

COVID-19 – Underserved Populations Response Strategy

Underserved populations include people experiencing homelessness, marginalized housing, or living in precarious or supportive congregate housing. As B.C. faces the challenge of two public health emergencies – the COVID-19 pandemic and the overdose crisis – Island Health’s underserved populations need a coordinated, comprehensive and flexible health-care response.



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Island Health’s approach, in partnership with provincial/municipal governments and many stakeholders, involves three steps to support underserved populations and frontline service providers:

- 1) Prevent**
- 2) Test & Trace and**
- 3) Support**

This approach also:

- Aligns with goals and priorities of the Government of BC, BC Centre for Disease Control and BC Centre on Substance Use
- Promotes effective linkages to and between services
- Fosters partnerships across agencies and organizations, including housing and social service providers
- Addresses the social determinants of health with municipal and community partners (e.g. food security, access to public washrooms, housing)

Island Health has identified a Point Person in each community to lead coordination of outreach and isolation supports for underserved people with COVID, or those who are symptomatic/under investigation for COVID. The Point Person works with Public Health, Primary Care, Mental Health & Substance Use, and Community Health Services to coordinate wrap-around supports.



1) Prevent – Mitigate the Spread

- Enable training and education for clients and service, housing and health-care providers
- Provide safe care guidelines and resources, hold regular stakeholder meetings
- Support new shelter and isolation beds in partnership with BC Housing
- Facilitate access to, and appropriate use of, personal protective equipment



2) Test and Trace – Identify and Follow Up Suspected/Confirmed Cases

- Provide testing, tracing and follow up through dedicated testing (mobile, onsite, outreach)
- Provide rapid response to confirmed cases/exposed individuals through symptom monitoring, environmental cleaning and infection control



Indigenous Cultural Safety and Support

The dual public health emergencies disproportionately affect Indigenous communities due to the legacy of colonization and racism. COVID-19 compounds structural traumas experienced by Indigenous people and can trigger trauma from past pandemics. Island Health is partnering with the First Nations Health Authority to apply an Indigenous cultural safety lens to our approach.

3) Support – Access to Care and Services that Keep People Safe

- Provide medical care and supports, including services for people self-isolating (case management, mental health services, infection control, environmental health, withdrawal management medication)
- Provide physician outreach for primary care and addictions medicine
- Provide overdose prevention and supervised consumption services, and harm reduction supplies and training
- Implement new prescribing guidelines for medications to manage withdrawal symptoms and provide alternatives to toxic drug supply