

Canada: Vancouver homeless left to fend for themselves amid coronavirus pandemic

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The Canadian ruling elite's policy of malign neglect in the face of the lethal coronavirus pandemic is exemplified by the failure of all levels of government to do anything to protect homeless people. Authorities in Vancouver, which has one of the largest homeless populations in all Canada, have failed to take even the most basic steps to protect the health and well-being of the homeless and other residents of the Downtown Eastside, Canada's most impoverished urban neighbourhood, many of whom are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

About 3,000 homeless people live in Vancouver, with around 200 residing in the entrenched tent city at Oppenheimer Park. A further 7,000 sheltered residents are living without proper sanitation or ability to self-isolate, and increasingly are confronted with the cutback or suspension of services critical to their well-being. Many already struggle with serious physical health issues and untreated mental health difficulties and are at high-risk for lung disease. The Downtown Eastside is also one of Canada's hotspots for the opioid crisis.

Most sheltered residents live in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels where safe hygienic practices are difficult or impossible to follow. Janice Abbott, CEO of non-profit SRO operator Atira Women's Resource Society, told *Maclean's*, "We've got people who live cheek to jowl with shared bathrooms in poorly ventilated buildings. Without being alarmist, it's a matter of time [before the coronavirus starts spreading]."

Last week, a resident at a city-owned SRO told the *Tyee* that there were still no hand sanitizers in her building's shared bathrooms or at the front door. She cautioned that if someone were to contract the coronavirus in the neighbourhood, "it would spread like

wildfire."

The congestion at the city's temporary shelters, already deplorable spaces due to decades of government cutbacks, is alarming. Even with the application of emergency health protocols, social distancing is difficult for people who are housed in crowded spaces and lining up in groups to use bathrooms and get food. "When shelter mats are two feet away from each other how exactly are you going to do that?", poverty advocate Chrissy Brett told the *Globe and Mail*. "Or when you're told the shelters are full and there's 100 people that are sitting in [a warming centre] at night trying to stay warm because there's nowhere else for them to go?"

In the face of the pandemic, shelter services are being further scaled back and adjusted. The Union Gospel Mission, a local shelter provider, must now turn away clients if they show symptoms of coronavirus. In a statement to the media, a spokesperson for the Mission stated, "We're forced [to deal] with the agonizing reality that if people come looking for help who have symptoms of COVID-19 we can't have them in our shelter, because one person could put at risk the other 71 people that are there."

Food banks in Vancouver servicing the Downtown Eastside are finding themselves in dire straits due to a sharp decrease in donations. In a press release on Tuesday, Cynthia Boulter, COO of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, issued an urgent call for donations to continue because "food insecure people cannot afford to stockpile food."

In response to warnings from advocacy groups describing the Downtown Eastside as "a ticking time bomb," Vancouver mayor Kennedy Stewart ordered the installation of eleven hand-washing stations—this in a neighbourhood that is home to nearly 8,000 people.

Long after cases of coronavirus exploded throughout Europe and in the US state of Washington—which is only an hour’s drive south of Vancouver—city officials reluctantly began to take protective measures, with orders for the closing of civic and community centres, local restaurants, and cafes. But nowhere near the same amount of energy or financial resources has been devoted to strengthening the city’s already overwhelmed and underfunded public healthcare system. With tests heavily restricted, it is virtually impossible for homeless people with the virus to be identified before they turn up in a serious condition in hospital, by which time they will have infected many others.

After declaring a local state of emergency on March 19, the city has increasingly prioritized a law enforcement approach. Hefty fines of up to \$50,000 are being imposed on anyone found “violating” social distancing and social isolation orders.

Enforced quarantine in SROs worsens the plight of the residents, who are pauperized and isolated, with family and friends now banned from entering those buildings. The quarantine rules also jeopardize the lives of drug users, who, without a safe supply of drugs or access to support workers while in isolation, could sustain a fatal withdrawal.

While quarantines are medically necessary to stop the spread of the disease, they must be implemented in a humane way that protects the rights, and cares for the well-being, of those affected, particularly the most vulnerable sections of society.

On March 19, the city shut down the popular bazaar-style Downtown Eastside Street Market, after banning crowds of over 50 people. The market, which provides washrooms, clean needles and the support of peer workers, is viewed by advocates as a key hub where volunteers can check in with vulnerable people and educate them about the risk of the virus.

The city has no intention of protecting the residents of the Downtown Eastside. While drawn-out plans continue to be discussed, each new day brings more confirmed coronavirus cases in BC. Despite over 250 confirmed cases in the Vancouver Coastal Health region, officials from the provincial NDP government continue to refuse to answer whether anyone on the Downtown Eastside has tested positive for the coronavirus. For its part, the federal Liberal

government has focused its energies on funneling hundreds of billions of dollars into the coffers of the banks and major corporations, while offering a pittance to workers and Canada’s dilapidated healthcare system.

Last Saturday, the province announced a moratorium on evictions due to non-payment of rent. However, this narrow measure only applies to properties managed by the province, which owns less than a third of the SRO stock in Vancouver. Tenants who face eviction this month because of a building renovation or their inability to pay rent are faced with a vacancy rate at near zero percent. This, coupled with fearful landlords reluctant to show available units, makes finding new housing virtually impossible.

The conditions of decrepit and scarce social housing in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood and across Vancouver are the result of decades of defunding of social housing and its sell-off to private speculators, who have been given free license to neglect SRO buildings to the point of them being uninhabitable. There are no plans to increase the social housing stock or relocate the vulnerable into permanent housing. This is in spite of the fact that thousands of high-price condos in Vancouver sit empty, having been purchased by property speculators to hold as assets.

In response to the growing calls for action by the public to protect Downtown Eastside residents, the city announced it would be looking into the use of community centres, temporary modular housing and other spaces to house people in order to keep them socially distanced, and to isolate potential cases “if they arise.”

Such wait-and-see pronouncements were precisely what compelled nearly 200 local doctors to sign an open letter to Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, urging for a “community lockdown” to prevent “a catastrophic number of preventable deaths.” It warned that BC is on the same trajectory as Italy, “with the infection rate doubling every four days.”



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