



Fire & Life Safety: Operational Standards for SRO Supportive Housing Providers

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This document establishes fire and life safety standards for nonprofit providers operating BC Housing–funded supportive housing in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings in Vancouver. It explains why these standards are needed and sets the overall framework for maintaining safety in SRO environments.

Alignment with Codes and Legislation

Developed in alignment with applicable building and fire codes, fire acts, fire bylaws, and other related legislation, these standards address both the general safety of buildings and the specific needs of residents.

Current Scope

These standards currently apply to SRO supportive housing providers in the City of Vancouver, reflecting the high concentration of SRO housing in the Downtown Eastside. Future updates may expand the scope to include all BC Housing-funded supportive housing buildings across British Columbia

CONTEXT

Fire Safety Challenges in SROs

Fire safety in SRO and supportive housing buildings has been an ongoing concern across B.C. Aging infrastructure, complex resident needs, and the limitations of existing building systems contribute to an environment where fire risks are elevated. Fires in these settings can lead to devastating outcomes, including loss of life, serious injury, displacement, and the destruction of homes and belongings for many vulnerable residents.

Winters Hotel Fire Incident and Impact

On April 11, 2022, a fire at the Winters Hotel, a BC Housing-funded SRO in Vancouver’s Gastown, resulted in two resident fatalities and the destruction of the building. This was not an isolated incident—multiple fires in SROs and supportive housing across B.C. underscore the urgent need for improved fire safety measures.



Coroner's Inquest and Impact

In the aftermath, the BC Coroners Service conducted a thorough inquest and issued a series of recommendations aimed at improving fire and life safety in SROs. These recommendations focused on enhancing resident and employee safety by preventing future loss of life, reducing building damage, and mitigating the risk of resident displacement.

PURPOSE OF THESE STANDARDS

These standards serve as a practical resource for providers. They:

- Summarize key provincial and municipal requirements.
- Direct staff to detailed resources for developing policies and procedures.
- Reinforce the importance of clear, well-maintained safety practices to mitigate fire risks and ensure staff readiness.

Relation to Legislation

This document is not a substitute for, nor does it override, existing fire and life safety legislation. Instead, it aims to highlight relevant code-based requirements to help providers uphold the highest standards of life safety. In cases where any content in this guide conflicts with applicable codes, acts, bylaws, or regulations, the official legislation shall take precedence.

Compliance

Providers are legally obligated to comply with all relevant codes, regulations, acts, and local bylaws. Please note that this document is subject to revision and may be updated periodically to reflect the most current fire and life safety information available.

Document Structure

- **SRO Responsibilities** – Defines roles and duties of the Fire Safety Director, Deputy Fire Safety Director, and provider staff.
- **SRO Operational Standards** – Outlines procedures, requirements, and best practices for maintaining fire and life safety in SRO buildings.

Roles = Accountability; Standards = Operational Compliance.



RELATED DOCUMENTS

The following provincial, federal, and municipal documents inform these standards.

Note: The list is not exhaustive:

- British Columbia Fire Code
- National Fire Code of Canada
- British Columbia Building Code
- BC Fire Safety Act
- City of Vancouver Fire Bylaw
- CAN/CSA C282 2015 – Emergency Electrical Power Supply for Buildings
- CAN/ULC S536 2019 – Inspection and Testing of Fire Alarm Systems
- CAN/ULC S552 02 – Maintenance and Testing of Smoke Alarms
- NFPA 10 2013 – Standard for Portable Fire Extinguishers
- NFPA 25 2017 – Inspection, Testing, and Maintenance of Water Based Fire Protection Systems

To access these documents, visit the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to section A. Legislation, Codes and Technical Standards.

FIRE & LIFE SAFETY RESPONSIBILITIES

All SRO buildings must have a designated and trained Fire Safety Director and a Deputy Fire Safety Director. These roles are critical to ensuring proper fire safety measures are in place. The name and contact information of both positions must be included in each building's Fire Safety Plan.

Responsibilities of the Fire Safety Director

Plan Administration & Updates

- Review the Fire Safety Plan annually and update it when building alterations or staff changes occur.
- Notify the Vancouver Fire Department of any changes to emergency contacts and update the plan accordingly.
- Train the Deputy Fire Safety Director, provider staff, and residents on fire safety procedures.
- Maintain required records, including:
 - Inspections and service reports.
 - Monthly and annual tests.
 - Fire drills and training sessions.
 - Meeting minutes.



System Maintenance & Inspections

- Ensure fire protection systems are inspected, tested, and maintained in line with the fire code.
- If systems are inoperable:
 - Arrange a fire watch
 - Notify the Fire Department.
- Confirm that building maintenance, renovations, and alterations do not introduce additional fire risks.
- Additional guidance is available in Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links on bchousing.org. Refer to Resource B1: VFRS Construction Fire Safety Plan Bulletin.

Emergency Response

- Train staff on how to respond to fire emergencies.
- Communicate fire safety procedures to residents, ensuring special provisions for those individuals needing evacuation assistance.

Training & Coordination

- Train staff on evacuation procedures and emergency response.
- Access free online training support in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links on bchousing.org: Fire Safety Training Awareness for Non-Profit Providers.
- Maintain communication with local fire departments and alarm monitoring stations.
- Keep emergency contacts up to date and included in the Fire Safety Plan.

Responsibilities of the Deputy Fire Safety Director

The Deputy Fire Safety Director supports the Fire Safety Director:

- Perform regular fire safety inspections.
- Complete necessary reports.
- Maintain familiarity with the Fire Safety Director duties and stepping in when they are absent.

Staff Responsibilities During a Fire Emergency

Provider staff must be prepared to act during a fire emergency.

- Sound the fire alarm.
- Notify fire department with a 911 call.
- Instruct occupants on procedures when the fire alarm sounds.



- Ensure support for residents requiring assistance.
- Confine, control and extinguish the fire, if safe to do so.
- Liaise with the fire department.

Provider Reporting Responsibilities

Providers must report any fire to Vancouver Fire Rescue Service, regardless of size, or whether it was extinguished without assistance.

FIRE & LIFE SAFETY OPERATIONAL STANDARDS

The following Fire & Life Safety Operational Standards provide comprehensive guidance for Vancouver SRO supportive housing providers to maintain compliance, protect residents, and safeguard building integrity.

These standards outline key requirements and best practices for:

- Developing and maintaining a Fire Safety Plan.
- Conducting regular fire drills and documenting results.
- Delivering ongoing fire safety training for staff and residents.
- Implementing fire watch protocols during system outages.
- Establishing resident feedback and complaint resolution processes.

1. Fire Safety Plans – Overview & Requirements

Purpose

A Fire Safety Plan is the foundation of fire and life safety in SRO environments.

Formal definition: A Fire Safety Plan is a written document that outlines emergency procedures, staff responsibilities, and preventive measures required to protect residents and buildings from fire.

Plain language explanation: A Fire Safety Plan is a step-by-step guide that tells staff and residents what to do if there's a fire, how to get out safely, and how to keep the building firesafe day to day.

A comprehensive Fire Safety Plan is especially critical to ensure support for residents with visible and invisible disabilities.

Regulatory Requirements

- Under the City of Vancouver Fire Bylaw 12472, all newly developed Fire Safety Plans must be submitted to and approved by the Vancouver Fire Department upon completion.



- BC Housing-funded SRO supportive housing buildings are required to always maintain a current Fire Safety Plan.
- Providers are responsible for ensuring the plan is developed, approved, and regularly updated to meet all regulatory requirements.

Help to Develop and Store a Fire Safety Plan

- Use the prescribed Vancouver Fire Safety Plan Template adopted by Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services. Access this resource in the Fire & Life Safety Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to B2).
- Store the plan in a designated Fire Safety Plan Box inside building at the principal entrance beside fire alarm panel.
- Additional guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to B3: Fire Safety Plans and B4: Fire Safety for Building Owners

Preventive Measures

The Fire Safety Plan should outline proactive measures to prevent fires, such as:

- Maintaining fire-resistant building materials
- Ensuring electrical systems are up to code
- Proper storage of flammable materials, and
- Required maintenance of smoke alarms, fire detectors, and fire extinguishers.

Regular maintenance and inspection of these systems are essential to ensure their reliability, as per all relevant codes, regulations, acts, and local bylaws.

A. EVACUATION PROCEDURES, ROUTES & ACCESSIBILITY

Purpose

Ensure all residents can evacuate safely during an emergency.

General Requirements

- The Fire Safety Plan must include clear evacuation procedures for all residents.
- Evacuation routes must:
 - Remain unobstructed at all times
 - Be clearly marked and provide accessible exits leading to designated assembly areas.
- Floor plan signage outlining exit routes and general emergency instructions must be posted in visible locations.



Staff Responsibilities

- Staff must be trained to assist residents with specific evacuation needs, including guiding them to the nearest exit or designated safe area.
- Practical guidance is available in Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) Program

Maintaining Clear Egress

- Items must not be stored in hallways.
- Fire doors must remain fully closed.
- Additional guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to:
 - B5 Blocking or Wedging Fire Doors in the Open Position
 - B6: No Storage in Hallways

Temporary Changes During Construction

- Evacuation procedures must be updated whenever maintenance or construction affects safe access. Example: If work is underway on a specific floor, revise procedures to reflect temporary changes or restrictions.
- Updates must be documented in a Construction Fire Safety Plan, reviewed and approved by Vancouver Fire Rescue Services before work begins.
- Additional guidance is available in in Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links on bchousing.org Refer to B1: VFRS Construction Fire Safety Plan Bulletin.

Annual Fire Safety Plan Review and Compliance

- Fire Safety Plans must be reviewed annually
- Updates are required whenever there is a material change to the fire safety system(s) or a change in the Fire Safety Director or Deputy Fire Safety Director.

Posting Fire Safety Instructions

- As required by the National Fire Code 2020, simplified fire safety instructions must be posted on each floor.

B. PERSONAL EMERGENCY EVACUATION PLANS (PEEPS)

Purpose

Provide customized evacuation support for residents with disabilities or temporary impairments. This may include residents who:

- Use wheelchairs and/or mobility devices



- Have hearing or visual impairments.
- Have reduced motor functions or cognitive conditions.
- Have a temporary impairment due to injury, illness or other factors.

Provider Responsibilities

- Maintain an up-to-date list of residents requiring assistance.
- Keep the list in the Fire Safety Plan box for easy access by the Fire Department and supervisory staff.
- Align practices with applicable guidance in Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links on bchousing.org. Refer to:
 - B11: VFRS Residents Requiring Assistance Program
 - BC Housing Personal Emergency Evacuation Program (PEEP) Program

Plan Development and Review

- Conduct a needs assessment and collaborate with residents to create their PEEP.
- Involve cultural or accessibility support persons where appropriate.
- Review and update PEEPs regularly to reflect changes in the resident's condition or ability to evacuate.
- Offer residents the opportunity to participate in the PEEP program within one month of moving in.

Inclusive Approach

Residents with disabilities are more commonly represented in supportive housing compared to the general population. Providers should consider these unique needs when developing emergency plans to ensure equitable safety for all residents.

Best Practice

- **Implement a Buddy System** - Assign someone to assist residents during emergencies for faster, safer evacuation. Guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to BC Housing Personal Emergency Evacuation Program (PEEP) Program.
- **Early Engagement** - Discuss PEEP options during intake and revisit regularly.
- **Confidentiality** - Safeguard resident information while ensuring emergency access.
- **Drill Integration** - Include PEEP scenarios in fire drills to test and refine procedures.

Integration with Vancouver Fire Authority Initiatives

Vancouver Fire Rescue Services (VFRS) administers a Residents Requiring Assistance Program: 'Can You Escape in an Emergency?', which encourages



residents who may need assistance to self-identify and develop a personal evacuation plan. Providers are encouraged to:

- Maintain an up-to-date list of residents requiring assistance.
- Store the list in the Fire Safety Plan box so it is accessible to supervisory staff during an emergency.
- Align practices with both the VFRS program and BC Housing’s PEEP program to strengthen safety measures.

C. FIRE SYSTEMS AND EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE

Purpose

The Fire Safety Plan must include detailed information on the maintenance and testing of all fire safety equipment and systems, including sprinklers, fire extinguishers, standpipes, and alarm systems.

Equipment Standards & Testing

- All fire safety equipment must comply with applicable codes and standards.
- Systems must be inspected, tested, and maintained at the intervals required by the Fire Code and the Fire Safety Plan.
- Smoke alarms must be tested monthly, and results documented in accordance with bylaws, codes, and standards.
- Records retention: Maintenance and testing records must be kept for at least two years, as required by the National Fire Code.

Action for Inoperable Equipment

If any fire safety equipment is found to be inoperable:

- Notify the Fire Department immediately.
- Implement a fire watch until repairs are completed.
- Arrange for prompt repair or replacement.

Related Resources

Additional guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to the following VFRS bulletins:

- B8: Standpipe System Testing Bulletin
- B9: Sprinkler System Isolation Valves Bulletin
- B7: Exterior Means of Egress Structures Bulletin
- B10: Silencing of Fire Alarm Bulletin



D. RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT AND AWARENESS

Providers must communicate fire safety measures to residents, including:

- Evacuation routes
- Alarm systems
- Safety protocols
- If applicable, a resident's Personal Emergency Evaluation Plan (PEEP)

Information should be:

- Clear and accessible
- Provided in formats appropriate for each resident's needs.
- Staff should actively engage residents to ensure familiarity with the building's fire safety features and exit routes.

E. CONTINUOUS REVIEW AND IMPROVEMENT

Fire Safety Plans are living documents and should evolve based on:

- New safety technologies
- Changes in building and fire codes
- Lessons learned from drills or actual fire events

Regular reviews and updates help identify weaknesses, enhance safety measures, and ensure compliance with current standards.

F. RECORDKEEPING REQUIREMENTS

All required daily, weekly, monthly, and annual inspections and tests must be carried out as outlined in the Fire Safety Plan and in compliance with the National Fire Code 2020, which states:

- 1) Where this Code requires that tests, inspections, maintenance or operational procedures be performed on a fire safety system, records shall be made and the original or a copy shall be retained at the premises for examination by the authority having jurisdiction.
- 2) The initial verification or test reports for each system shall be retained throughout the life of the system.
- 3) Records of tests, inspections, maintenance or operational procedures undertaken after the initial tests referred to in Sentence (2) shall be retained so that at least the current and immediately preceding records are available.
- 4) Notwithstanding the conditions stated in Sentence (3), no record shall be destroyed within two years of having been prepared.



2. Fire Drills

Purpose

Fire drills are a critical component of fire and life safety. They ensure staff and residents know how to respond during an emergency, practice evacuation procedures, and identify any gaps in preparedness.

Frequency

Fire drills must be conducted at least once every 12 months. Additional drills are required when:

- New staff are hired.
- Resident training is needed to ensure preparedness.

Fire drills shall be conducted at a minimum every 12 months, or when staff or residents' training is required for all staff.

Resident participation

Resident involvement is essential to ensure familiarity with:

- Evacuation routes
- Emergency procedures
- Designated assembly points outside the building

Clear communication about the purpose and importance of drills helps strengthen overall safety and preparedness.

Recordkeeping

Providers must maintain records of all completed fire drill logs, including:

- Date and time of the drill
- Names and roles of staff who conducted the drill
- Observations, such as the number of residents who participated.

Related Resources

Additional guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to C: BC Housing Fire Drill.



3. Fire Safety Training

Purpose

Fire safety training ensures staff and residents understand emergency procedures, equipment use, and evacuation protocols. Proper training reduces risk and improves response during an emergency.

Training Requirements

The Fire Safety Director or their designate must conduct periodic training, covering:

- Function and operation of all life safety systems.
- Evacuation procedures, evacuation routes and designated meeting areas outside the building.

Providers must develop and maintain a fire evacuation procedure that is accessible to all residents and staff.

- Distribute a copy to residents upon move-in and to staff upon hire.
- Provide translated versions when needed.

As required by applicable codes, bylaws, and legislation:

- All supervisory staff must be trained in fire emergency procedures before assuming fire safety responsibilities.
- Supervisory staff are responsible for training all provider staff on equipment use and emergency procedures.

Benefits of Training

- Ensures staff can follow emergency procedures during a fire.
- Improves detection of fire safety concerns and timely reporting to the Fire Safety Director.

Related Resources

Additional training resources can be accessed in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to:

- BC Housing Fire Safety Awareness Training for Non-Profit Providers
- B13: Vancouver Fire Rescue Service (VFRS) Training Support Contact
- B14: VFRS Supervisory Staff Training and Fire Prevention Checklist
- B15: VFRS Fire Extinguisher Training Information



4. Fire Watch

Purpose

A fire watch is a safety protocol implemented when any component of a building fire safety system is not functioning properly. It involves designated staff or contracted personnel conducting 24-hour patrols throughout the building to actively monitor potential fire hazards.

Notification Requirements

Providers must notify Vancouver Fire Rescue Services prior to any life safety system interruption, including:

- Fire alarm or sprinkler system repairs
- Changes in exit ways
- Damage to fire separation

Responsibilities and Procedures

Fire watches are critical for ensuring residents and staff safety during system outages.

Providers must follow the Vancouver Fire Rescue Services Fire Watch Procedure, which includes:

- A description of fire watch duties
- Identification of who is responsible for carrying out the fire watch

During any fire or life safety system interruption:

- Notify VFRS immediately
- Inform all residents and staff that a fire watch is in effect, in accordance with the VFRS Fire Watch Procedure

Related resources

Additional guidance is available in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to B12: Vancouver Fire Rescue Services Fire Watch Procedure as well as D: BC Housing Fire Watch Resources.

5. Feedback & Complaints Resolution

Purpose

Providers must establish clear policies and processes to invite resident feedback on fire and life safety issues and to resolve complaints effectively. This ensures transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement in safety practices.



Complaints Resolution Policy Requirement

Supportive housing providers must have a complaints resolution policy that:

- Clearly outlines how residents can submit complaints.
- Is reviewed regularly and updated as needed.
- Remains transparent, easily accessible, and guarantees non-retaliation for residents and staff.

Related Resources

Additional guidance is available in Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to E: Complaints Resolution Policy Requirement.

OTHER RESOURCES

Reducing Common Fire Hazards

The City of Vancouver provides guidance on preventing common fire hazards and complying with local safety requirements.

Find this information in the Fire & Life Safety: Resources & Quick Links section on bchousing.org. Refer to:

- F1: Battery Fire Prevention - Best practices for safe storage and handling of batteries.
- F2: Locking Torches Banned Equipment Notice— Details on prohibited equipment and enforcement measures.

SUMMARY

Strengthening Fire Preparedness and Protection for Residents and Staff

This document outlines essential standards to protect residents, staff, and the integrity of SRO buildings. By combining Fire Code requirements with practical measures, it helps providers prevent and mitigate fire risks effectively.

Consistent implementation of Fire Safety Plans, clear evacuation procedures, staff training, and regular drills ensures compliance and strengthens emergency preparedness. Together, these efforts create safer, more supportive environments for all residents and staff.