Hastings Tent City Decampment
Myths & Misunderstandings

9 August 2022

What is the Hastings Tent City Decampment?

On July 25, Vancouver Fire Rescue Services issued a Fire Order, ordering the City of Vancouver to immediately evict or “decamp” the unhoused community on East Hastings. In the leadup to this order, multiple news stories described Hastings as a “tent city.” Often “tent city” conjures an image of people sheltering in a public park to avoid daily displacement by police and city workers. The same need for accessible, safe shelter exists for people who reside on city sidewalks.

This decampment comes after a community campaign to stop daily sweeps of their possessions. When the VPD stopped participating in the daily street sweeps on July 1, 2022, people sheltering along Hastings were granted momentary relief from municipal violence. Without VPD present, city engineering workers stopped enforcing bylaws that prohibit people from sheltering with their possessions on sidewalks.

Ordering the removal of all tents and structures along Hastings – without the provision of housing – is an eviction without a plan. Continued acts of interference, displacement, and targeting of people who rely on public space constitute hostile decampment efforts and are completely at odds with the human rights of folks who shelter on public space. These hostile activities have been aided by stigmatizing news coverage and the pro-displacement politics that characterize the majority of municipal politicians and candidates in Vancouver.

What is a street sweep?

“Street sweep” refers to the daily practice of City Engineering Workers and Vancouver Police Department (VPD) officers moving throughout the Downtown Eastside seizing possessions, notionally in order to ‘clean’ City property.

The City itself has recognized the harmful impact of street sweeps, and apologized in a June 2022 statement.
What has the City done to end these sweeps?

After months of advocacy, research, and community meetings, in April 2022, #StopTheSweeps Coalition was successful in getting the City to convene a Street Sweeps Working Group (SSWG) to identify alternatives to the harmful practice of street sweeps.

Members of this working group identified key infrastructure, including:

- Storage facilities (secure, easily accessible, adequately size, and informed by best practices and cultural safety for people who rely on public space)
- Permanent parklets, green & blue spaces
- Hygiene facilities & garbage disposal sites

All of these solutions were outlined in Member’s Motion B3 Street Care, Not Street Sweeps: Ending Daily Displacement in Vancouver. This Motion charted a path away from the sweeps, informed by people who rely on public space. Unfortunately, City Council decided not to hear this motion and deferred updates to the future.

Why did the street sweeps end?

While the City chose not to listen to community advocacy calling for an end to the sweeps, the VPD stopped accompanying city engineering workers on July 1, 2022. This effectively ended the practice of street sweeps in the DTES.

During this time, #StopTheSweeps Coalition members once again identified a path forward, and the Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War and Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), collaborated to create Our Streets – Block Stewardship Program.

What is Block Stewardship?

The Block Stewardship Program identified block leaders that would work with residents to keep their area clean and tidy; provided cleaning, harm reduction, LED lights, and other supplies and provisions; identified pathways to keep clear for wheelchairs, strollers, and folks with other mobility aids; and identified fire captains who received training to ensure fire safety, as well as hosted fire safety and overdose prevention workshops for community members. Block Stewardship is informed by the wisdom and knowledge of folks who shelter on Hastings and opposes decampment of unhoused neighbours.

What happened next?

Without the sweeps, people sheltering on Hastings were able to find stability and hold onto their personal possessions, without fear of disposal by VPD or city engineering workers. In the weeks that followed the end of the sweeps, there were more people sheltering along Hastings, presumably because it offered a reprieve from the usual targeting of people who rely on public space.

More people sheltering on Hastings also meant more personal possessions and property on Hastings. The Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War and VANDU were getting ready to support folks on the street through the provision of harm reduction supplies, regular meetings, and fire captain training. The abrupt announcement of a Fire Order dramatically shifted their ability to support the community.

What Fire Order?

This Order was issued by Karen Fry, Fire Chief, Vancouver Fire Rescue Services. The Chief’s order calls for the immediate removal of tents and structures along East Hastings Street.
Where are people supposed to go?

We are in an affordable and accessible housing crisis. There are no new housing or sheltering options available to residents of Hastings, despite people being decamped due to recognized fire and safety issues. They are being evicted, without being provided any safe(r) alternatives. Neither the City of Vancouver nor the Province of BC have stepped in to provide immediate emergency housing. The City of Vancouver has refused to even suspend their anti-sheltering bylaws which makes it impossible for people to shelter in any other location.

How do we stop this decampment?

Many people recognize how unjust this Fire Order and its goals are. Since July 27th, 1,044 people have sent emails in support of unhoused neighbours to the Mayor and other senior City Staff. We have also seen popular support through social media, fundraising and donation drives, and offers of direct support. We ask people to continue these efforts to lean on our public officials and support those sheltering outside.

Don’t you support fire safety?

Absolutely! We want everyone to live safe of any fire or other safety issues. With fires across East Vancouver in recent months, these concerns are an imminent reality. As an organization that has been supporting tent city residents for many years, we also recognize that uncontextual fire safety enforcement has been driving displacement and banishment, with no evidence that dispersing people keeps them safer.

Using fire safety to displace people from Hastings will increase overdose & fatality risks by driving isolation. There is no clear evidence that displacement will even increase fire safety; many deaths from tent fires occur when people are sheltering alone, and no one responds. Displacement certainly does not increase overall safety, for those forced to live outdoors in this ongoing housing crisis.

The National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada states that “municipal governments deploy bylaws, local police, and zoning policies that displace people in encampments, in turn compromising the physical and psychological health of people who have no place else to go and who rely on encampments to survive, absent accessible alternatives.”

Based on reporting by BC Coroners Services, tent fires are a tiny part of the “accidental deaths” that kill unhoused residents. Tables 1 & 2 are taken from the Coroners Service report: “Reportable Deaths of Homeless Individuals, 2007 -2016.”

a. Table 1 shows that accidental deaths make up 56% of the total number of deaths among unhoused people.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td>Homicide</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>175</td>
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b. Table 2 shows that, of accidental deaths, only 2% are related to fire.

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<tr>
<td>Poisoning: Drugs/Alcohol</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motor Vehicle Accident</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure Cold</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall/Slip</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Othera</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>108</td>
<td>100%</td>
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* Drowning does not include deaths where drowning was secondary to a fall or motor vehicle incident.
* Other includes categories accounting for <2% of accidental deaths and cases still under investigation.

Concerns about fire safety also do not end if people are moved indoors or forced to reside in unsafe SROs. A spate of recent fires in the DTES illustrate this – including the fatal Winters Hotel Fire.

Doesn’t the City have to give people options?

Since this Fire Order is being used to decamp Hastings Tent City residents, the City’s enforcement of the Order is in violation of their “Memorandum of Understanding on Support for Unsheltered Vancouver Residents,” signed by the Parks Board, City and Province. Under the MOU, the City of Vancouver should not be enforcing by-laws which displace unhoused people unless there is “suitable space” for them to move into. BC courts have recognized that in the context of tent cities, spaces must not simply exist, they also need to be “accessible”. For example, a bed is not “accessible” if it requires residents to follow rules they cannot reasonably follow or if they cannot afford the rates. In this decampment, the City is not honouring its responsibilities.

What is going to happen next?

To date, the City has failed to provide concrete information on what will happen when enforcement of the Order begins. We have been advised that the City will begin removing structures on August 9.

We are also aware that there is more and more garbage in the neighbourhood, as city engineering workers stopped collecting garbage along Hastings on Saturday July 31. Failure to provide core city services is putting people at further risk of fires, contact with hazardous materials, and disease transmission. Failing to provide services is a longstanding tactic used by municipalities to exacerbate tent city conditions and justify decampment.

Demands

As long as there is inadequate, inaccessible housing there will be people sheltering in tents and makeshift shelters outside. We ask that the City, and the VFRS specifically, work with Our Streets and the residents on Hastings to ensure fire safety is approached from a harm reduction lens, not in a way which ignores other safety concerns and ultimately causes more harm. We support the demands outlined by Our Streets:

1. The City of Vancouver and BC Housing must provide liveable, dignified, and accessible housing to all.
   a. As well, both institutions must take accountability for the inhumane living conditions currently present in Single Room Occupancies (SROs), including ongoing fire code violations.
   b. If the City and BC Housing fail to provide any housing options, there must be alternative locations provided for folks to tent without threats of eviction.

1 Abbotsford (City) v Shantz, 2015 BCCA 1909 [“Shantz”] at paras 81-82.
2. The City of Vancouver must provide an adequate number of appropriate hygienic facilities such as bathrooms and showers to residents of the DTES, whether housed or unhoused.

3. The Fire Department must acknowledge the unique set of needs our community faces with the overlapping toxic drug supply, lack of adequate housing, daily police violence, and effects of intergenerational trauma resulting from colonization
   a. To reflect this, they must adopt a true harm reduction approach to fire safety
   b. Fire Chief Karen Fry must reverse the fire order.

4. The immediate end to enforcement of bylaws created to criminalize poverty.