

PORT ALBERNI SHELTER SOCIETY REVIEW

REPORT SUMMARY

Port Alberni Shelter Society (PASS) operates a BC Housing funded facility called “Our Home” in Port Alberni, which was opened in March 2019. Through this facility PASS operates a 23-bed emergency shelter, a 30-unit supportive housing program, and Community Expansion Shelter (CES) Spaces (15 at Our Home and 12 in a separate building). PASS operates other related facilities in Port Alberni, such as the Overdose Prevention Site, which have other funders. This review focuses solely on BC Housing funded facilities operated by PASS.

In response to escalating concerns in the community about services provided by PASS for people experiencing homelessness, BC Housing initiated a review of the organization. BC Housing hired an external consultant to collect information and conduct the arm’s-length review. Due to COVID-19 precautions, information for the review was collected through telephone interviews with local service providers and community partners, former PASS clients and staff, concerned community members, PASS representatives, and relevant BC Housing staff. In total, 26 interviews were conducted for the review and they included both lived experience and professional expertise (front line and management). Community partners were included in the interviews to provide a contextual understanding of the community and the local homeless population. Input from these interviews shaped the observations and recommendations presented in this report.

The interviews highlighted a range of issues regarding service access, the service environment, governance, operations, and community support. They also provided suggestions for remedies which have evolved into the recommendations presented in this report. This review is based upon current BC Housing requirements and guidance; it references relevant Service Agreements and Program Frameworks.

Observations

This section highlights key findings from the interviews conducted for the review.

Service Restrictions: One of the central issues identified by the protesters, service providers and community partners interviewed is that PASS staff issue too many service restrictions, some of which have been long-term, multi-year bans. Some of the interview respondents stated that clients are restricted arbitrarily, often for minimal reasons, and they are also removed from the banned list arbitrarily. People who cannot access the PASS shelter must sleep rough because there is no other shelter in the community. The PASS Policy Manual has policies regarding involuntary discharge and service restrictions; however, they are out of date, unclear, and do not recognize that PASS is the sole emergency shelter provider in the community. According to PASS representatives, the length of the restriction depends on the nature of the incident, with longer term restrictions now going to an arm’s length Review Committee which meets quarterly. According to BC Housing agreements “*Clients should not be refused services unless extenuating health or safety issues are present (e.g., assaults/threats to clients or staff and/or medical needs beyond what the shelter can accommodate)*”. The Service Agreement makes no mention of the allowable length of a service restriction, nor if permanent bans are permissible.

Complaints and Appeals Process: Protesters and service providers interviewed report that there is no sufficiently accessible appeal or complaints process for clients who have been barred. They want a process that provides options for complaints and appeals. Some service providers say it is not possible, with the current process, for them to advocate for clients who have been, in their opinion, unfairly barred. In some cases, outreach workers are able to successfully intervene for clients at the shelter, when they know about a service restriction situation. The PASS Policy Manual provides some guidance on the Complaint and Appeal Process; however, given the stated concerns of interview respondents it appears that the relevant policies and procedures in this area may not be adequate or adhered to in a consistent manner.

Mental Health: Interview respondents point out that it is clients with mental health issues, especially those who have associated behavioural problems, who are often the clients barred from the PASS shelter. The protesters say that trauma informed process and support and adequate staff training is needed at the shelter. Interview respondents say current mental health services in Port Alberni are limited and challenging for the most vulnerable to access. Substance use is a barrier to getting assessed and diagnosed. BC Housing requires shelter staff to have training in mental health first aid and crisis prevention and/or de-escalation training and nonviolent intervention.

Minimum Barrier: Interview respondents say PASS is not providing the right type of housing for people with significant mental health concerns. All service providers and community partners interviewed agree that there is no minimal barrier housing or emergency shelter in Port Alberni, but it is desperately needed. The need for low barrier beds and housing for those struggling with addictions, homelessness and mental health has been highlighted by the City of Port Alberni in recent communications with BC Housing.

In the service agreement BC Housing provides the following minimum barrier shelter standards:

MINIMAL BARRIER SHELTER STANDARDS

1. *All providers are expected to operate shelters as minimal barrier unless otherwise approved by BC Housing, depending on the availability of other adequate services in the same community.*
2. *Minimal Barrier shelter means an emergency shelter that accommodates all individuals, twenty-four (24) hours per day, seven (7) days per week, who require shelter services and focuses on bringing people indoors. A minimal barrier shelter should accommodate individuals who:*
 - a. *Require physical accessibility to the shelter and within the shelter.*
 - b. *Are currently experiencing addiction and/or mental health issues.*
 - c. *Have a pet.*
 - d. *Require appropriately sized and secure storage facilities for their belongings, including a cart, bike etc.*
 - e. *Require harm reduction supplies on site, including but not limited to clean needles, access to safe disposal (i.e., sharps containers), condoms etc., and*
 - f. *Require access to primary health care.*

The Service Environment: Many of the interview respondents claim that PASS clients can face stigma, demeaning language, and jail-like rules which are enforced arbitrarily, and some do not feel safe and respected at Our Home. Service providers, community partners and former clients say that while the PASS facility is clean and well maintained it does not provide an atmosphere of dignity and respect for all clients. They are not surprised that some people experiencing homelessness choose not to stay at the shelter. The BC Housing service agreement states that the service environment in an emergency shelter is to be “welcoming, safe and secure”, also “The Provider is expected to create an environment that is supportive of the needs of the clients and provide a sense of community within the development”, and finally, “The provider will ensure that an atmosphere of dignity and respect for all clients is to be maintained”.

Indigenous Clients: Several interview respondents, including Indigenous representatives, confirmed that the homeless population, especially the absolute homeless, are disproportionately Indigenous in Port Alberni. They say that some Indigenous people do not feel safe at Our Home. The clients who are often barred from the shelter or who are asked to leave for minimal or arbitrary reasons are Indigenous with mental health concerns and/or learning disabilities. Indigenous representatives who were interviewed feel adequate staff training, trauma informed practice, and cultural safety are missing from the PASS approach to providing service to Indigenous people. They also say PASS does not reach out to local Indigenous organizations to foster relations with Indigenous leadership. PASS senior management confirmed that there are no Indigenous people employed in management or front-line positions at Our Home. For a shelter that serves a clientele that it is 50% - 60% Indigenous, it is surprising to those interviewed that there is no evidence of Indigenous culture being welcomed or present at the facility. When asked about specific practices for welcoming Indigenous clients at Our Home, PASS representatives emphasized that all clients are treated the same regardless of race.

Female Clients: Some service providers expressed concern about a lack of understanding about women’s safety at PASS. Some interview respondents reported incidents of unwanted sexual attention for female clients staying at the shelter. They say the shelter does not take complaints of sexual harassment seriously and they are met with a “never mind” response from staff. While there is some security at the co-ed CES shelter, the protesters interviewed feel it is not keeping women safe. BC Housing does provide clear direction for addressing the safety of women in co-ed facilities. The Service Agreements require training for domestic violence and safety for women in co-ed shelters.

Senior Management: Some interview respondents have suggested that a change in organizational leadership at PASS would be a positive move for the homeless population and would help win back community confidence in the Society.

PASS Staff: Some interview respondents stated more staffing and better training would allow shelter workers to provide better support to clients and improve safety overall in the shelter. A PASS representative did point out that with the new Our Home facility the shelter capacity increased significantly from 12 beds to 23 beds plus 30 new supportive housing units and CES mats. This has put a strain on the organization, especially in terms of finding adequate staffing in a small town. PASS representatives say that they require their case managers have a Human Service Worker diploma, but it

is unclear how many current staff have this training, or if it is adequate for the workplace demands at PASS.

BC Housing: Service providers and community partners stated stronger BC Housing oversight and leadership will help PASS and the broader community through the current challenges. They say the Society needs BC Housing support and attention to improve operations.

Key Recommendations

The review of PASS resulted in a range of recommendations for change to resolve the issues that were identified through the interviews. Here are the highlighted recommendations.

1. To address current unmet needs in Port Alberni, BC Housing should consider the development of an alternate shelter/housing site in Port Alberni with strong mental health and substance use supports. It should be developed collaboratively with local Indigenous representatives to create a service that is welcoming for Indigenous people. To ensure diversity and choice in the community an alternate service provider would be beneficial.
2. BC Housing should review service restriction and eviction procedures with PASS and ensure that only those who present an imminent health and safety threats are considered for time-limited-service restrictions and evictions. Clearer guidelines for implementing and completing a service restriction should be developed.
3. BC Housing should work with PASS to develop more accessible and client-centred complaint and appeal processes for evictions and service restrictions at Our Home, including options for clients who are unable to read or write.
4. BC Housing should review current staffing levels at the Emergency Shelter, CES/EWR, and Second Stage Housing operated by PASS to ensure minimum barrier shelter standards can be safely maintained.
5. BC Housing should work with PASS to ensure the safety of women in their co-ed facilities, adhering to principles of safe access, safe shared spaces, safe sleeping areas, and privacy. PASS must develop practices and standards that minimize the risk of violence and ensure the specialized safety and security needs, specifically for women, are met.
6. BC Housing should provide clearer guidance regarding best practices for actively welcoming Indigenous people to use shelter and housing services and PASS should embed local First Nations culture at its facilities through building stronger relationships with local First Nations and improving Indigenous representation in the organization.
7. PASS must provide more in-depth and effective training and upgrading to their staff and management:
 - a. to be more client-centred, work with sensitivity and be trauma informed.

- b. in mental health related topics including de-escalation and violence prevention.
 - c. for cultural safety, specifically for Indigenous clients, including awareness of local First Nations history.
 - d. for domestic violence and safety for women in co-ed shelters.
8. BC Housing should work with the PASS Board of Directors to develop capacity, improve accountability to the community, and to engage in relationship building with other non-profit organizations, local government, and local First Nations communities.
 9. BC Housing should support the PASS Board of Directors to conduct an immediate review.
 10. BC Housing should consider establishing a Community Advisory Committee in Port Alberni with oversight and advisory functions. One of its responsibilities could be to monitor service provision to people experiencing homelessness in the community. Membership should include the City of Port Alberni, local Indigenous leadership, and Vancouver Island Health Authority.