

### **Nurturing a Community of Caring**

Many of us feel blessed to live in a community that is as vibrant, progressive, inclusive and prosperous as North Vancouver. And we are.

But we must guard against that bucolic community narrative making us immune or complacent to the reality that there are families and individuals in our midst suffering through painful challenges due to life's unpredictable twists and turns.

Fortunately, among North Vancouver's attributes is an extraordinary network of social agencies that provide crucial support when people are vulnerable, desperate and feel there is nowhere to turn.

I recently attended an annual community-awareness event hosted by Hollyburn Family Services Society. Several people spoke from the stage about severe and unexpected life challenges and of how Hollyburn's programs, staff and volunteers provided the means to get their lives back on track.

Among those who had the courage to speak was a high school student who had been homeless and in urgent need of mental health counselling support, and a business executive who lost his job and then his home in a fire and had nowhere to live.

#### **Often hidden**

Their stories – and the many like them that staff at agencies like Hollyburn tell – underline how significant but often hidden social issues can be within a community like ours. Sometimes we only become aware of them when they affect a neighbour or co-worker – or our own family.

I grew up in Saskatoon with parents who were actively engaged in social service work. My mother, a social worker, worked with abused women. My father was a community development leader who spent his time in Saskatoon's lower income areas.

However, even though I was aware of many social issues in the Prairies during my adolescence, in the two decades that my wife and I have lived in North Vancouver we have personally encountered such challenges only infrequently. Though they are often out-of-sight in a community such as ours we cannot let their reality be out-of-mind.

The continuum of programs offered by the Hollyburn Family Services Society illustrates the broad range of social need on the North Shore. Some examples:

- Co-ordinated services for women fleeing situations involving domestic violence

- Programs to enable the homeless to obtain housing and get back on their feet
- A safe house for youth requiring a secure place to stay
- Parent-teen mediation
- Programs to assist vulnerable youth to overcome barriers to employment

### **Grassroot agencies on the front lines**

Clearly governments at all levels have a role to play in thoughtfully deploying resources to address important societal issues such as homelessness, domestic violence, employment barriers and seniors' isolation. But its grassroots community agencies that are on the front lines of program delivery.

Over the past 18 months my office has worked closely with organizations such as Hollyburn and with Family Services of the North Shore to bring federal funding to assist with programming for the critical challenges these organizations have prioritized in our community.

We've been successful in securing financial support for programs that include Hollyburn's "Wired 4 Success" program, which addresses employment barriers facing youth, and for Family Services of the North Shore's programming focused on seniors' social isolation – a real and growing concern.

Beyond government, we as citizens of this community also have a critical role to play. Organizations such as Hollyburn, North Shore Family Services, North Shore Neighborhood House and other vital social agencies would not exist without the active volunteer and financial support of individual North Vancouverites.

It is often said that the true measure of any community can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members. I would suggest that the work being done by and the support that is provided to Hollyburn, to North Shore Family Services and to other key social agencies by many citizens of the North Shore is a visible sign that we are indeed a community that cares.

One of Hollyburn's core values is "to nurture a community of caring." Let that be a call to action for us all.