

COMOX VALLEY

WINTER SHELTER STRATEGY

2026-2030



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Coordinating Efforts Across the Comox Valley	4
KEY ROLES IN SHELTER PROVISION	4
Action Plan Summary	5
ADDRESSING IMMEDIATE NEED	5
PROVIDE ENOUGH WINTER SHELTER TO MEET CURRENT NEEDS.	5
STRENGTHENING THE SYSTEM OF SERVICES ACROSS THE VALLEY	7
LASTING, SYSTEMIC CHANGE.....	8
Glossary	9
1. Why a winter shelter strategy	12
1.1 STRENGTHENING THE HOUSING WHEELHOUSE	12
THE HOUSING WHEELHOUSE	13
THE FOCUS OF THIS PLAN: WINTER SHELTERING SERVICES.....	15
1.2 CURRENT SITUATION	17
SERVICE GAPS	17
POPULATION SPECIFIC NEEDS.....	20
PLANNING IMPLICATIONS	23
THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS BEYOND EMERGENCY SHELTERS	24
2. Creating this Plan.....	25
2.1 ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS	25
2.2 BACKGROUND STUDIES.....	25
NESTING STRATEGIES	26
3. Coordination	27

3.1 ROLES IN ESTABLISHING SHELTERS	27
3.2 COORDINATING EFFORTS IN THE COMOX VALLEY	27
3.3 COORDINATING BODY STRUCTURE	32
4. Actions	36
4.1 IMMEDIATE NEED: BRIDGING TO BRAIDWOOD	36
INCREASE THE NUMBER OF SERVICES AVAILABLE TO FILL CRITICAL SERVICE GAPS.	
36	
LAND USE PLANNING AND APPROVALS	39
CREATE AN ANNUAL COMMUNITY PLAN	42
RE-EVALUATE ONCE BRAIDWOOD IS OPEN	43
4.2 ENHANCING THE ECOSYSTEM OF CARE	43
INCREASE DIVERSITY IN SERVICES.....	43
ENGAGEMENT TO DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING	44
4.3 LASTING, SYSTEMIC CHANGE	46
ZONING AND LAND USE REGULATION.....	46
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND SUPPORT	47
5. Monitoring and evaluation.....	51
MONITORING STRATEGIES	51
EVALUATION METRICS.....	51

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Winter shelter services have unique challenges in launching and operation that deserve special attention and their own strategy to address. This is that strategy.

The Comox Valley needs to act urgently to provide winter sheltering services in the Comox Valley. In the Comox Valley there are over 137 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness¹. Of those 137 people, 107 were staying outside in parks, alleys, or vehicles. Unsheltered people are at increased risk of illness and death due to exposure to the elements in winter.

With no permanent sites currently available for winter sheltering services to be provided, this strategy is intended to:

- Assess the level of need for winter sheltering services, both currently and in the next 3-5 years.
- Identify ways to fill those needs.
- Understand potential barriers to filling those needs.
- Describe the roles and responsibilities for overcoming barriers and filling community needs for municipalities, service providers, community organizations, and the broader community.

In this strategy, you will find information on:

- The current state of need for winter sheltering services.
- Projected future needs.
- Details on diverse types of services needed.
- An action plan that considers immediate needs, improving the system of care in the Valley, and creating lasting, systemic change.

Throughout the document, there are special sections that share lessons learned from the process of activating a Temporary Winter Shelter within the City of Courtenay from 2024-2026. The City took a leadership role in this work with funding from the CVRD and captured valuable learnings along the way. They are shared here to show how the actions came to be. They also give important nuance and context to the actions that can be used going forward.

The cornerstone of this action plan is the description of what coordination and leadership is needed to activate and oversee winter shelter services that meet the needs of our community in the Comox Valley. The biggest lesson learned has truly been how important local government initiative is in getting a new site activated. The intricacies of funding, land use approvals, cost for setting up a shelter, public and neighbourhood engagement, community safety, and ensuring that people with experience are leading requires skilled coordination and the cooperation and participation of local governments.

¹ 2025 Point in Time Count: [Comox Valley - 2025 Homeless Count](#)

COORDINATING EFFORTS ACROSS THE COMOX VALLEY

Coordination among the many organizations with a role in making winter shelters happen is necessary for this work to happen at all. Leadership of this action plan needs one assigned coordinator who has the authority and resources to take action, supported by a collaborative coordinating body that has representatives from each of the local governments, key service providers, and people with lived and living experience.

Key Roles in Shelter Provision

Funders	Operators and Providers	Approvals and Land Use	Oversight of Health and Safety
BC Housing, Private Donations/ Fundraising	Non-profit organizations, community groups, faith groups	Municipal Governments	Building Code, Health Authorities

Other tasks required to launch a shelter program include:

- time and effort spent identifying locations,
- applying for permits and land use,
- applying for funding,
- renovations and site improvements/ capital improvements,
- public engagement and communication, and
- ongoing coordination of services to respond to changing community needs.

Unless a coordinator is in place to convene partners and provide guidance and support to them to fulfill their roles, this action plan will struggle to be implemented. The first step of this work is to invest in this position being established.

ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

The following tables summarize the actions outlined in this plan. Details of how the actions came to be and information to help shape their implementation is in the Action Plan section of this document.

Addressing Immediate Need

The first priority is finding indoor sheltering space for the over 130 people who are currently unsheltered in the Comox Valley.

In the immediate future, services that provide protection from winter conditions, even if they are not ideal, are needed. The first set of actions in this plan is focused on a 'Bridge to Braidwood', or actions to protect people experiencing homelessness during the winter months between now and when Braidwood is opened.

Provide enough winter shelter to meet current needs.

Action	Description	Timeline
Continue to provide 971 Cumberland for use as a shelter site for the term of the existing Temporary Use Permit	971 Cumberland Road is currently providing the only Temporary Winter Shelter service in the Comox Valley.	Immediate
Identify 2-3 Additional Temporary Winter Shelter sites to serve the more than 130 people currently left without any shelter, and the more than 80 will remain unsheltered after Braidwood opens.	Secure sites in each community for Temporary Winter Shelters and/ or Extreme Weather Response Shelters (Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland).	Immediate

Create a Community Plan for Extreme Weather Response Shelters	Each year, communities must submit a plan to BC Housing in order to secure funding for Extreme Weather Response services. This strategy should be created by a working group or collaborative of service providers but owned by a single entity who has the funding and capacity to activate the plan as needed on an annual basis. Preparation should begin in spring/ summer each year.	Annually in Spring, completion by September
Re-visit Winter Shelter Strategy once Braidwood opens and the 2028 PIT Count is complete. Update Actions to reflect changes	The opening of Braidwood will mean a significant change in services for winter sheltering. A re-evaluation of service levels and needs in the community will need to be conducted at that time. Service gaps and strategies to fill them need to be addressed at that time.	2027/2028
Proactively identify pathways to land use approval for winter shelters within each municipality.	Each local government needs to examine their processes for land use related to shelters and create a pathway for approval within their current system.	Immediate
Identify a lead person or organization for coordinating land use approval processes.	The process of getting land use approvals requires specific knowledge of planning procedures, and time and resources for applications, fees, engagement, and other aspects of the process. A leading person should be identified to give direction and support landowners, non-profits, and local governments throughout the process.	Immediate
Match engagement to the community needs, not procedural minimums.	Land use approvals typically have a minimum requirement for engagement with the public. It is recommended to review each process to determine whether the minimum requirements meet the needs of the community and do more engagement than required as needed.	Ongoing

Strengthening the System of Services Across the Valley

Shelter services are not one-size-fits-all. One of the challenges to providing services is the diverse needs of shelter guests. The Comox Valley needs a variety of services so that people can access supports where they feel safe, welcomed, and stable. The needs of people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness change as available services change. Ongoing engagement with people with lived experience is part of ensuring the right services are established.

Action	Description	Timeline
Create population specific shelter sites.	Two to three more sites for services, whether year-round or winter only, that can accommodate population specific needs are required. Geographic distribution of services across the Comox Valley also needs to be considered.	1-4 years
Establish a strategy for communication and inclusion of PWLLE.	Working with PWLLE, establish a living document that outlines how to communicate and involve people at all stages of the spectrum. This document should outline for each level who to communicate to, how to communicate to them (i.e. posters, meetings, location of posters, etc.), and what needs to be in place to support involvement.	1 year
Outreach and engagement with people who are couch surfing and living in vehicles	A current gap in data is information related to the experiences of people living in vehicles and 'couch surfing'. Special outreach and engagement are needed, with a key guiding question being whether they would use shelters if services were available, and if so, what services they need. Engagement for this plan has indicated that non-shelter support services may be preferred for this demographic – places to shower, do laundry, cook, and access supports may be more appropriate than sleeping accommodations.	1-2 years
Reinstate and formalize the Weekly Conversation Circles	Ensure continuity of Conversation Circles at the Library (or a similar way for people with lived and living experience to gather) and continue providing honoraria for participation for those with lived and living experience of homelessness.	1 year

Lasting, Systemic Change

Finally, work needs to be done to support lasting systemic change and to recognize emergency shelters as part of the housing wheelhouse. This includes proactive land use planning that considers sheltering sites as community infrastructure, which could remove barriers and give local governments the ability to establish parameters related to appropriate locations. It also means changing how shelters are supported within their neighbourhoods by addressing narratives that prevent our community from discussing the challenges and potential solutions in a pragmatic and compassionate way.

Action	Description	Timeline
Ensure that sheltering is a permitted land use in every community in appropriate locations.	Work collaboratively across the Valley to ensure consistency in policy and zoning approaches to temporary shelters (TWS and EWR). Identify conditions and siting criteria for shelter sites.	2-5 years
Engage with the public to identify community preferences on shelter locations.	Planning for the non-market portions of the housing wheel should be done to identify what the community wants to see in terms of diverse options that meet the needs of community now and in the future. Public engagement across the Comox Valley should be done to identify community preferences on form and location of sites. Open, transparent engagement can support a community-wide vision of how to locate these services as integrated parts of our housing systems. Preferences to consider may be distance from other types of services (for example schools), distance to other amenities, and transportation routes to and from sites.	2-5 years
Community Conversations	Community Conversations can be a way of bridging divides and awareness raising related to homelessness in the Comox Valley led by people with lived experience.	Ongoing
Create a space for community members to be engaged in solutions.	Community members are eager to find solutions to the issues facing our community. Community Dialogues, education, neighbourhood integration tables for specific sites, and other means of exploring practical, local solutions. The ultimate goal is to build more awareness of the crisis, as well as solutions that are available at all levels, from grass roots to federal policy, so that people can identify ways to be engaged and part of making positive change.	Ongoing

GLOSSARY

Homelessness

Homelessness is the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, and appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability of acquiring it. Homelessness exists along a spectrum that includes unsheltered homelessness, sheltered homelessness, temporary or provisional accommodation, and situations of housing precarity.

[homelesshub.ca]

To help make this clearer, the definitions below explain different types of homelessness, along with examples of how they may show up in real life.

Term	Definition	Examples
Unsheltered	People who do not have a place to live and are not staying in an emergency shelter. Sometimes called absolute homelessness.	Outdoors, cars, empty buildings.
Emergency sheltered	People who are staying in a short-term shelter because they have nowhere safe to go.	Staying in emergency shelters, transition houses, temporary winter shelters, recovery housing, hospitals, detox facilities, women's shelters, or other temporary accommodation programs.
Temporarily Staying with Others	People who do not have their own place and are staying somewhere only for a short time.	Transitional housing, living with others temporarily ("couch surfing"), staying in medical institutions or treatment programs without housing.
At risk of Homelessness	People who currently have housing, but their situation is not stable, and they could lose it.	Housing is too expensive, risk of eviction, unsafe or overcrowded living conditions, going through a crisis (jobless, health issues, family violence).

Core Housing Need

A household is considered to be in **core housing need** if its housing is inadequate, unsuitable, and/or unaffordable, and the household would need to spend 30% or more of its before-tax income to access acceptable housing in its community. Acceptable housing is housing that meets standards for adequacy, suitability, and affordability. People in core housing need are at high risk of homelessness because only one unexpected life event (like an illness, unexpected large repair bill, etc.) could put them in a position of losing their housing.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is the standard source used across Canada for this definition. [cmhc-schl.gc.ca], [cmhc-schl.gc.ca]

Shelter

A shelter is a facility whose primary purpose is to provide temporary accommodation for people experiencing homelessness and to meet immediate needs such as safety, shelter, food, hygiene, and connections to housing and support services. [bchousing.org], [law.cornell.edu]

This strategy primarily addresses two specific shelter services funded by BC Housing: Temporary Winter Shelters and Emergency Weather Response Shelters.

EXTREME WEATHER RESPONSE (EWR)

Extreme Weather Response (EWR) is a provincially funded program that provides temporary emergency shelter spaces during periods of extreme winter weather that threaten the health and safety of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. EWR shelters are activated in response to weather conditions and provide time-limited emergency protection when existing shelter capacity is insufficient. [bchousing.org], [hsa-bc.ca]

TEMPORARY WINTER SHELTER (TWS)

Temporary Winter Shelters are seasonal emergency shelters that operate during the winter months, typically from October through April, to provide overnight accommodation, basic nutrition, hygiene services, and other supports to individuals who are unhoused or at risk of homelessness. They operate regardless of daily weather conditions and are distinct from Extreme Weather Response shelters. [bchousing.org]

Point-in-Time (PiT) Count

A Point-in-Time (PiT) Count is a coordinated community effort that provides a snapshot of homelessness over a single 24-hour period. It estimates the number of people experiencing homelessness and collects information about where people are staying, demographic characteristics, pathways into homelessness, and service use.

Housing Wheelhouse

The Housing Wheelhouse is a housing systems framework developed by the City of Kelowna that recognizes housing as an interconnected system rather than a linear continuum. The model acknowledges that people move between different forms of housing throughout their lives, that homeownership is not the end goal for everyone, and that communities require a diverse mix of housing options to meet changing needs.

[kelowna.ca], [comoxvalleyrd.ca]

Housing needs are not the same for everyone. A healthy housing system includes different types of housing to meet the needs of different residents. Here is a list of types of housing:

	Emergency shelter	Temporary shelter and basic supports for people who do not have a safe place to stay.
	Short-term supportive housing	Stable housing with supports for people who need extra help for a period of time before moving to longer-term housing.
	Long-term supportive housing	Housing with ongoing supports for people who need long-term help to live safely and well. There are different levels of support: • Supportive: Low support needs • Assisted living: Minor support • Residential Care: Full support
	Subsidized rental housing	Rental housing with lower rent for people with low or moderate incomes. It is often provided by non-profit housing providers, BC housing, or housing co-ops.
	Rental housing	Housing that people rent from a private landlord or housing provider. This can include apartments, townhomes, carriage homes, and single-family homes.
	Ownership housing	Housing that people own, such as a house, apartment, townhouse, or mobile home.



1. WHY A WINTER SHELTER STRATEGY

The Comox Valley needs to act urgently to provide winter sheltering services in the Comox Valley. In the Comox Valley there are over 137 people experiencing unsheltered homelessness², meaning they are sleeping outdoors, in vehicles, or in other highly temporary situations like staying with a friend or at a hotel with no place to return to. Of those 137 people, 107 were staying outside in parks, alleys, or vehicles. Unsheltered people are at increased risk of illness and death due to exposure to the elements in winter.

With no permanent sites currently available for winter sheltering services to be provided, this strategy is intended to:

- Assess the level of need for winter sheltering services, both currently and in the next 3-5 years.
- Identify ways to fill those needs.
- Understand potential barriers to filling needs.
- Describe the roles and responsibilities for overcoming barriers and filling community needs for municipalities, service providers, community organizations, and the broader community.

A Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan is also being created. The Winter Shelter Strategy seeks to align with this work but focuses on a specific area of need. Winter Shelter services have unique challenges to launching and operation that deserve special attention and their own strategy to address.

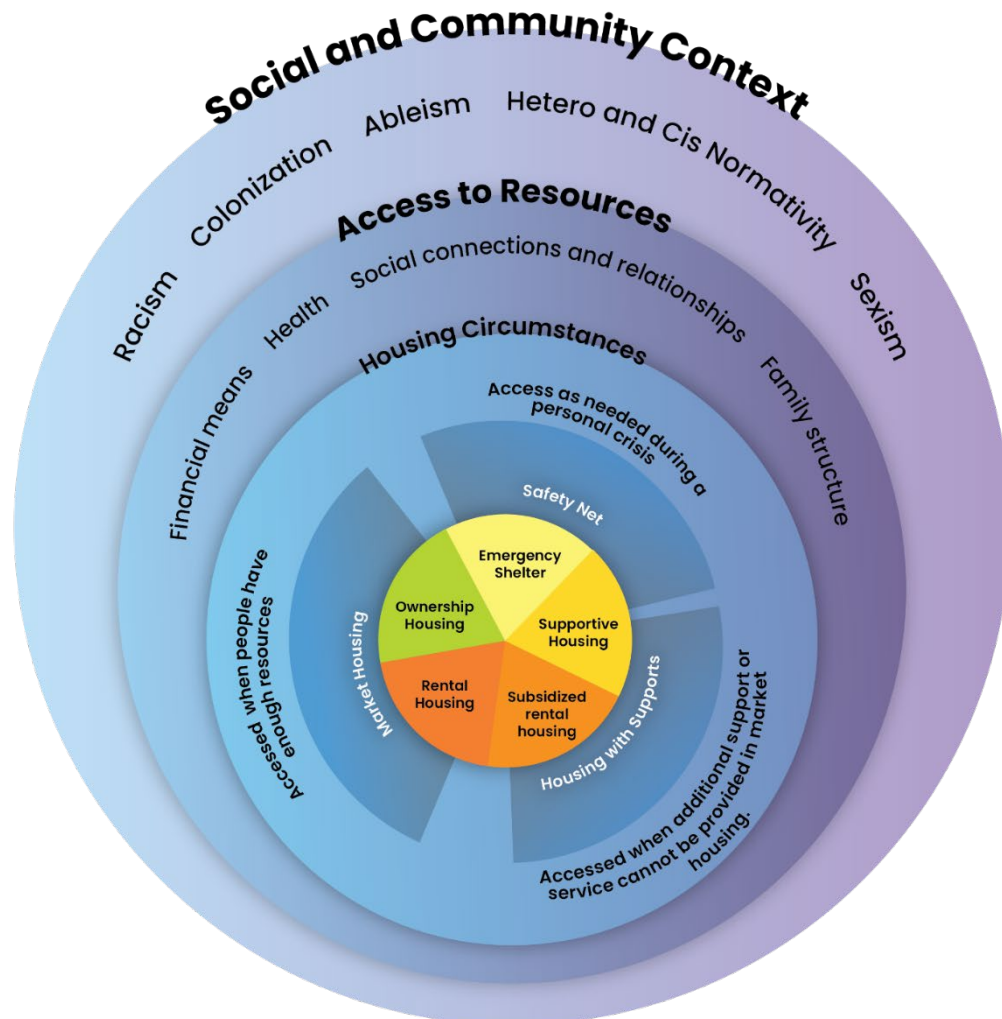
1.1 Strengthening the Housing Wheelhouse

While the Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan oversees the broader system of care, **this action plan is focused on emergency shelter as a life-saving service during the coldest time of the year.** Ultimately, the goal is to establish services that can shorten or prevent the amount of time people spend experiencing homelessness in our community. Access to shelter, however temporary, can be a first step toward connecting a person to the care and consistency they need to transition to permanent shelter and/or housing. Shelters provide connections to social and health services that can assist people in finding and keeping housing.

² 2025 Point in Time Count: [Comox Valley - 2025 Homeless Count](#)

The Housing Wheelhouse

The Housing Wheelhouse illustrates a housing system that includes a variety of housing tenures and reflects the reality that people's housing needs change over time, influenced by changes across their lifetime, crises they may face, and access to resources such as financial means, health and wellness, and social capital. The changes over time a person may experience in their housing scenario are affected by the social and economic conditions around them, as well as the institutions that govern and provide service in our societies. The wheelhouse reflects the full spectrum of the types of housing a person may need access to throughout their lifetime.



Overall, the Wheelhouse contains 3 categories of different housing tenures and supports. These include:

Market Housing

Market housing includes rental or ownership residential units of any housing form for which prices are set by the private market. These include:

- Homes that are owned privately are not purchased or maintained with subsidies.
- Market rental housing can refer to any type of housing available on the market, including purpose-built apartments, duplexes, townhouses, single-detached dwellings, secondary suites, and accessory dwelling units, to name just some.
- Market rental housing includes market rate rentals that achieve tenant affordability through rental assistance programs (i.e. RAP and SAFER).

Housing with Supports

Long-term or permanent housing that has financial or other supports for residents to assist them with maintaining their housing while living independently. This can include:

- Subsidized housing where residents pay rent geared to their income (typically 30% of gross household income).
- Non-profit housing / social housing – rental housing that is owned and operated by community-based, non-profit societies or governments. The mandate is to provide safe, secure, affordable accommodation to households with low to moderate incomes.
- Supportive Housing³ that provides ongoing specialized assistance so residents can live independently. Examples are housing for people with mental illness, seniors who require services like meals, housekeeping, and social activities, etc. It does not include personal assistance services such as dressing, medication, or bathing.

Safety Net Services

Safety Net Housing includes temporary shelter and housing services that provide crisis response and/ or transitional housing programs. These housing types offer support services that help residents move towards independence and self-sufficiency. This can include:

- Emergency shelters for people experiencing homelessness (including Winter Shelters)
- Safe Houses and Transition Houses for women and children fleeing violence

³ Supportive housing is a term used in both the Housing with Supports and Safety Net housing types to recognize that the housing may be intended to be temporary (in the case of Safety Net housing category) or ongoing (in the case of Housing with Supports category).

- Housing for people who have been homeless or are at risk of homelessness and need temporary supports (typically less than three years) to work towards their independence
- Recovery homes for people receiving mental health or substance use treatment

The Focus of this Plan: Winter Sheltering Services

There are two types of winter shelter programs funded by BC Housing: Extreme Weather Response Shelters and Temporary Winter Shelters. A community may have one or more of each of the programs depending on the needs of the community and capacity to provide services.

Extreme Weather Response Shelters (EWRs)

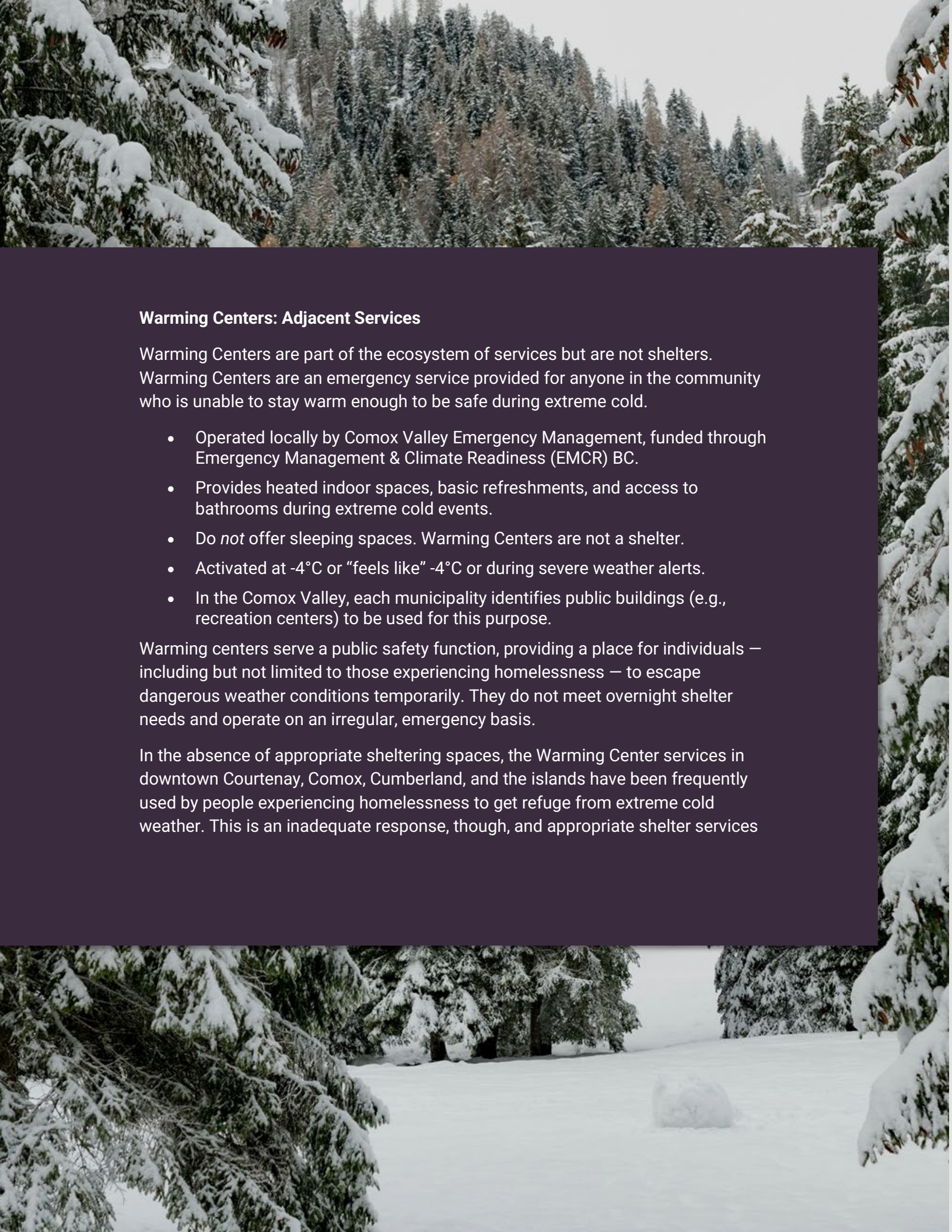
EWRs serve as an emergency survival intervention, offering essential shelter during extreme conditions. They are overnight shelter services that operate in certain winter weather conditions, typically related to prolonged periods of rain or snow, cold temperatures below 0 degrees Celsius, or extreme weather such as high winds. Because they are only open during specific weather conditions, they lack the stability and wraparound supports many people need to move toward housing stability.

- Governed by BC Housing's EWR Program Framework and the Assistance to Shelter Act.
- Funded for minimal operations – includes food per diems, minimum required staffing, and basic supplies only.
- Does not include capital, lease, or site renovation costs.
- Services are inconsistent and reactive – activation is night-by-night based on weather and staffing availability.

Temporary Winter Shelters

These shelters offer individuals a stable overnight space for several months but typically do not provide daytime programming or intensive case management.

- Operate nightly or 24-hours from November 1 to April 30, regardless of weather.
- Offer sleeping spaces (beds or cots), meals (on-site or via partners), and limited on-site supports.
- Funded through BC Housing agreements with selected service providers. Funding includes lease and some capital expenses for initial renovations to make a site suitable.
- Provide more consistent service than EWRs but remain short-term and seasonal.



Warming Centers: Adjacent Services

Warming Centers are part of the ecosystem of services but are not shelters. Warming Centers are an emergency service provided for anyone in the community who is unable to stay warm enough to be safe during extreme cold.

- Operated locally by Comox Valley Emergency Management, funded through Emergency Management & Climate Readiness (EMCR) BC.
- Provides heated indoor spaces, basic refreshments, and access to bathrooms during extreme cold events.
- Do *not* offer sleeping spaces. Warming Centers are not a shelter.
- Activated at -4°C or “feels like” -4°C or during severe weather alerts.
- In the Comox Valley, each municipality identifies public buildings (e.g., recreation centers) to be used for this purpose.

Warming centers serve a public safety function, providing a place for individuals — including but not limited to those experiencing homelessness — to escape dangerous weather conditions temporarily. They do not meet overnight shelter needs and operate on an irregular, emergency basis.

In the absence of appropriate sheltering spaces, the Warming Center services in downtown Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland, and the islands have been frequently used by people experiencing homelessness to get refuge from extreme cold weather. This is an inadequate response, though, and appropriate shelter services

1.2 Current Situation

The 2025 PiT Count showed a slight decrease in the total number of people experiencing homelessness but a significant increase in the number of people who are unsheltered. It is important to understand that Point in Time counts are an imperfect methodology (see the limitations in the report) and are considered an under-count. This undercount means that the count found that *at least* 218 people are experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley. Of those counted, *at least* 137 individuals were unsheltered, and over 100 of those were sleeping outdoors or in vehicles. Many others counted as “sheltered” were in hospitals, detox facilities, or transition housing for people fleeing violence, not in designated shelter beds. While overall numbers may be decreasing, the need for consistent, reliable shelters and safe indoor spaces to get people off the street/out of neighbourhoods and into care is increasing.

Current Services

There are currently two year-round shelter programs operating in the Comox Valley: Comox Valley Transition Society’s Connect Temporary Shelter and Salvation Army’s Pidcock House. Combined, these services provide 63 shelter beds to the community. The recent temporary use approval of 971 Cumberland Road for sheltering, first activated in the winter of 2024/25, adds another 18 shelter beds during the winter season.

Future Services: Braidwood Shelter

BC Housing has purchased land in Courtenay to develop a new purpose-built shelter and supportive housing site at Braidwood and Ryan Road. The Braidwood shelter site is expected to become active in Fall 2027, however delays are possible and need to be planned for. This site proposes to provide 70 year-round shelter beds and as many as 30 Extreme Weather Response beds (additional sleeping spaces open during extreme weather activations). The site will also include 77 new supportive housing units, expected Winter of 2027.

Service Gaps

The Comox Valley’s sheltering system does not meet the needs of the region’s population—particularly during the winter season - when exposure to the elements increases risk to life and safety, and demand for shelter spikes. At the time of writing (2026), the current system depends heavily on temporary programs that cannot reliably serve all who require shelter. There is a planned purpose-built shelter (Braidwood) expected to open in Courtenay in 2027, but this will not meet all of the needs in the Valley, especially in terms of number of beds, distribution of services, and meeting diverse needs.

Shortage of Beds

The Braidwood shelter site goes a long way toward providing necessary housing and shelter services; however, it still leaves a gap in needed beds (Table 1). When Braidwood officially opens, Connect Temporary Shelter and 971 Cumberland Road will close, resulting in the closure

of 51 shelter spaces currently available in winter. It is estimated that 100 people will remain unsheltered year-round, and 70 will remain unsheltered in winter.

Once the supportive housing units open, a significant number of people may be relocated to this housing, but service providers have noted that, given long waitlists for BC Housing supportive sites, it is not certain how many of these beds will be filled by people who are currently unsheltered and how many will be filled by people from waitlists who are currently living in temporary situations. If all the beds are filled by people who are currently unsheltered, the total number of people unsheltered year-round will be reduced to about 30. This is not a guarantee, however, and should be approached with caution when trying to determine future need.

Data	#	Notes
Total number of People experiencing homelessness in 2025 Point in Time Count	218	<i>This is a minimum; PiT acknowledges that this number is always an undercount.</i>
Sheltered	81	Connect Temporary Shelter – 33 Pidcock House – 30 971 Cumberland – 18 (winter only)
Unsheltered	137	<i>This is a minimum; PiT acknowledges that this number is always an undercount.</i>
Net new beds at Braidwood (year-round)	37	70 new beds at Braidwood – 33 beds due to closure of Connect = 37 new year-round beds
Gap Year round	100	137 people – 37 new year-round beds = 100 people remain unsheltered year-round
Net new winter beds at Braidwood (Extreme Weather Response)	12	30 Extreme Weather Response Beds – 18 Temporary Winter Shelter Beds due to closure of 971 Cumberland= 12 new Winter shelter beds during extreme weather. Total additional extreme weather beds = 30
Gap in Winter	70	100 people unsheltered year-round - 30 winter beds = 70 people remain unsheltered in Winter

Lack of Geographic Distribution

We know that people live in unsheltered and unsafe conditions throughout the Valley. However, shelter services are concentrated in Courtenay, with no shelter programs operating in Cumberland, Comox or the Electoral Areas in the Comox Valley. This concentration of services means that anyone who requires shelter services in the Comox Valley must relocate to

Courtenay, becoming geographically removed from their home community. It also means that people who may need services but are unable to travel or feel unsafe accessing centralized services (for a variety of reasons) are left unserved. It is also understood that many people live in vehicles, trailers or other situations that may not require a place to sleep but do need warm, indoor spaces and access to services. The majority of those experiencing homelessness outside of Courtenay are in this situation and have distinct needs for services.

Access to winter sheltering services is needed in all communities to support people living without adequate shelter, including people outdoors and people living in vehicles, trailers, or homes without adequate heat due to inability to afford heat or lack of proper heating. The type and level of service may differ by community, but concentrating service in Courtenay not only puts pressure on one municipality and its residents to respond, but also leaves people in other communities without service.

Lack of Diversity in Services

The Comox Valley has only a few shelters. Each shelter fits a certain need, but there are some specific population needs that remain unaddressed. Even when Braidwood opens and new beds are added, a single site and program will not address population-specific needs such as the unique needs of youth, seniors, women, and Indigenous people. These needs are described further below. There is also a gap in shelter services for people in recovery. A strong support system needs to consider diverse needs and help coordinate response for people without housing to find appropriate shelter for their needs. Work needs to continue to secure sites tailored to youth, seniors, women, and Indigenous people.

Population Specific Needs

Youth⁴

Appropriate youth services are a key part of preventing and reducing the impacts of homelessness in our communities. The Youth Homelessness Assessment (2025) notes a decrease in the average age of youth who are homeless (from 21 in 2023 to 18 in 2025). Approximately 1/3 of all people who experience homelessness were youth in care, with that rising to nearly half of Indigenous people who experience homelessness. For people under 25 experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley, the average age of their first experience of homelessness was 14. The majority of youth homelessness in the Comox Valley is hidden, with 'couch surfing' a common theme.

About 1 in 5 of people surveyed in the 2025 Point in Time Count were youth (under the age of 25).

Youth require developmentally appropriate, safe, and accessible services. Most shelters in BC are designed for adults, meaning youth must be referred to separate programs. Youth shelters often have unique reporting obligations (e.g., to the Ministry for Children and Family Development). By nature of their age, there are different eligibility and safety considerations in place for services youth may be referred to, such as income assistance or employment programs. Youth also require space that fosters autonomy, dignity, and trust — often

through peer support and low-barrier engagement. Because youth are a vulnerable population, it is often not appropriate for them to be sheltered at adult-oriented facilities. Youth need their own services that can respond to the complexities they are experiencing and are specialized in assisting them to navigate services.

Seniors⁵

The rate of seniors experiencing core housing need and homelessness are increasing across Canada. Increasing cost of living, especially housing, and static retirement income is resulting in more and more seniors faced with the inability to cover monthly costs. Half of seniors in BC have an after-tax income below \$32,000. Seniors who experience homelessness have high rates of depression. They are also likely to have age-related health and mobility issues that require environmental adaptations to serve properly.

About 1 in 3 people experiencing homelessness in the Comox are seniors.

Older adults may face physical or cognitive challenges that require adapted spaces — such as raised beds, accessible bathrooms, and on-site health supports. Shelters must also support navigation of income supports (CPP, GIS) and healthcare systems, and be equipped to address chronic illness or mobility needs. Cold weather poses particular risks for this population, making

⁴ Youth Housing Needs Report 2025 Comox Valley. (2025) Prepared for the John Howard Society by Stephanie Hendrickson Consulting and Turner Drake and Partners, LTC.

⁵ Aging in Uncertainty: The Growing Housing Crisis for BC Seniors. (20323). Kadowaki, L., Bridgefoot, G., Cohen, M.

Prepared for the United Way of British Columbia.
<https://homelesshub.ca/resource/aging-uncertainty-growing-housing-crisis-bc-seniors/>

reliable winter shelter access a health imperative.

Women⁶

Women face unique vulnerabilities when experiencing homelessness. There are significantly higher rates of human trafficking and physical and sexual abuse for women experiencing homelessness. Additionally, intimate partner violence or family violence is a common pathway into homelessness for women and girls, making trauma-informed and secure shelter services critical for serving their needs.

Women who experience homelessness are more likely to be in 'transactional' housing situations, such as staying in or forming relationships with men (for youth this is sometimes with a significantly older man) in exchange for housing, or behaviours like survival sex or trading things for shelter.

About 1 in 3 people experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley are women. It is estimated that 7% of women in Canada have experienced hidden homelessness at some point in their lives.

Without intentional design, women and gender-diverse individuals may be deterred from accessing services altogether, leaving them more vulnerable to hidden or precarious homelessness (e.g., couch surfing, abusive partnerships, or survival sex).

CVTS does provide shelter services for women and children leaving dangerous situations such as intimate partner violence,

but there are otherwise no services tailored to women in the Comox Valley.

Indigenous People

Indigenous individuals are significantly overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness due to the intergenerational impacts of colonization, displacement, and systemic racism. Culturally safe services — rooted in Indigenous knowledge, language, and practices — are shown to improve engagement, healing, and housing outcomes. Whenever possible, Indigenous-focused services should be Indigenous-led, and include options for ceremony, community connection, and land-based practices. Cultural safety is not just a feature of service — it is foundational to equity.

Intersectional Experiences

People experiencing homelessness often live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities — such as being Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, living with a disability, experiencing mental illness, or having a history of incarceration or child welfare involvement. Intersectionality means that no single program model will meet all needs. Effective sheltering systems are flexible, inclusive, and equipped to offer differentiated supports, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Programs should reflect the diversity of community members through staffing, governance, and design — including peer support, culturally-specific services, and inclusive policies that reduce systemic barriers.

⁶ Women & Girls' Homelessness in Canada. (2026). Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network.

<https://womenshomelessness.ca/women-girls-homelessness-in-canada/>

The diverse needs of individuals experiencing homelessness require consideration. For the safety and comfort of guests, it is best practice to have sheltering spaces that meet distinct needs separately from one another. For example, youth are often better served in a youth-specific service that can offer tailored supports and women can benefit from shelters with enhanced safety protocols. This is why multiple locations with differing services are preferable to one single service trying to meet all needs.

Diverse Living Situations

The housing crisis has increased the number of people living in vehicles, RVs, tents, or temporarily doubling up with friends or family. These groups may not be counted in traditional shelter metrics but still face acute winter vulnerability. Many are also disconnected from formal services, making outreach and shelter access more difficult.

Services that offer flexibility and provide access to hygiene, warmth, and outreach can help minimize risk to people who do not require sheltering services but are at risk of weather-related health impacts.



Planning Implications

There is an urgent need for over 130 winter shelter spaces in the Comox Valley. In order to meet this need, creative solutions are needed. Leadership, decisive action, and collaboration need to be central to this strategy.

Issues that need immediate attention are:

- Service gap: over 130 people left unsheltered
- Geographic distribution: No services available outside of Courtenay

It is also important to continue to plan to establish future Winter Sheltering services. It is wise to plan for a shortage of at least 50 year-round and 20 winter spaces after Braidwood opens. It is also critical to establish a plan for the 2026/2027 and 2027/2028 winter seasons to accommodate the 137 (minimum) people unsheltered while Braidwood is under construction. While the site plans to open in 2027, recognizing the potential for construction delays a contingency plan for delays is important to address demonstrated need. Our community also needs to think about meeting needs of populations and people whose needs will not be met by the Braidwood facility, including youth, seniors, women, and people who want/ need to stay in their home community. Taking a proactive approach will only help to meet the true level of need in our community.

In terms of a Winter Shelter Program, Temporary Winter Shelter is preferable to Emergency Weather Response Services given the number of unsheltered members of our Comox Valley Community. The EWR program provides only limited service and is open inconsistently. This adds to disruption for both people accessing the service and the surrounding area as people travel to the shelter site, find it closed, and seek shelter nearby. Temporary Winter Shelters offer more consistent and reliable service and also provide funding for additional supports and services that can improve both the experience of guests and the integration of the program into the neighbourhood.

Having multiple sites that tailor programming to different needs is important to create an inclusive and diverse service system. To create a robust ecosystem of services, low-barrier shelters are needed but cannot be the only services. There are a wide range of people who use shelter services and have different access needs. There need to be services for people who are living outdoors and need additional support in winter or need to connect to services. There also need to be services for people who live in their vehicles, who work, or who are not comfortable accessing low-barrier services.

The Need for Comprehensive Supports Beyond Emergency Shelters

While emergency and winter shelter programs provide vital short-term relief, they primarily address immediate survival needs: a place to sleep, protection from the elements, and sometimes a meal. On their own, they are not designed to address the underlying causes of homelessness or to support long-term housing stability.

Many individuals accessing winter shelter services have complex needs, including mental health challenges, substance use, physical disabilities, trauma, or chronic illness. Without integrated support, people often cycle through emergency responses without moving closer to permanent housing.

Comprehensive shelter models — especially those operating year-round or in purpose-built spaces — are better equipped to include wraparound supports, such as:

- Mental health and addiction services
- Income assistance and ID replacement support
- Housing navigation and tenancy readiness
- On-site or mobile health care
- Indigenous wellness and cultural supports
- Peer support and lived experience engagement
- Social work or case management staff

Even with this support in place, it's important to recognize that housing pathways are rarely linear. Progress may involve setbacks, transitions between services, and continued support long after shelter use ends.

Strengthening these supports — and ensuring they are adequately resourced and culturally appropriate — is essential if sheltering programs are to serve as more than temporary relief.





2. CREATING THIS PLAN

This strategy takes the learnings from the process to identify spaces appropriate for and capable of accommodating temporary winter shelter generally and the actual process to develop the temporary winter shelter program at 971 Cumberland Road. The plan applies this information with the needs of the community to create a Winter Shelter Strategy for municipalities, service providers, and community organizations to work from.

2.1 Engagement and Community Conversations

This work has been informed by:

- **Engagement with people with lived and living experience:** two sessions held at the Vancouver Island Public Library Courtenay branch, with over 30 people attending
- **The Winter Shelter Working Group:** a multi-sector working group including municipal staff, social service providers, health services, BC Housing, RCMP, Bylaw and SD71
- **Review of zoning, bylaws, and other critical municipal documents**
- **Ongoing conversations** with the Coalition to End Homelessness Coordinator, Shelter operators in the Comox Valley, CVRD Social Planning staff, and the City of Courtenay departments of Planning, Recreation Culture and Community Services, Corporate services, Procurement, Operations and more.
- **Experience of City of Courtenay staff** during the work of activating an Extreme Weather Response shelter and later the process of temporarily permitting a Temporary Winter Shelter at 971 Cumberland Road
- **Community feedback** gained through City funding and participation in the Community Integration Table, a collaborative table that brought together neighbors and supporting organizations (RCMP, Island Health, etc.) during the 2025/2026 winter season of the 971 Cumberland Temporary Winter Shelter. This table met regularly throughout the season to proactively support integration of the shelter into the neighbourhood.

2.2 Background Studies

A **comprehensive background document** has been written that summarizes learnings and describes regional context, efforts to date, scope of need, and technical considerations for the successful provision of winter shelter in the Comox Valley. It offers detailed descriptions of:

- the scope of need for services;

- an ecosystem model of sheltering services;
- conditions for success for establishing and providing Winter Shelter Services, including considerations for operators, municipal staff, site selection and facility needs, and more;
- land use considerations and approval processes;
- public engagement and involvement; and
- a case study of 971 Cumberland Road that describes the work needed to activate a Winter Shelter service.

The background analysis provided critical context and technical basis for this strategy.

Nesting Strategies

The Comox Valley Winter Shelter Strategy (WSS) is not a standalone initiative — it is nested within the broader strategic direction set out in the Comox Valley Homelessness Plan and other related municipal and regional housing efforts. The intent of the WSS is to connect to existing goals, principles, and evaluation frameworks to ensure alignment and continuity in the region's homelessness response.

3. COORDINATION

In order to implement this plan, decisive leadership is needed. Ad-hoc working groups without facilitation, authority, or financial means are not effective at navigating the complex and often very time-sensitive realities of activating sheltering services. Responsibility for actioning this plan must be clearly established. Based on lessons learned over the last few years of trying to activate Winter Shelter services, it is best to have this role assigned to an actor with the authority and capacity to write and execute the plan.

3.1 Roles in Establishing Shelters

Table 1- Overview of Key Roles in Shelter Provision

Funders	Operators and Providers	Approvals and Land Use	Oversight of Health and Safety
BC Housing, Private Donations/ Fundraising	Non-profit organizations, community groups, faith groups	Municipal Governments	Building Code, Health Authorities

Other tasks required to launch a shelter program include:

- time and effort spent identifying locations,
- applying for permits and land use,
- applying for funding,
- renovations and site improvements/ capital improvements,
- public engagement and communication, and
- ongoing coordination of services to respond to changing community needs.

These other roles are not clearly assigned to any one party and require leadership and clear coordination. Collaboration is critical, but without clear assignment of these tasks and a process to ensure they are completed, no shelter site can be identified or activated. A coordinator and/or working group needs to be established to facilitate these tasks.

3.2 Coordinating Efforts in the Comox Valley

There are five key players or groups in actioning this plan: CVRD, Local Government, Service Providers, Funders (especially BC Housing), and people with lived and living experience. Their core roles, as identified in the background review, are summarized in Table 2 - Key Players and their Current Roles below.

Table 2 - Key Players and their Current Roles in the Comox Valley

CVRD	The CVRD plays a key role in efforts to address homelessness as the providers of the Homeless Support Service (HSS). They manage this service on behalf of Courtenay, Cumberland and Electoral Areas A, B, and C. The HSS collects funds and allocates them to non-profits working to address homelessness in the Valley.
Local Governments (Town of Comox, City of Courtenay, Village of Cumberland and CVRD Electoral Areas)	Coordinate, Approvals, Regulation, Provide Land/ Buildings Local Governments, as land use regulators and authorities, are crucial to activation. Local Governments also play a critical role in <u>overall leadership</u> of efforts to activate shelters within their communities. Their role is in all stages of site activation, from identifying potential sites, negotiating or securing leases for temporary sites, assistance with navigating the approval process for temporary use permits or rezoning, and selecting operators through the leasing or license to occupy process. This role may be fulfilled in part by a coordinating role or body; however Local Governments are still necessary partners to navigate their land use bylaws and approvals processes. They can significantly <u>reduce barriers</u> to activating shelters by: - helping to identify locations and siting criteria for shelters, - Showing willingness of elected officials from councils and boards to approve shelters in their communities, and - efforts to expedite and facilitate the process of approvals.
Service Providers	Provide services to individuals Service providers are the front-line <u>organizations that operate shelter services</u>. Their primary role is to improve the circumstances of individuals experiencing homelessness. Their work is part of public safety, creating safe and welcoming spaces for individuals, providing reprieve from the streets. They also connect people with other services, such as health, housing, and income supports. Shelters are often a key entry point to other services in the community. As relationship builders, service providers connect people experiencing homelessness with opportunities to be involved in creating solutions.
BC Housing	Funding Service Providers BC Housing is the primary funder of Winter Shelter Services, specifically EWR and TWS programs.

People with Lived and Living Experience	Advice and Leadership PWLLE bring knowledge, skills, and understanding to any work related to homelessness. Beyond being valuable knowledge holders, they are connected to the community of people experiencing homelessness and can act as a communication channel and bridge between communities within our Valley. People with lived and living experience are systemically marginalized and thus regularly excluded from decision making tables. Service providers can offer support, tools, and skill building to help individuals have positive experiences at these tables.
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Two services of the Comox Valley Regional District are directly related to this action plan: the Homelessness Supports Service (Bylaw No. 389) and the Comox Valley Housing Service (previously called the Emergency Shelter and Supportive Housing Land Acquisition Fund) (Bylaw No. 52).

The Homelessness Supports Service provides funds to one or more local non-government organizations based on a board approved five-year action plan to address homelessness in the Comox Valley. The fund is used to provide capital contributions and grants to organizations addressing homelessness in the Comox Valley.

To-date the non-government organization that adjudicated applications for funds to address homelessness was the Comox Valley Coalition to End Homelessness.

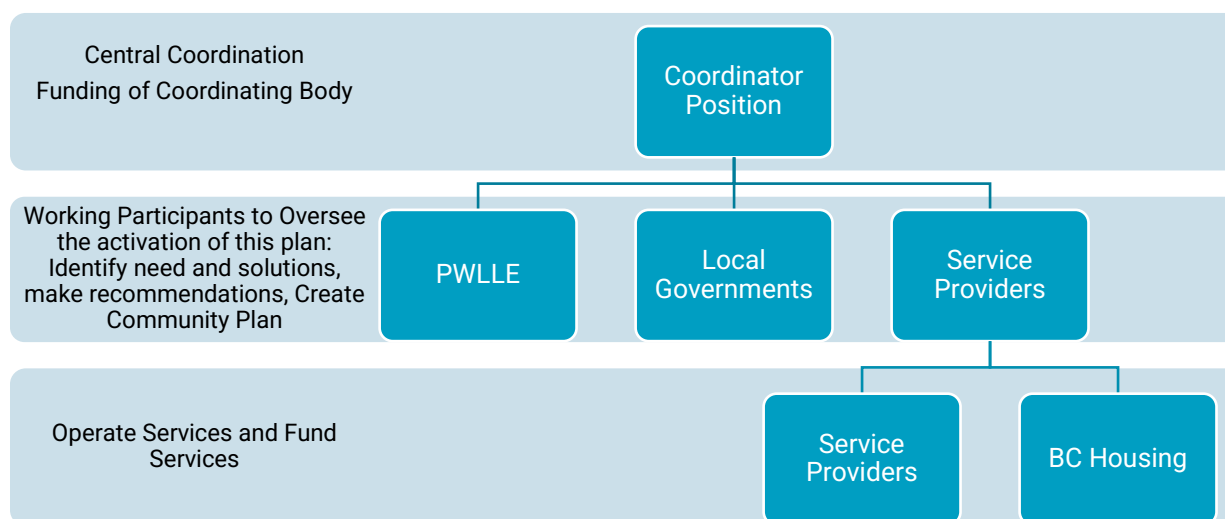
Comox Valley Housing Service (Emergency Shelter and Supportive Housing Land Acquisition Fund) exists for the purpose of providing non-market rental housing within Comox Valley Regional District through investing in, developing, acquiring, holding and disposing of lands and buildings for the purposes of providing non-market rental housing.

The services serve the City of Courtenay, Village of Cumberland, Electoral Area 'A' (Baynes Sound – Denman/Hornby Islands) excluding Denman and Hornby Islands, Electoral Area 'B' (Lazo North) and Electoral Area 'C' (Puntledge – Black Creek).

The Town of Comox does not participate in these services but contributes to the aims of both through other mechanisms such as grants and regular funding contributions.



Leadership of this action plan needs one assigned coordinator who has the authority and resources to take action, supported by a collaborative coordinating body that has representatives from each of the Local Governments, key service providers, and people with lived and living experience. Based on the existing roles of key players, the following distribution of tasks is recommended.



Central Coordination

Funding and dedicated staff for coordination to activate Winter Shelter Strategy is needed. Resources are needed to:

1. Provide overall leadership,
2. Establish and maintain a coordinating body to deliver on the Winter Shelter Strategy as part of addressing Homelessness in the Comox Valley, and
3. Fund initiatives of the working group, such as fees for community engagement during Temporary Use Permits, honoraria for people with lived and living experience, or renovations and supplies needed to activate spaces.

Coordinating Body

A coordinating body should be established that is involved in activating this strategy, monitoring outcomes, and reporting. This working group should be funded for facilitation and an operating budget for costs related to engagement and research.

Service Delivery and Funding

A variety of organizations will be required to take action to make this plan work. Service providers, with funding from BC Housing, will be tasked with operating shelters.

3.3 Coordinating Body Structure

Effective leadership and collaboration require there to be mechanisms for action. Careful consideration into the structure of the Coordinating Body is needed. A first task of this group will be to establish a terms of reference or other governance arrangement to support their work. This terms of reference should be clear on who has authority to act, how decisions are made, who is involved at the table, and what resources are available for their work.

Participants

Core members should include PWLLE, Representatives from each Local Government, CVEM, shelter service providers, and homelessness support services like outreach and health programs. PWLLE should be empowered to take leadership roles on the coordinating body.

Responsibilities

- Continuous monitoring of community need for Winter Sheltering Services
- Advising and providing leadership towards the actions in this plan.
- Creation of annual Community Plan⁷

This working group may be a sub-committee to the broader Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan Committee.

Decision Making

Balancing Collaboration with Decisive Action

Generally, consensus decision making is the preferred method of decision making for a collaborative group such as this. However, given the need to be opportunistic when activating shelters (i.e., swift action to respond to emerging opportunities), there may be times when engagement or consensus is not possible. To avoid any misconceptions that may result in disillusionment, any terms of reference should be clear about what decisions may be made unilaterally by service providers or municipalities, and which decisions will be brought to working groups and/or involve engagement. It is also critical for relationship and trust building to be done within the coordinating body so that members can know and understand who is making non-consensus decisions and why.

Leadership for the Coordinating Body must balance the need for decisive action when opportunities emerge with the relationship and trust building that is needed for a cohesive group. Clear communication and the authority to enter into agreements and make decisions will be critical.

⁷ The Community Plan is an annually created plan required for Emergency Weather Response Shelter funding from BC Housing. This plan includes definitions of extreme weather that would activate EWR programs, locations and operators of EWR sites, communications protocols for activation and deactivation of EWR services, and other relevant information. The Community Plan also identifies a lead person or organization that will be responsible for activation and communication related to EWR.

Local Government Leadership is Crucial to Success

Given the complexity of securing and activating a site, municipalities and the CVRD can play a significant role through leadership. Dedication of staff time and resources can help with site selection, managing lease agreements, making applications for use or major renovations, and other activities that can pose a risk or drain resources from service providers.

Given the challenging circumstances and timeline, the City of Courtenay Council direction and staff coordination was critical in securing and preparing a site for occupancy to support the 2024/2025 and subsequent 2026 winter season. The City was able to navigate the required processes with skilled staff familiar with building code, zoning and land use regulations, fire safety regulations and more. By bringing together a team of staff to proactively identify what was needed to activate the shelter, the City was able to coordinate in a way that non-profits and community groups are unable to. Regular multi-departmental meetings served as a space to discuss potential locations and the risks/rewards of various sites. Staff were then able to write reports to Council that spoke to the reality of potential sites and ways forward. This circumvented the need for an external party to first identify and negotiate the terms of using a site and then apply to the City without thorough knowledge of the requirements. Even where a community group or organization is aware of all of the intricacies, without inter-departmental collaboration the process is onerous and can take a significantly longer period of time.

Council direction to staff to act quickly and prioritize this work was also critical to ensuring that this work was done expeditiously. When local government staff is directly involved in identifying and negotiating sites, and determining the realities of what a site would take to be considered safe and usable. This changes the conversation from “is this site allowable” in response to the request of an outside party, to “is it possible to use this as a shelter site?” Changing this lens on the viability of a building generates a more realistic evaluation of suitability and creates opportunities that are often not considered.

It is essential to note that following site identification and selection, coordinated regional support from all local governments was sought. Direct financial contributions by the Town of Comox and the CVRD, through HSS Function participants, were critical to activation of the Winter Shelter. Without priority site selection, expedited land use approvals, and coordinated regional funding, the Winter Shelter activation would not have been possible.

Engagement and Inclusion of People with Lived and Living Experience

Ongoing inclusion in decision making and general engagement with PWLLE has been identified across engagements as critical to the success of this plan. PWLLE need to be involved in activities and conversations related to sheltering and supports in the Comox Valley.

Engagement should be ongoing, provided in a variety of means, and directly advise the coordinator and coordinating body on what is working and not working, and emerging needs.

From its inception, the Coordinating Body needs to include people with lived experience, including in the process of establishing a terms of reference and processes for working together. In addition to having PWLLE as coordinating body members, regular opportunities for formal and informal ongoing engagement should be provided for PWLLE.



Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan Coordination

While still in formative stages, it is likely that the Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan will also create a coordinating body. The coordination of the Winter Shelter Strategy may be best positioned as a working group of this body, however the work of this strategy needs to

begin immediately. It is not feasible to wait for the establishment of that body, and so a coordinating body may be started that is later moved to within the Comox Valley Winter Shelter Strategy.

Funding Coordination

The primary cost associated with activating this plan is funding the coordination work. A year-round coordinator position, with hours fluctuating seasonally, is needed to:

- Convene and facilitate a coordinating body for this plan
- Coordination between partners
- Respond to needs related to activating a shelter as needed, including gathering letters of support, searching for locations, activities related to securing a service provider, etc.
- Navigate local government processes such as TUP or Zoning change applications, leasing agreements, etc.
- Create the annual Extreme Weather Response community plan and confirm roles with partners.
- Be the primary contact for winter shelter and Extreme Weather Response programs in the Comox Valley.
- Reporting as needed, including on actions identified in this plan.

This position also requires an operating budget for the inclusion of people with lived and living experience in the work.

Estimated cost is \$65,000 to \$75,000 annually.





4. ACTIONS

4.1 Immediate Need: Bridging to Braidwood

The first priority is finding indoor sheltering space for the over 130 people who are currently unsheltered in the Comox Valley. In the immediate future, services that provide protection from winter conditions, even if they are not ideal, are needed. The first set of actions in this plan is focused on a 'Bridge to Braidwood', or actions to protect people experiencing homelessness during the winter months between now and when Braidwood is opened.

Increase the number of services available to fill critical service gaps.

Continue to provide 971 Cumberland for use as a shelter site for the term of the existing Temporary Use Permit	
Lead: City of Courtenay	Timeline: Immediate
971 Cumberland Road is currently providing the only Temporary Winter Shelter service in the Comox Valley. A Temporary Use Permit issued by the City of Courtenay is in place to allow the continuation of this use until 2028. The City is leasing the property to Lookout Housing and Health Society to operate the shelter with BC Housing funding.	

Identify 2-3 Additional Temporary Winter Shelter⁸ sites to serve the more than 130 people currently left without any shelter, and the more than 80 will remain unsheltered after Braidwood opens.	
Lead: Coordinating Body	Timeline: Immediate
Secure sites in each community for Temporary Winter Shelters and/ or Extreme Weather Response Shelters (Courtenay, Comox, Cumberland). Look for both additional permanent shelter sites and temporary ones to serve the next 2-3 years.	

⁸ **Temporary Winter Shelter is preferable to Extreme Weather Response Services.**

The EWR program provides only limited service and is open inconsistently. Temporary Winter Shelters offer more consistent and reliable service and also provide funding for additional supports and services that can improve both the experience of guests and the integration of the program into the neighbourhood

Lessons Learned: Site Selection

Site selection has been an ongoing challenge. In 2024, for example, the community plan was created but the reality of activating the identified sites prevented its full implementation. Especially in the case of Extreme Weather Response services, site selection is largely determined by opportunity rather than ideal scenario. It is in the best interest of the community to work with the *most feasible and immediately available opportunities* for securing sites for both.



Site selection is largely determined by opportunity rather than ideal scenario. Site selection is a significant challenge. Because there is currently no location secured for winter sheltering, it is in the best interest of the community to work with the *most feasible and immediately available opportunities* for securing a site. Initiating a new search, unless new buildings not previously explored become available, will take significant time and effort that may prevent the region from seizing opportunities to secure funding for the upcoming season.

Establishing a shelter requires leadership and coordination. There are aspects of establishing a new shelter that are not the clear mandate or responsibility of established organizations. Naming these roles and assigning them in a coordinated way is critical to success. Without this coordination there are key tasks that go undone.

Recreation and Community facilities are not ideal and not often suitable for sheltering services.

Recreation and community facilities are already in regular use and to stop programming for 4-6 months a year and re-direct space to be used for sheltering creates a gap in community programming. Already community recreation facilities are at maximum capacity, and are not zoned or designed for the accommodation and services needed to provide shelter.

Churches and other community spaces can offer viable options for Sheltering if well located and can be accommodated through regulation.

They often have the space required and many have washrooms to accommodate large groups as well as cooking facilities.

Privately Owned Buildings

Leasing commercial space from private landlords may be possible but is challenging to achieve. Barriers include difficulty finding short term leases (i.e. winter-only) and finding suitable buildings to meet residential building code and fire alarm requirements. If those conditions can be met, the potential challenge of underlying zoning will have to be addressed. As funding is not available for leases for winter shelters, and definitely not available for leasing a space for a potential site, this means either finding funds to lease a space and then ask the landlord to apply for permits or asking the landlord to apply for permits and not require a fee for keeping the building vacant while they do so. Without local government investment in up front leasing costs and a landowner's willingness to go through the permitting process, securing commercial space is not feasible.

Land Use Planning and Approvals

Land use approval is a critical part of activating a shelter. Without land use approval, a site cannot be opened. Where zoning does not already allow sheltering as a use, the approval process is time-consuming and requires significant effort to engage, gain social licence, and build consent. Local governments can provide leadership and support through clarity on their processes and guidance on the approval process. Community concerns about safety around shelter sites add complexity to the conversation. Public discourse related to shelters needs to be managed with skill and compassion. It is therefore recommended that a lead person with the knowledge and skills to navigate the approval process and coordinate appropriate engagement activities be identified and resourced to lead the process.

Proactively identify pathways to land use approval within each municipality.

Lead: Each Local Government

Timeline: Immediate

Each local government needs to examine their processes for land use related to shelters and create a pathway for approval within their current system. The coordinator of this strategy needs to have clear guidance on what is required for approval so they can provide leadership to the process. This should include:

- The general locational/siting criteria and conditions under which a permit would be considered, or not considered – remember that OCP policy is very important when land use decisions are being made
- What permits and approvals are required
- Direction to the application forms with a list of required documents
- List of referrals staff are required to make
- Public notice and engagement requirements

Identify a lead person or organization for coordinating land use approval processes.

Lead: Coordinator

Timeline: Immediate

The process of getting land use approvals requires specific knowledge of planning procedures, and time and resources for applications, fees, engagement, and other aspects of the process. A leading person should be identified to give direction and support landowners, non-profits and local governments throughout the process. Each application will require the lead to work with a staff person tasked with navigating the process within the Local Government.

Match engagement to the community needs, not procedural minimums.

Lead: Coordinator, on the advice of People with Lived and Living Experience

Timeline: Immediate

Land use approvals typically have a minimum requirement for engagement with the public. It is recommended to review each process to determine whether the minimum requirements meet the needs of the community. In some cases, an expanded mail out may be appropriate in order to build public trust and transparency. In other cases, such as opening a women or youth shelter, it may be more important to be discrete about the possible site to protect anonymity and security of shelter users in the future. People with lived and living experience should be consulted about the level of discretion needed in these engagements. Where discretion is required, minimal engagement requirements should be met.

Mail outs and open houses are generally the engagement requirements during temporary use permits and zoning changes. These may not be the best forum for engagement. It is recommended that mail outs and open houses be carefully planned to ensure that

- a) the right audiences are reached,
- b) people are given enough information and clarity to meaningfully participate,
- c) potential concerns are addressed in advance,
- d) people have multiple ways to provide input, and d) that the conversations and dialogue are managed with compassion and respect.

Lessons learned

One of the biggest barriers to securing a location for sheltering is zoning. The requirement that there be amendments to zoning bylaws or a public process to provide a Temporary Use Permit is an added procedural step to acquiring a location. This has an impact on securing a site in a variety of ways:

- The process takes time, money, expertise, and resources that most non-profits do not have. Even where there is expertise, this is unpaid work with little to no chance for recouping costs. The process takes away from non-profits' ability to focus on providing the services they do best.
- This process delays securing a site. If a non-profit wishes to enter a lease for a site, this generally requires immediate commitment. To hold a site for sheltering use then requires the upfront payment and commitment to a lease, followed immediately by a request that the landowner submit a re-zoning or TUP application. There is no guarantee that this will be approved and non-profits face significant financial risk by putting out non-recoupable payments for a lease.
- Public concerns need to be adequately addressed through clear communication and good engagement.

Success of the process should include OCP or other policy analysis and also require clear direction from council regarding the conditions in which they would approve a shelter. The employment of a coordinator would take the pressure off service providers and provide the process management required to develop and activate shelter sites.

Lessons Learned: Public Engagement

Communications and engagement help with reducing concerns, clarifying shelter services and supports, and integrating shelters into neighbourhoods.

While public engagement on shelter locations is only legally required during local government approval processes related to land use regulations, it is best practice to ensure that the community is well informed of both the process of selecting and activating a shelter site and the ongoing operations of the site. Including the community can resolve concerns early and provides an opportunity for two-way communication that can improve neighbourhood integration and safety.

Providing Information

Providing information about sheltering programs and services can help alleviate concerns and quell misinformation. Providing clear information through letters to neighbours, information on websites, press releases, and/or social media may help address this early.

Additionally, providing as much information as possible about the process of site and operator selection and program/operational details before sites are finalized can help the community to understand why certain locations were selected or not.

Community Conversations

It is best practice to hold conversations with the community before, during, and after winter sheltering services season. Preference is to have the operator, funders, and organizations supporting the shelter (including municipalities) available to answer questions. As many community questions also related to law-enforcement, RCMP, and Bylaw presence is also recommended. This ensures that people with questions get answers directly and immediately as much as possible. It has also been demonstrated in other communities that having peers present at these events, either as hosts or presenters, can help humanize the need for shelter and support dialogue.

Providing Contact Information

It is important for the public to be able to report concerns throughout the season. Contact information sheets as well as easily searched contact information online can help provide a direct line of communication between the shelter operator and the public. Not all concerns are related to shelter operations, though, and additional contacts for RCMP, Bylaw, the municipality in which a shelter service is provided, and other relevant sources (such as PACT or other mental health services) should be provided along with information on when to call whom and what to expect.

Create an annual community plan

Using data from the Point in Time Count, enhanced by local knowledge of PWLLE and service providers, an annual community plan for winter sheltering needs to be created that includes a Community Plan for Extreme Weather Response sheltering, and preparation for any additional shelter spaces that are needed.

Create a Community Plan for Extreme Weather Response Shelters	
Lead: Coordinating Body	Timeline: Annually in Spring, completion by September
In order to access funding for Extreme Weather Response shelters from BC Housing, a Community Plan needs to be created each year by a leading organization. Confirming site availability has been a core challenge to the activation of these plans in recent years. Creating Community Plans needs to be done well in advance to identify and confirm site availability. Preparation for the winter season should start no later in the spring to ensure adequate time for these preparations. This strategy should be created by a working group or collaborative of service providers but owned by a single entity who has the funding and capacity to activate the plan as needed on an annual basis.	

Lessons learned: Community Plans

In the past, the Coalition to End Homelessness and CVTS facilitator has created and activated the annual Community Plan, however as a non-entity with the ability to collaborate but not fund or resource the plan, it has been difficult for the Coalition to be the lead and to implement the plan under this structure. An added layer of complexity is the need

The Community Plan should be created collaboratively and then owned and implemented by an agency funded oversee its activation. Agreements and memorandums of understanding between partners, shelter providers, and BC Housing should be created to create clear understanding and confirmation of the actions in the plan in advance of the season.

Re-evaluate once Braidwood is Open

While Braidwood will add needed beds in our community, there will still be 30-80+ people left unsheltered. The Winter Shelter Strategy will need to be updated once Braidwood is open to identify ongoing needs and strategies to address them.

Re-visit Winter Shelter Strategy once Braidwood opens and the 2028 PIT Count is complete. Update Actions to reflect changes	
Lead: Coordinating Body	Timeline: 2027/2028
Services at Connect and 971 Cumberland are to be moved to Braidwood when the facility is complete (planned to be open in 2027). This will mean a significant change in services for winter sheltering. A re-evaluation of service levels and needs in the community will need to be conducted. Service gaps and strategies to fill them need to be addressed in this update, including any EWR gaps and Temporary Winter Shelter service gaps.	

4.2Enhancing the Ecosystem of Care

As important as meeting the immediate needs of the community is ensuring that the right mix of services is available to meet diverse needs.

Increase Diversity in Services

Having multiple sites that tailor programming to different needs is important to create an inclusive and diverse service system.

Shelter services are not one-size-fits all. One of the challenges to providing services is the diverse needs of shelter guests. Conversations with people with lived experience and shelter providers emphasized the need for a variety of services so that people can access supports that they feel safe, welcomed, and stable while there.

Create population specific shelter sites.	
Lead: Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan Lead	Timeline: 1-4 years
While Braidwood will provide needed services, it does not provide services specific to youth, seniors, Indigenous peoples or groups who benefit from separate services. Two to three more sites for services, whether year-round or winter only, that can accommodate these needs are required. Geographic distribution of services across the Comox Valley also needs to be considered to ensure that supports are available in appropriate locations to serve people in Comox, Cumberland and the CVRD Electoral Areas. Denman and Hornby in particular need their own sites as ferry travel is a major barrier to people accessing services in Courtenay.	

Lessons Learned: meeting diverse needs

Some particular needs identified by people with lived experience as being important to have special consideration are:

- **Cultural Safety** – Services should ensure that staff are trained in cultural safety and trauma-informed practices. There are currently no Indigenous-led organizations providing sheltering services in the Comox Valley. Opportunities to establish them should be explored.
- **Accessibility** for people living with disabilities and seniors who may have increased health and mobility challenges.
 - Examples: fully accessible buildings, raised beds instead of mats on the floor
- **Youth services** for people under the age of 25. Youth have specific needs and are more vulnerable than adults. Separate shelter services for youth are needed.
- **Low barrier** shelters are needed to care for those with the most complex situations, such as experiencing compounding mental health and/ or substance use challenges.
- **‘Dry’ facilities** for community members experiencing homelessness who are in recovery.
- **‘Quiet’ Shelters** are also needed. For people who work or have other obligations during the day, a ‘sleeping’ focused shelter is needed. This was requested to balance the needs of different groups. Like the rest of the population, there are ‘early birds’ and ‘night owls’. In any other living situation people would have the power to schedule their own day. Having shelters with different hours and guidelines can provide this opportunity to people experiencing homelessness.
- **Couples** – Flexible sleeping arrangements that allow couples to stay together.
- **Pets** – Pets are family. Pet-friendly services allow families to stay together.

Engagement to Deepen Understanding

The needs of people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness change as the ecosystem of services changes. Engagement with People with Lived and Living Experiences of homelessness and those at risk of homelessness needs to be ongoing. Specific attention should be paid to hearing about how new services or changes to services affect people’s ability to stay safe during winter. There are also gaps in currently available information, both qualitative and quantitative. This area of work has been strongly emphasized by those engaged in the creation of this plan and the Comox Valley Community Homelessness Strategy engagement.

Establish a strategy for communication and inclusion of PWLLE.

Lead: Comox Valley Community
Homelessness Plan Lead

Timeline: 1-2 years

Working with PWLLE, establish a living document that outlines how to communicate and involve people at all stages of the spectrum. This document should outline for each level who to communicate to, how to communicate to them (i.e. posters, meetings, location of posters, etc.), and what needs to be in place to support involvement. This strategy can be created through a sub-committee of the working group, with input from the Friday Discussion Circles.

Outreach and engagement with people who are couch surfing and living in vehicles

Lead: Comox Valley Community
Homelessness Plan Lead

Timeline: 1-2 years

A current gap in data is information related to the experiences of people living in vehicles and 'couch surfing'. Special outreach and engagement are needed with people living in vehicles and couch surfing to identify what services are needed to support them. A guiding question is whether they would use shelters if services were available, and if so, what services they need. This engagement should also ask about what housing, financial or other barriers they are experiencing. Engagement for this plan has indicated that non-shelter support services may be preferred for this demographic – places to shower, do laundry, cook, and access supports may be more appropriate than sleeping accommodations.

Reinstate and formalize the Weekly Conversation Circles

Lead: Comox Valley Community
Homelessness Plan Lead

Timeline: 1-2 years

Ensure continuity of Conversation Circles at the Library (or a similar way for people with lived and living experience to gather) and continue providing a living wage honoraria for participation for those with lived and living experience of homelessness.

Lessons Learned: Ongoing Engagement

For the past several years, a weekly gathering was held for people with lived and living experience of homelessness to come together and share about topics they felt were relevant to them. These circles were facilitated by the Coalition to End Homelessness Coordinator and served as a connection between the Coalition members and people with lived experience. These conversations were highly valued as a place of connection and self-advocacy. While some concerns have been raised about the need for increased safety and structure around the meetings, their importance to the community is clear. Suggestions for improving safety were to have more than one facilitator, have separate circles for women and Indigenous people, have Elders present during circles, and re-develop the group guidelines.

4.3 Lasting, Systemic Change

Zoning and Land Use Regulation

One of the biggest barriers to securing a location for sheltering is zoning.

The requirement that there be amendments to zoning bylaws or an application for a Temporary Use Permit is a procedural step to acquiring a location that has an impact on securing sheltering services. Proactive land use planning that considers sheltering sites as community infrastructure could remove this barrier and give Local Governments' the ability to establish parameters related to appropriate locations.

Ensure that sheltering is a permitted land use in every community in appropriate locations.

Lead: Lead: Each Local Government to Review their OCP/ Regulatory Bylaws

Timeline: Timeline: 2-3 years

- Define sheltering within local government OCP and/or zoning regulations and identify conditions and siting criteria to support the development of shelters.
- Identify zones where shelters may be temporarily or permanently allowed. Update Zoning Bylaws as necessary and apply to properties that meet identified criteria
- Consider pre-zoning or including conditions where shelters are permitted without zoning amendments in general regulations of Zoning Bylaw
- Work collaboratively with all Comox Valley local governments to ensure consistency in policy and zoning approaches to temporary shelters (TWS and EWR).

Lessons Learned

Where there is no zoning to allow for sheltering, the process for securing a shelter site is complicated and often impossible for a non-profit organization to do alone.

The process takes time, money, expertise, and resources that most non-profits do not have. Even where there is expertise, this is unpaid work with little to no chance for recouping costs. The process takes away from non-profits' ability to focus on providing the services they do best.

This process delays securing a site. If a non-profit wishes to enter into a lease for a site, this generally requires immediate commitment. To hold a site for sheltering use then requires the upfront payment and commitment to a lease, followed immediately by a request that the landowner submit a re-zoning or TUP application. There is no guarantee that this will be approved and non-profits face significant financial risk by putting out non-recoupable payments for a lease on a site they are not guaranteed to be able to use for sheltering.

Best practice has identified that establishing siting criteria and enabling land use regulation is an important factor in ensuring both shelters are permitted and developed and that they are located so as to meet the needs of the community and are successful in providing housing.

Public Participation and Support

Homelessness in our community is an increasing concern, not only for people experiencing homelessness but for the broader community. Changing systems takes efforts from the whole community, and so the Comox Valley needs to build a sense of clarity on the issues and solutions. The actions in this section are intended to promote community-wide dialogue on solutions related to preventing and addressing homelessness in the Comox Valley. The goal is to get at the root causes and make lasting changes to move beyond the cycles of crisis and response that have resulted in the need for this strategy in the first place.

Engage with the public to identify community preferences on shelter locations.

Lead: Coordinating Body

Timeline: 2-5 years

The reality is that the need for shelter, as well as supportive housing, will remain after Braidwood is open. Winter shelter spaces, population-specific services, and additional year-round spaces still need to be planned as part of a robust ecosystem of care. Safety net and supportive housing are critical parts of the housing wheelhouse, but are rarely planned for as part of Official Community Planning and land use bylaws.

Much like planning for market housing, planning for the rest of the housing wheel should be done to identify what the community at large wants to see in terms of diverse options that meet the needs of community now and in the future. Public engagement across the Comox Valley should be done to identify community preferences on form and location of sites. Open, transparent engagement can support a community-side vision of how to locate these services as integrated parts of our housing systems. Preferences to consider may be distance from other types of services (for example schools), distance to other amenities, and transportation routes to and from sites.

Community Conversations

Lead: People with Lived and Living Experience in partnership with CHP lead, service providers, and other community partners (such as Walk With Me, Art Gallery, etc.)

Timeline: Ongoing

PWLLE have indicated a strong desire to work on anti-stigma and awareness raising projects related to homelessness in the Comox Valley. This work can assist with many aspects of this plan such as decreasing barriers to activating services, promoting the importance of this work, and advocating for the creation of a fulsome ecosystem of care. There are opportunities for partnership and collaboration in this work across multiple organizations, but this strategy can be a catalyst for those collaborations.

Create a space for community members to be engaged in solutions.

Lead: Community Justice Center, if funding and capacity allows

Timeline: Ongoing

Community members are eager to find solutions to the issues facing our community. We heard repeatedly that the current state is distressing to people for a variety of reasons. Bringing the public along in creating solutions can help ease fears and tensions about the current gaps in service and break down barriers related to perceived risks and challenges related to supportive housing and shelters.

Methods of engagement could include Community Dialogues, education, neighbourhood integration tables for specific sites, and more.

The ultimate goal is to build more awareness of the exact nature of the crisis, as well as solutions that are available at all levels, from grass roots to federal policy, so that people can identify ways to be engaged and part of making positive change.

Lessons Learned: Community Conversations

Community Integration Table

The Community Integration Table is a pilot project by the City of Courtenay to provide broader community support and connection around the shelter at 971 Cumberland Road. This table is a mix of neighbors, RCMP, Bylaw, service provider, residents, City representatives, and ideally PWLLE.

Residents have a vital role at this table, acting as hubs for communication between the organizations at the table and residents surrounding shelter services. This table seeks to provide a direct method of communication where residents can be heard and receive communication about issues important to them.

The table is in early days of establishment and while it has set aside funding and resources for including PWLLE that has not happened yet (their first meetings happened before the winter shelter opened). Learnings from the pilot should be recorded and future tables learn from them.

Ultimately, the success of this table will be defined by how well all members feel heard and whether or not they believe that action was taken to address their needs for safety, inclusion, and belonging.

Community Conversations

As part of creating this strategy, community conversations were held with select community members. People who have lived nearby shelter sites, operated shelter sites, and/or lived in shelter sites were invited to participate in 1.5-hour long focus group style conversations to share about what helps integrate shelters into neighborhoods for the benefit of everyone.

What emerged at these sessions was a sense of deep concern and anger regarding the situation of increasing homelessness in the Comox Valley. What the community members shared was a sense of anger and frustration that our society had failed people and that they had nowhere to go. There was recognition that our systems of care are not working, and people are left with few options for recovery when they experience crisis. Solutions suggested included increasing options for treatment of mental health, addiction, and brain injury, improving overall housing opportunities, diversifying work options so more people can do work suited to their aptitudes, and better support for youth leaving care.

The hopelessness and anger were exacerbated by the feeling that residents and business owners in Courtenay, especially in the downtown area and the areas between Fitzgerald and Cliffe Avenue, as well as the McPhee and Piercy Corridor adjacent to the E&N Railway Lands / ICF, are left without resources to deal with the disproportionate impact of substance use, specifically “drug houses,” and homelessness on their neighbourhoods. Lack of diversity and geographic distribution of services across the spectrum of prevention to recovery was an often-repeated concern. Community members want to see more services that contribute to well-being

and bring hope to what seems to be a crisis-based system of care that doesn't offer people good solutions.

The takeaway here is that the community cares and wants to see action. While people who don't have experience may not know the answers, they do want to see change and can be part of solutions if shown how.



5. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring Strategies

- Publish this plan, and share information on the Working Group/ Committee publicly
- Use the Point in Time Count to understand changing levels of need in community.
- Collect and share information on usage of winter shelters (% occupancy by month)
- Do pre-season preparation sessions with service providers, local governments, and people with lived and living experience to give information on seasonally available services, referral pathways, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Do post-season debriefs with service providers, local governments, outreach providers, people with lived and living experience to discuss learnings from each season and apply lessons to future seasons.

Evaluation Metrics

The number of people who are unsheltered during winter season.

- Successful implementation of this plan, in conjunction with the Comox Valley Community Homelessness Plan, can be measured by a decrease in the number of individuals who are unsheltered during the winter season.
- This requires the addition of new shelter spaces, but housing people currently experiencing homelessness *and* prevention of new individuals entering homelessness. This recovery and prevention is outside the scope of the Winter Shelter Strategy but will have direct influence on this metric of success. Given no material change in the number of people experiencing homelessness in the Comox Valley, providing additional winter shelter space should result in a reduction in unsheltered people during winter.

The number of people who experience weather-related harm in winter months.

- Providing adequate shelter is intended to reduce harm due to exposure. Success can be measured by a reduction in the number of medical interventions (ambulance, emergency room, urgent care, nurse and doctor visits) required each winter.
- Tracking this metric requires Island Health to provide data.

Satisfaction of people experiencing homelessness with shelter services.

- People accessing shelter services may report satisfaction levels with service during special engagements or during Conversation Circles.

- If this action plan is successful, it would be expected that satisfaction with services would increase. This would be related to addressing current concerns regarding the availability of beds, variety of services, and feelings of safety accessing services.

Experience of Community Members who are adjacent to and interact with shelter services.

- Community Members and Business may report satisfaction levels with delivery of shelter service during special engagements or during Conversation Circles or at regular engagement events designed to solicit feedback and support service delivery.
- If this action plan is successful, it would be expected that satisfaction with the delivery of shelter services would increase. This would be related to addressing current concerns regarding impact of the service delivery in the area and feelings of safety accessing services.

