

# HOT POTATO INITIATIVE

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## UGM TALK: RACHAEL ALLEN

Hot Potato Initiative Foundation  
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## VIDEO COMPANION PAPER

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**The Hot Potato Initiative** is a non-profit organisation working to educate and engage young Canadians in the conversation about homelessness.

Learn more at [hotpotatoinitiative.ca](https://hotpotatoinitiative.ca)

## Overview

The Hot Potato Initiative has had the pleasure of speaking with Rachael Allen, the Media and Communications Officer at Union Gospel Mission (UGM). We sat down to learn about COVID-19 and how it impacts one of Vancouver's most vulnerable populations. Giving insight into the current homelessness crisis within Greater Vancouver, Allen and the team at UGM have supported thousands of individuals experiencing homelessness during these trying times.

## What is Union Gospel Mission, and what are the values of the organisation?

Union Gospel Mission is a faith-based organisation that has been working in communities across Metro Vancouver and Mission, including the Downtown Eastside area, for over 80 years. Through their vision of "demonstrating the love of Christ," UGM is determined to transform communities by "overcoming poverty, homelessness, and addiction, one life at a time." This is exhibited through services such as providing meals, shelter, and outreach to relieve suffering and renew hope. UGM also hosts life recovery programs that offer freedom to people who are living with addiction, and provides education and job preparation, as well as affordable housing that fosters community.

As UGM is faith-based and Christ-centered, having integrity, excellence, and relationships are heavily emphasized in their day-to-day work. Allen stated that "trying to rebuild communities and give dignity and value to people permeates everything that we do".

## Are individuals experiencing homelessness more at-risk for being exposed to COVID-19?

The impact of COVID-19 has severely deepened poverty and homelessness among individuals living in Metro Vancouver. In other words, the increased rate of homelessness has resulted in scarce resources and limited space among shelters.

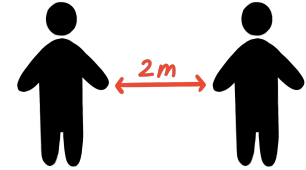
Numerous individuals, including the elderly who are experiencing homelessness, have compromised immune systems or pre-existing health conditions. Many do not have homes to isolate or practice personal hygiene such as hand washing; therefore, the lack of a hygienic environment for individuals experiencing homelessness poses a larger risk for contracting COVID-19. Safety measures such as social distancing and capacity restrictions have resulted in narrow resources for families of low-income to divert to. The closure of schools and summer camps, which previously provided food programs, are now more confined. Prior to COVID-19, low-income families had already attained allocative efficiency regarding child care and employment. In a sense, parents cannot provide more of one activity without giving up another. With that being said, many parents give up work hours to take care of their children, leaving less of a budget for food and basic necessities. Ultimately, UGM is working assiduously in order to protect and serve the community during this unprecedented time.

## How has COVID-19 impacted access to resources that are usually made available to individuals experiencing homelessness, and what does staying at a shelter look like a time with social distancing?

COVID-19 has impacted access to resources that were previously available to individuals experiencing homelessness. At the beginning of the pandemic, guests were frantic as uncertainty surrounded new restrictions and limited services—particularly services they relied on daily. Services like public libraries, community centers, and meal programs had to scale back or close because of the pandemic, which proved difficult for many individuals experiencing homelessness.

UGM, designed specifically to preserve dignity and illness control, fortunately eased into COVID guidelines as people were already assigned into dispersed rooms. In addition to the already **spaced-out living arrangements, social distancing practices have increased, and a health screening process prior to entry has been put into place.**

As Allen states, UGM takes their health and safety very seriously, as well as the safety of the community and their staff. All staff are required to use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, face shields, and gowns when they are within 2 meters of the guests. Lastly, further protective measures are put into effect such as isolating individuals with mild symptoms for the first night of residence, and calling emergency services for guests demonstrating any symptoms in order to reduce transmission.



**Figure 1:** Two people standing two metres apart

## Has there been a change in the amount of people visiting UGM for support during these times?

Allen clarifies that at the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020, there was a considerable increase of individuals requiring the services of UGM, with over 30 to 60 more daily meals being provided. As other services had to scale back their operations, UGM took on a greater responsibility to serve the community.

As many individuals were laid off from their jobs, there was an influx of new people requiring support and assistance, with the spike in numbers lasting from mid-March to mid-May. Allen stated that the typical number of guests is slowly beginning to return to normal, and that is partially due to the increased community and government support in recent months, in addition to the onset of the government financial assistance program. UGM has been responsive and is prepared to increase services such as their meal distribution program to support as many people as possible in face of another wave of COVID-19.

**UGM IS NOW  
GIVING OUT 5x  
AS MANY FOOD HAMPERS  
THAN PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS**

As individuals relocate towards the outskirts of the suburbs in an effort to social distance, Rachael explains that there has been a massive increase in the demand for emergency food hampers, especially for single mothers and other low-income families. **UGM is now giving out 5 times as many food hampers than pre-pandemic levels. What was once 50 per month, has become 50 per week.**

At the UGM located in Metro Vancouver, there has been a reduced number of individuals coming in to obtain meals, but individuals are now visiting the location to utilise the mobile mission vehicles that allow them to connect with people who are camping on the fringes of the suburbs. This service has been quite popular, especially reaching different neighborhoods and communities.

### **What are food hampers?**

While the impact of COVID-19 has led to financial hardship for many across Greater Vancouver, it has forced lower-income families to choose between basic necessities, such as food and shelter. Food hampers are care packages that involve a variety of food such as non-perishable or fresh items, helping alleviate the burden that families face regarding food budgeting. Each hamper differs in variety, as they are assembled by the UGM team depending on the types of donations that they receive. Donations that consist of cans of tuna, peanut butter, fresh fruits, and vegetables, or anything that is nutritious to support families during COVID-19.

## How does UGM respond to shortages of resources such as donations, supplies, or volunteers due to COVID-19?

Initially, UGM was rushing to obtain PPE, relying on donations for face shields and creating cloth face masks made by staff and people who were members of their UGM Recovery Programs. However, Allen stressed the notion that in terms of shortage of resources, the scarcity of safe physical spaces and housing for people in the community was their largest concern, as opposed to physical equipment. The pandemic highlighted that in Vancouver, safe physical areas are not at an adequate level for individuals who are experiencing homelessness. With the ongoing housing crisis, there are thousands of individuals who are experiencing homelessness, and there is still no affordable space for people to go. Due to the pandemic, this crisis has been heightened as spaces such as drop-ins or community centres have shut down. Rather than lacking in physical donations or help, COVID-19 has exposed the need for affordable housing as there is a massive shortage.

Thus, **Allen states that ending the perpetuating cycle of homelessness is not necessarily about taking a few hours just to volunteer, or to donate supplies, but it is crucial to have long-term structural transformations in our city to provide spaces for people to live in and to feel safe.**

## How will shelters and other nonprofit organisations such as soup kitchens and food banks change in a post-COVID-19 world?

At this time, nobody knows what shelters and other non-profit organisations will look like, and it is a question the members of UGM have been asking themselves. Allen believes that this pandemic will likely elevate the level of sanitation and hygiene in the community due to people generally being more focused on it.

## Has there been any change in how organisations and the government collaborate with each other on how to support individuals experiencing homelessness?

With the onset of COVID-19 and social distancing, the process in which many individuals experiencing homelessness receive food has changed. This is largely due to the joint efforts across different organisations within Greater Vancouver. Allen applauded the efforts for all of those who were involved, stating that there was **“an amazing collaboration between the government, the for-profit sectors, nonprofits, social enterprises, restaurants, and even the film industry to really come together,”** as the organisations rallied to provide food and other necessities to those living in **single room occupancies (SROs)**. As individuals experiencing homelessness and those living in SROs were unable to easily access food due to reduced travel around the city and social distancing practices, UGM has collaborated with organisations across Metro Vancouver to collect food from participating restaurants. By partnering with distribution centres, thousands of meals are subsequently packaged everyday and sent off to those living in SROs, alleviating the stress for people who are unable to travel to food kitchens and similar institutions. In addition, individuals and companies have been donating other supplies, and restaurants that have temporarily shut down due to COVID-19 have been providing financial aid from selling their unused stock.

As we all face an unprecedented landscape due to the impact of COVID-19, Allen believes that the efforts of organizations around the city to help those in need has united now more than ever. She hopes that people recognise the need to help those that are less fortunate through unify.

**Single Room Occupancy:** *small living space comprised of a bed and a communal washroom*

## How can youth get involved?

Rachael stated that the best way for interested youth to get involved is through UGM’s peer fundraising, where they can show their support for UGM and people in our communities by putting their own creative ideas to work.

She recommended starting a campaign or hosting an event at **my.UGM.ca** to help raise awareness for their cause. On the website, youth are given the option to start a fundraiser for a specific cause—such as meals, care packages, shelters, or women and families. Additionally, youth can also start a fundraising event for their birthday, using the *#sharebirthdays* campaign which can be further shared with friends and family. Rachael stated that creativity during these campaigns has dramatically helped youth and the organisation reach their goals.

Another way to get involved with UGM is to follow their social media platforms to stay connected and hear stories of life changes and transformations that they have helped create through their work in the Greater Vancouver area. As new opportunities arise to further create transformations in the community, she believes that sharing this information with friends and family will greatly benefit UGM.

**UGM Social Media Platforms:**  
**Instagram:** @ugmvancouver  
**Facebook:** @Union Gospel Mission  
**Twitter:** @ugm

## Conclusion

UGM is extremely thankful for all of the support from those in the community, the volunteers, and even the people on social media that have had an amazing response.

Rachael stated that she knows that there is a lot of anxiety and fear due to COVID-19, but working at UGM has allowed her to appreciate the way that the community has come around to make a difference for their guests who are experiencing homelessness right now. As this past year has been difficult, being able to connect with others that genuinely care, having food on your plate, and having a shelter makes all the difference. UGM encourages youth who are passionate about reducing homelessness and live in the Vancouver area to get involved wherever possible, as it is an amazing opportunity to bring hope to individuals in the community during this unsettling time.