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NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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Combating teen homelessness in North Vancouver

Few on the North Shore know it exists. Its location is closely guarded. It serves a critical need - vulnerable youth. It is the only facility like it in the province... and up until recently, it was at risk of closing its doors for good.

What makes the North Shore Youth Safe House special is its approach to its clientele. Some are as young as 13. They're homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless. They are vulnerable and they are scared.

Some end up on the street due to disrupted or dysfunctional family situations... mental health and addiction issues... sexual exploitation. They come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, but they have one thing in common – a lot of trauma in their young lives.

It is all too easy to live on the North Shore in a kind of bubble where we may think we do not have “those kinds” of problems here. We do.

Fortunately, we also have a number of incredible social agencies that exist in large part because ours is a caring and generous community – a community that supports these agencies through donations and volunteer hours.

Hollyburn Family Services is one such organization. It has been operating the Youth Safe House since 2008.

Designed originally for North Shore youth, the Youth Safe House now supports youth from Metro Vancouver and beyond. It is the only shelter that 13 to 15-years-olds can access without a referral, but older youth as well find shelter there. Between 100 to 150 homeless youth access the Safe House each year.

Verge of closing

It has always been a struggle to sustain its \$600,000-a-year budget through fundraising and benefactors, and it has been on the verge of closing many times.

Hollyburn Family Services first approached me and my fellow North Shore Member of Parliament, Terry Beech, about three years ago with a real “Catch 22” of a story.

The Youth Safe House was not eligible for the federal homelessness funding program, put in place by the previous government, because the program targeted only the chronically homeless.

However, the whole point of Hollyburn's Youth Safe House is to prevent chronic homelessness among youth by early intervention and provision of a continuum of services designed to help them be resilient, connected and contributing members of our community.

Terry and I pushed hard in Ottawa on this file. It took some time but in the end, our efforts and the efforts of other advocates were ultimately successful.

Essentially, the federal program that funds homelessness initiatives was redesigned to provide greater flexibility to include funding for homelessness prevention initiatives. As a result, Hollyburn was recently notified that it would be receiving \$1M in federal funding for the Youth Safe House over the next two years.

“I vividly remember the day you called to tell us,” Joy Hayden, Hollyburn's indefatigable Director of Community Outreach told me recently. “I don't know how you did it, but you and Terry must have had some pretty poignant conversations down there in Ottawa.”

Looking to the future

Hollyburn believes that support to the Youth Safe House should be a mix of municipal, provincial and federal dollars – reinforced with individual community philanthropy.

“Over the past five years, Hollyburn has regularly increased its fund-raised revenues through strategic planning, donor acquisition and retention,” says Joy. “This is in large part due to our community's commitment to addressing youth homelessness. Youth homelessness is everyone's problem and everyone needs to participate in the solution.”

The Youth Safe House very much deserves support and recognition. It is innovative, it is caring and it is respectful of the youth and families it serves. The Safe House is also a doorway to other Hollyburn services for youth - like education, employment programs, life skills and social training, and connections to other community-based resources.

This North Vancouver initiative could quite possibly be a model for other communities – because the need certainly exists right across the country.

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