



# Advancing tenants' rights to retrofits and energy efficiency

## Research Summary



**COMMUNITY ENERGY INITIATIVE**

June 2024



# Tenants Rights Report Summary

Tenants, who make up one-third of BC households, typically have very little agency over matters that influence their energy bills, or the health and comfort of their homes. Currently, it is much easier for a homeowner to improve the energy efficiency of their living space, or to add cooling, compared to tenants. Most BC buildings were not originally designed for extreme weather. Increases in extreme heat and poor air quality events precipitated by climate change, combined with rising pressure on housing and affordability, threaten to reverse rather than advance progress on energy rights for tenants.

The goal of this research was to gather real stories from BC renters to communicate the home energy issues tenants are facing, and to identify the most promising policy options to enhance tenant protection from extreme heat, cold, and poor air quality. **We believe that everyone deserves to live in a comfortable home with clean air, and nobody should have to choose between paying their utility bills and feeding their family.**



“Having to choose between paying your hydro bill, food, and internet affects your overall well-being.”

– Monica, tenant participant

We interviewed practitioners in relevant fields, as well as tenants with lived experience of energy poverty and energy inefficient housing, to receive their input on several policy options with a view to ensuring the public health and safety of tenants in a changing climate. We also considered the likelihood of policy options to lead to increased rents, evictions, or removal of housing from the rental market, in the context of an ever-intensifying housing crisis.

## Policy options:

1. Temperature requirements and cooling rights
2. Energy efficiency labelling
3. Retrofit incentives



# Findings

The research included nine lived-experience interviews with tenants and 10 interviews with housing providers, tenant advocacy organizations, and poverty reduction organizations.

As of Canada's 2021 census, 38% of tenant households in BC lived in unaffordable units – spending over 30% of their pre-tax household income on their housing. Fully 25% of tenants were in housing that did not meet their needs but would be unable to afford the median rent for an alternative unit. If evicted, these tenants and their families may face homelessness.

This situation greatly complicates the energy-related issues of extreme heat, cold, and poor air quality, as tenants often fear losing their housing if they request improvements to their units and may choose not to pursue complaints.

Unfortunately, all tenants and many professionals we spoke to noted a lack of health, safety, and basic maintenance. These included underheating, overheating, inadequate ventilation and poor air quality, mould, electrical problems, water quality issues, broken systems that were repaired with significant delay or not at all, pests, security issues, etc. In many cases, tenants reported a lack of accountability of building owners and managers, and little to no action by authorities. While many of the health and safety issues reported by tenants are interconnected, we focus here on those most related to energy efficiency and health, and most significantly affected by the changing climate.

Tenants we spoke to described some of these issues and how they are affected by and deal with them in their daily lives:

- The need for air conditioning due to a lack of passive measures such as insulation or shading.
- The time and cost burdens of researching, buying, and running supplemental heating and cooling.
- Using their oven to heat their unit due to lack of central heating (no heat because

the system is turned off or broken, or, more frequently, insufficient level of heat).

- No ability to regulate heating in their units, resulting, among other issues, in overheating from the building heat, forcing

them to open windows to cool even in winter.

- Noise impacts of single pane windows, walls with minimal or no insulation, and open windows required for airflow or window/portable air conditioners disrupting sleep.
- Health issues they or their doctor attributed to building issues (temperature, moisture, mould), including respiratory issues, headaches, nausea, coughs, and rashes; and aggravation of existing health issues including arthritis, asthma, and chronic pain.



“We turn on the oven to heat. The place is not well insulated, it has single-pane windows, so it’s usually very cold. Heating with the oven makes the bills go up.”

– Tenant participant



# Recommendations

Everyone needs a safe, healthy home to shelter from heat, cold, and air pollution. **Based on the findings of our research and interviews, we call on all levels of government to adopt the following recommendations concurrently to most effectively address concerns of health and safety, low-carbon resilience, and affordability.** All should include stipulations that protect tenants' rights, security of tenure, and health. Adopted together, the following proposals would serve to improve tenants' health by mitigating temperature extremes, improving energy efficiency and information available on energy performance, and addressing cost barriers for building owners who cannot afford upgrades.

## 1) Temperature requirements and cooling rights

We recommend the adoption of maximum temperature standards as a flexible, performance-based solution to the public health threat of extreme heat. We encourage all municipal governments to adopt a Standards of Maintenance Bylaw requiring a 21-26 °C temperature range in rental units. Applicable provincial legislation, including the Residential Tenancy Act and the Strata Property Act should be updated in tandem to provide consistency across the province and support municipalities' legal rights to regulate their rental housing stock in this manner.

Additionally, since the 21-26 °C temperature range may not sufficiently protect all people, standards should also include the right for tenant to add their own additional cooling to their units, even if the unit is within the regulated range. Any temperature measures should ensure that they do not negatively

affect indoor air quality.

## 2) Energy efficiency rating & disclosure of utility costs

Concurrently with temperature requirements, we recommend mandatory energy assessment and labelling of all rental units, and mandatory disclosure of this label along with utility costs at the time of listing any unit for rent or sale. This would serve to

address data and information gaps faced by all parties, including policy makers, tenants, as well

as property owners, managers, and buyers.

The development of home energy labels, which both the BC and federal governments have committed to, should be extended to all new and existing housing units regardless of tenure. This will also enable future minimum efficiency rating requirements as needed to reduce building stock emissions. Such requirements could be included in the RTA as well as the forthcoming BC Existing Buildings Renewal Strategy and federal renters' bill of rights.



“It’s unbearably hot in the unit. I was not allowed A/C, neither window nor portable.”

– Tenant participant

### 3) Financial support


To address the concern regarding the affordability of new temperature and energy efficiency requirements, we recommend the provision of financial incentives supported by all levels of government, focused on rental buildings, and attached to tenant protections, including tenure and affordability covenants. Nonprofit and co-operative housing will need funding to comply with building and alteration codes, equipment regulations, energy efficiency standards, and temperature requirements.

A financing program that streamlines processes for deep low-income market rental retrofits, such as a tax incentive or a combined mortgage and grant program, could provide the needed stimulus and administrative support for building owners, while protecting

affordability and tenure, and ensuring tenant participation and benefits.

We recommend that BC Hydro consider the option to create building-level on-bill financing or tariff specifically to enable retrofits in multi-unit residential buildings. Existing and forthcoming residential retrofit programs aimed at renters, including the CleanBC Better Homes Energy Savings Program and the forthcoming Canada Greener Homes Affordability Program, should clearly stipulate affordability covenants, health and well-being requirements, and methods of enforcement.

Financial support for basic utility costs for low-income households and disconnection bans for households facing high energy burdens are also recommended as a measure to increase public health and safety.



One of our respondents was a recipient of a small free air conditioner distributed by BC Hydro in 2023. Just two weeks of using this A/C increased her electricity bill by over \$100, which was more than she could afford. As a result of paying this higher utility bill, she had to go into credit card debt to buy groceries. This intensified the financial stress she is constantly under, and her blood pressure subsequently worsened to the point of needing medication. This experience illustrates how an energy inefficient unit can increase tenant costs, and for tenants on low and/or fixed incomes, even small increases can have significant negative financial and health impacts, trapping them in cycles of stress and ill health that might be entirely preventable with a combination of energy retrofits and utility bill supports.

# Conclusions

This research has focused on tenants' challenges at the intersections of energy efficiency and health, and the intensifying needs as a result of climate change. Practical solutions can be implemented now and improved over time:

- Setting safe temperature standards requiring all rental units to be able to maintain 21-26°C in provincial law and municipal bylaws, including the right to cooling.
- Assessing and labelling the energy efficiency and utility costs of every home.
- Providing targeted financial incentives to support upgrades.

**In combination, these policies can prevent needless human suffering and drastically improve the lives and health of tenants in BC. Approaches will be most effective if they integrate energy efficiency, carbon emissions reductions, climate resilience, health, anti-poverty and housing objectives as much as possible.**







## Vancouver Office

225 West 8th Avenue, Suite #300  
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1N3

## Prince Rupert Office

425-309 Second Avenue West  
Prince Rupert, BC V8J 3T1

[ecotrust.ca](http://ecotrust.ca)