



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

## KELOWNA & DISTRICT BRANCH

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### Homelessness: Reasonable help, not reasonable force

We have serious concerns about the Assistance to Shelter Act, which has just been introduced, not surprisingly, the same day the Olympic flame came to Canada. As well-intentioned as it might be, this is neither a humane nor a practical solution to really help people. “Reasonable force” will take the place of reasonable help. We believe that the Shelter Act is a short-sighted band-aid solution to a complex problem. It provides a hammer when a hand is needed.

People with mental illnesses and/or addictions are overrepresented in the homeless population. Most homelessness counts ask people who are homeless and don't use shelters why they don't use them. In Vancouver, and mirrored in other regions, some say they are turned away or couldn't get to a shelter, meaning that even now people wanting shelter beds aren't getting them —something the proposed Assistance to Shelter Act doesn't address. But more importantly, a significant number of homeless people just don't like shelters. Shelters can be an extremely distressing choice for many with mental illnesses, and being forced to go to one could trigger some into a mental health crisis, which is traumatic for the individual, the other shelter residents and the shelter staff and volunteers. This law, if passed, could actually push the most vulnerable into further hiding and removing them from their supports.

CMHA Kelowna has been successful in providing innovative Outreach Services to those who are homeless and at-risk of homelessness in our community. Over the past 4 years we have helped well over 500 people to access services, find and maintain housing, create personal support networks and piece together the building blocks to a better future. Our success is based upon the creation of a relationship with the most marginalized in our community, and working effectively with other service providers to ensure that people, no matter where they are at, are seen, and offered practical supports. Getting someone inside is a process, and that process is based on a relationship.

We have several other areas of concern around the legislation. First, BC's *Mental Health Act's* already has provisions for police intervention for someone with mental illness and/or addiction (including if they are homeless) in the case of involuntary treatment. The Ministry's guide to the Act also describes the critical steps and procedures that apply when patients are released from hospital on extended leave. In both cases, if the Assistance to Shelter Act is about saving lives, the Mental Health Act is already a tool for many homeless people with mental illness and/or addiction problems.

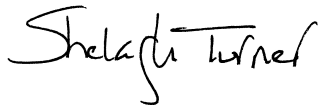
From our perspective, the issue has never been the legislative framework; it's the lack of resources in the community. This has been well documented by international, national and provincial reports including Simon Fraser University's Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction. The Vancouver Police Department, the Auditor General and the Union of BC Municipalities have also all called on the government to build the capacity in the community to address the needs of people with mental illness and addictions who are homeless. It's not a

lack of knowledge on what to do; it's a lack of resources and political will to make it happen. Community based services are already stretched beyond their limits. As important as bricks and mortar, clever, practical supports that have shown to make a difference must be enhanced in communities.

While shelters are a temporary measure to address homelessness, we need a long-term solution to provide both housing and the social supports necessary for homeless individuals to lead productive lives in the community. We know homelessness and a lack of supported housing are major issues for small and large communities across BC. Continued and sustained investment in permanent supported housing beds is crucial to address the current and growing need. The provincial government has made many investments in this area but they can't do it alone. We need the federal government to play its part in building housing. MP Libby Davies recently introduced a private members bill calling for a National Housing Plan. Let's just do it.

If we're going to have a legislative solution, let the new law be a right to effective treatment and support. People who are homeless who willfully choose not to use shelters in the winter are between a rock and a hard place. Isn't it time we gave them a third option?

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a charitable association that has been providing community supports to people with mental illness for over 50 years. We promote the mental health of all and support the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness in our community. We do this through public education, community-based research, influencing public policy and providing direct service and supports. CMHA has been on the leading edge of innovative projects in primary care, police training, criminal justice diversion, income assistance and housing in our province.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shelagh Turner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Executive Director  
CMHA Kelowna