



OMBUDSPERSON
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Financial support programs for people displaced by extreme weather emergencies outdated and unfair: Ombudsperson report finds

Victoria – In a report released today, the BC Ombudsperson finds emergency support programs are outdated, under-resourced, inaccessible for vulnerable evacuees and poorly communicated and calls on government to take urgent action to better support people who are increasingly being displaced from their homes for long periods by extreme weather events.

The report *Fairness in a Changing Climate: Ensuring disaster supports are accessible, equitable and adaptable* is a case study of government’s response to the 2021 fires and floods that displaced thousands of people from their homes and communities, some to this day. While volunteers and communities came together to help evacuees, the events of 2021 showed that existing government programs are not meeting the demands that intensifying extreme weather presents. The report finds the current one-size-fits-all approach to emergency support services unfairly creates barriers for people to access the supports they need.

“The events of this past summer have further demonstrated that government urgently needs to fix the shortcomings our investigation uncovered,” said Ombudsperson Jay Chalke. “Climate change has resulted in more frequent and more extreme weather emergencies, and government is trying to respond with a framework that is decades old and insufficient to meet current reality. Government needs a comprehensive plan for how to address the needs of those who are being displaced from their homes for longer and longer. The time to act is now.”

The Ombudsperson’s investigation examined the two government programs that provide financial support to people who are displaced from their homes in a disaster. Emergency Support Services (ESS) provides short term financial support for basic needs like food and accommodation for the first 72 hours after a disaster. The Disaster Financial Assistance (DFA) program provides help to people who are underinsured or uninsured in specific events, such as the 2021 atmospheric river, to rebuild their homes.

The Ombudsperson found unclear and confusing communication about these programs, unreasonable delays in providing support, a lack of flexibility in how supports are delivered, and a process that does not take into account the distinct needs of Indigenous evacuees as well as elderly people and people with physical and cognitive disabilities.

“We have an under-resourced system in place that isn’t meeting the needs of people, many of whom are in the most significant crisis they have ever experienced,” said Chalke. “The complexity of delivering services during large-scale events exceeds the current capacity of most communities, most of which still

rely on volunteers and many using paper-based record keeping. The province needs to step up, modernize these two programs and put additional resources in place to ensure people are treated fairly and equitably during extreme weather events.”

The report notes that climate change is impacting the availability of insurance. “In the context of a changing climate, people may be less able to access insurance, and this changing reality needs to be taken into account as recovery supports are modernized,” said Chalke. “Equity, timeliness, flexibility, accessibility and appropriate risk allocation must be at the forefront of this work.”

The report emphasizes that the delivery of disaster supports needs to be proactive and centred on the needs of people, and it should consider the disproportionate and compounding impacts of disasters on individuals and communities.

The report makes 20 recommendations including that the Ministry of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness:

- support community-led ESS with timely and effective surge support for large-scale disasters, integrated professional mental health care and a reliable communications hub for evacuees
- ensure reception centres are accessible, and supports are flexible and responsive to the needs of all evacuees
- develop a plan to support people experiencing long-term displacement and consult broadly in doing so
- support Indigenous self-determination in emergency management through capacity building, adequate funding and reporting on action taken
- identify ways to better communicate about DFA with people who have applied or who might need it
- ensure the DFA program has capacity to process applications and appeals in a timely way
- develop a policy and process to reassess insurance availability in BC as risks increase with the impacts of climate change

The ministry has accepted and committed to implement all 20 recommendations.

“I am encouraged that the ministry has accepted these important recommendations. This is a welcome response to our report. As the province’s emergency support programs evolve, my office will continue to provide oversight of government’s implementation of the recommendations to ensure British Columbians impacted by future weather events are treated fairly and equitably.”

View the report: www.bcombudsperson.ca/fairness-changing-climate

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