

2023 VCH Winter Health Resource for Community Organizations

Who is VCH Seasonal Readiness?

Email notifications are sent jointly from Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Public Health (Priority Populations, Healthy Environments and Climate Change programs). The content and health guidance is intended for organizations supporting their community during extreme weather events. Email us to sign up: seasonalreadiness@vch.ca

What does VCH Seasonal Readiness email me?

- Seasonal readiness webinars and engagement opportunities
- Pre-season messaging and updates
- Health guidance during extreme weather events. Currently extreme heat and cold events, but the team is working to expand to guidance for other events, such as air quality and flooding.

How does VCH Seasonal Readiness support community organizations?

- Connections to health services, such as mental health and substance use.
- Letters of supports for funding, programming, community planning.
- Health guidance for planning, response, and daily operations. E.g. infection control, water quality, climate change, extreme weather events, harm reduction.
- Health training and presentations. E.g. Heat check-ins, seasonal readiness and naloxone training.
- Community projects to learn how environmental hazards impact community. E.g. air quality monitoring and engaging people with lived experience.
- **Please email seasonalreadiness@vch.ca to discuss how we can support your work.**

Contents of this Resource

Winter Resources	page 2
Sign Up for Weather Notifications	page 2
Follow Verified Emergency Information	page 2
Sign Up for EWR Shelter Notifications	page 2
People at Higher Risk from Winter Weather	page 3
Health Effects from Winter Weather	page 3
Supportive Community Level Actions	page 4
Types of Winter Shelter	page 5
Winter Shelters in VCH Region	pages 6-8

Winter Resources:

- VCH [Winter Webpage](#) with resources for the public and community organizations (translated).
- Prepared BC [Severe Winter Weather and Storm Preparedness](#): Webpage and translated guides
- VCH [Frostbite Poster](#)
- VCH [Hypothermia Poster](#)
- VCH [Toxic Drugs: Ideas to Stay Alive](#)
- Towards the Heart [Getting Prescriptions and Carries During Extreme Weather](#)
- Environment and Climate Change Canada [Wind Chill Index](#)
- For people having difficulty paying for heat, consider exploring [BC Hydro's Energy Conservation Assistance Program](#) and [check if your city or town has a rent bank](#).

Sign Up for Weather Notifications

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) is the official Canadian weather service used by health authorities, government, and emergency management professionals.

- ECCC provides **early warning email notifications** for organizations involved in emergency response. Email MeteoPac@ec.gc.ca to sign up. Ensure you also sign up for public weather notifications below.
- Sign up for [EC Alert Me](#) for ECCC **public weather alerts by email**. Select the communities and weather events you would like to be notified about.
- Download the [WeatherCAN](#) app to for ECCC **public weather alerts on your cell phone** (including air quality alerts from Metro Vancouver and Smokie Skies Bulletin). Select the communities you would like to be notified about.

Follow Verified Emergency Information

- EmergencyInfoBC [website](#) and [@EmergencyInfoBC](#) on social media for provincial emergency events.
- Local government or First Nation's website, Facebook and sometimes X (formerly Twitter).
- [Local health authority](#) website and social media platforms.

Sign Up for Emergency Weather Response (EWR) Shelter Notifications

Check out the [BC Housing Shelters List](#) to see if there are [Emergency Weather Response shelters](#) in your community. If there are, sign up to be emailed when they are activated. Within Metro Vancouver, contact Homelessness Services Association of BC at info@hsa-bc.ca. Outside of Metro Vancouver, contact BC Housing.

People at Higher Risk from Winter Weather

Anyone exposed to winter weather conditions can experience cold-related injuries, but some people are at higher risk for frostbite, hypothermia, and other impacts, including:

- People who are unhoused or insecurely housed
- People who use substances, including alcohol
- People spending long periods of time outdoors (e.g. work, recreation, transportation)
- People living in housing without enough insulation, electricity or heat (including energy poverty)
- People with a pre-existing health conditions, including disease of the heart, lungs, or conditions that impact blood circulation (e.g. diabetes or some medications that constrict blood vessels)
- Older adults, infants, and young children

Health Effects from Winter Weather

Hypothermia

- VCH [Hypothermia Poster](#): How to identify and treat hypothermia
- VCH [Winter Webpage](#) (translations available)

Frostbite

- VCH [Frostbite Poster](#): How to identify and treat hypothermia
- VCH [Winter Webpage](#) (translations available)

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning can happen when appliances malfunction or are used in spaces without adequate ventilation (e.g. blocked chimney, closed windows or inside a tent or vehicle). You cannot see, smell or taste carbon monoxide but it can be deadly in minutes. Share the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning and prevention tips:

- [Unsafe heating sources for indoor or enclosed spaces](#) (graphic)
- [Common sources of carbon monoxide poisoning](#) (graphic)
- [Common CO myths and facts from Ontario fire fighters](#) (17 min video, start at 51:35).

Mental Health and Substance Use

For many, winter can take a toll on physical and mental health and well-being. Supports include:

- VCH [Mental Health and Substance Use](#)
- VCH [Harm Reduction](#)
- VCH [Overdose prevention sites](#)

Slips and Falls

Everyone, regardless of age and ability, can be at risk for falls. Over the winter, emergency department visits or hospitalizations due to slips and falls increases. But falls are preventable with the right tools and preparation.

- VCH [Fall prevention Tips](#)
- VCH [Fall prevention programs and resources](#)
- FHA Video: [Tips for walking outside](#)

Supportive Community Level Actions

*We understand these actions may not be feasible for every organization or may be done in partnership with local governments, First Nations, or other organizations. These are example actions that could be done as funding and capacity allows. Please email [VCH Seasonal Readiness](#) to discuss how we can support you in this work (see page 1 examples).

Actions **BEFORE** a Winter Weather Event:

- Learn about [winter weather hazards in your area](#) and [sign up for weather notifications](#) (page 2).
- Revise or create a winter weather response plan, with actions like education, outreach to high-risk community members, providing a warming space, hot food/ drinks, transportation to shelter, etc.
- Update other winter-related plans, such as business continuity plans. Will programs be cancelled during weather events? How will staff and community be notified so they do not attempt to travel in winter conditions?
- Consider operating an [Extreme Weather Response shelter](#) (often done in partnership, see page 5).
- Prepare for winter response: coordinate with partners, identify high risk community members, gather equipment, print information materials, train staff and volunteers, etc.
- Encourage community members to [make a winter plan](#), find a winter weather buddy and [learn how to prevent winter health risks](#) like hypothermia, frostbite, carbon monoxide poisoning and falls (see page 3).
- For community members who are unhoused or inadequately housed, begin handing out and posting information about warming spaces, shelters, hot food, and drinks. Consider preparing and distributing maps of winter services ([City of Vancouver](#) and [North Shore Homelessness Task Force](#) already have maps).
- Share community needs you may be hearing with local governments and other partners. E.g. Additional shelters/ warming centres, cultural or other needs in these spaces, winter equipment, transportation, etc. [VCH Seasonal Readiness](#) is also happy to amplify these requests.

Actions **DURING** a Winter Weather Event:

- Activate winter response plans. Notify staff and ensure frontline staff are aware of shelters and other resources.
- Seek out opportunities to participate in community emergency coordination calls for situational updates. If you are not sure if your community has one, please reach out and [VCH Seasonal Readiness](#) can help find out.
- Increase community messaging:
 - Updates and messaging from government, First Nations, and health (page 2).
 - Dangers of being exposed to even mildly cold weather and [prevention tips for hypothermia/ frostbite](#).
 - Locations of shelters, EWRs, warming spaces and hot food/ drink.
 - Encourage community to check on neighbours, friends and family, especially older adults or people with disabilities who live alone. Are they keeping warm? Homes should be at least 21°C if infants or older adults are present. Do they need supplies, transportation, assistance clearing snow or other supports?
 - Available winter health services, including mental health and harm reduction (page 2).
- Conduct outreach to high-risk community members, especially those who are unhoused or inadequately housed. Provide warming supplies (e.g. hats, mitts, socks, hand warmers, snacks, Vaseline, etc). Help them access warming or emergency shelters.

Cold Weather Shelter Options within the VCH Region

Information pulled from [BC Housing](#), [City of Vancouver](#) and other local government or First Nations shelter webpages.

For the most up-to-date information: Check the [BC Housing shelter registry](#) or [BC211](#) or call the shelter directly.

Year-Round Shelters (permanent)

- Open year-round, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Provincially funded and run by NGOs

Temporary Shelters

- Temporarily open to supplement permanent shelters. Operated year-round, usually day and night.
- Some may be open for months, some for years, depending on funding and need.
- Usually funded by BC Housing in partnership with local government(s) or First Nations
- Examples: Powell River

Temporary Winter Shelters

- Generally open Nov 1 to April 30
- Generally closed May 1 to October 31
- Usually open at night, 7pm -7am.
- Usually funded by BC Housing in partnership with local government(s), First Nations, NGOs or combinations.
- Examples: Gibsons

Emergency Weather Response (EWR)

- Only available Nov 1 to March 31
- Only at night, hours vary
- Funded by BC Housing, space often donated by NGOs (sometimes local government or First Nations) and operated by NGOs (sometimes local government or First Nations).
- Thresholds: set by community planning table (HSABC/ BCH, local government, First Nations, operators, health reps etc). Not historically coordinated across communities or in alignment with other shelter options, e.g. daytime warming centres.
- [Learn more about EWRs.](#)

Warming Centres

- Usually daytime. Some extend overnight but do not provide mats/ beds (e.g. Vancouver). Some only open over night and essentially EWR but called “Warming Centre” (e.g. Richmond).
- Often provide warm drinks, food and sometimes referrals to other services
- Hosted by local governments, First Nations or NGOs
- Operated by local governments, First Nations, NGOs or a combination.
- Funding: Many streams (UBCM, split between local governments, EMCR)

Warming Spaces

- Publicly available spaces with heating rebranded as warming space, e.g. mall
- No services provided because not opened specifically for this use.

Scan of Cold Weather Services in the VCH Region: November 2023

Community	Winter Shelters	Emergency Weather Response (EWR) Program	Warming Centre / Spaces
Brief scan completed November 2023. Shelter information may change quickly so this list may not be accurate. Check BC Housing shelter registry or BC211 for more up-to-date information. Always confirm availability directly with the shelter.			
City of Richmond General Cold Weather Info	Richmond House Emergency Shelter, operated by the Salvation Army. Shelter Info	Richmond House Emergency Shelter expands into an EWR when thresholds reached. EWR Info	Nothing announced for 2023/2024.
City of Vancouver General Cold Weather Info	Many shelters and different operators. Check City of Vancouver list of Shelter Beds in Vancouver	5 downtown, 1 in Marpole Check City of Vancouver list of Shelter Beds in Vancouver Activated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> temperatures near zero with rainfall that makes it difficult or impossible for those experiencing homelessness to remain dry Sleet or freezing rain Snow accumulation Sustained high winds Temperatures at or below 0°C, or "feels like" 0°C with wind chill Rainfall of at least 50mm in a 24-hour period 	In Vancouver, warming centres are activated as a life-saving measure when the temperature reaches -4°C or below (or it feels like -4°C or below). See the City of Vancouver map below for shelters, warming centres and daytime service centres. 2023/2024 City of Vancouver map of winter shelters and warming centres
North Shore North Shore Emergency Management General Cold Weather Info City of North Vancouver General Cold Weather Info District of North Vancouver General Cold Weather Info District of West Vancouver General Cold Weather Info	Year-round shelter operated by Lookout and located in North Vancouver. Shelter info	North Shore Neighbourhood House EWR Shelter, operated by Lookout and located in North Vancouver. No thresholds available. EWR info	North Vancouver City Library offers a warm refuge during open hours . North Shore Homelessness Task Force has a resource map and list and a Keeping Safe resource card which list available services on the North Shore (e.g. shower programs, meals, drop in spaces).

Community	Winter Shelters	Emergency Weather Response (EWR) Program	Warming Centres/ Spaces
Brief scan completed November 2023. Shelter information may change quickly so this list may not be accurate. Check BC Housing shelter registry or BC211 for more up-to-date information. Always confirm availability directly with the shelter.			
Bowen Island General Cold Weather Info		Had EWR in 2019 but does not seem to be operating still, per Lookout and BCH websites.	
Lions Bay General Emergency Info			
District of Squamish General Cold Weather Info	Year-round shelter operated by Helping Hands Society. Shelter info	Year-round shelter expands into an EWR. Operated by Squamish Helping Hands Society EWR Info	Warming centres only seem to be activated for severe storms/ power outages. Monitor District of Squamish Facebook for activation and hours.
Resort Municipality of Whistler General Cold Weather Info		EWR run by Whistler Community Services Society. EWR Info Activated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temperatures are -10 degrees Celsius or below, OR • Temperatures are 0 degrees Celsius WITH adverse weather conditions (snowfall, heavy rainfall, blizzard, etc.) 	Sometimes open warming centre at the library for power outages or cold weather warnings. Monitor Resort Municipality of Whistler Facebook Page for activation and hours.
Village of Pemberton General Emergency Info			
District of Lillooet General Cold Weather Info		Community Cares Homeless Shelter at the Lillooet Friendship Centre (Emergency Weather Response Shelter). No thresholds avail. EWR Info	
Town of Gibsons General Cold Weather Info	Temporary shelter at St. Bart's Church, operated by the Salvation Army. Shelter Info		Sometimes warming centres have been open during events. Monitor Gibsons Facebook Page and website .

Community	Winter Shelter	Emergency Weather Response (EWR) Program	Warming Centres/ Spaces
Brief scan completed November 2023. Shelter information may change quickly so this list may not be accurate. Check BC Housing shelter registry or BC211 for more up-to-date information. Always confirm availability directly with the shelter.			
District of Sechelt General Cold Weather Info	Year-round and temporary shelter spaces, operated by Raincity Housing. Shelter Info	Raincity and local outreach services provide survival supplies to people living outside, e.g. tent and sleeping bags. More Info	Does not seem to have an official warming centre but municipal reps have said the library and mall are available during opening hours.
Shíshálh Nation			<p>Winter 2023/24: shíshálh community members are welcome to warm up at the Community Member Services building (5559 Sunshine Coast Highway) during office hours (Mon- Fri, 8:30 am- 4:30 pm). Note: Nation offices are closed for the holidays from Dec 21 to Jan 2, 2024. Call 604-885-9404 for more information.</p> <p>For updates, Nation members can follow the shíshálh Nation Members facebook group and general public can follow shíshálh Nation’s facebook.</p>
Powell River General Cold Weather Info	Temporary shelter (operated by Lift Community Services). Shelter Info		
Bella Coola			
Anaheim Lake			
Bella Bella			Warming centre seems to only be for one-off emergencies, like power outages. Follow the Heiltsuk Tribal Council facebook page for updates.