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Tackling youth homelessness: lessons from the frontlines

Vancouver Foundation held its first-ever forum on youth homelessness today. Youth workers shared the successes and challenges they've experienced trying to link young people who are homeless to permanent housing. More than 130 people attended the event, including service agencies, the youth they serve, and decision-makers.

One key lesson learned: although agencies can help at-risk youth secure housing by signing the lease, or paying the first month's rent and damage deposits, the severe lack of affordable units and lack of sufficient funds for rent severely restrict the number of youth that can be assisted.

Another key finding is that addressing the needs of young mothers presents unique challenges. It can take longer for these youth to transition to self-sufficiency than single at-risk youth. It can also be more complicated to work with the family as a whole due to occasional conflicts between the needs of the mother, the needs of the child and the needs of other family members.

These lessons, among others, were shared at the one-day forum hosted by Vancouver Foundation at the Vancouver Public Library downtown. Over the last two years, Vancouver Foundation has committed over \$1.5 million to a variety of projects designed to address youth homelessness from different angles. Some of the agencies that received funding gathered this morning to share their experiences with others in the field.

Young people who become homeless and don't have access to affordable housing and support services can end up living on the streets, in shelters or couch surfing, for extended periods of time. Because of a lack of affordable housing options for young people, many youth resort to living in unsafe and insecure housing, which can aggravate other issues that they may be dealing with such as addictions or mental illness.

"Some people might say we need to spend more on addressing homelessness," said Catharine Hume, Director of Vancouver Foundation's Youth Homelessness Initiative. "And we should. But the truth is, Vancouver residents are already paying a lot for homelessness through our expenditures on shelters, jails, ambulances, hospital emergencies, food banks, and so on. As a community, we need to consider reallocating some of this funding to ensure real housing options for young people and to providing support to address issues that contributed to their homelessness. In the long run this would be more effective at actually resolving this problem."

Currently, as many as 700 youth are homeless in Vancouver, and that doesn't include the hidden homeless: youth who couch surf, live in deplorable conditions or just bounce from home to home. Without any stability it is nearly impossible to make progress in life, and without help, many of these youth could be on their way to a lifetime of homelessness.

Vancouver Foundation has been in existence for over 67 years, providing support to hundreds of charities throughout British Columbia. Financial support is offered in nine different areas, including arts and culture, education, health and social services, animal welfare, health and medical research, environment and youth homelessness.

For more information contact:

**Kimberley Fehr, Communications Coordinator, Vancouver Foundation
604.688.2204 kimberleyf@vancouverfoundation.ca**