



United Way
British Columbia

Working with communities in
BC's North, Interior, Lower Mainland,
Central & Northern Vancouver Island

MEDIA RELEASE
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Free Tickets Doubled and Monthly Passes Added to Emergency Transportation Assistance Program

The program provides people in need with access to bus transportation through the provision of transit vouchers.

Kelowna, BC – United Way British Columbia (United Way BC), in partnership with the City of Kelowna, has expanded support for Central Okanagan residents by nearly doubling the number of bus tickets for community partners to distribute and launching a pilot program for monthly passes.

The Emergency Transportation Assistance Program (ETAP), administered by United Way BC and funded by the City of Kelowna, reflects a shared commitment to improve mobility and foster social equity throughout the region.

The program expansion rolled out in September, with approximately 5550 tickets distributed quarterly and 100 monthly passes distributed each month.

ETAP provides transit vouchers to agencies accepted to the program and allows people in need to use public transportation for emergency needs, employment, education, medical, dental, social recreation, food, and shelter.

"I'm one of the many who was fortunate enough to benefit from this new program," says Mark Arvesu. "These are challenging times in my life, and it gave me a sense of comfort knowing that we live in a community where we are genuinely here for each other, and I felt it more-so when I was blessed with the bus pass. I'm truly grateful."

Stories like Mark's are much more common than we think. Rita* moved to Kelowna after fleeing persecution and genocide in Syria in 2020. Her husband is looking for work every day, but learning English is proving difficult at the age of 45. She takes her children to school every morning and then walks back the 5km to her home, where rent costs over 80% of their income. To feed her children, she also walks to the various free food programs across Kelowna, often for upwards of 1- 2 hours, and carries the heavy food items home. Rita cannot afford the transit fare of \$2.50 per trip, so walking is the only option, including in scorching summer heat or frigid winter temperatures.

Since 2012, United Way BC has been distributing bus tickets to charities and non-profit organizations in the Central Okanagan in collaboration with the City of Kelowna and its regional partner communities. However, the region has seen massive changes over the last 5-6 years, with the need growing exponentially to 10,200 tickets per year, which spurred United Way BC and the City to revisit and update the program.

"The Emergency Transportation Assistance Program has been incredibly successful at making transit accessible for those who cannot afford fares but need reliable transportation to access services, and opportunities for employment, education, and social connection," said Mike Kittmer, Transit and Programs Manager, City of Kelowna. "Expanding this program is an important part of the City's ongoing work to support our community's most vulnerable and improve social wellness for all."

In 2021, United Way BC initiated a thorough audit of the program. This year, United Way BC and the City of Kelowna implemented a new model to make the program sustainable, empowering, and impactful in the long term, which includes the monthly passes pilot program. It also introduces a new application process to distribute the tickets, which helps ensure that Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion values are respected in the distribution.

Significant Impact on Local Communities

The 10,200 tickets distributed annually have been helping residents of Kelowna, West Kelowna, Peachland, Lake Country, and Westbank First Nation:

1. Access health appointments, reducing the likelihood of more severe health conditions or relapses, including mental health treatment, kidney dialysis, cancer appointments, and others.
2. Attend visits with their children in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development, which sometimes means the difference between someone maintaining their motivation to continue their sobriety and journey to wellness versus a relapse motivated by the inability to see their kids.
3. Transportation to job interviews and training courses on time – many people in our communities walk or hitchhike to get where they need to be, often putting themselves in danger in the process; being able to use transit means they can engage in the workplace without worrying about getting there safely and on time.
4. Access food security resources – like Rita, who is now able to travel by bus, which means hours saved from walking and carrying very heavy items.

ETAP is offered in partnership with various cities across the province: Abbotsford, Cowichan, Kamloops, Kelowna, Mission, Penticton, Prince George, Quesnel, and Vernon. The program is uniquely run in each city. To learn more about the details for each of them, please visit <https://uwbc.ca/program/transit-assistance-program>.

"Being able to move around the city increases a person's sense of well-being and belonging," says Naomi Woodland, Community Impact & Investment Coordinator, United Way BC. "Community is not just a place to live; it is a place where connections are made, people look after each other, and a vibrant and inclusive atmosphere is created, where everyone has access to a good quality of life."

The Emergency Transit Assistance Program is guided by a common interest in the well-being of our communities and an understanding that access to transportation is an essential service.

*Fictitious name to protect anonymity.

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About United Way British Columbia – working with communities in BC's North, Interior, Lower Mainland, and Central & Northern Vancouver Island

United Way BC supports healthy, caring and inclusive communities by strengthening vital connections that support people in need. Representing the five regions of Central and Northern Vancouver Island, Lower Mainland, Southern Interior, Thompson Nicola Cariboo, and Northern BC, our organization serves a population of more than 4.5 million people, with a focus on emergency response, kids and youth, seniors, poverty, mental health and food security.

www.uwbc.ca

Interviews are available with Naomi Woodland, Community Impact & Investment Regional Coordinator, United Way BC.

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