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March 28, 2024

The Honourable Ravi Kahlon
Minister of Housing
Room 248 Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
E: HOUS.minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Honourable Minister Ravi Kahlon,

We are writing to you to advocate for changes to the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) program. As social workers we focus on the social determinants of health. One of the most imperative social determinants of health is housing. Over the past year there have been many announcements from the BC Government regarding initiatives to make housing more affordable and accessible for British Columbians. There has been considerable focus on middle income earners and how to create affordable housing. While these initiatives address the needs of many, it seems that lower income seniors have been forgotten.

The Seniors Advocate of BC website provides these statistics: "Over the past five years the number of seniors receiving the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) subsidy (23,506) decreased 3% and the average subsidy fell by 8% despite a 12% increase in monthly rents for SAFER clients. Overall, the rate of seniors receiving SAFER has dropped 14%." These numbers indicate that the SAFER program is not meeting the needs of many seniors in BC who are struggling to pay rent and, in many cases, are food insecure.

As of today, when using the SAFER calculator on the BC Housing website, the following information can be obtained: A senior living in Prince George or Victoria with an income of \$2200 per month, and paying \$1400 per month for rent, can receive a SAFER subsidy of \$64.52 per month. A senior living in Vancouver with an income of \$2200 per month, and paying \$1400 per month for rent, can receive a SAFER subsidy of \$93.14 per month.

There are two major issues with these scenarios: 1) Finding a rental for \$1,400 per month is virtually impossible; 2) Paying 63.6% of one's monthly income for rent means that other necessities such as food and transportation may not be affordable. In both scenarios adding the SAFER payment to the monthly income still works out to 61% of income required for rent.

BC Housing needs to review the gross monthly income cut-offs. At present a senior who has an income of \$2,550 per month is not eligible. That is an annual income of only \$30,600. BC Housing sets Housing Income Limits (HILs) for subsidized housing. Housing Income Limits vary based on location in the province. In Vancouver, the HIL is \$58,000 per year. The SAFER program could help more seniors by increasing the income cut-off to the cut-off for subsidized housing based on the HILs.

BC Housing also needs to increase the maximum rent ceilings. At present the maximum rent ceiling in Vancouver is \$803, and in Prince George and Victoria it is \$767. These rent ceilings have not been updated since 2018 and they do not reflect market rents.

We urge the BC Government to review the criteria of the SAFER program, to increase the monthly income cut-offs, and to increase the market rent ceilings to reflect current market rents.

Sincerely,

Fiona Lewis, MSW

Chair, Health Advocacy Committee
BC Association of Social Workers

CC. The Honourable David Eby
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