



SUMMER 2022

ISSUE 141

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Move It (When
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WHERE TO FIND US

828 View Street
Victoria, BC V8W 1K2

250-361-3521

info@tapsbc.ca
www.tapsbc.ca

@tapsbc

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

Defending Housing Affordability for Low-Income Renters in Vancouver

HANNAH MANG-WOOLEY,
VACANCY CONTROL & TENANT ADVOCATE



PICTURED: THE BALMORAL HOTEL, ONE OF VANCOUVER'S PRIVATELY OWNED SRO'S, NOW SET TO BE DEMOLISHED. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER CHEUNG VIA THE TYEE, 'RENT CONTROL FOR PRIVATE SROS PASSES IN VANCOUVER', 18 NOVEMBER 2021

As any renter knows, low-cost rental housing in the private market is almost impossible to find, especially in Victoria and Vancouver. More and more, renters are feeling the affordability crisis in our communities, and tenant activists are taking a stand. One significant step towards defending the interests of low-income renters can be seen in Vancouver, in the form of activism to protect the interests of tenants who live in SRO (Single Room Occupancy) housing.

Single Room Occupancy (SRO) housing is a type of rental that many people rely on. This term refers to housing where someone rents a room, often in a converted hotel, and shares a bathroom (and sometimes kitchen) with other tenants.

ARTICLE CONTINUES ON NEXT PAGE

Typically, an SRO room is around 10 ft x 10 ft and rents for \$600 or less per month. The Downtown Eastside (DTES) in Vancouver is a place that has a high percentage of SRO housing, most often rented by people who have limited incomes. Victoria also has SRO housing - the Fairfield Hotel on Cormorant Street was an SRO and there are other SROs around town. SRO housing in Vancouver and other cities is increasingly attractive to developers and investors because they are often buildings on prime pieces of real estate that are being rented for rates far below what they could be rented for if they were renovated. Many SRO buildings in Vancouver are being rebranded as "luxury microsuits" and rented for much higher rents to people that have a lot more money.

Activists in Vancouver's DTES, including the Downtown Eastside SRO Collaborative Society, have been working hard to preserve affordable housing in their community for a long time. This has included getting Vancouver city council to introduce a bylaw in 2003 limiting SRO landlords' ability to convert or demolish their buildings. This protects renters from being displaced because of a landlord deciding to convert their building into larger, more profitable rental units, or demolishing the building and selling the land. Most recently, this activism has taken the form of lobbying Vancouver City Council to enact a bylaw for SROs that would limit a landlord from raising the rent in between tenancies. This form of rent control is known as **vacancy control**. In November 2021, Vancouver City Council passed a bylaw that implemented vacancy control in SROs. This means that landlords cannot increase the rent beyond the rate of inflation, even if a tenant moves out. This increases housing security and eliminates the economic incentive for landlords to evict SRO tenants, many of whom are very vulnerable and would not be able to find anywhere else to live.

Predictably, SRO owners don't like this bylaw, as it makes it much harder for them to make money. This bylaw was challenged in court by two SRO landlords, one operating a typical Downtown Eastside SRO and one operating a "luxury micro suite" complex. This court case was heard in April, and I was able to go to Vancouver to observe the proceeding.

There were two main arguments presented by the SRO owners' lawyers: 1) it was outside the city's powers to introduce a form of rent control and 2) it was enacted in bad faith because the city was intentionally trying to decrease the value of these buildings, and this decision was based on city council having a hostile attitude towards SRO owners. In response, the lawyer defending Vancouver City Council made the point that the bylaw and provincial rent control laws do not contradict each other, and that it is within the city's powers to enact bylaws that they see as being in the best interest of their citizens. Vancouver City Council sees that this housing stock is at risk of becoming unaffordable to the people who need it. The lawyer made the case that the motivation of City Council was to protect tenants, not to punish landlords.

It may be a number of months until we find out the judge's decision in this case. Regardless of the outcome, it is likely that the decision will be appealed by the unsuccessful side. I hope that the decision is ultimately decided in favour of the City of Vancouver, as this vacancy control bylaw is major step toward housing justice for low income tenants in Vancouver. If the bylaw is successful, this sets a road map for other cities in BC, Victoria included, to follow to work in the best interest of tenants.



PICTURED: THE FAIRFIELD HOTEL ON DOUGLAS STREET, ONCE A VICTORIA SRO THAT CLOSED IN 2019, RESULTING IN THE DISPLACEMENT OF DOZENS OF TENANTS.

What's New at TAPS?

Happy Summer! We have some big news to share this edition. After some unexpected events we have agreed to temporarily run advocacy services in partnership with the Law Foundation in Nanaimo. In December, 2021 the Society for Equity, Inclusion and Advocacy (SEIA) closed its doors, and this meant that the two long-time legal advocates who had been working there were left without an organization to call home. We started getting lots of calls for help from people living in Nanaimo looking for help, so when the Law Foundation asked us if we would temporarily provide administrative support to the legal advocates in Nanaimo we enthusiastically agreed. We are currently in the process of getting the Nanaimo office up and running and look forward to working with the two dedicated and knowledgeable legal advocates that provide support to the Nanaimo community while the Law Foundation looks for a long-term home.

We'd also like to take this opportunity to say goodbye and thank you to our wonderful Tax Administrative Support worker, Mandy Scollard. Mandy has been an incredible addition to our team, plowing through tax packages and calmly explaining the workings of the CRA to stressed out clients. Along with our Tax Coordinator, Gillian Gaffney, and our fabulous tax volunteers, Mandy has helped us to process more than 1500 tax returns over the last 4 months (more than double the number of returns we processed during last year's tax season!) Thank you Mandy – we will miss you!



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, by mail to 828 View St. Victoria BC, V8W 1K2, or by dropping off your submission in person!



New Shelter Allowance Minimum Inches Towards Inclusion, But Policy Still in Need of Reality Check

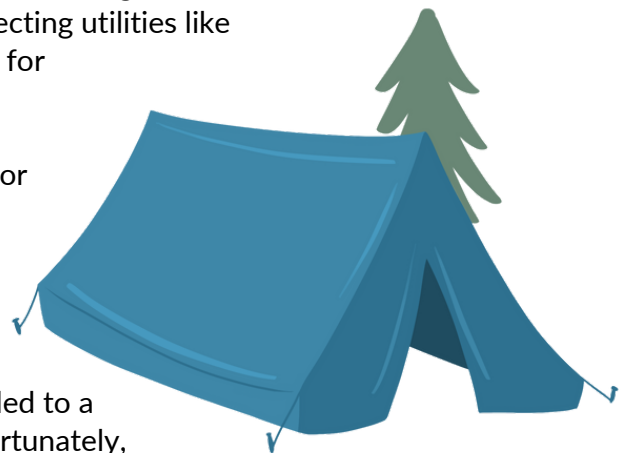
MADYSON POWELL, INCOME ASSISTANCE LEGAL ADVOCATE

Contrary to common sense, some of our community's most vulnerable folks – those without a fixed address or stable, traditional housing – historically receive the least in terms of social assistance. Those who cannot prove they have shelter costs to maintain such as monthly rent, mortgage payments, or utility bills are routinely denied access to the Ministry's *shelter allowance* benefit, leaving them with only their support allowance to cover their basic needs. Although the amounts that Ministry benefit recipients receive to help cover shelter-related costs each month are wholly inadequate in the face of BC's worsening unaffordability crisis, we are beginning to see some new policy changes moving incrementally towards a more inclusive and realistic approach to shelter assistance.

Effective May 1st, all those receiving hardship, income, or provincial disability assistance are entitled to a minimum shelter allowance of \$75 a month for individuals, \$150 for a 2-person family unit, \$200 for a 3-person family unit, increasing progressively up to \$300 for a 7-person family unit. Though this new minimum shelter allowance is still not nearly enough to secure reliable shelter or housing, folks may use this amount to help cover the cost of other daily living expenses without encountering any red tape (in other words, without having to submit any documentation to the Ministry.) If an assistance recipient has shelter costs above the new \$75 minimum allowance, they will continue to receive shelter funds equal to their shelter costs up to a \$375 maximum, as long as they can provide documentation to establish their costs.

The Ministry has also updated their policy in relation to how shelter costs are determined. Now, for clients without a fixed address, alternative forms of non-traditional housing and their associated costs are to be fully considered on a case-by-case basis. This includes accommodation in the form of living on a boat, in a tent/campsite, as well as in a standard or recreational vehicle. Some examples of the kinds of allowable costs for these types of alternative forms of housing include fees for renting a campsite or for docking at a harbour, fees for connecting utilities like water or septic services, and buying wood or fuel when used for cooking and heating.

The inclusion of allowing fuel costs for cooking and heating for those living in vehicles is especially significant. Prior to these publicized policy changes, it was maintained by the Ministry that the purchase of gas, diesel, or propane for a vehicle be used for commuting purposes only, and therefore it was expected that these costs would have been met through the optional *transportation supplement* (an additional \$52 added to a recipient's monthly allowance for transportation costs). Unfortunately, within the context of BC's unaffordability crisis, we are seeing significant increases in the numbers of folks forced to live in vehicles, tents and campsites amongst other non-traditional forms of housing, making this change a vital one for more folks than ever.



While we're pleased to see positive changes like these, we hold that the \$375 maximum shelter allowance rate is completely removed from the realities of what is actually needed to maintain housing in our community. TAPS will continue to push the provincial government to significantly raise the shelter rate benefit to better reflect local rental markets and, furthermore, harmonize all Ministry benefits by removing the support and shelter categories, allowing all recipients to access the maximum amount of funding they're entitled to.

I Like to Move It, Move It (When the Ministry Helps Pay For It)

CAITLIN WRIGHT, INCOME ASSISTANCE LEGAL ADVOCATE

This time of the year is often a period of change and movement, with many folks seeking out new housing opportunities. Sometimes, the desire to move might be instigated by positive life events, like growing a family or finishing an education program, but oftentimes it's traumatic changes that force someone to move (particularly for low-income folks and those surviving on social assistance through the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction.) At TAPS, we're now seeing more folks than ever displaced by disasters such as floods, wildfires, and apartment and house-fires, which may leave them particularly vulnerable. At the same time, we're seeing a high number of folks living in poverty who are being forced to move for a very specific reason: massive housing unaffordability of current rental housing and resulting evictions or renovictions.

For people receiving income, Persons with Disabilities (PWD), or hardship assistance, they may be able to use Ministry supplements for expenses associated with moving, including storage fees, hiring movers and moving vans, gas and fuel costs for transportation, security deposits, and even pet deposits. However, like with most kinds of Ministry supplements, there are eligibility criteria that first must be met to achieve a successful outcome.

What types of costs may be eligible for a moving supplement?

- Moving costs for a confirmed job, where moving is both required to start the job and the job will increase your financial independence;
- Moving costs for new accommodations that are significantly less costly than your current housing;
- Moving costs resulting from being compelled to leave your current housing (including legal and illegal evictions) or, your current housing is being demolished or condemned and no longer fit for habitation;
- Moving costs incurred to avoid *imminent threat to the physical safety** of yourself or anyone else in your family unit;
- Transportation and living costs needed to attend a child protection hearing, family maintenance hearing, or DNA paternity testing collection site; and/or,
- Storage costs required to store belongings and personal effects while in the process of moving.

*What is considered an imminent threat to physical safety?

According to the Ministry, an imminent threat to physical safety includes situations where there is a risk of becoming homeless or living in unsafe conditions (e.g.: black mold, unsafe facilities, vermin infestation, etc.), as well as threats to physical safety and risk of domestic or family violence. Attempts to avoid exposure to active drug use or any risk to the safety of minors may also constitute an imminent threat to physical safety.



Can a Moving Supplement Help Me Move Anywhere?

Moving supplements for costs associated with attending child protection hearings, family maintenance hearings, or to attend a DNA testing site are only eligible within BC.

The Ministry may issue a supplement to assist with moving costs for moves outside of BC, if:

- You can prove moving outside the province will significantly improve your living conditions, and will result in a move to a permanent, supportive living environment that is not available to you in BC; or,
- You have confirmed new employment that would increase your financial resources and independence and are required to move to begin your job.

Finally, the Ministry may provide a supplement to help move outside of Canada, in very narrow circumstances, and require a significant volume of specific documentation to verify this request.

What Kind of Information or Documents Do I Need to Provide?

Regardless of the reason for moving, it is essential you obtain prior approval from the Ministry before paying for any moving costs yourself – the Ministry will only provide financial reimbursement for moving expenses that have already been paid for in exceptional circumstances.*

Exceptional Circumstances

It might not actually be possible to obtain pre-approval from the ministry before you incur moving related costs. For example, you may be fleeing an abusive or unsafe living environment or facing imminent risk of homelessness (e.g.: you lost a hearing through the Residential Tenancy Branch, and your landlord is granted an order of possession and has hired bailiffs to remove you from the property). In these kinds of circumstances, you might be entitled to financial reimbursement, if you can prove there were 'exceptional circumstances' that required you to act fast and incur moving costs without pre-approval.

You will also need to prove that you have no other financial supports available to help cover your moving costs. The Ministry will review your information to see if you have access to funds through your bank accounts, financial assets, or investments, lines of credit, or potential employment earnings.

Finally, you will need to ensure that the moving expenses you are asking to be covered through a moving supplement are the least costly option. This is typically established by providing a few different financial quotes per expense, and submitting them all as part of your request to the Ministry. Most moving, storage, and transportation companies will provide free

estimates over the phone or online. You will want to make sure that you cover a range of cost estimates so that the least costly option is clear and obvious.

Since you may have to contact a few different moving and storage companies, or arrange for transportation (e.g. BC Ferries), it's a good idea to begin contacting companies as soon as you know the dates of your move in order to pre-book or place a hold on specific dates, vans, or moving services.



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

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-memership or swing by our office!

OUR FUNDERS:



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