CLOSE TO HOME:

Housing First Plan for Youth in the Cowichan Region

Prepared by:

Cowichan
Housing Association

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Cowichan Division of Family Practice
Social Planning Cowichan
Mental Health and Substance Use Collective Impact Initiative
(Members include Cowichan Tribes, Island Health Authority, Cowichan Valley Division of Family Practice, First Nations Health Authority, H'ulh-etun Health Society, Halalt First Nations, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Warmland House, Our Cowichan Health Network and Social Planning Cowichan)

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Close to Home Initiative

Close to Home: Housing First for Youth in the Cowichan Region initiative was developed in response to community concerns about the growing number of youth experiencing homelessness.

This project is hosted and led by Cowichan Housing Association in partnership with Our Cowichan Health Network, Cowichan Division of Family Practice and Social Planning Cowichan, and in collaboration with the Mental Health and Substance Use Collective Impact Initiative (members include Cowichan Tribes, Island Health Authority, Cowichan Valley Division of Family Practice, First Nations Health Authority, H'ulh-etun Health, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Warmland House, Our Cowichan Health Network and Social Planning Cowichan).

> The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2016)
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> *"Youth homelessness" refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence.*

The purpose of this document is to outline a framework and plan based on an extensive gap analysis and needs assessment conducted in 2017 (see: Cowichan Housing Association (2017) Close to Home: Needs Assessment. Author: Duncan, BC).

The plan outlined here builds upon two years of community consultation and dialogue at various tables around the region.

It includes the voices of fifty organizations that participated in two community dialogues in 2016, and moves further to build directly upon specific consultation and input from thirty-two community organizations that serve youth, plus a survey of 107 young people.

2. Cowichan Youth Homelessness and Housing Needs Assessment: What We Heard

Homelessness and lack of safe, adequate, affordable housing are critical issues for young people in the Cowichan Region. Research conducted over the past five years has emphasized growing concern around the increasing numbers of youth experiencing homelessness and lack of affordable housing. Concurrently, the past five years has seen significant increases in issues related to poverty, mental health and substance use, particularly for youth.

The longer a youth lives without stable housing, guidance and supports, the more likely these concerns will increase, potentially having long-term negative consequences.

During 2017, the project conducted extensive research and consultations with many community organizations and youth. Part of this consultation involved a focussed survey with 107 youth.

Here is a brief snapshot of what we learned from youth surveys:

- 60% work *and* go to school.

- 14% are parents.

- Just under 6% were living on the streets (66% of whom were Aboriginal youth).

- 23% were couch surfing or living with relatives or friends.

- 13% have had problems with paying their rent.

- 16% have had problems with having a place to stay and 33% were worried about having a place to stay.

- 3 youth had stayed at a shelter at least once and another 7.5% said they had needed a shelter but were too young to access it. Half of these youth were Aboriginal.

- When asked what would help, youth said:
    - Housing (e.g. affordable, safe, for young families, easier access, youth rentals, housing registry, help finding housing)
    - Supports/Resources (e.g. mental health, substance use education, financial)
    - Employment & Training (e.g. work programs, higher wages, job search)
    - Youth drop-in Centre

Community organizations that serve youth had very similar suggestions. The needs identified included:

1. Shelter, transitional and permanent housing that meets the needs of a spectrum of youth
1. A 'System of Care' that provides for the range of supports needed to ensure youth are appropriately sheltered or housed and that youth perspectives and well-being is at the centre
2. Community responses and services supported by an overarching coordination structure with a central intake function
3. Participation and involvement strategies that recognize and provide for differing needs and that highlight the voices of youth
4. A process for sharing information and keeping everyone connected

3. The Close to Home Housing First for Youth Plan

The Close to Home Housing First for Youth Plan lays out a model framework for a Housing First Approach to addressing youth homelessness and affordable housing in the Cowichan Region.

Part I outlines core principles and considerations, and details the components of a Cowichan model based on community input.

Part II sets out objectives for implementation including the range of partnerships and resources required to bring the plan into action.

PART I: KEY PRINCIPLES AND HOUSING FIRST MODEL FRAMEWORK

1. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK [1]

Housing first for Youth is situated within a Strategic Framework that recognizes that youth need both housing and supportive services, and that the ultimate goal is to prevent youth from becoming homeless.

Strategy	Objectives
HOUSING	• Adopt a community-wide Housing First Approach • Develop a Housing First Program • Develop a spectrum of housing for youth including shelter, transitional, supported scattered site) • Develop transitional housing for Aboriginal youth
SUPPORT	• Promote relationship-based approaches to supporting youth • Provide outreach services to connect youth with housing and support • Ensure adequate services for youth with mental health issues • Enhance services for LGBTQ youth and foster public awareness • Enhance services for Aboriginal youth and foster public awareness • Ensure that education, training, and job skill development are accessible to youth
PREVENTION	• Foster youth resilience and meaningful community engagement • Work with schools to educate youth about homelessness and available supports • Promote family mediation and support • Ensure effective support for youth aging out of government care • Ensure youth are not discharged into homelessness • Coordinate the activities of youth-serving organizations to best serve youth • Develop a spectrum of housing for youth including shelter, transitional, supported scattered site). Connect this housing to transportation.

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[1] Adapted from: A Way Home Kamloops (2014) - A Plan to End Youth Homelessness in Kamloops Available at: http://homelesshub.ca/resource/way-home-plan-end-youth-homelessness-kamloops

[2] Excerpted and adapted from Gaetz, Stephen. (2017). *THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide*.

2. HOUSING FIRST DEFINITION

Housing First for Youth: What is it? [2]

HF4Y is an adaptation of the well-established Housing First approach to addressing homelessness.

The adaptation of HF4Y is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adults, and therefore the solutions must be youth-focused.

HF4Y is grounded in the belief that all young people have a right to housing and that those who have experienced homelessness will do better and recover more effectively if they are first provided with housing.

From Philosophy to Programming to Systems Approach

Distinctions between HF4Y as a philosophy, systems approach, and program:

- o Ideally, all levels of practice and system design should align to support and put the core principles into practice, because greater fidelity to the model can indicate what works well in practice and where changes may need to be made.
- o *A community can do systems and planning work in partnership with the education and health systems using the HF4Y model without having any formal HF4Y programs, as long as the core principles are guiding and integrated into the community's system of youth homelessness services and interventions.*

HF4Y Philosophy

As a philosophy, the core principles of HF4Y can provide a community or an organization with a foundational set of values to guide goals, outcomes, collaboration and practice.

In guiding community planning, it means that as a whole, the local system is designed around these core principles. All services should contribute either to the prevention of youth homelessness, or ensuring that young people have immediate access to housing and supports so that their experience of homelessness is brief and non-recurring.

This does not mean that all crisis services and housing options/models are HF4Y programs. Rather, they exist within, and support a broader systems strategy that follows the core principles.

Different models of accommodation and support can be part of the community strategy, and can support the Housing First agenda without actually being considered HF4Y.

Similarly, while mainstream services such as schools and health clinics support the work of

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[2] Excerpted and adapted from Gaetz, Stephen. (2017). *THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

HF4Y, they are not Housing First programs themselves. What connects them altogether is integration into a service model guided by HF4Y principles.

However, if a community only offers such programs and does not have any HF4Y programs that follow this program model guide, it cannot make the claim that it is a HF4Y community.

Program Models

Housing First can be considered more specifically as a program when it is operationalized as a service delivery model or set of activities provided by an organization.

While HF4Y programs must demonstrate fidelity to the model, values and core principles as described, it can—and should—be adapted to take account of the local context, including the range of existing services and supports.

Systems Integration

In the context where the core principles of HF4Y guide local program planning, it is important that an integrated systems approach is adopted.

This means that within a "system of care" approach, all services and program elements within the youth housing/homelessness sector work towards supporting young people to access housing (or avoid homelessness) and to get the supports they need. This includes not only dedicated HF4Y programs with a mandate to provide the intervention, but also allied services including outreach, emergency shelters and other youth-serving organizations.

Barriers to successful implementation can arise if the broader systems that provide funding and policy directions do not align with the core principles of HF4Y. Efforts to align these resources and interests with HF4Y should not be understated.

3. SETTING PRIORITIES

Within a community strategy, population-based priorities should be set, where chronically homeless youth must always be a priority.

However, communities may also decide to adapt the HF4Y model in order to target and meet the needs of specific sub-populations, or to implement it in a preventive context.

4. HF4Y CORE PRINCIPLES

1. **A right to housing with no preconditions**

   - Housing and supports are separated: actual services, particularly mental health and clinical services, are not located in the housing or living environment of the individual.

   - A young person's behaviours and actions should not lead to a permanent loss of housing.

2. **Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination**

   - HF4Y recognizes limitations to choice but emphasizes youth choice regarding housing and supports. Participation in a HF4Y program does come with two key conditions:

     a. Young people must agree to a weekly visit or contact with a caseworker.
     b. If young people have an income source, they are expected to contribute up to 30% to the cost of rent.

   - Young people should be actively involved in the design and evaluation of local HF4Y programs and have the opportunity to provide feedback on the supports they are receiving.

3. **Positive youth development and wellness orientation**

   - A recovery orientation focuses on individual wellness, beyond merely providing housing and minimal supports but also focusing on building assets, confidence, health and resilience.

   - A positive youth development approach:

     - Identifies the youth's personal strengths in order to build self-esteem and a positive sense of self
     - Works to improve the youth's communication and problem-solving skills
     - Enhances and builds natural supports, including family relationships
     - Assists the youth in personal goal setting
     - Helps the youth to access educational opportunities and identify personal interests
     - Assessment tools, case management and data management supports must be strengths-based and account for risks and assets.

4. **Individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits**

   - Once housed, some young people will need few, if any, supports while others will need supports for the rest of their lives.

   - Supports must be flexible

   - Needs evolve over time

5. **Social inclusion and community integration**

   - Part of the HF4Y strategy is to promote social inclusion through helping young people build strengths, skills and relationships that will enable them to fully integrate into and participate in their community, in education and employment.

5. HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH MODELS OF ACCOMODATION[3]

In Place Crisis Housing	• Short-term accommodation for young people with the aim of diverting youth away from emergency shelters into healthier, more positive environments while long-term housing is being arranged • E.g., Host homes
Returning Home	• Young people are assisted and supported to return to the home of their parents and/or to the home of a significant adult including relatives, godparents and/ or family friends.
Supportive Housing	• Short or long term • This is a more integrated model of housing and services for individuals with complex and concurrent issues where the clinical services and landlord role are often performed by the same organization.
Transitional Housing	• Various models: • Two stage models provide an interesting approach, whereby in the first stage, young people live in congregate settings where they may share living space (separate bedrooms but congregate cooking and living spaces). In the second stage, young people may move into separate bachelor apartments within the same facility. This allows for more independence and the learning of life skills, but in a more structured environment than scattered site models. • All young people who access such accommodation must eventually be supported to move into independent living, with supports, at some point.
Independent Living – Scattered Site	• This is the model of accommodation that most closely fits with mainstream approaches to Housing First, and should be the end goal for any client in a HF4Y program. • Independent living refers to situations where young people obtain and maintain their own or shared permanent housing in either the private market or the social housing sector. Depending on the needs and desires of the young person, they will also have access to a range of services and supports.

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[3] Excerpted and adapted from: Gaetz, Stephen. (2017). *THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

6. POPULATION SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

The youth homeless population is diverse. There are typically more homeless male youth than females (Segaert reports that 63% of youth in shelters are male, and 37% are female), which may be an outcome of the fact that young women are especially at risk of crime and violence (including sexual assault) while homeless, leading them to find alternatives to the streets, even if those alternatives pose other significant risks.

Certain significant sub-populations of youth are over-represented, particularly Indigenous youth. Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual (LGBTQ2S+) make up 25-40% of the youth homeless population, compared to only 5-10% of the general population.

Age also matters when considering youth homelessness. Developmentally, there is a huge difference between the needs, circumstances, and physical and emotional development of a 14 year old compared to an 18 year old or a 23 year old.[4] And finally, feedback from community organizations in the Cowichan Regional also stressed that many youth have children and these young people in particular can be overlooked when considering youth housing needs.

Indigenous Youth	Indigenous youth may face different challenges because of their backgrounds in culture and history. Indigenous youth supports would look differently to help begin to heal, build community, and reconnect with culture and family. This would happen through cultural teachings, lessons, and traditional practices guided by elders from their home community.
LGTBQS2 Youth	LGBTQ2S+ youth face challenges and barriers because of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. LGBTQ2S+ youth would need an option that provides a safe place where their sexual orientation and gender identity is respected and celebrated.
Young Families with Children	Youth with Children would need specific supports around child care and parental education, as well as separate housing with enough space for their families.
Newcomers	Newcomers would need specific supports around the English language, cultural education, and community connection.
Rural/Urban	Rural youth would specifically need transportation support, as well as mobile wrap-around services.
Developmental	Developmental growth happens different with each individual; specific life skills will vary depending on the youth, but might look like cooking, cleaning, work ethic, education, etc.

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[4] Homeless Hub (2017) Youth (Available at: http://homelesshub.ca/solutions/population-specific/youth. Accessed: 11/30/17)

PART II: THE HOUSING FIRST PLAN

1. COMPONENTS OF HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH IN THE COWICHAN REGION

I. Shelter, Transitional and Permanent Housing that meets the needs of all youth

i. Youth Respite/Shelter/Safe House/Transitional Housing
- Low/no barrier, to meet youth "where they are at"
- Open and staffed 24/7
- Trauma-informed practice

ii. Youth-appropriate Supported and Independent Housing Options
- Low/no barrier supported housing options for youth with different needs (Housing First Model)
- Affordable rental housing (build, renovate, repurpose)
- Wrap around services without preconditions
- Tenant advocacy, mediation and education to prevent evictions

II. A System of Care that provides for the range of supports needed to ensure youth are appropriately sheltered or housed and that youth well-being is central

i. System of Care
- Multitier system that attends to the spectrum of youth needs from shelter and housing to mental health and well being

ii. Youth Housing First Service Philosophies and Interventions
- Housing First models that align with trauma-informed harm reduction, client-centred, strengths-based approaches to service, that is more suited to youth and appropriate for the Spectrum of Youth

iii. Centralized intake and Case Management Capacity
- Coordination between agencies and outreach
- Adequate Case Management for each youth to connect them to the right community resources
- Involve Youth ACT and ICM teams

iv. Support to Transition Out of Care
- Community-based support to help youth to prepare for aging out of care

v. Skills Building and Training
- Life skills training (e.g., cooking, budgeting/finance, laundry)
- Housing readiness training (e.g., Ready to Rent courses)
- Educational options (e.g., upgrading high school or post-secondary preparation, literacy skills)
- Communications and conflict resolution
- Employment readiness training (resume writing, interviewing)
- Computer literacy and access to computers and internet
- First Aid, Food Safe and other certificates

vi. Mental Health and Substance Use Supports (including prevention, treatment and Interventions)
- Outreach and Supports (24/7) for youth dealing with mental health and addictions (either themselves or those they live with)
- Low/no barrier access to treatment options (e.g., safe injection sites, sobering/detox centre, treatment centres, harm reduction)
- Prevention education and supports

vii. Counselling and Education Supports
- Access to counselling services
- Liaison and partnerships with schools to identify and support youth who are experiencing challenges
- Increase community education on mental health and substance use to dispel myths and reduce stigma
- Community Outreach, Education and Awareness for Youth on Domestic Violence and Sexual Exploitation
- Relationship supports for parents and youth, foster parents, group home providers and/or social workers

viii. Healthy Activities
- Options for drop-in for youth (including evenings and weekends)
- Promotion of local activities for youth (using appropriate technologies/social media)
- Age-appropriate programming and appropriate age groupings (e.g., with sports, games, activities)

III. Leadership, participation and involvement strategies that recognize and provide for differing needs and that highlight the voices of youth

i. Community Organizations Options for Participation and Involvement
- Identify different options and tiers for involvement in planning

ii. Youth Leadership is Key

iii. Youth Leadership and Engagement with/by Youth
- Create opportunities for youth to engage with vulnerable youth
- May increase youth comfort in asking for help
- Need youth voice on youth services

iv. Interim Action Plan
    Identify immediate actions that can be taken to address youth homelessness

IV. A process for sharing information and keeping everyone connected

i. Youth Resources Online
- Current and future youth-oriented services/activities/events are promoted online via social media, preferably updated by youth

ii. Youth Hub or Neighbourhood House in Central Area
- Safe place for youth to learn about services and resources (e.g., counselling, treatment, housing, finances)
- Place for youth and workers to build relationships & connections

PART III: MOVING THE PLAN FORWARD

Community consultations and research have identified the Plan Components for the Cowichan Housing First for Youth initiative. Our next steps will be to work on each one of these areas to identify and facilitate actions and partnership, and update status of each as progress occurs.

Objective/Actions
Objective I: Shelter, Transitional and Permanent Housing that meets the needs of all youth
Objective II. A System of Care that provides for the range of supports needed to ensure youth are appropriately sheltered or housed and that youth well-being is central Youth Housing First Model – Philosophy, Systems Approach, Programming Youth Services – ▪ Adopt philosophy ▪ Develop/adopt HF Program Model Support Services: Skills Building and Training Support Services: Mental Health and Substance Use Support Services: Counselling and Education Supports, Healthy Activities Support Services: Support to Transition out of Care
Objective III: Leadership, participation and involvement strategies that recognize and provide for differing needs and that highlight the voices of youth Youth Leadership Youth Engagement Community Organizations Options for Involvement
Objective IV: A process for sharing information and keeping everyone connected Information resources / online Youth hub/central drop in