

COVENANT HOUSE



A significant part of Vancouver's homeless population is made up of youths in their teens and early twenties. They may be trying to run away from their past, or they may perceive opportunities in Vancouver that they can't pursue at home. The temperate weather in the region is a big draw as they feel they are able to live outside if they need to. What they don't anticipate in coming to Vancouver is the

physical and sexual exploitation they can encounter on the streets or the addictions issues that can haunt them for the rest of their lives.

One organization that is devoted to helping these youths get their lives back on track is Vancouver's Covenant House. **Community Drug Alert** spoke with Michelle Clausius, the Associate Director of Development and

Communication with Covenant House. Michelle tells us that “we work with youths ranging in age from their teens to the end of their 24th year. Approximately 1/3 of the youths we work with are from the lower mainland, 1/3 are from other parts of British Columbia, and 1/3 from the rest of Canada.”

Most of the youths who end up living on the streets have interrupted education and have not completed high school. Many come from abusive or chaotic home environments, and it takes a long time for them to deal with the scars from their past. How do these youths get involved with Covenant House? Michelle explains that “we have an outreach team that goes out on the streets and meets with youth directly. We also get referrals from social workers and schools - as well as referrals for youths who are coming out of detox.” Word of mouth and advertising campaigns also help to let youths know about Covenant House when they decide it is time to turn things around.



The longer youths have been living on the street, the harder it can be for them to change their lifestyle. It takes a lot of trust-building to convince them it is time to change. Michelle stresses that “young people really know that they are safe here. We strive to maintain a community that is harassment free - no bullying, no racial slurs and no homophobia. We also offer a physical sanctuary in the sense that the doors are locked and people from the streets who might be looking for them are not able to track them down.”

Covenant House has 54 beds - 30 for males, and 24 for females. In any given year, approximately 1500 different youths come through the shelter. The typical stay is a couple of weeks. After this, youths move on to the *Rights of Passage* program where they live independently in bachelor apartments in the community. Youths have to make a commitment to the Rights of Passage program following curfews, taking classes, and putting aside a portion of their income to pay for room and board.

A Stable Environment

Life on the streets can be pretty chaotic. Youths tend to sleep wherever they can, at all hours of the day and night. They eat whatever meals they can find, whenever they can find them. When drugs and alcohol are thrown into the mix, there is nothing remotely stable about their day-to-day lives.

Michelle notes that “at Covenant House, we realize how important it is to provide a stable environment. Youths have regular routines they need to follow, and meals are at the same time every day. We work hard to create a healthy and nurturing environment.” Staff don’t want youths to worry about details like “*where will I sleep, how can I get my meals, who will look after my laundry, etc...* All of these basic needs are provided for when they are staying at Covenant House. For all too many youths, this is the first time in their lives they have been offered this level of support and care.



Michelle points out that “our philosophy when working with youth is that **ONE SIZE FITS ONE** - not one size fits all! Every youth that we work with is a unique individual and we treat them accordingly. We are very client directed and we take into account their goals and values when we help them plan what steps they want to take in their lives.”

Providing opportunities for learning and recreation are important part of the program at Covenant House. All too often, the only “recreational” activities youths are familiar with revolve around drug and alcohol use and partying. They may not have had much chance to pursue interests and hobbies at home. Staff and volunteers help connect youths with activities and sports in order to let them know having fun doesn’t have to involve getting high. Michelle says that “several of the youths take part in a soccer team. It’s a great way for them to get out and connect with the community.”

Partnerships

Staff at Covenant House work in cooperation with a number of agencies and organizations to ensure youths can access a full spectrum of services. For example, if youths are just coming off drugs, they might be referred to a detox centre until they have stabilized enough to come back to Covenant House. Staff also help connect clients to schools and employment programs that can help them make long term career choices.

About 1/4 of the clients who come to Covenant House are First Nations people. Covenant House doesn't offer any Aboriginal counselling on site but they can direct clients to resources and support networks in the community that can address their cultural needs.



Mental Health Issues

Many of the youths who end up at Covenant House are dealing with mental health issues like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. These illnesses often begin to manifest in the later teens - typically between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. This is a period when youths are already going through the angst of teenage years. When problems associated with mental health come up, there is often just too much stress for these youngsters to continue living at home. Covenant House works in conjunction with other agencies to ensure these youths get the support they need to cope with their illness and be as successful and independent as possible.

Family Reconciliation

Some of the youths at Covenant House end up there because they come from abusive or chaotic home environments. But others come from stable and supportive backgrounds. Whenever possible, staff at Covenant House work to promote family reconciliation and get youths in touch with their natural support network. They may help them to reconnect with parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents or siblings. At the very least, they encourage youths to contact family members to let them know they are alive and safe.