

Housing youth must be a priority

Jennifer Blyth
Black Press

Most people would agree that a community has a responsibility to provide its children and young people a safe, nurturing community in which to grow up. Essential to that – for their mental and physical health, their self-confidence and their ability to grow into healthy, productive adults, is a place to live.

For too many youth in the Capital Region, however, that ideal is simply not the reality.

The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness believes there are as many as 600 youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the region. Typically, these can be young teens right up to those in their mid- to late-20s.

While estimates suggest youth homelessness is increasing by as much as 10 per cent per year, as many as 80 per cent of homeless youth do not sleep rough on the streets, but are “hidden” – couch surfing or sleeping in cars; others are “horribly insecurely housed,” sharing a small space with many people and paying virtually all of what little money they have for rent, says Mark Muldoon, executive director of the Threshold Youth Housing Society.

And despite the common myth that many at-risk youth come from outside the region, most come from surrounding municipalities, Muldoon says.

While a few may be experimenting with street life, most have left families in stress and sometimes situations of physical, mental or sexual abuse. Caregivers may be dealing with addictions, mental health issues or problems arising from challenging economic times.

“Kids who are homeless are homeless for a reason, though we don’t always know what that is,” says Ellie James, manager of Youth & Family Services for the Boys & Girls Club, whose client-centred care home model matches young people in need with a nurturing home environment in the community.

Muldoon points out that many of these homeless youth he sees have not been involved with police and are not heavy drug users; in fact, many are in school or working – more of his referrals are coming through area schools than ever before.

If there is a common denominator with today’s at-risk youth, it is anxiety and a range of undiagnosed disorders that prevents them from achieving independence, he says.

Some homeless youth emerge after “aging out” from the provincial care system at 19, finding themselves without a roof over their heads, Muldoon says. He points to one study indicating that about 40 to 45 per cent of the youth who have been in care will end up on the street within two years, a problem B.C. Child and Youth Representative Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is seeking to bring under her mandate to try to remedy, he says.

Today, with research suggesting young people’s brains are still developing into young adulthood, it makes more sense to provide care until age 25, as is currently proposed in Ontario, Muldoon says.

Greater Victoria has some youth-focused accommodations, such as the Boys & Girls Club’s care homes, Pandora “Y” Youth Apartments and temporary shelters run by the Youth Empowerment Soci-



It’s believed more than 600 young people are experiencing homelessness in Greater Victoria. Some are visible on the streets, others hidden in inadequate or precarious housing.

ety and Beacon Services, as well as youth-specific services providing health care and support services. But a disconnect remains in providing a seamless level of response to the growing demand of youth in need.

And the related costs of poorly housed youth, such as healthcare and policing, are significantly higher than the costs of subsidized youth housing, Muldoon says.

“Long-term, stable housing is the pillar of getting youth

out of trouble; it is what the region most desperately needs to give at-risk youth time to make safe, reasonable decisions and just to grow-up,” he says.

“Even more, we want to make sure that today’s at-risk youth don’t become tomorrow’s adult homeless population. Providing long-term transitional housing for youth is simply a good investment to preventing difficult homelessness issues down the road.”

Boys & Girls Club provides safe, caring homes for youth in need

Sometimes a listening ear can make all the difference in the life of a young person who may feel the world is against them.

That caring, client-centred approach is the cornerstone of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Victoria’s youth housing program, says Ellie James, manager of youth and family services for the Boys & Girls’ Club of Greater Victoria.

Operating on a care home model, the program places a young person with a family in the community who wants to provide a safe, nurturing environment. Typically the youth are referred through judicial or health services, but could come from other avenues as well, including self-referral.

The situation for youth has changed in James’ 25 years working with the Boys & Girls Club.

With the new Youth Justice Act, for example, “the kids are not getting into the system as early as they used to, so when they do come in they are often farther down the continuum.”

Many of the family supports typical of earlier decades have also disappeared. Youth no longer have extended family nearby and the resources available to families experiencing challenges have fallen victim to budget cuts. “We’re trying to do more with less and the youth do pay.”

On the positive side, “there has been a lot of research into trauma and trauma-informed practices,” James says.

“We know that people do not start to heal unless they feel safe, so for youth, we know they need to be in a safe, secure environment before they can start dealing with those issues. That’s where our care home model, when it works, is really amazing. (We see) the youth re-engaging in school and attendance and participation rates soar.”

For those interested in becoming a care home family with the Boys & Girls Club, “our expectation is that they provide a safe, supportive environment for that child,” James says.

“We have a wide range of families, from families with kids to couples who have just retired. We don’t expect experts,” James emphasizes. “We want caring homes.”

For more information, call the Boys and Girls Club at 250-384-9133.

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–Ellie James

How can you help?

- Get involved in the discussion around homelessness and the needed services.
- Volunteer – a variety of opportunities are available at organizations around the Capital Region.
- Donations of food, clothing, supplies and money to provide services are essential to help community organizations continue their much-needed work.

Unacceptable.

Just because it’s called “couch surfing” doesn’t mean it’s fun.

If you agree that homelessness is unacceptable, tweet #unacceptablyyyj to @homeforhope and go to our Facebook page to spread the word and end homelessness in our community.

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