
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Housing and Social Development

ACT WILL PROTECT HOMELESS IN EXTREME WEATHER

VICTORIA – The Province has introduced the Assistance to Shelter Act to keep homeless British Columbians safe from extreme weather by giving police the authority to take people at risk of harm to emergency shelters, announced Housing and Social Development Minister Rich Coleman.

“When an extreme weather alert has been issued, we want people at risk off the streets and into safe accommodation,” said Coleman. “This legislation will help to prevent tragedies such as the one that occurred last winter when a woman died trying to keep warm in a makeshift shelter.”

Police will have to be satisfied people are at risk of harm due to the weather conditions before taking them to an emergency shelter. Once at the shelter, they have the right to decide whether or not they want to stay at the shelter. The shelter may provide the opportunity for individuals to connect with outreach workers, who can help them access medical, financial and long-term housing supports.

“The RCMP fully endorses efforts to assist homeless and less fortunate people on our streets,” said Gary Bass, RCMP Deputy Commissioner, Pacific Region. “We recognize that for the most part, these individuals do not commit crimes, but consider it a key pillar of our Crime Reduction Strategy in terms of those people who are on the street and may find themselves in situations where they are committing criminal offences to support themselves. We view this as a positive step forward in terms of assisting not only the homeless but those making efforts to avoid a criminal lifestyle.”

Victoria Police Chief Jamie Graham said, “The terrible dilemma for police officers is when the weather is so extreme and vulnerable people are found who are at very substantial risk. When a mental illness or addiction takes over rational decision making, the only hope is for the police to have supportive legislation allowing them to take people to safety. This is socially relevant policing in its purest form. “When the weather changes for the worse, many of our community's most vulnerable need a helping hand, and many times we are the only ones out there. I welcome any initiative that gets needy people the help they deserve.”

The new legislation will apply to adults age 19 and older when an extreme weather alert has been issued for a community. It is expected that the legislation will be in place this winter. Youth are covered by the Child, Family and Community Service Act, which provides the framework for Child Protection Services.

“What we want to do is show people the supports available to them, including a warm bed and a hot meal,” said Coleman. “Our hope is that once they see these supports, they’ll decide to stay at an emergency shelter, safe from the risks of extreme weather.”

The Province provides annual funding of \$56 million for shelter supports and has more than doubled the number of year-round shelter beds across B.C. from just 700 in 2001 to 1,500 today. An additional 1,200 beds are available during extreme weather situations.

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