



Aboriginal Housing Management Association
Celebrating 25 Years

Vancouver Downtown Eastside Decampment Response

AHMA STATEMENT

April 2023

ABOUT AHMA

The Aboriginal Housing Management Association (AHMA) is an umbrella organization of 55 Indigenous housing and service providers in BC. AHMA's members oversee 95% of Indigenous housing units across the province for those not living on reserve. This includes over 5,600 units that provide homes to an estimated 10,000 Indigenous individuals and families living in urban, rural, and northern regions of British Columbia (BC). An additional 2,100 housing units are currently under development.

In addition to providing Indigenous peoples, their families, and communities with affordable housing, AHMA's members offer many support services. These include homelessness prevention, transition homes, parenting skills, mental health programs, substance use support, and more. AHMA members provide a culturally safe space for Indigenous peoples to make their home wherever they settle, by facilitating connections to community and cultural resources.

BACKGROUND

Since August 2022, the City of Vancouver (CoV) has encouraged community members experiencing homelessness in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) to comply with the Vancouver Fire Chief Order (FCO) issued in July 2022 and the Street and Traffic Bylaw 2489, Section 71A. CoV deployed two City-owned spaces for daytime common space use, washrooms, storage, and programming while supporting community members committed to a housing transition plan.

The CoV decampment efforts have removed more than 600 structures in order to address public safety concerns due to more than 400 outdoor fires occurring on East Hastings St over the last eight months, with four people reported injured. The Vancouver Police Department (VPD) reported a 9% increase in assaults since last August, with 28% of total assaults occurring within the encampment zone. On April 5, 2023, the CoV initiated another decampment response to remove approximately 80 remaining tents and/or structures.

AHMA was invited to sit at the People's Planning and Support Table as a member for the DTES encampment. Initially, AHMA was pleased with aspects of the encampment response, which signalled a commitment to a trauma-informed approach. However, the approach to decampment undertaken by the CoV, with assistance from the VPD, was not done in concert with the numerous discussions and tables on how best to move forward. This has meant that many Indigenous community members living in the DTES have either been precariously



displaced or expected to accept shelter offers that may be unsafe or do not support their needs. Enforcement-driven approaches have been applied to encampments in the past but have failed to keep individuals stably housed. Furthermore, many encampment residents simply return and either set their tents back up or stay in alleyways, some will seek shelter in unsafe situations, or even sleep out in the open with little to no shelter from the environment.

OUR STATEMENT

Almost 40% of DTES residents are Indigenous. Most of these individuals are coping with the impacts of complex intergenerational trauma. AHMA's position is that, for the most part, Indigenous residents of encampments have not been appropriately supported and have been forcefully decamped multiple times. However, in BC, some municipalities have implemented encampment responses that provide critical services to residents, empowering them to consider alternative housing options. For example, the City of Duncan has supported an encampment operation called "The Village" since March 2022 that incorporates secure shelter, accommodations, and wraparound support services for 34 community members experiencing homelessness.

Residents living in the village are supported in terms of their basic needs, including shelter, amenities, initialized care plans and outreach to health care. These supports enhanced the quality of life for residents of the encampment and minimized safety risks to the larger community. Approximately 86% of residents felt that they planned for the future more¹. The village model provides a concrete example of a municipality willing to take risks to best serve their community members experiencing homelessness and is closely aligned with our Transitional Village Housing framework.

AHMA's encampment framework, the Transitional Village Housing Model was developed and submitted to BC Housing and the Ministry of Housing in December 2022. Our framework supports encampment responses that embed services and empower residents to engage with a continuum of housing that will enhance wellness and stability. This is achieved by providing no-barrier housing options and wrap-around support to residents of encampments. No-barrier housing options are diverse and may include tiny homes, modular builds or shelters, domes, and other safely heated structures that stand up to the elements.

The CoV has an opportunity to set a precedent with their Indigenous community members and commit to reconciliation by supporting Indigenous-led no-barrier housing options for encampment residents that incorporate the TVH principles. This includes:

- **Culturally supportive** housing options that embed Indigenous principles and values into operational structures and integrate **trauma-informed** approaches that empower participants to engage with their community.

¹ The Lookout Housing and Health Society & Cowichan Housing Association. (2022, August). Update of the Village Project. <http://cowichanhousing.com/>. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <http://cowichanhousing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Village-Update-Aug-2022.png>



- Creating **wraparound services** that connect Indigenous people to the full spectrum of services required to the extent each person requires it.
- Centred around **harm reduction** practices that provide stability and safety for those living in encampments.
- Formalize **peer engagement** opportunities that facilitate natural belonging, cultural sharing, and peer support models to direct community development.
- Encampment responses require **ongoing evaluation** from the beginning of the operation. The evaluation plan and best practices must be designed in collaboration with the Indigenous community, organizations, and leadership to identify criteria for success.

CONCLUSION

AHMA's approach to encampment response emphasizes the need for system-level change and opportunities for Indigenous-led approaches. This is demonstrated through the development of our TVH framework as well as other policy and research work centred around implementing further low and no-barrier housing options.

Sources:

The Lookout Housing and Health Society & Cowichan Housing Association. (2022, August). Update of the Village Project. <http://cowichanhousing.com/>. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <http://cowichanhousing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Village-Update-Aug-2022.png>

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