



# NUPGE warns federal government: crisis brewing in shelter system

May 20, 2020

Late last week, the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) [sent a letter](#) to the Prime Minister of Canada, provincial and territorial Premiers, and leaders of the other federal parties, detailing the crisis brewing in shelters across Canada and urging the federal government to take swift action.

## ***Multiple issues make shelters a ticking time bomb***

In his letter, Larry Brown, NUPGE President, outlined 2 key issues at play: 1. people experiencing homelessness aren't receiving any COVID-19 benefits or protections from the virus; 2. Community Service Workers (CSW) aren't receiving adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), or funding that enables them to do their jobs safely.

"We've heard frightening stories from our members. The shelter system was full before the pandemic. Many facilities have shared common areas and use bunk beds. There's no room for physical distancing or self-isolation," Brown. "On top of that, there are knowledge gaps, so residents don't or can't understand why they're being told to wash their hands a lot and/or to wear a mask. It's dangerous and mentally draining for residents and community service workers."

Member reports come on the heels of a study done at a shelter in Boston that was reported by [Boston 25 News](#). Of the 397 clients tested, a shocking 36% tested positive for COVID-19 but none of them displayed any symptoms.

## ***People experiencing homelessness still part of Canadian society***

People experiencing homelessness don't live separately from the rest of society. They visit food banks. They go to grocery stores. They interact with people on the street. The same risks exist for the CSWs that work with these individuals. A single asymptomatic CSW could potentially spread COVID-19 to hundreds in their community.

An outbreak in any sector of our society is still an outbreak. People experiencing homelessness should not be of less importance than any other person living in Canada. The CSWs who work with vulnerable populations deserve the same protection as other public-facing workers.

## ***Action must be taken now***

In the last section of the letter, Brown outlined short-term asks to better protect CSWs and people experiencing homelessness, as well as long-term asks, stressing that things must not be allowed to go back to pre-pandemic conditions once the emergency is over. The \$207.5 million the federal government has earmarked for immediate investment to support organizations that service vulnerable populations falls short of what's needed to deal with the pandemic, let alone to end homelessness in Canada.

"If stronger measures aren't taken now, we're likely to see a crisis in our shelter system like the one we saw in long-term care," wrote Brown. "Society is only as strong as its most vulnerable members. And our society has left people experiencing homelessness in a very vulnerable position."

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## **NUPGE**

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is one of Canada's largest labour organizations with over 390,000 members. Our mission is to improve the lives of working families and to build a stronger Canada by ensuring our common wealth is used for the common good. — *NUPGE*

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180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017