Getting Started in BC as a Newcomer

Finding services, preparing for work, understanding health coverage and settling into everyday life across British Columbia.

Compiled and edited by Chioma

Life & Discourse

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Service information reviewed October 30, 2026. Contact providers to confirm eligibility, hours, fees and availability before travelling or paying.

Moving to British Columbia brings everyday questions that are not always easy to answer. Where do you find household essentials? What do you need before applying for work? How do you register for health coverage, understand prescription benefits or arrange transport?

These are some of the things I wish I had known where to ask about when I arrived. Having money available does not mean knowing which office to contact, which course an employer accepts or how a local service works.

This guide is for newcomers finding their way around life in B.C. It begins with province-wide directories and programs, followed by examples from different regions. Free support and affordable options are included alongside paid services, with eligibility and access details clearly identified.

Find help near you anywhere in BC

Your postal code is a useful starting point. A service listed in another city may not cover your address, even if you can travel there.

- Food Banks BC lists member food banks by community. Contact the local provider about registration, documents and collection arrangements. Food Banks BC itself does not distribute food or book appointments.
- 211 British Columbia lets you search for food, clothing, household help and other community services. Check the service area and access instructions on each listing.
- WelcomeBC explains newcomer programs and helps you find providers. Eligibility differs between programs; some provincial services support eligible temporary workers, students and new citizens.
- WorkBC provides a centre directory for employment support. Ask about eligibility and approved funding before paying for training.

Where to get food without paying

Greater Vancouver Food Bank

Free food support · Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster and the North Shore

Book a registration appointment through reception@foodbank.bc.ca or 604-876-3601, option 1. The provider asks for identification and proof of address; its registration page explains household documents and first-visit arrangements. Registered households can normally collect food once a week according to the distribution schedule.

Registration and current requirements

The Mustard Seed Street Church

Free food support · Greater Victoria

The food bank is at 625 Queens Avenue, Victoria. Bring identification for household members and shopping bags. Call 250-953-1588 or email foodbank@mustardseed.ca to confirm hours and access before travelling.

This Victoria organisation is separate from the Mustard Seed service listed below in Kamloops.

Victoria food bank information

Fraser Health food directory

Free and lower-cost services · Fraser Health communities

Use the health authority's directory to find local food banks and meal options. Check each entry: a free meal and a reduced-price grocery program are different offers.

Free and low-cost food directory

Smaller and rural communities

Use the Food Banks BC map rather than assuming there is no service nearby. Some member organisations operate depots in neighbouring communities. Ask about the closest collection point, transport and any delivery eligibility.

Kamloops Food Bank

Free food support · Kamloops

Go to 171 Wilson Street. The food bank asks for identification for each person in the household. Its client page currently allows access to perishable food twice per calendar month and a non-perishable hamper once per calendar month. Collection days differ for families, single parents, singles and couples.

Check the client page before travelling, or call 250-376-2252. If identification is a barrier, contact the food bank to ask what can be arranged.

Kamloops Food Bank client information

Mount Paul Community Food Centre

Free meals and some lower-cost food · Kamloops

At 140 Laburnum Street, Interior Community Services lists no-cost community lunches on Mondays and Thursdays, noon to 1 p.m., open to everyone with no referral. Its produce market is a separate, paid service. Seasonal produce boxes are listed at $10 for a $25 value; confirm availability before going.

Contact cfc@interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca.

Food access programs and current times

The Mustard Seed

Meals, clothing and basic-needs support · Kamloops

The Mustard Seed at 181 Victoria Street West provides meals, clothing, hygiene supplies and referrals. Its current contact page lists 250-372-9890 for the West End Shelter and 1-833-448-4673 for the Wellness Centre. Confirm meal access, appointments and available clothing before visiting. Current Mustard Seed contacts

City directory with Mustard Seed services

Salvation Army Food Bank

Free food support · Prince George

The food bank at 3500 18th Avenue serves people experiencing food insecurity. New registrations are listed for Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 9:30–11 a.m., with intake closing after ten applicants.

Bring identification for household members and separate proof of address for adults aged 19 and over. The provider says it will work with people when documentation is a barrier. Call 250-564-4000, extension 1. Registered clients may collect food up to once a week, with different collection sessions.

Registration and collection details

St Vincent de Paul

Food support and meals · Prince George

The diocesan directory lists a drop-in centre at 1220 2nd Avenue, 250-564-7871, providing meals and food hampers. Call to confirm the current schedule and how to request a hamper.

St Vincent de Paul services and contacts

For help elsewhere in B.C., search 211 British Columbia for food banks and community meals near your postal code. Students can also ask their student union or campus support office about food assistance.

Clothing and furniture for free or less

A thrift store usually sells items. A voucher or assistance program may let an eligible person receive items without paying. Ask about that distinction rather than assuming everything in a charity shop is free.

Dress for Success Vancouver

Free work and interview clothing appointments for women and gender-diverse individuals in Metro Vancouver. You can request an appointment yourself; an agency referral is not required. Request support

Helping Families in Need Society

Household furniture assistance requires a referral from a local social-service agency or health professional. Its provider page excludes Surrey, Delta, Langley, Pitt Meadows, Maple Ridge and beyond. Have your referring worker confirm address eligibility, the cost of items, collection arrangements and any delivery charges before making plans. Referral information

Salvation Army Surrey

Emergency food and clothing assistance, furniture referrals and connections to other services. An appointment is needed: 604-496-5172, surrey.familyservices@salvationarmy.ca. The provider currently lists a waitlist for food-bank registration. Furniture referrals do not guarantee free furniture. Community assistance

Salvation Army Prince George

Clothing vouchers are available to people in need once every six months, one per person. Basic household-goods vouchers may be issued once every twelve months, one per household. Furniture vouchers are assessed case by case. People with a current food-bank card can email PrinceGeorge.FoodBank@salvationarmy.ca; others should attend food-bank registration. Prince George voucher requests

St Vincent de Paul Prince George

Its store at 1180 3rd Avenue, 250-562-5136, sells lower-cost clothing and household goods. Its support services also help people in need with clothing and household items. Ask the office about assistance before shopping. St Vincent de Paul contacts

The Mustard Seed Kamloops

Ask the Outreach Centre about available clothing and hygiene items. This is basic-needs support, not a guaranteed full wardrobe.

Salvation Army Kamloops

Ask about emergency food support and current Coats for Folks availability at 344 Poplar Street, 250-554-1611. The 2026 coat notice gives extension 206 for program information. Confirm collection arrangements and current stock; advertised donation dates are not collection times. Salvation Army Kamloops

Habitat ReStore

A paid second-hand option for furniture, appliances and household goods. Use the national locator to find an operating store and confirm stock and delivery costs. Find a ReStore

Buy Nothing and Freecycle

Local gifting communities where available items may be free. Search for your community; membership rules and collection arrangements vary. Buy Nothing Freecycle town finder

Facebook Marketplace

Look for free listings and lower-priced second-hand items. A listing is an individual offer, not an approved assistance program or a guarantee of condition. Facebook sign-in is required, and listings depend on your location. Facebook Marketplace

Useful links: Prince George voucher requests · St Vincent de Paul · Salvation Army Kamloops · ReStore locator · Buy Nothing · Freecycle town finder · Facebook Marketplace

Before accepting furniture, check its condition, measurements and collection cost. A free sofa can still be expensive if it needs a hired vehicle to move it.

What do you need for your first frontline or support worker job in Canada

This section focuses on B.C. Job titles cover different duties. A shelter worker, community support worker and health care assistant may have very different entry requirements.

Start with a few real job advertisements. Separate what you already have, what is essential before starting and what the employer will provide.

Check your permission to work

- Permanent residents: You can generally work without a work permit. You still need a Social Insurance Number and the qualifications for the role.
- Open work-permit holders: Check the expiry date and all occupation or location restrictions.
- Employer-specific work-permit holders: Follow the employer, occupation and location conditions on your permit. A different job may require new authorization.
- International students: Off-campus work is conditional. Eligible students can generally work up to 24 hours a week during regular academic terms, across off-campus jobs combined. Different rules apply to eligible scheduled breaks. Confirm your circumstances with IRCC and your school's international student office.
- Anyone entering health services or work with children: Check whether your permit prohibits that work. An immigration medical examination and a change to permit conditions may be needed before you can start.

A SIN does not override restrictions on a permit.

Official starting points: Apply for a SIN · Student work rules · Work-permit conditions · Removing medical restrictions

Prepare for the actual job

Relevant education or experience

Social and community service roles commonly ask for related education or relevant experience. Short certificates alone do not qualify someone for every support role.

First Aid and CPR

Ask for the exact course name and CPR level accepted. Basic workplace first aid, community-care first aid and Standard or Intermediate First Aid are not automatically interchangeable.

FOODSAFE Level 1

May be requested where duties include food preparation or handling. It is separate from First Aid.

Criminal record screening

Follow the employer's instructions about the required check, including vulnerable-sector or provincial screening where applicable. Ask before paying for a check yourself.

Driver's licence and driving record

A full B.C. Class 5 is a common requirement for jobs that involve driving. Some roles require a personal vehicle or a different class. It is not a requirement for every support job.

Health screening

Ask whether the particular role requires TB screening, immunization records or other occupational-health clearance.

Role-specific training

Ask about crisis prevention, de-escalation, naloxone, medication support, WHMIS and safe lifting or transfers where relevant. Confirm which training the employer supplies.

Application documents

Prepare a clear résumé, relevant certificates and references who have agreed to be contacted. Be ready to discuss communication, confidentiality, boundaries and accurate record keeping.

WorkBC social and community service career profile · WorkBC home-support career profile

Health care assistants need a separate check. Care aides and community health workers seeking work in publicly funded B.C. health care must meet the BC Care Aide and Community Health Worker Registry's requirements. FOODSAFE and First Aid alone do not replace the required education or registration pathway.

Registry requirements · Training and registration pathways

Where to take courses or ask for funding

WelcomeBC provider directory

Find a settlement agency serving your B.C. community. Ask whether its employment program can arrange or fund certificates for your status and circumstances. Find newcomer services

KCR Community Resources in Kelowna

Roots to Employment lists FOODSAFE, First Aid, WHMIS and workwear within a farm-to-table employment program for newcomers and neurodivergent participants. WorkBC approval is required. This is a specific employment pathway rather than a general support-worker qualification. Ask about current intake at 250-763-8008 or roots@kcr.ca. Program details

Kamloops Immigrant Services

Lists First Aid, FOODSAFE and WHMIS opportunities. Ask about your eligibility, upcoming dates and whether fees can be covered. Funding is not guaranteed. Workshops and training Employment workshops: 778-470-6101, extension 119. Kamloops Immigrant Services is at 448 Tranquille Road.

Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society in Prince George

Lists short pre-employment training such as First Aid and FOODSAFE for eligible clients. Ask about cost and eligibility for your status. Program details

WorkBC

All job seekers can use the WorkBC self-serve resource area, including computers, résumé resources and job-search information. Additional employment services and training funding have eligibility rules. Temporary-resident eligibility depends on status and documentation. Ask about approved support before enrolling or paying. WorkBC eligibility

YMCA Jumpstart to Employment

Advertises free First Aid, FOODSAFE and WHMIS training. Eligibility includes ages 16–30, B.C. residence, and Canadian citizenship, permanent residence or protected-person status. Other conditions apply; ask about delivery location and intake. Program details Participants must not already be in another provincially or federally funded labour-market program.

Official FOODSAFE Level 1

Paid option. The official online course is listed at $69; classroom prices vary. Confirm the checkout price. Official course finder

St John Ambulance

Paid First Aid courses; fees and course levels vary. Confirm employer acceptance before booking. B.C. courses

Canadian Red Cross training partners

Paid courses with provider-specific fees. Search by location and certification needed. How to find a course

Toward the Heart

Public naloxone learning resources, including Naloxone 101. These do not replace an employer's practical training requirements. Training resources

The Health Career Access Program offers employer-linked paid training pathways. For the health care assistant pathway, applicants must be Canadian citizens or permanent residents. Selected participants receive funded education and a living allowance, with a 12-month return-of-service requirement after registration. Repayment may apply if the service requirement is not completed. Selection, other requirements and employment terms apply. Official HCAP health care assistant pathway

Your licence from another country

A valid foreign driver's licence may allow you to drive for a limited time after moving to B.C. Most new residents have 90 days to switch to a B.C. licence. Exceptions include eligible full-time students.

An international driving permit is used with the original licence; do not assume it replaces that licence or gives permission to drive indefinitely. Employer and vehicle-insurance requirements are separate.

Ask ICBC what documents prove your driving experience. Depending on your licence and experience, you may need knowledge and road tests. Prepare early if the jobs you want ask for a full Class 5.

ICBC guidance for people moving from outside Canada

MSP and help paying for medication

MSP and PharmaCare do different jobs. MSP covers eligible medical services. Drug coverage depends on PharmaCare plans, the medication and sometimes private insurance. Having MSP does not mean every prescription is free.

Get your health coverage organised

Apply for MSP promptly if you are eligible. Some study- and work-permit holders with permits valid for six months or longer can qualify, subject to residency and other conditions. New residents usually face a waiting period of the remainder of the arrival month plus two months; arrange suitable interim coverage.

International students enrolled under qualifying study permits are generally charged a $75 monthly international student health fee. Student extended-health plans are separate.

Apply for MSP · International student health fee

Medication help available to women and men

Fair PharmaCare

Income-based assistance for eligible drugs and supplies. Deductibles and family maximums can apply. Register and complete income verification; newcomers without the relevant Canadian tax return can use the prescribed proof-of-income process. If you did not file a Canadian tax return for the required income year, the province provides a Proof of Income Affidavit process. Signing and witnessing requirements apply, and witnessing may cost money.

National Pharmacare Plan NP

For B.C. residents enrolled in MSP, fully covers selected diabetes medications, menopausal hormone therapy and contraceptives. No separate Plan NP registration is required. Some products are partially covered or require approval.

Examples under Plan NP

Covered versions include metformin, certain insulins and other listed diabetes medicines; selected estradiol and progesterone products; and covered contraceptive pills, IUDs, implants, rings, injections and emergency contraception. Ask about the exact product prescribed.

Other prescriptions

For blood pressure, asthma, infections or other ongoing conditions, ask the pharmacist to check the exact drug in the PharmaCare formulary and any private plan. Coverage varies; the condition alone does not guarantee free medication.

Mental-health medication

Ask a prescriber whether Plan G is an option. It has financial and clinical eligibility rules and requires an application; it does not automatically cover every mental-health prescription. Official Plan G information

Fair PharmaCare registration · New-resident income verification · Plan NP information sheet · Official drug coverage search

Emergency contraception can be free

B.C. residents enrolled in MSP can ask a pharmacist for fully covered emergency contraception. For covered levonorgestrel products, a prescription is not needed.

The brand Plan B is listed as partially covered. Fully covered generic options are listed, so ask: “Can you provide an emergency contraceptive that PharmaCare fully covers?”

If you have completed MSP enrolment but coverage has not started, ask the pharmacist about exceptional coverage. Emergency contraception is time-sensitive: speak with a pharmacist promptly about the appropriate option.

B.C. contraceptive coverage and product list · HealthLink BC emergency contraception information

For non-emergency health questions or help finding care, call 8-1-1. HealthLink BC offers health navigation and access to health professionals, with interpretation available. Call 9-1-1 for an emergency.

HealthLink BC services

Getting around B.C.

Before buying a vehicle, compare the monthly cost with transit and occasional rides.

Across communities served by BC Transit, select your local system to check routes, passes and eligibility for reduced fares. In Metro Vancouver, use TransLink. Student passes and local assistance vary, so ask your school or municipality about the program that applies to you.

As one local example, in Kamloops, check KamPASS eligibility and, for TRU students, the U-PASS included in student fees. Current adult fares are listed at $2.50 a ride, $5 for a DayPASS and $55 for a 30-day pass.

Kamloops fares and reduced-cost programs

If a vehicle is necessary, compare older used vehicles through AutoTrader, local licensed dealers and private listings such as Facebook Marketplace. These are places to compare offers, not guarantees of an affordable or reliable car.

Work out the full cost: purchase price, tax, registration, insurance, gas, maintenance, repairs and suitable tires. Get an insurance estimate before agreeing to buy. For financing, compare the interest rate, term and total repayment, rather than judging affordability from the payment alone.

Before paying:

- Match the seller's identification to the vehicle registration.
- Arrange an independent mechanical inspection.
- Check the vehicle history and outstanding liens.
- Confirm transfer documents and insurance with an Autoplan broker.

ICBC used-vehicle inspection guide

This guide does not list a verified B.C.-wide general free-car program for newcomers. Ask an employment adviser about any individual transport support, but do not plan around a vehicle grant until it is confirmed.

Keep the useful details

Save the names of people you speak to, the documents requested and the next step. Before travelling, confirm hours, eligibility and whether the item or service is still available.

Sometimes the most useful information is a name, a working phone number or someone explaining which form comes first.

Read next: Finding Your Feet Again

About this guide

I am not a certified coach or therapist. This journal is a space where I share my thoughts, experiences and observations, not personal advice or therapy.

This resource guide shares service information, not individual medical, legal or immigration advice. Providers confirm eligibility, fees and availability. A listing does not guarantee access, funding, an appointment or available stock.

Source notes

The provider and government links appear beside the details they support. Pages were accessed October 30, 2026. Many service pages do not display a publication date; the access date is not their publication date. The National Pharmacare Plan information sheet is dated March 2026. The Canadian Red Cross Find a Course page was updated June 1, 2026. The Kamloops Coats for Folks notice was dated September 28, 2026.