

a home for every person



dispelling the myths of homelessness

Understanding what causes homelessness is the first step to solving the problem.

Too often assumptions are made – that the homeless are lazy, want to live off the system, don't care about themselves, are hopeless, don't want to work – that unfairly judge and label the most vulnerable, at-risk members of our society. These stereotypes lead to the ongoing rejection, marginalization and neglect of homeless people.

At RainCity Housing, many of our clients were, at some point in their lives,

considered respected members of the community. Due to circumstances over which they had no control, such as family breakdown, trauma, abuse, learning difficulties, disability, health problems and addictions, they found themselves without a home. *Being homeless is not a choice.*

When people live with mental illness as well, they bear a double burden. Many homeless people live with mental illness, coping not only with a challenging illness but also with people's negative attitudes. This discrimination can be as hard

for people to deal with as the symptoms of the disease itself. *Mental illness is not a choice.*

People who live with mental illness are often forced to adapt and cope in ways that become problematic for them. Often they use drugs as a form of self-medication in an attempt to temporarily relieve some of the symptoms associated with mental illness, including stress, anxiety, social inhibitions or depression. *Addiction is not a choice.*

While we still have a long way to go, RainCity

Housing's ongoing efforts to combat the myths and misconceptions around homelessness, mental illness and addictions have resulted in the re-thinking of negative stereotypes in the broader community and are leading to positive changes in public understanding.

We will continue to remain flexible and ensure barriers are minimized and myths are dispelled. At RainCity Housing, everyone is treated with respect and dignity – because we are acutely aware that homelessness, mental illness and addiction are not choices. ■

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mark's blog by mark smith, executive director

Stereotypes of people with mental illness are pervasive and entrenched in our collective psyches. What we believe about people with a mental illness is as inaccurate and dehumanizing as the stereotypes many of us believe about women, racial minorities, people with differing physical and developmental abilities, and any number of other diverse groups.

Mental illness is not anyone's fault; anymore than heart disease or cancer is a person's fault. Mental illness is not a choice or the result of willful, petulant behaviour. No one should have to feel ashamed of this condition any more than any other medical condition.

There are very few of us who haven't been touched by mental illness in some way, such as with a family member or friend. Approximately 50 - 70% of homeless people live with mental illness. As with other debilitating diseases, mental illness is not discerning – it's not a disease based on socio-economic class or ethnicity.

Homeless people, especially those with mental illness and addictions, are amongst the most vulnerable people in our society, suffering from acute levels of poverty and social exclusion. None of them simply woke up one morning to find they were homeless, mentally ill and addicted. They got there for a reason. Yet so many in our society believe that the homeless just need to smarten up and get a job. This attitude overlooks the facts – the enormous physical, emotional and sexual trauma our clients experience from very young ages.

I am proud of our clients and to have had the opportunity to play a part in supporting them to move forward with their lives. We all need support and our networks, whether we call those networks friends or family, church, or a sports team. The people we support at RainCity Housing have their network too and it is us. ■

did you know?

Bedbug infestations have grown worldwide. While many associate bedbugs with filth and poor living conditions, the reality is the bugs do not discriminate. The problem has spread to high end apartments, five star hotels, hospitals and doctors' offices. RainCity Housing spent over \$20,000 last year on bedbug control, an expense we are working hard to eliminate – along with the bugs – through our innovative "bed bug sauna," currently in the design stage.

Find out more at www.raincityhousing.org.

"How you guys are able to be so nice and so kind and understanding to people that most of society shuns is remarkable. In one of my darkest hours you gave me hope. I cannot even begin to thank you enough for all you have done." ~ Triage Shelter client

breaking news



In early September RainCity Housing began operations at our newest supported housing project, The Shaldon Hotel. The Shaldon provides housing and support for 55 men and women in the Downtown Eastside, with an emphasis on community building. The Shaldon is located on East Hastings Street (near Columbia), and was awarded to RainCity Housing by BC Housing in the Province's recent purchases of Downtown Eastside hotels.

the evolution of a caring philosophy

The mission of RainCity Housing is to advance social equity by building upon the strengths of our community and of each individual. Through innovative programs and adoption of best practices, we provide housing and support, promote health and facilitate hope, opportunity and change for people living with mental illness, addictions and other challenges.

In 1999 a **Client-Centred Approach** was adopted. This non-directive approach is based on the philosophy that people tend to move naturally toward growth and healing if provided the right supports, and everyone has the capacity to find their own answers. It's not about fixing people, it's about helping people settle into a meaningful life.

A **Harm Reduction** philosophy was introduced in 2000, acknowledging that harm is inherent in many behaviours. By providing safe and supportive environments, we work to help individuals recognize and reduce potentially harmful elements in their lives.

In 2001 we opened the Princess Rooms, our first low-barrier **Housing First** program for the most at-risk, chronically homeless men and women in the community.

A **Strengths Model** was adopted in 2002 to support clients in recognizing and using their strengths, talents, knowledge, skills and experience to help them achieve their goals and experience an improved quality of life.

We are always committed to doing better – to improve and build on what is working – to cast the net wide for new ideas that help us to continue to be a leader in providing solutions to end homelessness. ■

"You don't know me, but I am one of many people quietly cheering you on from the sidelines. Those of us on the outside can't know about all the difficulties you face, but we can admire your strength. I hope you know that you have the support of people in the community like me."

~ holiday sentiment to Fraser Street clients

taking it to the streets

Homeless Outreach Team Supervisor Christoph Hofmeister spends his days helping people in need.

Christoph is a RainCity Housing Homeless Outreach Program Supervisor. Since joining the team over a year ago, Christoph has worked with dozens of clients, helping them find housing or access resources.

Christoph's workday starts early when he and another outreach worker head out to the streets of the Downtown Eastside to check on those who are sleeping "rough" – under bridges, in doorways or on park benches. He and his partner talk with these folks to assess where they're at, what resources they have, and what they need. Christoph tries to develop relationships quickly, and he finds that many of the people he speaks with want help.

"It is really rewarding helping people out, when it all comes together. You can see that these people are grateful – when you see them again they come and shake your hand," he says.

About a quarter of his clients find housing within a day, and another 25% find housing within a few days. Although some drop-in centres and other community groups refer people to the program, Christoph is quick to mention that homeless people don't need a third-party referral;



they can access the program for themselves.

Not all of the people on the street are unemployed, using drugs or have mental illness, notes Christoph. "I even helped one woman who was eight months pregnant," he comments.

Christoph's knowledge has been gained through life and on-the-job experiences. He has been working for various organizations in this field over six years. One thing he firmly believes is that the sharp increase in real estate prices, coupled with a lack of legislated rent control and lax enforcement of existing residential tenancy laws has made Vancouver a city with rental prices that hardly anyone can afford. That is, if you can even find a place to rent – the current vacancy rate is less than 0.4%!

Keep up the good work Christoph!

Referrals to the Outreach Program can be made at 604.254.3727, Monday to Friday between 7 am and 5 pm. ■



The Homeless Outreach Team BBQ for clients at Crab Park in August.



"The best way to describe how I feel about 'The Viv' is it makes my heart sing." ~ Brenda Hawkes, Service Plan Coordinator at The Vivian

her story

Brenda is a role model.

Years ago, Brenda found herself living on the streets with her sons after her marriage broke up. She has endured many things – childhood and marital abuse, drug and alcohol use, prison, the death of a son - but she has survived, learned and grown.

Brenda is now the Service Plan Coordinator for The Vivian Transitional Housing Program for Women. She has been with the program for four years, and has been clean and sober for nearly ten years.

The women at The Vivian trust Brenda to hear their stories and witness their lives, as her life was at one time very similar to that of many of the women she now helps.

"I find the challenges and successes rewarding – seeing

these women succeed, even in the smallest things. The small things add up to bigger things," Brenda says.

Brenda has worked in other places – with a group of women helping sex trade workers at a drop-in centre, at a transition house for women and children – but she knew she needed to be back in the Downtown Eastside. When she found The Vivian, which was just opening, she knew it was the place. The Vivian reflects her beliefs and values.

"The women who live at The Vivian are warm, dry, supported through anything and, most of all, safe. It is a pleasure and honour to be a part of The Vivian, a housing project that has been so desperately needed for so very long," says Brenda.

Thank you so much Brenda for your inspiration and for being so caring and supportive. ■

get your office involved in ending homelessness

This holiday season consider an office campaign to raise money for RainCity Housing!

Just a few fundraising ideas include a happy hour party, office raffle or 50/50 draw,

silent auction, bingo, bowling night, lunch walkathon, jeans Friday, bake sale... be creative, set a goal, and most of all, have fun!

Leverage your efforts by asking your company to match what you raise or by a corporate challenge to another company! For fundraising ideas, brochures, donor cards or other information, please call Fran Romer at 604.215.5991. ■

blankets and warm clothing needed

Housing needs your help and generosity to ensure everyone stays warm this winter.

Donations of blankets, towels, warm clothing and toiletries are gratefully welcome. If you would like to donate these items, please drop them off at the Triage Shelter, 707 Powell Street. ■

myth:

It's impossible for an individual person to make a difference in ending homelessness.

fact:

RainCity Housing's programs are succeeding in ending homelessness thanks to every single donor who has made a commitment to be part of the solution to homelessness. Your individual donations really do make a difference by helping to bridge the shortfall in government funding. Just as importantly, your contributions show our clients that their community supports them as they work to gain control and move forward in their lives.

please join our community of support today

Your donation will help provide safe housing, greater sense of purpose and improved quality of life for people living with mental illness, addictions and other challenges. Donate online at www.raincityhousing.org or contact Fran Romer at 604.215.5991.