June 5, 2020

Dear Operator,

Re: Operating a shelter, supportive housing, addiction treatment or support recovery facility in the Vancouver Coastal Health region during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the context of the dual public health emergencies related to overdose and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital that essential housing, treatment and support services remain in operation. Vancouver Coastal Health believes that the risk of COVID-19 transmission in these environments can be mitigated and consistent with BC’s Restart Plan, that it is possible to safely operate these facilities at this time.

Facilities should screen new clients upon arrival to identify those who have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or who have returned to Canada following international travel or who have been in contact with a COVID case in the last 14 days. Individuals with symptoms should be referred for testing. Those with travel or exposure history should be asked to isolate at home or referred to public health for a discussion on how best to support their self-isolation. Clients without symptoms, regardless of travel or exposure history, do not meet testing criteria and should not be required to undergo COVID-19 testing prior to admission. Although residents admitted to long term care facilities for seniors are currently required to isolate for 14 days following admission, there is no similar requirement for shelters, supportive housing, addiction treatment or support recovery facilities.

Worksafe BC requires employers to develop a COVID-19 safety plans that outlines the strategies used to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in the workplace. The plan should include strategies that allow staff and clients to follow the Provincial Health Officer’s physical distancing recommendations and keep themselves 2 metres apart from other people as much as possible. Although masks can be used for clients that develop symptoms, clients without symptoms should not be required to wear masks. Signage and policies requesting clients who are ill to identify themselves to staff and to immediately self-isolate are recommended. Staff should be sent home if they are sick, and advised to contact their health care provider or 811. For facilities and programs that normally allow guest or visitors, there is no reason to limit asymptomatic guests or visitors due to COVID-19 concerns. Guests and visitors should be screened as per facility policy.

Although staff working at long term care for seniors, assisted living and provincial mental health facilities have been restricted from working at other long term care, assisted living and provincial mental health facilities, there are no restrictions on staff working at shelter, supportive housing, addiction treatment or support recovery facilities from working at other facilities.

Facility operators should follow routine cleaning practices with enhanced cleaning of high-touch surfaces or shared equipment. Operators should ensure that handwashing, shared toilet and shower facilities, where available, are open, well-stocked and regularly cleaned.
There may be additional measures related to the type of facility that operators can implement to further reduce the risk of COVID-19 such as limiting the number of clients, modifying programs and services or making changes to the environment by installing hand sanitizer stations or physical barriers.

To discuss issues related to specific clients in terms of symptoms, testing or isolation please call the VCH COVID Assessment Team at 604-290-3208.

For infection prevention and control advice regarding specific facilities please contact the VCH Rapid Response Team (rrt@vch.ca) or book here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSellUMKwRcgY20TXW8MMywtJEIn-uSC8u68qbW98FD0UV07XA/viewform

Sincerely,

Mark Lysyshyn MD MPH FRCPC
Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer

Resources:

Worksafe BC COVID-19 Safety Plan resources:

VCH COVID-19 website:
http://www.vch.ca/covid-19

VCH COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control resources:
http://ipac.vch.ca/Pages/Emerging-Issues.aspx

VCH COVID-19 Community Resources:
https://sneezesdiseases.com/covid-19-community-resources

VCH COVID-19 Health Protection resources:
http://www.vch.ca/public-health/environmental-health-inspections