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To: ["Direct to Mayor and Council - DL"](#)

Date: 8/3/2022 11:27:37 AM

Subject: [CM: Update on Improving SRO Safety & Livability - Heat Response, Overdose and Fire Prevention \(RTS 14122\)](#)

Attachments: [ACCS - GM - Memo \(Council\) - Update on Improving SRO Safety & Livability Heat Response, Overdose and Fire Prevention RTS 14122 \(2022-08-03\).pdf](#)

Dear Mayor & Council,

Attached please find a memo which provides an update on the on City, government and community partners' on-going and new work on heat response, overdose and fire prevention planning in SRO hotels. This memo is in response to Council information request on October 7, 2020. Key points include:

- The City of Vancouver (ACCS, DBL, VEMA and VFSR) is working with BC Housing, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) and the SRO-Collaborative (SRO-C) to better address the intersecting risks from heat, substance use, fire and the challenges of living in SROs, particularly for the elderly and people with health vulnerabilities, through grants, distribution of cool kits, information sharing, and other supports.
- The City and VCH provide funding to The SRO-C to employ SRO tenant workers for The Tenant Overdose Response Organizers (TORO) program to prevent overdose deaths in privately-owned SROs. The program is currently active in 39 SRO buildings providing support.
- Staff from ACCS, DBL and VFRS met with BC Housing to share information on fires in SROs and identify opportunities to increase fire and life safety standards and training in BC Housing funded SROs.
- Staff will meet with BC Housing and large non-profit SRO housing providers (Atira, PHS and Lookout) to identify training and other measures to improve fire and life safety in their SROs.

If you have any questions, please email Sandra Singh directly and she will ensure questions are responded to through the weekly Q&A.

Thanks,

Karen

MEMORANDUM

August 3, 2022

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Paul Mochrie, City Manager
Karen Levitt, Deputy City Manager
Armin Amrolia, Deputy City Manager
Katrina Leckovic, City Clerk
Lynda Graves, Administration Services Manager, City Manager's Office
Maria Pontikis, Chief Communications Officer, CEC
Anita Zaenker, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Neil Monckton, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Alvin Singh, Communications Director, Mayor's Office

FROM: Sandra Singh
General Manager, Arts, Culture and Community Services

SUBJECT: Update on Improving SRO Safety & Livability - Heat Response, Overdose and Fire Prevention

RTS #: 14122

PURPOSE

This memo provides Mayor and Council with an update on City, government and community partners' on-going and new work on heat response, overdose and fire prevention planning in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels.¹

BACKGROUND

General Context

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the heat dome in the summer of 2021, and the ongoing overdose crisis from the poisoned drug supply demonstrate the intersection of vulnerabilities many SROs tenants, and operators face in trying to provide safe, liveable housing. The recent fires at the Winters and St. Helen's SRO Hotels raise the urgency for all partners to find effective and sustainable strategies to improve tenant safety.

Staff are working with different levels of government on the SRO Revitalization Strategy to ultimately replace this outdated and inadequate housing stock with self-contained, affordable

¹ Council information request on October 7, 2020.

units for the residents. While working on this long-term goal, ACCS, DBL, BC Housing, CMHC, the SRO-Collaborative, Non-Profit housing partners, VFRS and VEMA are developing and implementing strategies to decrease the risks for SRO tenants and the community from heat, poisoned drugs and fire.

SRO Hotels

The majority of SRO buildings are older, heritage buildings that contain 10 by 10 ft. single rooms, typically with shared bathrooms and cooking facilities. The majority of Vancouver's SROs are located in the Downtown Eastside and Downtown Core.

SROs currently house approximately 7,000 residents in the City. Approximately 60% of SROs are owned by non-profit organizations or private owners, and the remainder are publically-owned. They are often the most affordable housing available for people with low incomes and are last resort before homelessness for many.

The majority of residents living in SROs are on limited or fixed incomes and face multiple compounding health challenges, including mental health and substance use challenges, physical disabilities, and compromised immune systems, making them much more susceptible to illness.

Risks: Overdose, Heat, and Fire

Overdose and Illicit Drugs Related Deaths

The BC Coroner's Office issued a [review on illicit drug related deaths for Q1 2022](#)² in May 2022 and a report on [heat-related deaths](#) in June 2022. At this time the data has not been provided to the City of Vancouver with disaggregated data to allow staff to identify the building level risks in SROs. Staff are working with the Coroner's Office to obtain social, supportive and SRO building-level data on heat- and overdose-related deaths to better inform the implementation of underway and upcoming responses.

165 illicit drug toxicity deaths occurred across the Province from 1 January to 31 March 2022, which equates to 5.3 deaths per day. The highest number of deaths were in Vancouver (137 deaths). In Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Authority, 45% of decedents were found in "other residences", which include social and supportive housing, SROs, shelters, hotels and other indoor locations, followed by 36% in private residences between 2019 and 2022. No deaths have been reported at supervised consumption or drug overdose prevention sites and there is no indication that prescribed safe supply is contributing to drug toxicity deaths.

Heat-Related Deaths

Vancouver had the highest number of heat-related deaths in the Summer of 2021 across the Province (117 people compared to a total of 619). Place of injury, living situations and social connectedness influenced why and when the deceased was found, with half

² The BC Coroner's Report [defines](#) "illicit drug toxicity" as including street drugs, medications not prescribed to the decedent and obtained/purchased from the street or from unknown sources, and combinations of the above with prescribed medications.

of decedents being found during a wellness check and 32% during a regular or routine contact (e.g. family). Almost all deaths (98%) in BC occurred indoors in a residence, with 10% occurring in social housing, SRO or supportive housing. Similar to most tenants of SRO hotels, more than half (56%) of decedents lived alone and most were in homes without adequate cooling systems such as air conditioners or fans. People living in socially and materially deprived neighbourhoods (similar to where most SRO hotels are) were more likely to die due to a heat-related incident than the general population, with 33% and 28% of decedents reported to have lived in these neighbourhoods respectively.

Fire-Related Deaths and Risks

SRO buildings, due to their age and design, present unique risks and challenges for ensuring livability and safety for marginalized tenants. The total number of fires in SRO hotels has almost tripled on an annual basis from 2016 to 2021, with cigarette smoke the leading cause of alarms in SROs (accounting for 56% of all alarm calls in 2021 and 2022). Fires in SRO hotels as a percentage of total fires across the City has also increased from 7% in 2016 to 11% in 2022.

On 11 April 2022, a fire destroyed The Winters Hotel, a four-storey heritage SRO hotel at 203 Abbott St. Tenants in the 71-room SRO were displaced and two people lost their lives in the fire. The extensive damage from extreme heat and water caused the evacuation of all tenants and businesses in the building and of an adjacent building, the Gastown Hotel at 112 Water St. that housed 73 tenants. BC Housing and Atira Women's Resource Society relocated the displaced residents to the Tawow building (formerly the New Columbia), which was recently purchased by Atira, as well as and in other vacancies across the stock.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The City (ACCS, DBL, VEMA and VFSA) is working with BC Housing, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) and the SRO-Collaborative (SRO-C) to better address the intersecting risks from heat, substance use, fire and the challenges of living in SROs, particularly for the elderly and people with health vulnerabilities. Governments are engaging community partners to help develop and implement a plan to reach marginalized populations in the event of a heat wave this year. Below is a summary of underway and emerging work by partners addressing heat response, overdose prevention, and fire prevention in SRO hotels.

Summer 2022 Heat Response

Grants

On June 21 Council approved staff's recommendation of a \$100,000 SRO Grant to support the community-led extreme heat response plan by the SRO-C to mobilize tenants to provide education, support and in-reach services to 2,300 at-risk tenants in 43 private SROs. This response plan includes the purchase of materials, preparation and distribution of cool packs and resources, as well as a comprehensive first-aid training of 100 tenant volunteers, including multi-lingual training. The SRO-C is also looking to leverage support from other funding partners and/or private owners to create and staff emergency cooling rooms in Private SROs during heat events.

Cool Kits

Staff secured funding through VEMA to acquire and distribute approximately 500 Cool Kits to the most vulnerable SRO tenants (out of 1,500 kits in total). Cool Kits contain supplies that people can use to cool down during hot days and identify when their home is dangerously hot. Each kit contains an indoor thermometer, a foot bath, cooling towel, spray bottle, cold packs, and a reusable water bottle to help people lower body temperature and stay hydrated. The major

Non-Market Housing Operations are funding the purchase and distribution of approximately an additional 480 Cool Kits to the most vulnerable tenants in City-owned housing stock. BC Housing is distributing the Cool Kit to tenants in their directly-managed housing portfolio and supporting non-profit operated SRO buildings.

Information Sharing

Vancouver Coastal Health developed a three-stage plan to support Indigenous and priority populations (which includes people living in SROs and supportive housing) in the event of a heat emergency as follows:

- Stage 1: Proactive messaging about possible extreme heat events distributed to organizations working with priority populations to encourage pre-planning (e.g. [Extreme Heat Preparedness Guide](#)).
- Stage 2: Messaging in the event of an extreme heat emergency to the above stakeholders with more information about expected temperatures and length of heat event.
- Stage 3: VCH outreach teams will be redeployed as needed to perform checks on hard to reach populations.

Staff are working in collaboration with VCH and BC Housing to ensure private SRO owners are provided with resources and information related to heat response in their buildings through an online Q&A forum and emailing informational materials. Staff are also working with partners such as VCH and Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to ensure effective public communication (in multiple languages) of heat alerts and warnings and proactively communicating to the public the risks and ways to mitigate heat impacts.

Other Supports

Every summer, the City activates cooling services in the DTES and Downtown Core that serve SRO tenants among other groups, such as cooling centres, misting stations, and outdoor shaded spaces. More information can be found in the June 14 Memo to Mayor and Council "Updates to extreme heat response plans for 2022".

Overdose Prevention in SROs

The City and VCH provide funding to The SRO-C to employ SRO tenant workers for The Tenant Overdose Response Organizers (TORO) program to prevent overdose deaths in privately-owned SROs. The program is currently active in 39 SRO buildings providing supports such as maintaining and distributing harm reduction supplies, organizing VCH Naloxone Trainings in those buildings, provide one-on-one overdose training to their peers, and communicate with

VCH and City staff on issues related to overdoses in those buildings. In preparation for extreme heat events this summer, VCH developed an extreme heat response plan for overdose prevention sites and outdoor spaces, both which are utilized by many SRO tenants.

Fire Prevention

Staff from ACCS, DBL and VFRS met with BC Housing to share information on fires in SROs and identify opportunities to increase fire and life safety standards and training in BC Housing funded SROs. VFRS will attend BC Housing's Non-profit Supportive Housing Leadership table in August to share information and identify opportunities for collaboration with housing providers. Similarly, staff will convene a workshop with large non-profit SRO housing providers (Atira, PHS and Lookout) to identify training and other measures to improve fire and life safety in their SROs.

Staff are also working with VFRS and SRO-C to plan a 2-year pilot program for SRO fire education and training. As part of the pilot, the City would support the SRO-C to conduct a Fire Safety Training and Education Pilot in private SRO hotels in collaboration with VFRS, including multi-lingual training for Chinatown SRO tenants. The pilot would also support a fire and heat preparedness multi-lingual survey. This survey would help identify the most vulnerable tenants in the stock who would require additional supports and give a better understanding of the level of fire safety awareness of SRO tenants.

FINAL REMARKS

Staff are working across departments, with government partners and in support of community partners working with tenants and operators in SROs. Staff are working quickly to bring key proposals to Council to improve safety and resilience for tenants in SROs.

If Council has any further questions or needs additional information, please feel free to contact Sandra Singh directly at sandra.singh@vancouver.ca



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