

Shelters & Emergency Weather Response

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| Description: | This session explains how shelters and emergency weather response (EWR) programs operate, where they fit in to the continuum of care, and how congregations can manage the anxieties and risks associated with hosting and/or running these programs. |
| Key Terms: | Home, Homelessness, Supportive Housing, EWR Shelter, Low-Barrier |

Biblical Reflection

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to the assembly of Israelites whom Cyrus the Great had allowed to return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem. They were a traumatized community, still under considerable threat, characterized internally by grave disparities in wealth and status – but who were nevertheless sincerely pious and assuming that prayer and fasting would convince God to secure their future. As with all the prophets, Isaiah’s message brings with it an invitation to discomfiting practices of justice that lead to greater intimacy with God and others, especially those who have been pushed to the edge of society.

Isaiah 58: 9-12 (*The Message*)

“If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again.

A true “home” involves much more than mere shelter. Empty space becomes storied place – a sanctuary even - through ongoing acts of dwelling. We fashion the space to reflect who we are and then it shapes who we’re becoming. This is no less true of God’s houses (churches) than of ours.

Consider, then, as we go through today’s session, how this passage points us to Gospel habits reflecting who God is, rebuilding and renovating God’s houses and our own – indeed, our neighbourhoods and cities – into places where everyone can root deeply together and flourish.

Introduction

Home is where we hang our hats. It is the place where we and our possessions are safe, warm, and dry. It is a place where we can take a hot shower and enjoy a quiet breakfast in the morning, return to after a long day, and where our wi-fi connects automatically. A true, abiding sense of home is where we know we belong, and we matter. Home is the ground on which we build a life for ourselves, and from which we build a common life with others in our community.

Vancouver has a population of around 2.5 million people. The last official count of our homeless population, completed in March of 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic descended, was 3,634¹. This may be 0.15% of our population, but it is still 3,634 people too many.

The 2020 count was less than 1% change from the previous count done in 2017, though we saw more seniors (55+) and fewer youth (under 24). About one third of our homeless neighbours are Indigenous. Black, Arab, and Latin American individuals are also overrepresented, which shows that we have work to do to ensure newcomers and people of colour do not experience **discrimination** as they seek housing, employment, and health services.

Health concerns are significant for homelessness individuals, with 87% reporting at least one challenge, including a physical disability, illness, addiction, mental health problem, or cognitive impairment. We also have much to learn about the connection between severe trauma, substance abuse, and homelessness (**See Mental Health Module**).



People who experience homelessness are highly vulnerable. They have about half the **life expectancy** of the average British Columbian, and accidental deaths account for 47% of all homeless deaths, more than double the general population, according to *Dying on the Streets*², a 2014 report on homeless deaths in BC.



While there may always be need for emergency supports, evidence is showing that approaches such as **Housing First**³ are more effective – both in overall cost and decreasing human distress. This approach involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions. Additional services and supports are then made available as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives once they have a safe, reliable home.

Until we do have a secure home for all our neighbours, community members and advocates must work together to provide safe refuge and hospitality (**See Hospitality Module**). The need for accessible housing and shelter options continues to exceed what is currently available.



¹ <https://www.vancitycommunityfoundation.ca/initiatives/2020-homeless-count>

² https://www.megaphonemagazine.com/dying_on_the_streets

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/resources/housing-first.html>

Types of Homelessness

The term “homelessness” often describes a dynamic experience, where one’s physical living situation may shift dramatically and quickly, between:

1. **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for habitation (often called “living or sleeping rough”)
2. **Emergency sheltered**, such as overnight shelters or temporary refuges for those at risk of family violence, or who lost their home for other reasons
3. **Temporarily accommodated**, such as sleeping on the couch of a friend or family member
4. **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people whose current economic and or housing situation is precarious and/or unsafe.

Routes into Homelessness

Any of us would be vulnerable to homelessness if several hard things happen to us in a matter of months. Losing one’s home, relationships, income, and other supports can launch us into a vulnerable spiral. Homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of several factors, including:

1. **Structural factors** – issues that affect access to capital, such as lack of adequate income, access to housing, health supports, ability to purchase and prepare good food, and/or discrimination
2. **Poverty** – without income, individuals cannot pay rent (or mortgage), damage deposit, utility bills, or stock a home with furniture and supplies; people living with poverty may also be unable to withstand a *budget shock*, or an unexpected bill, that can cause them to lose everything
3. **Housing shortage** – there are not enough affordable and safe homes for vulnerable individuals
4. **Difficult transitions** – sometimes our support systems are inadequate for vulnerable individuals, especially during transitions such as youth aging out of care, people released from prisons or hospitals, the onset of a disability or chronic illness, newcomers to Canada, or the end of earning potential
5. **Personal circumstances** – hard life events can leave people homeless, such as experiencing a traumatic event (e.g., accident), relational crisis (e.g., break-up or domestic violence), physical or mental health and addictions challenges (including brain injury or concussion)

Kinds of Shelters & Supports

The complex reasons behind homelessness require a continuum of responses. In BC, the provincial Housing Management Commission⁴ administers several programs, including:



⁴ <https://www.bchousing.org/home>

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| Warming Centers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate November - March in designated City of Vancouver community centres and other facilities • Remain open overnight when shelters are full • Activated when the temperature is -5°C or below • Individual sites operate for no more than 5 consecutive days • Sites are alternated regularly where possible • Guests may or may not be allowed to sleep • Hot beverages and snacks usually are supplied |
| Extreme Weather Response (EWR) Shelters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Metro Vancouver, these are run by the Homelessness Services Association of BC⁵ (HSABC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The EWR is called daily by 11:00 am by the Alert Team who monitor the weather • Open only overnight (often 7:00 pm – 7:00 am) during very bad weather November to March • They are staffed similarly to temporary winter shelters • Funding is provided by the Province, which covers shelter staff costs, volunteer honorariums, food, cleaning and laundry services, some guest transportation and first aid supplies, even modest safety upgrades to facilities and equipment • Located in existing shelters that can temporarily add extra mats, like places of worship or other community and social service centres • Ideally in large open spaces such as gymnasiums or common rooms that can allow for physical distancing (even without a pandemic, guests generally prefer some space from each other) • Host congregation is typically asked to provide dinner if possible |
| Temporary Winter Shelters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open nightly from about November to March • Ideally open 24/7 but at least nightly (e.g., 7:00 pm – 7:00 am) • Staffed at all times by at least two experienced shelter workers, with volunteers frequently augmenting service • Often in vacant commercial or industrial spaces • Usually “low-barrier” and welcoming to all (pets, couples, mental health and substance misuse issues) • Located similarly to EWR shelters, but more often in leased motels or commercial or industrial spaces • Food service is budgeted into Provincial contract |
| Emergency Shelters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate year-round, usually 24/7 |

⁵ <https://hsa-bc.ca/>

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff on site to connect clients to health and social services and more permanent housing |
| Supportive Housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes NGO-run Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SRO's), temporary modular housing, and permanent buildings or units designated for people who need supports to maintain their tenancy and/or health • Usually has 24/7 onsite staff |
| Subsidized Housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rent is below market, and tenancy is guaranteed as long as certain conditions continue to be met • Usually, but not always, owned by government or a non-profit • No extra supports |
| SAFER | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rental top up for seniors in private market |
| RAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rental top up for families in private market |
| Federal Rental Top Ups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For homeless at-risk singles |

Accessing Shelters

In general, individuals without a place to sleep for a night wait in line for a shelter bed until the facility opens and can confirm there is space for them that night. Many shelters will not admit guests after midnight. “Low barrier” shelters have higher tolerance for misbehaviour, and often admit guests who are intoxicated. Unsuccessful individuals must try to find another shelter or sleep outdoors. Some shelters will guarantee a guest who sleeps there will also have a bed the next night (for up to 30 days, though this has been relaxed during COVID), as long as the individual is compliant with the shelter rules.

EWR Criteria

Temporary extra emergency shelter spaces are needed during periods of extreme winter weather that can threaten the health and safety of individuals experiencing homelessness in communities without enough shelter beds. In the winter of 2019/20, there were 6 EWR sites supporting 160 shelter spaces in the municipality of Vancouver. Some municipalities had no EWR sites.

Each municipality writes an annual community plan which outlines the roles and responsibility for community organizations, service providers, and local coordinators. They describe services and hours of operation of EWR sites, outline procedures for how to call an extreme weather alert and identify who needs to be contacted during an activation. Although funded by the Province, compassionate **volunteers** and **donated services** and **resources** are necessary for smooth operation.

In the event of extreme weather, the EWR Coordinator will call an alert, usually a day in advance. This also activates the **Assistance to Shelter Act (ASA)**⁶ for the period of the alert. This ASA grants local police the capacity to assist a person who is experiencing homelessness to a shelter during extreme weather. This act has some controversy around it as it states that police can use *reasonable force, if necessary*, to transport someone to a shelter. Once in the shelter, the individual may choose whether they want to stay.

In the municipality of Vancouver, Extreme Weather Alerts are issued when one or more of the following criteria are met (though these may change slightly year to year):

- Temperatures near zero with rainfall that makes it difficult to remain dry
- Sleet/freezing rain
- Snow accumulation
- Sustained high winds
- Temperatures at or below 0°C, or feels like 0°C with the wind chill
- Rainfall of at least 50 mm in a 24-hour period

Shelter Logistics and Risks

An EWR or Temporary Winter Shelter is ideally run collaboratively by a church or other organization with the space and a shelter provider or operator with the expertise to support vulnerable individuals.

The church provides:

1. **Space** for sleeping, washrooms (ideally with showers), and kitchen for simple food prep
 - Room for 10 - 30 sleeping mats (minimum of 600 square feet or 15' x 40')
 - A staff area to monitor the sheltering spaces for safety and security of everyone (can be a corner of the sleeping area)
 - Food prep area for heating and serving snacks and breakfast
 - Use of an exit leading directly outside and a secondary emergency exit in case of fire
 - Use of tables and chairs for staff and guests to eat and visit
 - Storage for EWR items during the day (can be in the space used for sleeping)
 - Stacks of disinfected mats (~3' X 15' floor space by 6' high)
 - Non-perishable food supplies (~ two Rubbermaid totes)
 - Shelter supplies (e.g., TV, cleaning, and office supplies – two more totes)
 - The space is usually an in-kind donation (rent and utilities not compensated for)
2. **Permission** to host the program and
 - To advertise the space at various service, government, and businesses where homeless people frequent

⁶ https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/09032_01

- For a fire inspection and safety plan, which may mean additional smoke detectors in the sheltering area or temporary restrictions to isolate the area securely from other places in the building (e.g., locks on doors or internal door alarms)
- Ensure the building insurance covers this program and potential damage to the facility and yard

3. A liaison or person to manage:

- Informing all stakeholders whether the space is accessible and determine the times available
- Access and exiting protocols during EWR (keys, alarm code, etc.)
- Good communication between all stakeholders
- Opportunity for congregants to assist as volunteers to set up the shelter, organize donations and prepare meals
- **Media inquiries** should generally be directed to the HASBC
 - Local volunteers should not respond
- Concerns of neighbours and people from other church programs (especially childcare) about smoking, drug/alcohol use or other potentially disruptive behaviours

The shelter operator provides:

1. **Facility/equipment upgrades** deemed necessary by fire inspectors, the municipality, or HSABC
2. **Communication and Coordination**
 - Provide as much advance warning as possible of extreme weather conditions
 - Keep the church informed of EWR experiences, including the number people sheltered, number of volunteers, issues that clients face, challenges that the shelter is aware of, successes, etc.
 - Connect with the local Extreme Weather Committee – it meets generally twice a year, before and after the Extreme Weather season
3. **Operation**
 - Set up of mats, tables, chairs, food prep and service
 - Hosting shelter guests and responding to their needs and incidents
 - Serving breakfast and handing out essential items in the morning
 - Clean-up of space including disinfecting, laundry, and outside entrance
 - Manage the budget and reporting expectations (stats and incidents)

A bridging organization like UGM can:

1. **Provide Coordination**
 - Make initial connections between churches and operators

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- Assist in drafting operating agreements
- Assist in connecting each group to additional supports and resources

2. Provide Consultation

- Assist in developing policies and procedures
- Provide training and education for congregants who wish to learn more
- Be available for questions, concerns, and explanations

Reflect & Review

1. Are there some aspects of your home and the support it provides you that you appreciate more than before you began this lesson? Are there aspects you would change, considering what is reviewed above?
2. Did any of the statistics about homelessness surprise you? What else should you learn about homelessness and the shelter system in your area?
3. Which of the routes into homelessness listed above do you and your group have an ability to address? What one thing could you do this week to begin to address it?
4. Were you familiar with the Assistance to Shelter Act (ASA)? Describe a situation where you can see (or have seen) its potential for good. Describe a situation where you can see (or have seen) its potential for misuse?
5. Would you change any of the criteria for calling an EWR?

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Learn More

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| Read: | Bouma-Prediger, Steven, and Brian J Walsh (2008). <i>Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement</i> . Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Osborne, Bud (2002). <i>Hundred Block Rock</i> . Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. Or any other book of poetry by this Downtown Eastside bard who finds God, grace, community and beauty in the midst of horror. |
| Watch: | "Judy Graves, Advocate for the Homeless in Vancouver" (2013). Except from <i>Walking the Walk</i> , by Francesca Fionda and Neil Khare. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPdxWxeZ9ZU Now retired, Judy is a Jesus-follower and national treasure. This 16-minute segment gives the history of local homelessness and responses to it. |
| Listen: | "On the Way Home" is a weekly Canadian national podcast produced by York Region's Blue Door and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness . Hosts, Michael Braithwaite (BD) and Stefania Seccia (CAEH) speak with diverse guests each week to discuss innovative programs, stories of hope and hardship, and new perspectives on ending homelessness in Canada. Click HERE to listen, via YouTube, Apple, Spotify or Google. |
| Do: | Look at the 2020 Homeless Count for Metro Vancouver which includes data for your municipality, and locate the year-round and EWR shelters nearest your church. Then ask your pastor how your congregation could go about hosting an EWR or nightly Winter Shelter or else send volunteers to assist one nearby. |

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Contact churchrelations@ugm.ca to explore these ideas further.