

## WINTERS' FIRE/TAWOW UPDATE

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**We had planned on issuing an update in October, six months after the fire. That said, recent media questions have necessitated we issue this update earlier than planned. It is long, but we elected to provide as much detail as possible, in an effort to be transparent.**

First of all, our heartfelt thanks to everyone who donated to Winters' tenants following the fire. In total, we raised \$41,218.70, which we divided and distributed on July 13th to tenants and sadly, to some next of kin. We waited three months to distribute the cash donations, including waiting 30 days after the last donation was received, to ensure all of the money received for Winters' tenants was distributed. Each registered tenant received \$564.64. Money was provided in the form of a cheque, issued in tenants' names. In addition, we received a grant from the Vancity Community Foundation that enabled us to provide each tenant at Tawow with a new television, and more recently, \$993 from CFOX, which will be used to purchase new socks and underwear, to be distributed before the end of the month. Furniture donations were placed in rooms prior to tenants moving in, as was bedding. We were also in awe of the donations of clothing and household items, much of which was distributed out of Bette's Boutique in the immediate aftermath of the fire. For seven days following the fire, Bette's remained open 24/7 to only Winters' and Gastown tenants, those displaced by the fire. In addition, between April 19th and 25th, the front of Bette's was open seven hours each day to only Winters' tenants, while at the back of shop staff, peers and volunteers sorted donations. We are grateful to Community Impact Real Estate (CIREs) for providing funding for peer staff, which enabled us to keep this schedule. People were able to take whatever and as much as they needed. Ape Ship delivered 200 ZacPacs directly to the temporary shelter at the Vancouver Japanese Language School, each of which included brand new clothing, food, toiletries, bedding and backpacks. The remaining donations, which were combined with donations we regularly receive for Bette's and other programs, were sorted and two dump truck loads were delivered to Tawow, sorted again, and hung up in a vacant room on the first floor where tenants were able to "shop" for what they needed. After five days, the donations were moved to the basement of Tawow where tenants can still access with staff support.

Tawow remains a work in progress. We expected to have several months to address a number of deferred maintenance issues and instead worked through the Easter Long Weekend in order to secure a temporary occupancy permit, allowing us to house Winters' tenants as quickly as possible. Basic life and safety systems were addressed including installing new (up to code) sprinkler heads, as well as basic plumbing and electrical repairs, in-room and common areas repairs and lighting improved. We owe a debt of gratitude to Pacific Preferred Developments (PPD), R&M Mechanical, Community Fire Prevention Ltd, and Lux Electric Group Ltd. who all gave up their long weekends, along with us, to get these repairs done. Subsequent repairs have been slower than we would have liked as the building is now occupied and other issues have arisen, including plumbing issues that surfaced when the building, which had been operated as a hostel, was fully occupied. Work that is being completed includes bringing the fire, life and safety suppression system up to fire code by installing a new fire panel, new smoke and heat detectors, and fire alarm strobe lights. We remain grateful to the contractors who are completing this work. Despite the fact we have a fully functioning sprinkler system, we have maintained an external fire watch until all of the fire life and safety work is complete, which is by the end of this week.

We continue to make a contracted registered clinical counsellor available to tenants. He was available for three full days immediately after the fire, and has been on site at Tawow for a total of six days since. Posters hung around the building provide his contact information and an invitation for tenants to contact him directly for support, at a time convenient for them. He also offers referrals to more appropriate cultural services, as requested, and has been available to staff. Tenants have also been referred by staff to community counselling services, and we had the building cleansed by a Knowledge Keeper, who remained behind to offer cultural support to tenants, including providing examples of positive ways of dealing with their trauma. Dr. Brian Conway and his staff have also been on site on three separate occasions to offer general health support to tenants, with follow up available at his clinic. Not all tenants have accessed these services and we continue to invite tenants to talk to staff to ask for what they need. We do our best to accommodate their requests.

There are things about Tawow that are an improvement over the Winters building including having two common kitchens and dining rooms, on the second and fourth floors, in most cases larger private rooms, six self-contained units, and a number of double units. There is also adequate laundry facilities (we are just waiting on machines, which we expect to arrive on October 5th. A laundry service is being offered until they arrive), a full, free-to-use tenant wifi-network, and the bathrooms are in excellent repair. Tenant meetings, which are held monthly, have also been way better attended than they ever were at the Winters and we appreciate the contributions from everyone who attends. We have done our best to respond to questions and requests.

Sadly, there have been five deaths at Tawow in the past five months. Three of the deaths were people who were not tenants from the Winters, including the devastating suicide of a man who was an employee of one of the Easter Long Weekend contractors and who advocated for himself to get a room at Tawow. He lived with us for only six weeks so we didn't get to know him well. His family confirmed he had struggled with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder for much of his life. We also lost an older couple we had all known for some time and who were offered one of the one-bedroom units at Tawow – they had been living in a single room in another building. She passed, due to what we believe, based on the circumstances observed, was a health issue (we do not get copies of the coroners' reports so do not have absolute confirmation). Her partner passed away just two weeks later due to, we believe, drug poisoning. They had been together 30 years and we suspect his death may have been by his choice in that moment, but again we don't know for sure. He was heartbroken when his partner passed.

A former Winters' tenant who was just 29 years old, died two weeks after being stabbed on Hastings Street at Columbia. He managed to make his way back to Tawow where staff administered first aid on the front steps while waiting for an ambulance. He was placed in an induced coma and after multiple surgeries his family made the decision to remove him from life support. He left behind a partner and family who are shattered by his loss. The VPD continue to investigate his murder. And, an older man and former Winters' tenant passed, likely also due to a chronic health condition based on the circumstances we observed, though again we do not get confirmations from the coroners' office.

After tenants passed we made a conscious decision not to rent out the remaining vacant units, of which there are eight. We did not want to add to the trauma tenants all experienced as a result of the fire, and the subsequent deaths in the building. We are working with tenants, through the monthly tenants' meetings, to rent up the remaining vacancies, ensuring tenants have some influence over who moves in.

We are grateful to our commercial tenant, the Back and Forth Bar, which has been a good partner to date. We are also pleased that we were able to offer our commercial kitchen space to the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, free of rent, so they can expand their commercial kitchen operations and meet their ever increasing demand for meals. Our Gastown Outreach and Pet Outreach teams operate out of the commercial space accessed off of Cordova.

As noted above, Tawow is a work in progress. It is still an old building and having a near-full building is testing its infrastructure. We are also experiencing all of the same supply chain issues everyone is (for example, it took longer than we would have liked for new kitchen appliances to arrive, delaying the opening of the common kitchens). That said, we remain grateful for all of the contractors, the Province/BC Housing, the City of Vancouver, and the community, all of whom have supported this herculean task (opening an old building in four days) in one way or another. Mostly though we are grateful to our staff and tenants, who are working hard to make Tawow a home.

On a final note and as noted above, we were overwhelmed by the response from the community. Thank you to every single person, small business, community foundation, service group, community group, church, temple, Gurdwara and synagogue that thought about and responded to this terrible tragedy. Our hearts are full of gratitude.