

February 4, 2026

Responsible public communication about disability, distress, and community supports

An open letter from Family Support Institute and AutismBC

Dear Mayor and City Council of Port Coquitlam, BC Human Rights Commissioner, Community Living BC (CLBC), News Outlets, and Provincial Accessibility Committee (PAC),

Last week, news outlets reported on a Port Coquitlam resident in the care of CLBC experiencing mental health distress. We are concerned that public commentary may unintentionally reinforce misunderstanding about disability and community-based supports. When language or framing around people with disabilities focuses on behaviour rather than context, rights, and systems responsibility, the messaging can unintentionally escalate fear and undermine inclusion. We believe there is an opportunity to pause, reflect, and reframe public conversations in ways that support dignity, safety, and community belonging.

We ask elected officials and media to:

- 1) Use respectful language when speaking about disability and distress. Avoid defaulting to criminal or enforcement-based interpretations when a person is experiencing visible mental or psychological distress.
- 2) Avoid recording, sharing, or circulating footage or identifying information of a person experiencing distress without their consent. Ensure public discussion focuses on systems, supports, and solutions rather than on the individual's presentation.
- 3) Acknowledge system responsibility for individualized, trauma-informed, adequately resourced supports, including clinical, behavioural, environmental, and staffing considerations.
- 4) Engage disability-led organizations and people with lived experience before public statements, and seek evidence-informed language consistent with BC Human Rights guidance.

We are concerned about recent public comments from the Mayor. Language that frames an identifiable person with disabilities who is experiencing distress as a *neighbourhood problem* risks creating misunderstanding and harm. This messaging can shift attention away from systems responsibility, rights, and meaningful support. We believe there is value in civic leaders participating in disability-informed and trauma-informed learning opportunities; this learning supports thoughtful, rights-aligned communication around complex and sensitive situations, particularly when speaking publicly about disability, distress, and community safety. We encourage civic leaders to model trauma-informed language that respects privacy, centres dignity, and communicates solutions grounded in accessibility and human rights.

We fully recognize neighbours' safety concerns and understand the impact that repeated distress can have on a community. When supports are appropriately matched to the person and the setting,



including staffing capacity, sensory and environmental considerations, and access to timely stabilization and planning supports, the likelihood of crisis-related incidents is reduced for everyone.

We therefore propose a case conference among Community Living BC (CLBC), the provider, the municipality, and disability-led organizations to review fit to setting, individualized support and stabilization planning, staffing ratios, sensory environment considerations, and crisis response protocols, with the goal of realigning supports in a way that promotes safety, dignity, and community wellbeing.

People with disabilities are neighbours and community members. Supportive housing is not incarceration, and disability supports are not detention. The path forward requires care, sensitivity, and collaboration to realign supports so that the person, families, staff, and the community can be well.

Sincerely,

Family Support Institute of BC

AutismBC