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Health, hope and hard truths

The holiday season on the North Shore often slows our pace just enough to take stock of our lives and our community. For some, that reflection is rooted in faith, for others in family traditions or time outdoors, but for many of us it leads to the same questions: how are we really doing, and what kind of place are we building together?

This year's *Vital Signs Report*, released recently by the West Vancouver and North Shore Community Foundations, offers a timely mirror - celebrating our strengths while spotlighting where we truly must do more.

One of the most striking findings is how often residents of the North Shore report good health and a strong sense of connection. Many who live here describe their mental and physical health as better than the provincial average, and the data on activity levels bear that out. With hundreds of trails and easy access to the water, being active is part of everyday life for many North Shore residents - much more than for BC residents overall.

Echoes of the pandemic

At the same time, the report makes clear that not everyone experiences the North Shore in the same way. Since the pandemic, demand for mental health services has sharply increased, and illicit drug toxicity deaths in the region have risen over the past decade, from very low levels in 2015 to between 10 and 20 deaths in 2025.

More and more youth say they feel pressure from school, social media, and an uncertain future, and most 16 to 25-year-olds report climate change harms their mental health.

The report's data on discrimination is also sobering: many residents worry about experiencing racism, and a significant share - especially among Squamish Nation members - report

that they already have. These numbers describe neighbours who may not feel the safety or inclusion that many of us take for granted.

Housing and the cost of living form another thread that runs through the report. Even in one of Canada's wealthiest areas, there are households spending so much on rent that basics like food and medicine are out of reach. Homelessness counts have remained roughly the same, but we have more unhoused people sleeping outside. This sits uneasily alongside the image many have of the North Shore - and it should. A community's strength truly must be measured at its margins as much as at its centre.

Environmental promise and risk

The environment is another area where the report shows both promise and risk. Tree canopy coverage in West Vancouver and the District of North Vancouver has already exceeded 2050 targets, and work on salmon habitat and biodiversity in places like Howe Sound is starting to show encouraging results.

At the same time, hotter and drier summers are increasing wildfire risk, and changes in marine species such as Dungeness crab point to broader shifts in ocean health. The report also traces the deep and ongoing impacts of colonial actions on Burrard Inlet and on Tsleil-Waututh harvesting, reminding us that environmental health and social justice are tightly linked.

The *Vital Signs* findings invite us to see the North Shore as it really is - very fortunate in many ways, but with real fault lines that cannot be ignored. Recognizing both truths at once is the first step toward creating the kind of community we all want to live in - one where health, safety, environmental sustainability and belonging are shared and expected and not simply assumed.

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