



January 18, 2023

The Honourable Bowinn Ma
Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
Via email: PSSG.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Ma:

2022 Emergency Support Services Program Guide

The Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN) congratulates you on your recent appointment as Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR) and is looking forward to working with you to improve the safety of British Columbia, its communities, and residents.

In December 2022, EMCR released a new Emergency Support Services (ESS) Program Guide. While updating emergency management documents is a positive and needed action, the lack of consultation with Local Authorities province wide is disappointing. We acknowledge the online sessions being held this year for engagement on the Program Guide, however, that process does not replace the consultation of the organizations that need to implement the Program Guide.

Retention and attraction of volunteers is dissipating. The new Program Guide, in its current form, puts greater responsibility on an ever-decreasing number of volunteers across BC. With the additional obligations identified in the program guide, we anticipate having a considerable reduction in people wanting to volunteer for this program. This issue is not only being experienced in the ESS realm but in all Public Safety Lifeline Volunteer programs (PSLV), which are the backbone of public safety in BC.

Without the dedicated and highly skilled PSLVs, response to disasters can be delayed and may not meet the needs of impacted residents. An analysis needs to be undertaken by the Provincial Government in partnership with Local Authorities and PSLV groups as to the future of volunteerism for the critical roles each PSLV group is currently filling. A solution to better support and fund the existing structures needs to be found.

It is also important to note that practices that are implemented in densely populated communities does not necessarily work for smaller and rural communities; therefore, consideration must be given to the differences in geography and the socio-economic fabric of the communities.

Included in this letter is a staff report provided to the RDBN Board outlining the most significant concerns the RDBN has with the new ESS Program Guide. We would welcome further discussion and better engagement for the benefit of the safety of our residents.

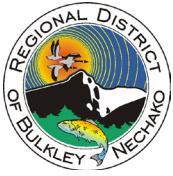
Sincerely,



Mark Parker
Chair

Attachment: RDBN ESS Program Guide Board Report

cc: Jennifer Rice, MLA North Coast and Parliamentary Secretary, Emergency
Preparedness
UBCM Flood and Wildfire Advisory Committee
EMCR ESS Program
All 26 Regional Districts



Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako Committee of the Whole

To: Chair and Committee of the Whole
From: Christopher Walker, Emergency Program Coordinator
Date: January 12, 2023
Subject: **Emergency Support Services Program Guide**

RECOMMENDATION:

(all/directors/majority)

That the Board send a letter to Minister Ma of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness (EMCR) to identify the RDBN's concerns with the Provincial Emergency Support Services Program Guide, and copy the letter to the EMCR ESS program, UBCM Flood and Wildfire Advisory Committee, and all regional districts.

BACKGROUND

EMCR released a new Emergency Support Services (ESS) Program Guide (Guide) on December 8, 2022, without any prior consultation with local authorities. The Guide replaces the January 2010 Emergency Social Services Field Guide, which was outdated, however, the Guide includes several key changes of concern.

The EMCR staff stated the Guide was not released in draft for comments and consultation, as it is primarily built on current practices already widely accepted across BC, and on feedback from previous emergency events. It is unclear if EMCR discussed this new guide with ESS teams, however, they did not approach any ESS teams within the geographical boundary of the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako. This process is not adequate consultation with Local Authorities and First Nations who must implement the Guide. A provincial wide consultation on a draft document should have occurred as responses in southern BC can be different in northern BC. The following is a list of issues with key parts of the guide.

EMCR have stated "To ensure updates to practices are consistently reflected in our resources, the ESS Program Guide will have multiple updates in its first-year post release and yearly updates afterwards. Feedback can be submitted to the ESS program office through EMBC.ESS@gov.bc.ca at any time. You can expect feedback to be reviewed and updates to the Program Guide at the end of the following months in 2023 and on a yearly basis afterwards." EMCR anticipates providing updates in February, May, and October 2023.

Issue 1: on page seven the Guide states that under preparedness for ESS response the Emergency Program Coordinator (EPC) is responsible to "Prepare adequately for supports to vulnerable populations".

ESS volunteer training does not prepare volunteers to deal with all people that can be classified as vulnerable. Vulnerable populations include people with mental health issues,

drug addiction, and seniors. Support for people with mental health issues and Drug addictions, beyond providing food, lodging and incidentals, should be the responsibility of the Health Authority.

Issue 2: Page eight of the Guide relates to the EMCR Regional Level and their supports during the phases of Emergency Management and states: "Acting as a contact point for EPCs, providing expert advice in local and regional issues".

EMCR Regional Managers (RMs) are not experts on local issues, this information is best provided by the Local Authorities and First Nations directly. RMs do not have a solid grasp on the issues that impact our respective residents and communities, they have a larger EMCR regional perspective and have in depth knowledge relating to the provincial response and the 'Financial Assistance for Emergency Response and Recovery Costs' but are not experts in local issues.

Issue 3: Page 15 of the Guide relates to Cultural Activity Location Support and states: "Large scale evacuations that impact an entire community may be stressful and traumatizing for First Nations people, so it is important to provide trauma-informed, culturally appropriate services to lessen further impacts and to transition more effectively into recovery".

This is a positive statement in the Guide, the issue is the Guides lack of acknowledgement of the potential stress and trauma to all people during an evacuation and transition into recovery. No support or culturally appropriate services are mentioned for non-First Nation communities. Clarification as to whether supports are available for all communities is needed.

Issue 4: Page 16 states: "Resource Requests (RRs) describe a need rather than a suggested solution. For example, a RR request which describes a need for immediate training for new volunteers could be filled by many different people, while a specific request for an experienced ESS responder narrows the solution to one option".

The ESS team on the ground know what they need and why they need it, while EMCR is present to support the actions of the responders. Removing the ability for the experts to request what they need and state a solution that they prefer is ineffective, a Regional Manager or person sitting in the ESS Branch Coordinator position may have some experience in ESS, but they are not the experts of the situation on the ground. A RR requesting a specific resource should not be discounted, if EMCR deems it not cost effective or inappropriate then a conversation offering alternative solutions should occur.

Issue 5: Page 27 of the Guide refers to unattended minors that arrive at a Reception Centre without a legal guardian. The language on reporting to Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) is too vague.

Under the *Child Family Community Services Act* Section 14 (1):

"A person who has reason to believe that a child needs protection under section 13 must promptly report the matter to a director or a person designated by a director." ESS

volunteers are not qualified to determine whether the child is safe or not. The Guide should state that if a child arrives without a legal guardian, it must be reported to MCFD.

Issue 6: Under Lodging on page 33 the Guide states: “Additional charges (such as room service or damages) are not covered by ESS and must be paid by the evacuee upon departure from the hotel. These costs are paid by either the evacuee, the First Nation Government or Local Authority or the hotel”.

EMCR has entered the Local Authority and/or First Nation Government into a liability situation for the actions of Evacuees they have no control over. On page 38 of the Guide, it states that the province may cover damages over \$1,000 to a maximum of \$10,000. While that may cover some damages, it keeps the RDBN liable for the actions of Evacuees. If the hotel is left with the burden, the few hotels that currently accept evacuees may cancel all agreements. The province is not considering the impacts to Local Authorities, First Nations, or the hotels willing to help and are downloading responsibilities and the burden of finances on communities that already struggle with the financial burdens of emergency response. This responsibility needs to be removed and the burden put solely on the Evacuee.

Issue 7: The downloading of Emergency Support Services Director (ESSD) responsibilities onto the EPC.

- Page 6 of the Guide states that the EPC is the direct contact for EMCR when a response is required. This is not appropriate as the EPC may not be the subject matter specialist on the local ESS team and its volunteers. The local ESSD should be that contact for EMCR as they are the experts on their team’s response protocols.
- Page 7 of the Guide refers to the preparedness phase:
 - Point two assigns responsibility to the EPC to recruit, train and exercise the ESS volunteers.
These responsibilities have been the responsibility of the ESSD. Before this Guide the ESSD’s role was to manage the ESS program, the volunteers, and the team as a whole and report their readiness to the EPC whose role was to support the ESSD in all activities.
 - Point four, requires the EPC to develop and maintain relationships with local suppliers:
Local suppliers are the backbone of emergency support services. The relationship management of these suppliers has been and must remain the responsibility of the ESSD and their team. The ESS volunteers work closely with the local suppliers to ensure they understand the process and are ready and able to support the evacuees.

In summary it is important that these issues be addressed as quickly as possible to avoid confusion and frustration for the dedicated volunteers that operate our ESS Teams.