

Youth safe house's beds full all the time

Homeless youth a bigger issue than many realize

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A girl, about 16, walks out the back door of the house and into a serene back yard, replete with the North Shore's natural beauty.

Back here, the sound of rushing water blends with the sound of traffic drifting in from the street, almost drowning it out.

The girl looks cozy in pink pajama bottoms tucked into brown winter boots and a sweatshirt. Her hair, highlighted and pulled up in a knot, is still damp from the shower. She looks like she just rolled out of bed but instead of being relaxed, the girl is anxious and on edge. She's the newest arrival at the North Shore Youth Safe House, and like every kid who walks through the door she's in crisis.

Pajamas, toiletries, a shower and a hot meal are all standard issue for the kids who show up here, and a spot in one of the home's four single beds. All full, all the time.

But the house is much more than a place to crash. This girl has been here before and so has had a care plan developed for her by specialized staff. It's an ongoing service tailored to each child's needs, offering support from the time they first access the house and extending up to a year afterward.

Every kid's plan is unique. For some, it includes reconnecting with a family member or going back to school, for others it's living independently and gaining job skills.

Ultimately though the goal is the same: Get the kids off the streets and help them live successfully in the community.

In the back yard the girl is not happy about being at the safe house again. "Please, can I talk to you," she asks Paul Butler, youth outreach co-ordinator with Hollyburn Family Services.

He shakes his head. "Not right now."

"Why," she demands with more than a hint of teenaged attitude.

"Because I'm busy," he responds in a firm but patient tone.

She heads inside accompanied by a staff member.



CREDIT: News photo Mike Wakefield

There are lots of possible reasons why teenagers feel like they are on the outside of their family, their school or their community. But whatever the reason, the North Shore Youth Safe House offers safety and support to local teens who need a place to regroup.

"That's typical," Butler says, looking resigned and a little tired. It can be hard for kids to transition to the home.

He speaks from experience. Butler is on the front lines receiving crisis calls on a daily basis. Kids in need don't always reach out to the house and many times it's up to Butler or his staff to connect with them. "There's the trust factor," he says, "There's an issue around trusting adults."

But despite their misgivings, word has gotten out among youth in crisis, and they're flocking to the safe house. Since opening its door in December of last year, 142 kids have come through here, receiving immediate care and comprehensive ongoing support. Forty-five of them have been here more than once.

To put that in perspective, a total of 127 homeless adults were counted on the North Shore as part of the 2008 Metro Vancouver homelessness count, though it is estimated that the real number is closer to 200.

Youth weren't counted in the survey, and homeless kids are chronically under-reported on the North Shore. Butler says that's partly because it's hard for some people to acknowledge there's a problem here; more than that though, it's because identifying homeless youth is extremely tricky.

"Over here, young people move around a lot. They're very transient, they're hard to find. They'll hang out in a community centre, they'll hang out in a drop in centre, they'll hang out at friends' houses. But the other thing is if you ask a child if they're homeless they'll say no because they don't want the stigma," he explains.

Butler relies on teachers, principals and other people who work with youth to let him know if they suspect a child is homeless.

"When you go into a community centre you can probably look around and find a kid who might be homeless by their physical appearance or they're hungry," he says. Most of the time though, it's not that obvious.

"You can only know a homeless child when you see them sitting on a corner panhandling, that's a stigma right there so that can be counted. But if they're not panhandling, who's going to ask them."

Although they often fly under the radar, Butler says he's seeing more homeless kids, and younger ones too. The safe house is designed for youth between the ages of 14 and 18 but Butler has taken in 12- and 13-year-olds with nowhere else to go.

"But we work very quickly on connecting them with the Ministry of Children and Family Development to get them further help," he's quick to add. "We don't want to see 12- and 13-year-olds sitting in a safe house, it's just not a place for them. But they are getting younger."

So what's causing the crisis?

Plunging stock markets and the unstable economy are squeezing families to the point where parents can no longer support their children, Butler says. "We've had many kids come through here where the parent's been evicted and ended up at the (adult) shelter and we have the child here."

That's exactly what happened to an 18-year-old who calls himself Brian. Last year, at 17, Brian suddenly found himself homeless when his mother announced that they'd been evicted from their apartment. "She pretty much said, 'I can't do this anymore.' She went to live at the adult shelter for a little while, and I came here," he says.

Brian doesn't get in to the circumstances around the eviction, but it's clearly a complicated situation. He does say he no longer speaks to his mother, doesn't know

where she is and is better off without her.

Brian came to the safe house, but like the girl who came in this morning, he had trouble adjusting.

"He wasn't ready for change," Butler says, "He had a lot of outstanding issues he had to work on."

Brian left the home and headed back out to the street, not sure where he'd end up. "I was couch surfing, kind of crashing wherever I could, whoever would let me stay at their house," he says. Eventually, he decided it was time to do the work necessary to change his situation and came back.

"He realized that homelessness sucks -- his words," Butler says. "He was tired of being cold and hungry . . . you can't force a child sometimes."

Several months later, Brian has "graduated" from the safe house into a supported-living apartment in the basement of the home that he shares with a roommate. Brian is getting job training and learning life- and time-management skills. The next step will be getting his own apartment on the North Shore.

Butler says Brian's success is just one example of what can happen when a child commits to working with his or her care plan. Even though many kids have initial setbacks like Brian, Butler says support from the house is there for them any time they choose to return.

"We build on those bridges of success with them each time they come through until they're ready," he says.

Brian's transitional program is separately run from those at the safe house. It receives funding from the provincial government, but that only came through after local rotary clubs submitted a petition with 8,500 signatures.

Funding for the safe house has been even harder to come by, and it could soon be getting worse.

Currently, a federal program called the Housing Partnership Initiative, an application-based grant distributed by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, funds the safe house.

According to Jane Baynham, chairwoman of the North Shore Youth Safe House Advisory Committee, those funds are scheduled to run out by March 2009. Neither Baynham nor Butler has heard from the government if the Housing Partnership Initiative is still around.

A government representative told the North Shore News that the fund is still operational and is scheduled to continue. In September, the government pledged to put \$387 million per year into homelessness and housing for the next five years. Some of those funds have been earmarked for the Housing Partnership Initiative.

But even with the fund forecast to continue, the application-based structure means there is no guarantee the safe house will be supported by the program again.

Luckily, enough money has been gathered through fundraising and donations to keep it open for a year past the expiration of its federal funds in March. But without permanent government support, Baynham and Butler say it could be forced to close.

"That security is really a warm blanket for the crisis of if the government doesn't step in and support this, because the community is," Butler says. "How can we continue building on success and building the programs and the services here for these kids if we don't know 10 months from now if we're going to be here?"

"It's just impossible to run a house like this on donations," Baynham adds. "You really need a government funder to keep it going because the extra fundraising doesn't really cover it all."

But donations have covered a lot. The house wouldn't even exist if it weren't for the generosity of others.

Volunteers donated hours of labour to transform the house from a mould-infested squat to a safe and welcoming home for kids. Inside, all the furniture from the black and white print on the wall to the dining room table was gifted.

And donations are still used to top up the tight budget for "extras" like the Thanksgiving turkey dinner, but sometimes they're needed for the basics.

"You go through more socks in this place than you'd ever imagine," Baynham exclaims.

When children enter the home the safe house absorbs all costs associated with their care. That can include school fees, medical fees, dental and eye care, even bus fare.

"If there's no parent in their life, it falls on the North Shore Youth Safe House," Butler says, "because we want them to feel normal in their life, we want them to have a right to certain things that they should have a right to."

The outpouring of community support has been remarkable. North Shore schools run clothing drives and Shopper's Drug Mart is fundraising for the month of October. But the poor economy is making for a much harsher fundraising environment. Butler says people are really watching their pennies these days.

"If families are afraid of their financial state, the North Shore Youth Safe House is also afraid. Because if the government doesn't back it or we don't have donors to support it, it's going to be a lost cause."

It's been lost before. A previous youth safe house on the North Shore was forced to close for lack of funds leaving the area without crisis support for two years. During that time kids were either on the street or in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Baynham thinks the deluge of community support this time around is because of a strong desire not to repeat the past.

"People were very concerned that North Shore kids were ending up downtown, because once kids end up downtown they don't come back," she says. "We wanted to find a way of dealing with kids before they got to so serious a position they couldn't really recover from it."

Baynham says the safe house is key in providing early intervention for kids like Brian. "If you get somebody like Brian who ends up living on his own with a job, he'll be paying taxes rather than taking money from the government," she says.

Butler agrees. "It's needed to break the cycle of homelessness. If we don't work with the children now, they are going to go in to the adult shelters."

Although he's somewhat comforted by the presence of contingency community funds, Butler still fears the safe house may have to close at a time when kids need it the most.

In addition to the economy, he says kids these days are facing unparalleled social pressures. The result is more drug and alcohol addiction and accompanying mental health issues.

"Usually when you're 19, 20, 21, the mental health issues develop, that's a cause for adults to be homeless. We're seeing more of it in teenagers."

Butler speculates the increase is due to harder drugs causing brain damage in teens.

"The kids are willing to try more chemical drugs. It's not just about smoking a joint anymore," he says.

And then there are the kids who need protection from pimps, drug dealers and abusive parents. A lot of kids, Butler says, chose to leave home because they feel safer on the streets.

"That's why it's not a quick fix here. The house is needed. The community wants it. The community rallied around it," he says.

It's a big message coming from all sides. It's one Butler hopes the government will hear. And answer.

The District of North Vancouver will discuss its youth services policy on Monday, Oct. 27 at 6 p.m. For more information on the North Shore Youth Safe House, or to make a donation, go to www.hollyburn.ca. Youth or families in crisis can contact the safe house toll free at 1-877-78-YOUTH.

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