

Issues related to removal of homeless encampment structures and belongings



CUPE recognizes that housing is a fundamental human right and has called on the government to prioritize non-market housing solutions by making significant investments in social housing. CUPE has also urged the federal government to make sure the National Housing Strategy is on track to secure adequate housing for all people living in Canada.

Unfortunately, homeless encampments (tents and non-permanent structures) have become common in communities across Canada as the housing crisis has continued to worsen over the last few years. Many CUPE members are now being required to dismantle and remove the material that is left behind once the residents have been removed.

Work related hazards

There are numerous potential hazards involved in the removal of the structures and other belongings. These include physical and psychosocial hazards. The hazards may vary depending on the location of the work duties, type of work duties, weather conditions, and numerous other variables. A comprehensive Risk Assessment is required to assess the hazards before the work starts.

Some hazards that may exist in the workplace include:

BIOLOGICAL HAZARDS	PHYSICAL HAZARDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hypodermic needles and other drug paraphernalia• Bloodborne pathogens (e.g., HIV, hepatitis)• Rodents and insects (which may carry diseases)• Human waste (feces and urine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sharp objects (broken glass, metal scraps)• Heavy or unstable debris• Slips, trips, and falls• Debris falling from heights

CHEMICAL HAZARDS	PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazardous chemicals (e.g., cleaning agents, solvents) • Contaminated materials (e.g., drug residues) • Mace, pepper spray, bear spray 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychosocial stressors (general) • Stress and anxiety from exposure to unsanitary conditions • Potential confrontations with individuals who lived on the site

Pre-Work Hazard Assessment

Before any worker enters the site to start removal, the employer must ensure the site has been inspected to determine if there are any additional or serious hazards on site:

- **Conduct** a site assessment to identify specific hazards and determine the necessary PPE and equipment.
- **Develop** a cleanup plan outlining steps and assigning responsibilities.

Pre-Work Training and ongoing communication

Unless this type of work is part of regular duties, workers must be provided training on how to recognize the hazards above and processes and equipment they will need to keep themselves safe.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Though the specific PPE required to perform the work safely will depend on the specific conditions, the following items will be expected:

- **Gloves** that are puncture-resistant to protect against sharps and contaminants.
- **Protective clothing** such as disposable coveralls to prevent skin contact with hazardous materials.
- **Foot protection** that includes closed-toe boots with puncture-resistant soles and crush protection for toes.
- **Eye protection** including safety goggles or face shields to shield eyes from splashes and debris.
- **Respirators** N95 masks or higher for protection against airborne contaminants.
- **Hard hats** to protect against head injuries from falling debris.
- **Mechanical tools** (e.g., tongs, grabbers) to pick up needles and other sharps.

Decontamination

There should be a decontamination area for workers to remove and dispose of PPE and wash any exposed skin with clean water and soap safely.

Specialized Equipment

In addition to regular clean up materials, workers may also need the following:

- **Sharps containers** for safe disposal of needles and other sharp objects.
- **Heavy-duty (thick) trash bags** measuring at least 3 mil thick for collecting waste.
- **Disinfectants** and other cleaning supplies for cleaning and sanitizing surfaces and equipment.
- **Containers or bins** that can be used for sorting and transporting larger items.
- **First Aid Kits** that meet or exceed regulatory requirements.

Recognizing the moral injuries for workers participating in encampment cleanup

Workers tasked with removing materials from unhoused tent-based encampments may face several psychological and psychosocial hazards. These hazards can significantly impact their mental health and well-being.

First, for many, it is recognized that these tents and other temporary structures are people's homes. Often when they are evicted, it is done quickly, with no assistance, so they are not able to remove all their valuables. Many workers perceive this task as throwing away people lives and this can lead to severe emotional and moral distress as it conflicts with their personal values in the way they believe we should be treating those who are unhoused.

CUPE strongly recommends that municipalities implement a policy where workers have the right to turn down the work of removing the property of the unhoused based on moral objections. Locals can also bring proposals to their bargaining committees to negotiate the right to refuse this type of work.

CUPE also encourages employers to utilize Critical Incident Debriefing as required, as well as provide access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) with appropriate services for the workers who are required to participate in the cleanup activities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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