



Canadian Mental
Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

Association canadienne
pour la santé mentale
Colombie-Britannique
La santé mentale pour tous

CMHA Cowichan Valley Branch External Investigation

Report

May 19, 2020

Report

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) BC Division initiated an external investigation at the Cowichan Valley Branch, a separately incorporated society, after receiving three distinct complaints concerning the affairs of the Branch, each of which were communicated to BC Division in November/December 2019.

The first complaint alleged discriminatory and unfair treatment of a tenant. The second complaint was made by a former board member and alleged unfair treatment and a failure to engage in a respectful resolution process. The third complaint was broad in nature and expressed general concerns about mismanagement at the Branch. The Cowichan Valley Branch requested an external investigation which CMHA BC responded to immediately.

The investigation gathered information from 28 witnesses combined with a review of records and information.

The report's findings and recommendations include:

- The Branch's housing policies and practices undermined and interfered with a tenant's security;
- The conduct of two staff members was inappropriate toward a tenant and their advocate;
- The Branch's housing program would benefit from a thorough review and redesign;
- There is a need for improved supports for the Board, including governance training, the development of clearer guidelines and structures to facilitate Board oversight, and clear communication between the Branch's senior staff and the Board;
- Training in interest-based conflict resolution mechanisms – including clear written policies and procedures – is required at all levels of the organization;
- The Board must make a meaningful commitment to reconciliation, including a long-term plan for ensuring the rights and needs of Indigenous peoples are attended to by the organization.

The Canadian Mental Health Association at all levels is trusted in a way that is unique, especially given that services and supports are designed to reach people living with mental health and substance use problems, experiencing situations of vulnerability and risk. Given this, the report's findings and recommendations warrant a rapid response which is outlined at the end of this report.

It is important to note the investigation found that overall the Cowichan Valley Branch is doing good work delivering important services to people who need their help. However, there are important improvements and actions needed going forward to improve the service the Branch provides, ensure greater fairness, and make more transparent the policies and procedures around the work that is already being done.

Concerns that the Cowichan Valley Branch is not spending funds appropriately or not accounting for spending properly were not substantiated by this investigation and the Branch was compliant with accounting requirements, including completing an annual audit and posting its audited financial statements and annual report publicly on its website. However, based upon the findings of the investigation, the Branch can do more to actively communicate with funders and community stakeholders while developing processes to facilitate greater transparency.

Immediate Actions

1. CMHA BC Division has placed the Cowichan Valley Branch into probationary status for the next year. During this time, the Division will oversee the Branch's plan aimed at improving accountability, transparency, and service delivery.
2. Going forward, the priority will be placed upon providing training related to Board governance and strengthening the Board's ability to provide oversight.
3. The Branch is expected to complete a review of all housing programming, develop clear written policies and procedures, train board and staff in conflict resolution, and engage in organization-wide training focused on a meaningful commitment to Indigenous reconciliation, including training on cultural safety, humility, and trauma-informed care. This will also include a number of key steps in response to the findings related to the tenant complainant.

CMHA BC Division is committed to providing oversight and support as the Cowichan Valley Branch moves through the implementation of its plan in response to the investigation report's findings and recommendations. BC Division acknowledges that North Cowichan and Duncan are engaging in rapid responses to address the housing needs of local people experiencing vulnerability and incredibly challenging circumstances and BC Division will help where it can to support the Branch's response.

Taking these immediate actions and implementing the Branch's plan to improve accountability, transparency, and service delivery will ensure its supporters can have full confidence in its work. The Division expects that the Board will be able to learn key lessons from the investigation report, move the Branch forward in a way that inspires trust, and continue its work in serving people living with mental health and substance use problems.

Note About Privacy

It is important to note that the investigative report is not public because CMHA BC Division needs to ensure the privacy rights of the complainants, respondents, and witnesses are upheld. This report provides as much transparency about the investigation as possible, its findings and recommendations, and the immediate actions in response, in order to ensure compliance with privacy regulations.

If anyone has questions or concerns about this report, the Cowichan Valley Branch, or any other CMHA service, please write to concerns@cmha.bc.ca.