budget is spent, the program is closed. It's like a game of musical chairs. If you don't get a rent supplement before the music turns off, you stay homeless.

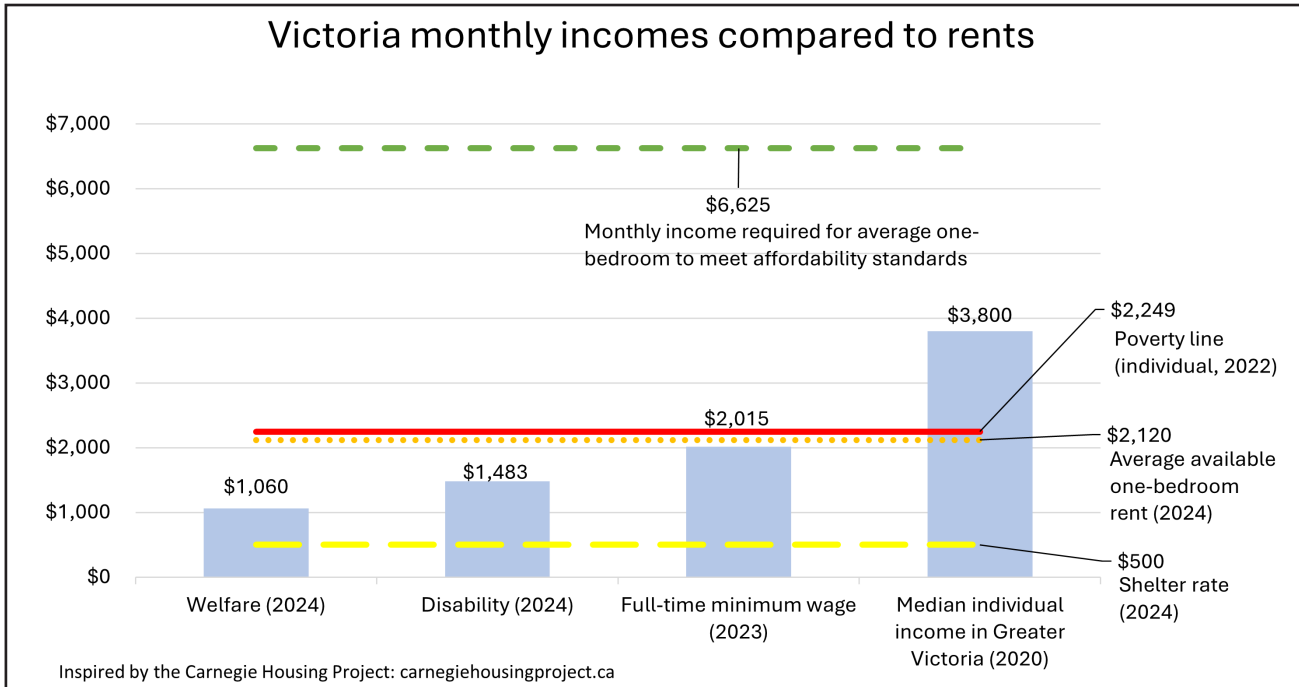
BC Housing rental supplements are available through seven different non profit organizations [59]. The process of accessing rental supplements is often confusing and complex with delays. To be approved for a rent supplement, some programs require a

signed rental tenancy agreement and forms signed by your landlord. This creates barriers to accessing rent supplements that many people cannot overcome.

Market rent is too high to exit homelessness. The rent is too high to move out of an encampment, emergency shelter or transitional program. Market housing is out of reach for people who get by on low incomes.

“ You have to pay the rent, pet and damage deposit upfront and hope you get it back and still feed your kids. It is only on women’s ingenuity that we are raising our families. ”

(T. Love, Housing Justice Project)



Data sources for “Victoria monthly incomes compared to rents” chart:

Welfare rates: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/income-assistance/on-assistance>

Disability rates: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/services-for-people-with-disabilities/disability-assistance/on-disability-assistance>

Full-time minimum wage (2023 hourly rate x 40 hours/week x 4.5 weeks): <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/employment-standards-advice/employment-standards/wages/minimum-wage>

Median individual income in Greater Victoria: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1,4&HEADERlist=0&DGUIDlist=2021S0503935&SearchText=Victoria>

Shelter rate: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/policies-for-government/bcea-policy-and-procedure-manual/bc-employment-and-assistance-rate-tables/income-assistance-rate-table>

Average available one bedroom rent (April 2024): <https://www.zumper.com/rent-research/victoria-bc>

Poverty line: This figure is calculated from Statistics Canada’s market basket measure (MBM) for 2022. The MBM is considered to be Canada’s poverty line. Statistic’s Canada presents the MBM for a family of four, so to calculate for a single individual, it is suggested to be half the amount presented on this website here: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601>

Monthly income for average-bedroom to meet affordability standards: CMHC recommends that your monthly housing costs should be no more than 32% of your average gross (pre-tax) monthly income. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2023/schl-cmhc/NH15-114-2022-eng.pdf

Call to Action #8:

We need rental supplements that are easy to access and are enough money to rent an apartment in the market.

CONCLUSION

WE ARE FIGHTING FOR HOMES FOR ALL AND FOR HOUSING TO BE IMPLEMENTED AS A HUMAN RIGHT.

The pathway to this is straight: HOUSING PEOPLE CAN AFFORD. For people trying to prevent their own pending homelessness, or trying to exit homelessness that means homes that rent for \$500 - \$1,000 each month.

Our evaluation of Victoria's housing system found that it is very far away from being aligned with the right to adequate housing, despite the right to housing being recognized in law in 2019. Further, our evaluation found many concerning human rights failures in Victoria's homeless system including, lack of affordability, evictions into homelessness, lack of cleanliness, and a lack of safety. To this, we add lack of availability. Importantly, our evaluation found that many of the problems in the homeless system can be resolved with an abundance supply of deeply affordable, subsidized, social housing.

We have 8 calls to action and we expect good outcomes from this report. We look forward to being full partners in the effort to end mass homelessness in Greater Victoria.

Calls to Action

1. There must be direct and meaningful involvement of people affected by homelessness as partners and in employment roles.
2. Until there is adequate housing for all, end displacement of people living outdoors. Work with people in encampments to protect their human rights and provide basic services such as running water, electricity, bathrooms, sanitation, and garbage disposal. Stop Displacement, Stop the Sweeps.
3. Eliminate long-term stays in shelters by moving people into permanent housing within 30 days.
4. End evictions from transitional programs into homelessness. Move people directly from homelessness or transitional programs into permanent, adequate housing that costs no more than one-third of income, or the shelter rate with security of tenure.
5. In Greater Victoria alone, we need 2,000 net new deeply subsidized and shelter-rate homes constructed annually for the next 10 years to prevent and end mass homelessness in our region.
6. Provide everyone who is exiting homelessness with adequate housing as defined by The Housing Justice Project. Adequate housing aligns with human rights, and includes security of tenure which cannot be found in program agreements.
7. Reconciliation includes ending homelessness for Indigenous people with Indigenous-led housing and culture as healing.
8. We need rental supplements that are easy to access and are enough money to rent an apartment in the market.

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