

What is the Extreme Weather Response (EWR) Program?

The Extreme Weather Response (EWR) program funds community-based services that provide temporary emergency shelter spaces during periods of extreme winter weather which threaten the health and safety of individuals experiencing homelessness. This program is designed to provide time-limited, weather responsive, temporary shelter spaces in communities where emergency shelter bed capacity is insufficient during extreme weather conditions.

The EWR program is a community led initiative that is made possible through donated space, in-kind services, and the commitment of volunteers. The EWR season represents a time when community members and advocates work together to provide safe refuge and hospitality in addition to emergency shelter during the winter months. EWR sites typically accommodate overnight mat programs and operate out of existing shelter locations, faith-based organizations, and community spaces.

Operational funding for this program is provided by the Province of British Columbia through BC Housing. More information about how this provincially funded program supports local community-based services can be found in the [Extreme Weather Response Program Framework](#). Service agreements with BC Housing can be made directly with the site or are supported through a partnership between community and social service organizations. EWR programs are typically hosted in spaces donated by community partners and staffed by experienced non-profit operators. The expected outcomes of the EWR program are decreased health and safety risks to persons experiencing homelessness during periods of extreme weather.

When do EWR Sites Open?

The EWR season starts on October 15th and operates through April 15th of each year. This provincially funded program supports Extreme Weather Response programming during the winter months only and does not fund Extreme Weather Response programming in community outside of this season timeline.

The EWR program is a weather driven program and EWR sites open nightly only when and Extreme Weather Alert has been issued.

Who coordinates the EWR program?

Each participating community has a Designated Community Representative who monitors conditions and activates, extends, and cancels Alerts in accordance with legislated protocols outlined in the Assistance to Shelter Act. Designated Community Representatives also lead capacity expansion efforts, manage any media enquiries in consultation with BC Housing, and work with community partners to develop and implement an EWR Community Plan.

What is an EWR Community Plan?

Annual community plans provide an operating structure for the EWR program and are written by each community. Each plan outlines the roles and responsibility for community organizations, service providers, and local coordinators. They describe services and hours of operation of EWR sites, outline Alert criteria and procedures for how to call an extreme weather alert. Implementation of community EWR plans continue to rely heavily upon supports through volunteers and donated services and resources.

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Although distinct, each community plan provides a framework for expanding resources to reduce the substantial threat to life and/or health for persons experiencing homelessness during extreme weather conditions. Annual EWR plans are finalized through consultation with a broad array of community partners and social service organizations and require approval from BC Housing.

What is the Assistance to Shelter Act?

Issuing an Extreme Weather Alert through the EWR program activates the [Assistance to Shelter Act](#) for the period of the alert. In 2009, the Assistance to Shelter Act (ASA) became a piece of legislation which grants local police and the RCMP the capacity to assist a person who is experiencing homelessness to a shelter during extreme weather alerts. Once in the shelter, the individual may choose whether or not they want to stay.

The Act was created as a tool to support law enforcement officers to assist those who are experiencing homelessness and sleeping outside to access safe spaces during extreme weather conditions. Upon issuance of an Extreme Weather Alert, the Assistance to Shelter Act is activated throughout the duration of the alert. Upon cancellation of the Extreme Weather Alert, the authorities in the Assistance to Shelter Act for police to assist persons at risk due to extreme weather conditions are no longer in effect.

What are EWR Shelters Like?

Extreme Weather Shelters are located in a building or a portion of a building that is used to provide temporary overnight accommodation to meet an individual's immediate basic needs for shelter during extreme weather conditions.

These sites are part of a continuum of resources designed to support those in need during the winter months and are intended to support a temporary crisis response in community. EWR services and resources are limited and are not intended to fill community needs around temporary winter shelter inventory, year-round shelter services, or supportive, transitional, and affordable housing options.

EWR sites typically support mat on the floor programs that are hosted in donated spaces which are vacant at night. EWR programs are often hosted in non purpose-built community spaces like a church basement or hall, in recreational facilities like a gym, or an amenity space in an existing shelter like a cafeteria or meeting room.

The range of services available through the EWR program is dependent on each individual site. Not all spaces are accessible, and the ability to accommodate couples, pets, and storage of personal belongings varies from site to site. In addition, the ability to offer showers or laundry services may be limited if those amenities are not available through the donated space. At minimum mats, blankets, snacks, warm drinks, and washroom access are provided to each guest accessing an EWR shelter.

Hours of operation at EWR shelters may vary as well depending on how each site is utilized during the day and when the space is needed for other purposes. EWR programs often close in the early morning hours to accommodate other community programming taking place in the space during daytime hours.

Who Supports the EWR Program and How?

BC Housing

- Approves Community Extreme Weather Response Plans and Extreme Weather Shelter Nightly Operating Budgets.
- Works with Extreme Weather Shelter Providers and operators to ensure formal agreements meet BC Housing policy requirements and community need.
- Funds the eligible expenses of Extreme Weather Shelter(s) included in a community's Extreme Weather Response Plan. These expenses include: Shelter staff costs (salaries and benefits), volunteer honourariums, food costs, cleaning and laundry services, guest transportation to and from Extreme Weather Shelters, and First Aid Supplies.
- Collects and reviews occupancy reports and invoices in the event of an Extreme Weather Alert.

Designated Community Representative

- Acts as media relations contact, in cooperation with BC Housing.
- Works with the community to assess capacity and identify additional spaces that can accommodate EWR programming when needed.
- Assists to develop, update, and submit an EWR Community plan in accordance with BC Housing's EWR Program Framework.
- Issues or cancels extreme weather alerts for a municipality in a prescribed manner outlined in the community Extreme Weather Response Plan and Assistance to Shelter Act.
- Supports communication with local police and RCMP Detachments to ensure the Assistance to Shelter Act remains active until the alert is canceled.

RCMP or Local Police Departments

- Supports the activation of the Assistance to Shelter Act by assisting people who are experiencing homelessness to access shelter in the event of an extreme weather alert.

Extreme Weather Shelter Operator

- Ensures required fire inspection and safety plans are in place to operate an Extreme Weather Shelter onsite. Each site must have the appropriate approval and comply with all requirements outlined by the local municipality.
- Submits an Extreme Weather Shelter Nightly Operating Budget to BC Housing for approval. This budget outlines operational expenses associated with providing safe nightly accommodation for guests during an extreme weather alert.
- Staffs and manages all nightly operations when Extreme Weather Alert are issued.
- Collects and reports data to BC Housing on a nightly basis during an Extreme Weather Alert. Occupancy data outlines the following information nightly: number of guests, self-identified gender and age category of guests.
- Submits invoices for related costs as identified in the approved Extreme Weather Shelter Nightly Operating Budget. Invoices are to be remitted twice a month in accordance with BC Housing's invoicing schedule.
- Notifies the Designated Community Representative and BC Housing of any issues that may affect the sites' ability to respond to an extreme weather alert.