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## RUNNING TO STAY BEHIND

### HOW INCOME ASSISTANCE RATES ARE NOT KEEPING UP WITH RENT HIKES

*By Emily Rogers*

On March 16, 2021, the British Columbia government announced that income assistance rates would permanently increase by \$175 per month. This means that a single person receiving basic income assistance will now receive \$935 a month, and a single person with the Persons with Disability designation will now receive \$1,358.42 a month. This increase is largely thanks to the tireless advocacy of people province-wide who have raised their voices for years to demand increased rates, and it is certainly worth celebrating. That said, both the “income” and “expenses” side of the ledger must be considered when contemplating whether our government’s policy decisions are effectively supporting people in our community.

For most people, housing costs are their most significant expense. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has defined affordable housing as 30 percent of a person’s income. According to the CMHC, the average rent in Victoria is \$1015 for a bachelor unit and \$1185 for a 1-bedroom unit. This means that someone on income assistance is \$80 short of being able to afford a bachelor unit even if they put every cent of their income towards rent. Someone on PWD has \$343.42 left over after paying rent, which needs to cover utilities, food, and medication for the month. This is after the \$175 monthly increase.

According to the CMHC, “the gap between asking rent for vacant units and occupied units has climbed from \$39 to \$356 in the past 6 years”. Put differently, in 2015 a renter could find a new place to live for almost the same amount of money as they were paying in their previous home. Now, someone looking for a new place to live would be looking at rental listings that are approximately \$350 more than their old place.

*(See Running to Stay Behind, page 3)*

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## CITY INCREASES RESTRICTIONS ON PARK RESIDENTS AS MAY 1 DEADLINE NEARS

*By Irene McGee & Daniel Jackson*

On March 11, the City of Victoria, working closely with BC Housing, declared that by the end of April there will be sufficient “indoor shelter” space to house anyone currently living outdoors in the Greater Victoria area. This marks a one-month extension of the original deadline of March 31. According to the City, the newly available shelter options mean folks will no longer need to shelter in city parks and the City will resume enforcing the ban on daytime sheltering in all parks on May 1. This means park residents will once again have to tear down their shelters each morning and rebuild them each night in designated zones. In the same announcement, the City rolled out increased limitations on tent placement, spacing and size and added more parks to the list of no-camping zones.

TAPS has called on the City to ensure that all offers of housing are reasonable, all acceptance is fully consensual and the entire process is trauma-informed. This does not appear to be occurring. Many folks are receiving little notice to move in to shelter spaces, and it is unclear what happens if an individual misses the narrow window of their assigned move-in time. We are also hearing that the available housing is not suitable for all residents. Folks are expected to begin living in extremely close proximity with others they do not know. Others are not receiving the support they require in their new housing, or that they were able to get from peers while living outdoors.

Further, it is unclear what an individual’s legal rights are in the new shelters. Several operating organizations have publicly declared that the *Residential Tenancy Act* does not apply to their housing. This eliminates any protections against eviction and leaves residents very little recourse if they encounter other tenancy issues.

The province’s recent efforts to provide affordable housing are commendable. Housing in Victoria is becoming more and more financially inaccessible and providing subsidized housing is an important step in addressing the affordable housing crisis. However, forcing people into temporary living situations they would never otherwise choose without a plan to provide permanent housing is an unjust and unsustainable band-aid solution. ■



(Cont'd from *Running to Stay Behind*, page 1)

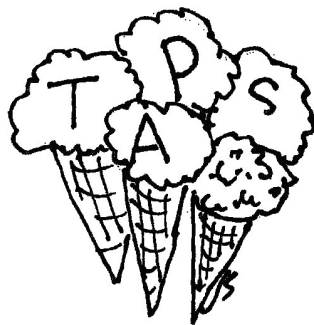
This is a problem for three main reasons. First, anyone looking for housing will be faced with housing costs that may be entirely out of reach. Secondly, given that landlords can charge 20 percent more for the same rental unit if they list it today, they are incentivized to end long-term tenancies. At TAPS we often see this occur under the guise of renovation or over small disputes that could otherwise be resolved. Third, the power differential between landlords and tenants is further increased as tenants feel trapped in tenancies that may not be safe or enjoyable because they can't afford to move.

These problems could be largely addressed with one policy: vacancy control. Currently, rent increases are controlled *during* a tenancy, but there is no limit to the amount landlords can increase the rent if there is a change in tenants. This is why available units are so much more expensive than occupied rental units: the "market" rate is uncontrolled and dictated entirely by landlord interests. A vacancy control policy would limit rent increases to a fixed percentage, even if there is a change in tenants (i.e. rent is controlled even when the rental unit is vacant). This policy was in place between 1974 and 1983 in BC and is currently enacted in PEI and Quebec.

TAPS helps hundreds of tenants every year who are facing precarious housing situations. We firmly believe that the government needs to implement a vacancy control policy if there is any chance of balancing the ledger between "income" and "expenses" for people relying on social support. Without it, the recent increase to income assistance rates is likely to go straight to landlord pockets rather than making a measurable difference in the lives of people living in poverty. ■

## TAX SERVICE

TAPS continues to help people file their income tax returns. This year, due to COVID restrictions, we are offering the service by drop off only. If you need your taxes done, just swing by our office at 828 View Street and pick up a tax package.



TAPROOT ARTISTS: Joan Stiebel & Robert Inglis

## TAPS STAFF

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## A LETTER FROM MEEGAN: DECAMPMENT

*By Bruce Livingstone*

Fluorescent orange and gunflint blue are the fashion forward statement this season in Meegan aka Beacon Hill Park. Like mycelium fruiting, tents suddenly colonized the Camas fields and Garry Oak bluffs when the first wave of the third concurrent health pandemic hit and the city discovered homelessness, which of course was living underground all along, waiting for optimal conditions to explode into consciousness with ferocious blooming. Stratified through flash freezing, seasoned by a winter of discontent, campers seek fallows in hyper-financialized pastures come real estate, finding post-Columbian barrens. The Save-On Foods shelter is not housing, it's less of a home than a tent, it's a bubble of a hundred or more indoors — prime conditions to spread COVID. Never mind: the neighbours want their rose gardens and bowling greens back yesterday, so bylaws are written regardless of pandemic timelines, legal eviction notices posted.

A thin blue line closed Dallas the morning B's body was discovered, and with investigative nondisclosure we volunteers on Cook were queried but uninformed. When M died in a van fire the next morning paranoia ran rampant with fear that we were witnessing a vigilante solution to homelessness. Peeling tires a meter away from the coffee on our cookstove, hurling "F\_\_\_ you" hate grenades, spitting vitriol at us from local airwaves; were they now murdering us?

While Island Health outreach teams sporting dayglo orange backpacks fan out through Meegan to distribute vaccine, the most vulnerable are plagued with irrational doubt. Science has little reach in the wifi-free wilderness. Rumours abound: the vaccine is experimental or causes autism, paralysis, green skin, contains a 5G microchip. Many refuse; mistrustful after repeated



relocations after red-zone re-mapping, surveillance that has tracked their every movement, seizing tents and belongings if one (like P) is away at Rehab or (like S) offers his tent to another after moving into a motel. Harvested by officers in the field, homeless numbers flow upstream from city to province, cross-referenced for outstanding federal warrants. Eligibility lists are drawn up and finalized, moving dates set. If not "home" during enumeration you're disqualified and must find another jurisdiction to be homeless in. ■

### WRITE FOR TAPROOT

Taproot welcomes articles, stories, and poetry from readers. Share your opinions, experiences, outrage, ideas and creativity. You can submit your writing by e-mail to [volunteers@tapsbc.ca](mailto:volunteers@tapsbc.ca), or by mail to 828 View Street, Victoria, V8W 1K2. Or drop your submission off in person at our office. If possible, include a phone number, e-mail address, or street address where we can reach you.

# WELCOME TO TAPS, RILEY!

Since TAPS opened its doors in 1989, we have had a fully volunteer run front desk reception, and we have been blessed to have had wonderful volunteers greeting our clients as they come into the office. However, while the front desk role was fairly straightforward back when we only had one or two advocates, as TAPS expanded, the complexity of the front desk role has steadily increased. At the end of last year, therefore, we decided to hire someone part-time to help with front desk reception. Riley Vaskic has been with us since the beginning of January, and she brings to TAPS a wealth of knowledge and experience gained as a shelter support worker and as an outreach and support worker at Cool Aid. We are all thrilled to have her at TAPS. Riley is on our front desk every Thursday and Friday. Welcome to TAPS, Riley!



## BECOME A TAPS MEMBER!

Want to support TAPS? Become a member! You will get the Taproot mailed or e-mailed to you.

### Together Against Poverty Society Membership Registration 2021

Together Against Poverty Society, 828 View Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1K2

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## UNHOUSED PEOPLE SPEAK OUT

*Submitted by Unhoused Homeless Committee within L'kwungen*

Unhoused people are speaking out against warehousing and forced social isolation due to “no guest” policies in “supportive” housing. As the deadline to end daytime camping approaches unhoused residents, indigenous and settler, living in Victoria parks are protesting their pending displacement and the lack of appropriate housing options.

The COVID pandemic prompted BC Housing to open up shelters and housing for people living in parks. Now the City of Victoria is moving to ban 24/7 camping in parks on the premise that all will be housed by May 1. Most of the housing options made available have blanket “No Guest” policies even in cases where people have individual units (e.g. motel rooms). While

many are choosing to move inside to escape homelessness, unhoused are raising the alarm about agencies’ policies that disconnect them from friends and family and cause lasting harms.

Ronald Dale Beland, a Stadacona Park resident, says “The COVID pandemic exacerbated the harms of social isolation – especially for those living with disabilities and chronic health issues – like my friend and a large portion of the unhoused community. It’s cruel to force us to choose between staying outside where we can access family and community, and housing and shelters where we lose that support.” ■



## PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

TAPS has advocates who can help you apply for Person With Disabilities status (PWD) through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. TAPS can also help you with an appeal if you have been denied. Call us at 250-361-3521 for more information. If you are at the appeal stage, get in touch with us as soon as possible after receiving your letter of denial, and tell the receptionist you are calling about a disability denial.

## BECOME A MONTHLY TAPS DONOR!

With your support, individuals and families living in poverty in our region will have access to critical legal advocacy and educational services. TAPS’ services are unique in their design and delivery, and offer knowledge, empowerment and, in many cases, a new sense of hope.

Select a monthly amount that’s affordable to you, and TAPS will automatically deduct it from your checking account each month. You’ll never have to write a check, buy a stamp or find an envelope again.

Monthly donors receive the following benefits:

- Updates on TAPS programs
- Annual tax receipt for all your donations during the year
- Taproot delivered to your e-mail.

See the monthly donor form on page 8 of this newsletter.

## AS SPRING BRINGS NEW HOPE

*By Rough Blue*

As spring brings new hope and promise, and as the vaccines roll out and we finally move towards an end to the hellish pandemic, Canada, and to a point the whole world, can finally breathe a deep sigh of relief—something no one could do without a twinge of guilt while so many others were still vulnerable and facing death and despair. The return to normal will come. The economy will open up. Jobs will need new workers. Boundless fortune.

But to what end? A return to what normal? This past year should have been a learning opportunity. I'm afraid that opportunity will be missed. This past year should have made apparent how many people hang in the balance between shelter and homelessness. To return to a normal where efforts to alleviate serial poverty are swept away would be foolish, blind and selfish. The pandemic brought to the forefront the need to act for the greater good.

And let me say here to the individuals and groups that have acted for the good of the population: You are so appreciated. The handmade signs for frontline workers. Food bank donations. Even those who have left Christmas lights out for a little beauty in the midst of such a dark and dismal year.

But can't we learn from this? A commitment to all makes its way to those who are most vulnerable. Shedding a bit of ego or personal finance and paying it forward has a compounding effect. A healthy community benefits all, not just in a time of crisis, but in general. Perhaps some have learned this to lasting effect. Others, though, may only aim for a return to the familiar. That is a loss. Why return to a system that works for so few? Or, it could be said, not at all.

I suppose it depends on perspective: shareholders vs. the people, reducing it to the simplest terms. Rogers wants to acquire Shaw and become the second largest telecom company in Canada. That's cool. I just want people to keep in mind that as we emerge from the crisis of the pandemic, the crisis of poverty remains. And while we can celebrate and breathe easier emerging from one, let's not allow the other to be overshadowed. We have built a foundation to fight the pandemic; let's use that foundation to address poverty. We could house and feed the homeless and hungry, end wage disparity, and address the factors contributing to poverty. I think Canada, from every community to the whole nation, would be stronger and more able to survive the next crisis if we do.

Well, 5G is cool too. So is drinkable water. It's been stunning to see Christmas lights behind cherry blossoms, but let's work on the sources that produce and prolong suffering. ■





## ABOUT TAPS

TAPS was established and registered as a society in 1989. We provide legal information and representation on issues relating to income assistance, provincial and federal disability benefits, residential tenancy, and employment standards to people in the Greater Victoria area. We also provide public legal education in these areas and on broader poverty issues.

You can reach us between 9:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, by phone at 250-361-3521 or in person at 828 View Street. The office is closed daily for lunch between noon and 1:00 pm and is closed to walk-in clients on Monday and Friday mornings.

## TAPS IS FUNDED BY



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## Thank You for Supporting TAPS' Legal Advocacy!

The best way to support TAPS is by becoming a monthly donor! Please submit this form and your voided check to: Together Against Poverty Society, 828 View Street, Victoria, BC, V8W 1K2

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please debit my bank account (attach VOID cheque):*

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*I would like this donation debit to be processed through my account on the 25th of each month.*

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This donation is made on behalf of:    an individual    a business

*A tax receipt for your total monthly donations will be sent to you at the end of the calendar year.*

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