

MEDIA RELEASE JANUARY 2005
SOCIAL WORKERS RESPOND TO NEWS OF THIRTY NINE CHILDREN AND HOMELESS YOUTH IN THE UPPER FRASER VALLEY

BCASW was saddened, but not surprised, to hear that 411 homeless people were enumerated during the Upper Fraser Valley Homelessness Study. The BCASW Child Welfare and Family Committee is especially concerned that the study found 39 children and youth who are homeless. Homelessness, prostitution and addictions were documented as part of the experience of children as young as 13 and youth as old as 18 years. Paul Jenkinson, chair of the BCASW Child Welfare and Family Committee, refers to these findings as “a social scandal”. Street outreach workers, social workers, educators and police have been advocating for youth safe houses/shelters in the Upper Fraser Valley and it is clear that they were seeing the deplorable conditions youth live in well before the homeless study confirmed their concerns.

The BCASW membership consists of many child protection social workers, workers who are concerned that children do not suffer abuse or neglect in their family or foster homes. Jenkinson asks, “what has happened to our child protection efforts when children in their early teens are out on the streets rather than at home, with extended family, in foster care or in an alternative living arrangement supervised by a MCFD social worker?” Jenkinson questions if MCFD focus on keeping most children in their families and the reluctance to take acting out teens into MCFD care isn't inadvertently contributing to more children living on the streets.

BCASW notes that older homeless teens, 16 and above, have government mandated services in place for them. It seems that youth are being lost to the streets without knowing about MCFD Youth Agreements or being able to complete the paperwork to qualify for this form of supported living. Youth involved in addiction or severe substance misuse, youth who have significant behavioral or mental health disorders, youth who are involved in the sex trade and youth who have absolute or relative homelessness, while not attending school, qualify for this type of supported living. One has to wonder what factors contribute to youth living on the street when a program is available for them. Social workers have reported that children with addictions, and no place to stay, do not fare well in a slow moving child welfare system.

Youth homelessness may be a result of the time delays that often accompany a teen seeking a Youth Agreement. The BCASW has noticed the increasing support among social workers for the establishment of a youth shelter(s) in the area. “Taking care of the youth's need for safety and reducing their risk of abuse is a basic child protection service” says Jenkinson. “Youth deserve a safe, dry place to live while they work with a variety of community agencies to develop a plan to address their homeless situation”.

The BCASW Child Welfare and Family Committee recommends:

- The establishment of one or more Upper Fraser Valley Youth Shelter/Safe Houses along the lines of Walden Place in Vancouver, the former Twin Firs residence in Abbotsford or the youth shelter in Prince George. The shelter should assist youth in the areas of housing, employment, education or training, counseling and possible reunification with family members. The committee recommends that those organizing the shelter include a drop in day program with facilities for youth to shower, do laundry and have a hot meal. The committee encourages those proposing a shelter to avoid the instability of being established as a pilot project as such projects have a short life and the needs of street youth requires a long-term solution.
- The establishment of a residential youth detox and treatment center in the Upper Fraser Valley. The lack of detox beds in the Lower Mainland is a direct contributing factor to youth living in homeless conditions. The lack of local Upper Fraser Valley beds means

drug addicted youth have little access to detox beds and little chance to get off of drugs. Homeless youth also need a residential treatment program that builds on the skills needed to live a drug free lifestyle. Youth who do not receive detox and residential treatment services are usually not successful in foster home situations and are often unsuccessful when living independently under a Youth Agreement.

- The expansion of the MCFD funded, Reconnect /youth outreach worker program, with the immediate hiring of additional temporary or permanent youth workers to connect with homeless youth and to substantially reduce the current number of homeless youth in the Upper Fraser Valley.

The city of Abbotsford and the other communities included in this study will need to act quickly as the number of youth at risk because of homelessness grows. If the municipal, provincial and federal governments do not act on behalf of the 39 children then unscrupulous adults will move into their lives offering a bed, food and drugs in exchange for sex and the income these children can earn for pimps and others in the sex trade.

MCFD must review how child protection and youth services are offered to children 13 years of age and older. Further, this report requires that the public participate in a moment of collective self examination and ask why individual members of the public aren't calling MCFD, making reports when they know children are homeless, at risk and easy prey on our city streets.

BCASW is thankful that the Upper Fraser Valley Homelessness Project has been completed. The publication of the findings are a good first step toward meeting the needs of all homeless adults and children. Now that communities and governments have the homelessness numbers there is a corresponding responsibility to reduce general and specifically child and youth homelessness. Once we have the knowledge about a social concern we also have the responsibility to change it.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

Paul Jenkinson
Chairperson
BCASW
Child Welfare and Family Committee
pjenkinson@shaw.ca
604-850-5669
604-852-0759 cell