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## WHAT'S INSIDE:

**Thanks for the Support...  
Not: The problem with  
supportive housing**

**A Cap on Rents Is  
Nice, but What  
Happens Between  
Tenancies?**

**Criminalizing  
Homelessness,  
but This Time  
On Wheels**

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*The TAPS office is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the lək'wəḡən People known today as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.*

## Thanks for the Support... Not The problem with supportive housing

DOUGLAS KING, TAPS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



IMAGE CREDIT: BC HOUSING VIA VICTORIA BUZZ (MORNEAU, ETHAN. 'CONSTRUCTION UNDERWAY ON VICTORIA'S NEWEST SUPPORTIVE HOUSING SITE' MARCH 21 2022)

It's time we talked about supportive housing. Different than social housing or subsidized housing, where the government provides below market rent to low-income tenants, supportive housing was designed to create an environment where some of our most marginalized residents, those experiencing chronic or episodic homelessness, could finally find a home.

The first big push to create supportive housing came when the provincial government announced their intention to buy up SRO hotels in Vancouver in the late 2000s in an effort to preserve low-income housing stock. Handed over to non-profit societies like the Portland Hotel Society to manage, the announcement came with a guarantee that these buildings would remain covered by the Residential Tenancy Act, with residents of supportive housing given all the same rights as those in privately run SRO buildings.

But, over the last two years, we have witnessed a disturbing trend at TAPS when it comes to supportive housing...

ARTICLE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

Slowly but surely the non-profit housing providers that are contracted by BC Housing to run supportive housing buildings have begun to take away those rights. Now, some providers are taking the position that supportive housing is not actually covered by the Residential Tenancy Act at all, meaning that the people who move into supportive housing buildings have virtually no rights, even though they may have been paying rent and living in these buildings for years. They tell us these buildings are now actually a form of transitional housing, because the goal, at some point in the unknown future, is for a tenant to move into a different home.

The results of this change have been staggering. Without any rights under the Residential Tenancy Act residents no longer have a way to challenge an eviction or assert their rights. Residents are now given “program agreements” instead of tenancy agreements to sign when they move in, which state that their housing is now completely controlled by the non-profit provider, who can remove it from them at a moments notice. Without other viable options in an increasingly tight housing market, those desperate to move indoors are given little choice but to sign away those rights.

The problem is, despite their best intentions, housing providers sometimes get it wrong, even the non-profit kind. We have seen a housing provider throw out one of their tenants on the spot because they suspected them of lighting a fire, only to sheepishly admit a week later that it turns out they were mistaken and the tenant had done no such thing. By then it was too late, and the person who had spent over a year in a homeless shelter waiting for a spot in a supportive housing building was two steps backward, sleeping in a tent on Pandora Avenue. We have seen a tenant summarily locked out of his housing and into homelessness because ironically according to the housing provider he apparently was not using his housing enough, spending too many nights at his girlfriend’s place.

The fact that his girlfriend wasn’t allowed to visit his building because residents of supportive housing aren’t allowed guests was of no consequence in their decision making. One person made homeless so another can be moved in from the shelter.



This Spring, the province hired a consulting firm to hear from residents, housing providers, and tenant advocates like ourselves to learn how they think supportive housing should be regulated. In that process we made it clear that residents in supportive housing need basic rights, either under the Residential Tenancy Act or through some other system that puts a reasonable check on the immense power we have now given their housing providers. We are still waiting to hear the results of that consultation and what, if anything, the province will do to address a system that has become dysfunctional at best.

Housing providers have voiced legitimate concerns about how the Residential Tenancy Act applies to their buildings when it comes to providing a safe environment (especially when BC Housing seems intent on providing the least amount of resources possible in order to run them) but giving housing providers the ability to evict tenants without due process will never be the solution. If we really want to provide a working system of support for residents in these buildings there must be a trust relationship between the housing provider and its residents. Removing someone’s rights is a great way to destroy that trust.

# What's New at TAPS?

The summer is always an interesting season at TAPS. The weather is nicer, but the extreme heat has increasingly meant that people are really uncomfortable when they come into the office. While we are able to offer folks cold water, we unfortunately don't have air conditioning in our office, so we are all just doing our best to take care of ourselves and our clients on those hot days.

We are pleased to say TAPS management and staff, represented by CUPE 374, negotiated a new collective agreement in July. We are excited to have reached an agreement quickly and amicably, and this three-year term will provide us stability and security to focus our attentions on providing high-quality legal services to our community. This is our third collective agreement since TAPS unionized in 2018.

As we transitioned into the fall, we said goodbye to two of our incredible summer-contract staff. Andrea Vogel worked with us last summer as a tenant advocate, and we were thrilled that she agreed to come back for another summer before she starts articling in September. David Eupen came to us from the Allard School of Law at UBC as a Public Interest Work Placement and was an integral part of our Income Assistance team for the last two months. Thank you so much David and Andrea!



We are also saying goodbye to one of our long-time staff members this fall. Isabelle Dehler-Hyde has accepted a new job at the Ombudsperson's office, and will be departing TAPS in September. Izzy has been a key part of our team and has done almost every job at TAPS at some point over the last five years. She is incredibly intelligent and creative in her work, and has helped countless people with her compassionate approach. While we are thrilled for her to embark on her new opportunity, we will miss her greatly.

Until the next issue,

DOUGLAS KING  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

EMILY ROGERS  
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

## Taproot welcomes articles, stories, and poetry from readers.

Want to share your opinions, experiences, outrage, ideas, and creativity with the community? Submit your writing by email to [community@tapsbc.ca](mailto:community@tapsbc.ca), by mail to 828 View St. Victoria BC, V8W 1K2, or by dropping off your submission in person!





# A Cap on Rents is Nice, but What Happens Between Tenancies?

## An update on vacancy control in BC

EMILY ROGERS, TAPS DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

The provincial government's announcement limiting rent increases to 2% is being lauded as a relief for BC renters. While it is true that capping rent increases rather than tying them to the inflation rate will limit cost-of-living increases for some renters, it doesn't address the real problem creating housing instability for tenants: the economic incentive for landlords to evict them.

Limiting rent increases in between tenancies, a policy known as 'vacancy control', is the most cost-effective way to provide renters with immediate and genuine housing security. This policy was in place between 1974 and 1983 in BC and is currently enacted in PEI and Quebec. As the Director of Operations at Together Against Poverty Society, I spend most of my day talking to people who do not have a home, are in the process of losing their home through eviction, or are terrified of losing their home because they know they cannot afford current rental rates and the list for affordable housing is years long. Over the last six years at TAPS, I have seen how larger and larger segments of our community teeter on the edge of homelessness, and I am deeply frustrated by the government's unwillingness to discuss vacancy control as a policy option. When asked, the government says that they considered vacancy control through the Rental Housing Task Force process in 2018 and rejected the idea at that time.

Since that time, however, economic and social factors in our community have shifted significantly. The average market rent for a vacant two-bedroom unit in Victoria has increased by 34% in the last year alone. As it stands now, asking rent is now \$2800 for a one-bedroom. This means that someone receiving Income Assistance is \$1865 short each month from being able to rent one-bedroom apartment even if they put every dollar of their income toward rent. Someone receiving Persons with Disability benefits is short \$1441, and a senior receiving old age benefits needs an additional \$1138 each month to be able to rent a one-bedroom unit, not considering other living expenses such as food and utilities.

The staggering rise of rent means that the power differential between landlords and tenants is magnified significantly – tenants don't want to speak up about issues in their tenancy because are terrified of losing their housing, even if it is substandard or unhealthy. Meanwhile, landlords have an incredible financial incentive to evict long-term tenants, and will take any opportunity to do so. Two years ago, it was common for TAPS to be able to negotiate agreements with landlords to preserve tenancies. Today, landlords are often unwilling to consider anything but eviction, even over trivial matters. From a capitalistic perspective, this makes sense – they literally can double the rent overnight.

Vacancy control would eliminate this incentive, lending a breath of relief to thousands of tenants and preserving the sliver of affordable housing that already exists in our community. Of course, I recognize that inflation impacts landlords too. Concerns are often raised about whether vacancy control penalizes landlords for investing in maintenance and repairs to their property. While I maintain that it is a landlord's responsibility to budget for such repairs and note that inflationary rent increases are still

permitted each year, a mechanism does exist to address concerns about financing building maintenance: landlords are able to apply to the residential tenancy branch to request an additional rent increase when they have completed capital repairs to their property.

The Union of BC Municipalities met in early September and considered a resolution proposed by the City of Victoria urging the Province to once again explore vacancy control as a policy option. Unfortunately, the resolution was defeated by 7 votes (143-136). While this is a disappointing result, we were very heartened to see that it was a close vote. This shows that vacancy control has gained significant momentum across the province and it is increasingly recognized as a necessary measure to temper the housing crisis. We need to build upon this success: I urge you to write to your MLA and local mayor and council and encourage them to support vacancy control. If we have any chance of turning the housing crisis around, we need vacancy control immediately as an emergency response.



PICTURED: VOTERS AT THE 2022 UBCM CONFERENCE (VIA UBCM TWITTER)

*This article was published as an op-ed in the September 12, 2022 edition of the Times Colonist.*

## Volunteer with TAPS!

TAPS relies on the hard work and dedication of volunteers who help with everything from filing tax returns to answering the phones at our busy front desk and helping folks navigate provincial disability applications.

**Interested in volunteering or want to learn more?**

Visit [tapsbc.ca/volunteer](https://tapsbc.ca/volunteer)

or give us a call at  
250-361-3521!



# Criminalizing Homelessness, but This Time on Wheels

LEILA GEGGIE HURST, TAPS STAFF LAWYER

The worsening housing crisis in BC has forced many people into precarious housing situations or homelessness. As low-income people are evicted in waves, some folks are turning to creative and resourceful solutions – like living full-time in RVs, modified vans, or fifth wheels.

While some may find it preferable to living on the street, RV living comes with its own risks and stressors. An RV itself can provide the bare necessities, but there's one huge underlying problem: finding a safe and reliable place to park is exceptionally difficult. Some RV parks have long waitlists, while others have increased their rates considerably to the

point where long-term stays are prohibitively expensive for low-income folks. An increasing number of people are being forced to live in RVs without a designated spot to set up home.



PICTURED: RVS PARKED ALONG VICTORIA'S DALLAS ROAD ELICIT COMPLAINTS FROM RESIDENTS (VIA NINA GROSSMAN FOR VICTORIA NEWS, 'DALLAS ROAD IS NOT AN RV PARK,' JANUARY 30 2020)

Municipalities and regional district bylaws regulate RV parking within their own boundaries. Unfortunately, despite the housing crisis very few municipalities have taken steps to loosen restrictions against RV parking and use. While the exact bylaws vary by municipality, people are generally not permitted to sleep in their RVs on municipal streets or parking areas, and often are severely restricted from where they can park even temporarily. These bylaws force people out of their communities, severing their community attachments and ability to access critical services.

Some municipalities claim their policy is to enforce RV parking only on a complaints-based basis. This means that bylaw officers aren't instructed to proactively seek out and ticket or tow RV dwellers, but merely to respond when other citizens call in complaints. This method, however, enables securely housed people to monitor and report the activities of their less-advantaged neighbours who have been forced into precarious RV living. To reduce this risk RV dwellers may feel compelled to continuously move their RVs, a practice that is onerous, anxiety-provoking, and expensive. And despite complaint-based enforcement policies, the reality is that once someone living in their RV makes it onto the radar of bylaw officers, they frequently are targeted with escalating threats and enforcement. Overall, RV dwellers are subject to a similar type of surveillance, instability and criminalization that marks the lives of people living on the streets.

As our communities grapple with the impacts of the housing crisis, municipalities need to consider revising their bylaws to allow for the safe, stable sheltering of people forced to live in their RVs. Is RV living an ideal long-term housing situation? No, certainly not – for neither the municipalities nor the RV dweller. But flexible, harm-reduction based approaches are necessary stopgaps as we seek more substantive long-term solutions to reducing housing crises and homelessness.

## About TAPS

Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS) is the largest anti-poverty organization on Vancouver Island. Established in 1989, TAPS is a recognized leader and resource for citizens, community groups, and social agencies attempting to reduce poverty, serving over 7,000 residents of Greater Victoria, adjacent municipalities, and the Southern Gulf Islands each year... and we still cannot meet the needs of all who approach us.

At TAPS, we believe that the causes of poverty are in the social, economic and political institutions of our society – not the failings of the individual. Through legal advocacy and public education, we have a positive impact on people's lives in ways that honour and promote human rights, justice, and a healthy, sustainable community. TAPS is a non-profit society whose membership is open to individuals or groups concerned with the preservation of civil society, social justice, the eradication of poverty, as well as the continuing moral progress of those ideals.



### become a DONOR

The simplest way to support TAPS with a financial donation is online at: [www.tapsbc.ca/donate](http://www.tapsbc.ca/donate)

Want your contribution to go farther? Consider becoming a **monthly donor!**

Physical donations can be mailed to or dropped off at:  
**828 View St.**

**Victoria BC, V8W 1K2**

If you'd like a charitable tax receipt, be sure to include your name, contact information, and mailing address!

### become a MEMBER

Please consider becoming a member of our organization to support the important work we do in the fight against poverty.

TAPS members can vote at our AGM and receive updates on our work throughout the year. There is no cost to membership.

To fill out a membership form, visit: [www.tapsbc.ca/taps-membership](http://www.tapsbc.ca/taps-membership) or swing by our office!

## OUR FUNDERS:



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