



## Connect & Prepare “Should Be in Every Building!”

At one BC Housing Building, Residents Foster Shared Capacity, Resilience, and Fun

By: Rob Wipond

Collaborating on emergency preparedness fosters residents’ collective resilience—and lived experiences of disabilities can be valuable assets in the process. This is one of the key takeaways from a unique collaboration in Vancouver, British Columbia that resulted in many resident-participants—and also staff at the organizations involved—feeling inspired and transformed.

“Because of recent extreme weather events and the pandemic, there’s been increasing interest at BC Housing in finding ways to help better manage different kinds of emergencies and increase tenant resilience,” says Magdalena Szpala, Sustainability and Resilience Director at [BC Housing](#) (BCH). The organization is now in the midst of a range of efforts including major building retrofits, expanding its tenant engagement team, and encouraging residents to support each other.



To learn more about BC Housing’s Tenant Engagement & Resilience Project, [listen to this “Let’s Talk Housing” Podcast.](#)

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DIRECTOR OF HOUSING AND HEALTH SERVICES

As part of these efforts, from spring 2023 until winter 2024, BCH partnered with Building Resilient Neighbourhoods (BRN) and SHIFT Collaborative to bring resilience activities into four BCH buildings, in collaboration with other community organizations. In one of the Vancouver buildings with high percentages of residents who are older adults or people with disabilities, BCH, BRN and Kitsilano Neighbourhood House (KNH) delivered the “Connect & Prepare” program.

Ordinarily, BRN’s Connect & Prepare is a series of three workshops during which neighbours learn about the value of social connections to preparedness for acute emergencies and chronic stresses, identify their collective vulnerabilities and assets, and then collaborate on a project to build their shared resilience. However, BRN has in recent years been adapting the successful program for more diverse circumstances—especially to support residents who may experience heightened vulnerability during emergencies, including those who are older, low income, recent immigrants, or disabled.

At one 200-unit BC Housing building, BRN facilitated eight monthly “Lunch & Learn” Connect & Prepare sessions that primarily centred around setting up a floor connectors system. Floor connectors are tenants within a building who take on roles of encouraging neighbours to support each other before and during emergencies. “We adapted the Connect & Prepare program a lot to accommodate what the residents themselves wanted and were able to take leadership on,” says BRN facilitator Ana Mendez.

The impacts were substantial.

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*Floor Connector before the Grab & Go Kit distribution event.*



## Past experience is a powerful motivator

“Early on, many tenants shared their feelings of fear, confusion, and anxiety from emergencies that had occurred in the building,” says Mendez. “And some of these same people soon became the most dedicated leaders.”

“Here, safety is such a huge concern,” confirms one resident-participant, Tammy. As a retired paramedic who now uses a power wheelchair herself, Tammy says she’s acutely aware that many residents in the building have mobility limitations and other visible or invisible impairments or disabilities that make them more vulnerable. “Any kind of supports that help people deal with these situations that are out of the norm like an earthquake, fire, or whatever, it’s a good thing for people’s health, their mental and physical well-being,” says Tammy.

“If there’s an emergency, everybody around here just panics,” says another resident-participant, Pepper Jones—only partly joking. Jones says there are frequent fire alarms from cooking or smoking accidents—in one case a more serious fire reached the suite next to her own. In addition, the building’s proximity to the ocean brings heightened concerns about floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis.

Both Jones and Tammy joined a group of about a half-dozen residents who became co-leaders in the floor connectors project alongside BRN facilitators. The group produced and handed out an easy-read guide for what to do and how to safely help others during emergencies. They also distributed door-hangers with emergency information, and door stickers to identify every apartment with a pet that could need evacuating. And most ambitiously, they organized bulk purchasing and a massive giveaway of “Grab & Go” emergency kits to 150 residents in the building.

“It was inspiring to see how tenant engagement grew as the months went by,” comments Mendez. “Many residents became more confident, took on more responsibilities, and stepped into stronger leadership roles.”

Jones agrees. “I think all of us have been very proud all along about what we’re doing here,” she says. And one of the biggest successes, Jones adds, has been the positive, supportive social connections being fostered through these activities. “We’ve had a lot of fun together.”

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BRN FACILITATOR



Emergency Preparedness resources co-created with Floor Connectors.

## Social connections are the key

BC Housing Tenant Engagement Worker Joseph Masongsong, who has taken on responsibility for coordinating the floor connectors' meetings, agrees with Jones that reducing isolation and nurturing social connections have been among Connect & Prepare's most important impacts.

While BC Housing is always working on ways to reduce risks through changes such as improving building accessibility features, Masongsong points out that such "structural" approaches can often take time to implement. "But one way for anybody to immediately build more confidence in dealing with an emergency is through getting help from neighbours," he says.

Masongsong witnessed this same recognition grow ever-stronger among the resident-participants. As they regularly showed up to develop ways to support each other and their fellow tenants, this increased their confidence and optimism that they could collectively achieve what they were setting out to do. In essence, everyone's consistency amplified everyone's capacity.

The Grab & Go emergency kit giveaway, says Masongsong, was a powerful culmination of this.

## Party with Purpose

During the planning of the Grab & Go kit project, Pepper Jones, with assistance from KNH, obtained funding from both the BCH Tenant Activity Grant and City of Vancouver Neighbourhood Small Grant programs. These allowed the floor connectors group to purchase \$1,650 in supplies and give out 150 bags that included a first aid kit, flashlight, rain poncho, emergency blanket, safety whistle, granola bar, water bottle, and pill pouch, along with the floor connectors' own newly-designed easy-read emergency guide. The giveaway was promoted for weeks throughout the building.

"On event day, we had a lineup waiting for the bags before we even started," says Masongsong.

The floor connectors set up booths and handed out snacks and refreshments in the building's common area, and in all directions tenants were chatting and learning about emergency preparedness. Masongsong says the floor connectors had planned to do a shift-change during the day—but the whole vibe was so positive that none of the volunteers wanted to leave.

"When we gave the go-bags away in the lobby that day, there was a lot of people who came out and were talking to me that normally won't say hi," says Jones. "It was bringing people a little closer together."



*Floor Connector before the Grab & Go Kit distribution event.*

Since then, both Tammy and Jones report that residents have reached out to them to ask for help or discuss safety and preparedness in the building.

Notably, just days after the giveaway, the edge of a cyclone brushed BC's southern coast, and a falling tree knocked out the building's power for the entire night.

"It was really nice to see everybody pulling out their little flashlights!" says Jones.



Neighbours lined up to receive Grab & Go Kits from Floor Connectors.

## Mutual helping can be healing

Braelyn Dillon also noticed how the floor connectors project reduced isolation and fostered supportive social connections among the participants—and to some degree throughout the building.

Dillon is a community programmer for Kitsilano Neighbourhood House (contracted by BC Housing to run a building resource center and other services for tenants), who supported Connect & Prepare by helping convene residents. Dillon says she was impressed by how many tenant relationships, some affected by prior incidents of conflict, improved during the program.

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And not only the tenants benefited from this spirit of collaboration, says Dillon—the organizations overseeing the project did as well (see last page for extra mini story).

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BRAELYN DILLON, COMMUNITY PROGRAM  
KITSILANO NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

When the floor connectors project was first getting underway, BCH's Wurdemann admits that she felt unsure if all the residents and organizations involved would truly want to work together. "But it's been a real success and it's an excellent pilot for us to take the learnings from," says Wurdemann. "Eventually, I would like to see something like this happen at all of our directly managed sites."

Moving ahead, the floor connectors are planning to purchase more items for people's Grab & Go bags, and are looking into getting their easy-read emergency guide translated into other languages. The group is also exploring how to create a buddy system for emergencies.



“We’re trying to get a system going where everyone who’s handicapped has a backup neighbour to make sure they’re all right,” says Jones. “We’ve got a lot more work to do. And I’m definitely motivated to keep going.”

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## Connect & Prepare: Valuable for Residents and Partners Alike

In Building Resilient Neighbourhood’s final survey at the BC Housing building that hosted the Connect & Prepare program, resident-participants reported:

- ✓ 100% made new or deeper connections with others in the building.
- ✓ 80% are more likely to ask for or offer neighbourly support.
- ✓ 80% feel more confident about preparing for challenges in the future.
- ✓ 100% have a better understanding of shared strengths, potential challenges, and/or emergencies.
- ✓ 80% have an increased feeling of being prepared for challenges.

“Our relationship with BC Housing is incredibly stronger because of this initiative,” says Dillon.

“We have a large organization, and we have the tendency of working in silos,” agrees BCH Sustainability and Resilience Director Magdalena Szpala. “This initiative has helped us to make more direct connections among the different business areas within BC Housing, and has also improved our planning with our community partners.”

Dillon has also observed that supporting the floor connectors project appears to have given BC Housing a goodwill promotional boost among some building residents.

“I think it did enhance the perception of what BC Housing is doing for their tenants,” says BC Housing Tenant Engagement Worker Joseph Masongsong. And BC Housing’s own on-site staff, he adds, have even begun actively requesting more programming that could help reduce tenant conflicts or enhance safety and resilience.

*Rob Wipond is a co-founder and contributing researcher, writer, and editor at Building Resilient Neighbourhoods.*

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