

— providing services to those who have experienced or suffered violence —



Comox Valley Transition Society

**SECOND STAGE TRANSITIONAL HOUSING
FOR WOMEN
IN THE COMOX VALLEY**

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March 5, 2013

With more than 20 years experience supporting women and their children who have endured violence in their homes and in their lives, the Comox Valley Transition Society is acutely aware of the need for safe, affordable, desirable and supportive housing that offers women a realistic chance to stabilize, heal and move forward towards self sufficiency with strength and self-determination.

In June 2012, Comox Valley Transition Society (CVTS), decided to actively proceed toward the development of Second Stage Transitional Housing to accommodate the many women, including women with children, who struggle with unsafe, unaffordable, and sub-standard housing in the Comox Valley. This need for Second Stage Housing is not surprising given that BC Housing has considered this kind of housing a priority for the province based on evidence they have gathered regarding social housing needs in BC Communities.

Priority access is given to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, people with mental or physical disabilities, women and children fleeing abusive relationships, and those living in severely inadequate housing. This approach ensures British Columbians most in need of housing receive help when and where they need it most. (BC Housing, HOUSING MATTERS [2009], Strategy #2)

To put this stated priority into action, the Government has built or developed, a number of second stage housing projects throughout the province. Currently such a project is under construction in Campbell River. Rose Harbour will provide 27 units of supported Second Stage Transitional Housing as well as Service Delivery Space and is set to open early May 2013. This \$6.4 million project has been a partnership between CR and North Island Transition Society, the City of Campbell River and BC Housing.



Rose Harbour – 1116 Dogwood Ave, Campbell River, BC - Campbell River and North Island Transition Society

Document Compiled by Pamela Willis and Heather Ney

There have also been Second Stage Transitional Housing projects specifically for women and their children completed or started in the last 12 months in Burnaby, Abbotsford, Nanaimo, Tri-Cities and Prince Rupert.

For some time there has been a local awareness of the need for better housing options for vulnerable populations. In late 2007 and early 2008, an investigation into the nature of homelessness was conducted in the Comox Valley by the Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness. From this, an excellent report, "HOMELESS!" (March 1, 2008), was produced. An assessment to determine the specific needs of the homeless population was a part of this investigation and an interesting result of this survey indicated that 53% percent of the identified homeless were women.¹ This is higher than the provincial average of less than 40% for women. Victoria, for example, identifies this number as 30%.² Of the 53% of Comox Valley women identified, 30 of them (almost half) had at least one child living with them.³

The Courtenay Report is both interesting and informative. Five key contributors to homelessness are identified: a lack of affordable housing, physical health challenges, substance abuse, mental health and domestic violence.⁴ For workers in the anti-violence sector this result is not surprising although, instead of domestic violence identified as the fifth cause of homelessness as per this report, domestic violence, and violence against women in general, would be identified as a primary cause, and an absence of affordable, safe housing as being a serious condition that further sabotages the safety of vulnerable women and children. "Researchers worldwide show repeatedly that violence is the primary cause of women's housing instability and homelessness and that as many as 31% of women return to their abusers because of a lack of housing".⁵

BC Housing identified women and their children fleeing violence as a priority group in their social housing program.⁶ A survey of 38 BC agencies, who participated in the provincial Transition Housing Program, predictably revealed that a woman's "Access to housing after leaving transition housing services" was the number one priority for service providers.⁷ Housing is an essential prerequisite for women leaving violent relationships; housing provides a foundation from which they can rebuild their lives and health and that of their children (McNaughton & Sanders, 2007; Paterson, 2009; Champion et al., 2009).⁸

There is widespread agreement that the provision of affordable, safe housing, including transitional housing options for vulnerable populations are priorities in many BC communities. "Homeless!" also identifies these as priorities for the

¹ Number of respondents = 116; 53% of this total = 62

² 'Task Force'. (2007). Mayor's Task Force on breaking the cycle of mental illness, addictions and homelessness. Victoria, BC: City of Victoria, Office of Mayor.

³ Number of children living with a female caregiver = 46

⁴ Pg. 16 of "Homeless!"

⁵ Pg. 6 of "Surviving Not Thriving"

⁶ BC Housing. (2009) HOUSING MATTERS, Strategy #2

⁷ Review of Women's Transition Housing and Supports Program; BC Housing and BC Society of Transition Houses, April 5, 2012

⁸ Pg. 16 of "Surviving Not Thriving"

Comox Valley. Indeed, the Implementation Plan of this report identifies transitional housing as being part of the Year Two action plan.⁹

The Comox Valley Transition Society participated in the “HOMELESS!” initiative as a member of the task force and as key informants in the study. CVTS is now ready to take the next step and intends to proceed with the development of second stage transitional housing for women and their children.

COMOX VALLEY TRANSITION SOCIETY

Comox Valley Transition Society has responded to the needs of abused women and their children since 1987. Initial services included a network of safe homes, a small office with two workers, and the beginnings of specific supports and programming designed to help. Since this time the Society has evolved into a sophisticated organization with 46 staff, more than 60 volunteers, and an array of programs and services that include emergency safe shelter for women and children (Lilli House), support and counselling for women, children and youth, detox and supportive recovery for women, community education and outreach, a weekly drop – in for women who are homeless, and risk of homelessness and living in poverty, employment support for vulnerable women, Police-based Victim Services, and a successful social enterprise, Too Good To Be Threw.

The Society is well-managed, and owns a building that houses the Lilli House Emergency Transition House program. It is because of its maturity and success as a respected non-profit organization, and its solid financial position and infrastructure, that Comox Valley Transition House can state with confidence its readiness to embark on this important next step of developing Second Stage Transitional Housing.

There is clearly a need for Second Stage Transitional Housing in the Comox Valley. Lilli House statistics, alone, can be used to substantiate this need. The statistics used for the 2008 HOMELESS! report indicate that for the fiscal period 2006-2007 (ending March 31, 2007), Lilli House sheltered 139 women and 66 children. In addition to this 35 women were served in the Lilli House Detox and Supportive Recovery program. These same statistics for 2012 are 152 women and 56 children in the Transition House program, and 72 women in Detox/Supportive Recovery. In 2012 Lilli House was full 181 nights. In 2012, more than any other year staff has had to find accommodation at local hotels for some women because Lilli House was full when they needed a safe place to stay. Women are also staying longer because there is no ‘acceptable’¹⁰ housing available.

Lilli House is only one of many programs offered by Comox Valley Transition Society. During August and early September, 2012, a representative selection of staff was interviewed¹¹ to gain their perspectives on whether second

⁹ Pg. 45 of HOMELESS! report

¹⁰ The CMHC defines acceptable housing in terms of affordability, suitability and adequacy. According to CMHC’s definition, affordable housing costs less than 30% of household income, including the costs of related housing bills; suitable housing has the appropriate number of bedrooms for the size and make-up of the inhabitants, as per a standardized calculation; and adequate housing does not require any major repair. Housing is unacceptable if any of these three standards are not met.

¹¹ Participating staff included: Anne Davis, Programs Manager; Caroline Leadbitter, Lilli Transition House Coordinator; Basira Godfrey, STV Counsellor; Alisa Hooper, STV Counsellor; Patti Curtis, STV Counsellor/CWWA Counsellor; Glenda Dawson, Crisis Intervention Support Worker/Community Facilitator; Diana Paige, CWWA Counsellor/Child Support Worker

stage housing was needed and, if so, what empirical evidence did they have to support this claim. All, without exception, declared a desperate need for such housing for the women and children they support. Some of their comments include:

Every woman I see needs shelter. 39 contacts in the last month; half were over 30 and, of these, most were in the mid-40 to mid-50 age range. Many have grown kids. They stay in a variety of places: on a couch, unsafe/temporary places, some stay outside, 2 used the Salvation Army shelter.

For single women housing is a nightmare! Most have been in a series of abusive relationships and are dealing with the adverse health effects and may have adopted unhealthy coping strategies. Many are living with complex trauma. Housing is very, very difficult. Most do not have references they can use to obtain what little housing there is. Most can't afford what is available.

I looked at two years worth of files that are now closed and 55 out of 188 women, about 1/3rd of clients, could have used second stage housing. The majority of women I saw had not been through Lilli House. Of the 55 women, two thirds of them had children at home. A particular need I see is for women who have kids in care and who need secure housing before their kids can come home. Also, women who are waiting for divorce settlements, which can sometimes take up to five years, are often thrown into poverty. Second Stage housing would make a huge difference for many of my clients.

I saw 20 women in the last month – most had kids at home; all have housing issues.

50 women regularly attend the weekly drop-in group; lots have lost their kids; all are either homeless or insecurely housed. Some would be able to get their kids back if they had suitable housing and supports.

I'm currently working with 16-20 different families and all are struggling with poverty and housing issues.

Sub-standard housing is a big problem in the Comox Valley. Bed bugs are here and one woman I am working with was forced out of her housing and into the shelter with her 3 year old because of this. She had to dispose of all of her belongings because of the bed bug infestation.

Moving is a constant for the kids I work with – it is not surprising to find kids in Grade 6 who have been to 10 different schools – most of this is economically driven – housing is simply not affordable or desirable. This constant moving has a negative impact on children's social relationships and academic performance. Second stage housing would be really useful here. It would give women time to build a more solid foundation.

Grandmothers who find themselves parenting their grandchildren are particularly vulnerable. They are often poor and isolated. For this group, there is very little support and supportive housing could make a huge difference to them and to their grandchildren.

In addition to this, a quick survey of two allied professionals was conducted to gain their perspectives on a need for second stage transitional housing in relation to their own work in the community. Although the sample size was

admittedly small, both agreed without reservation that not only does the need exist but that they would refer clients if such housing existed.¹²

Although the surveys conducted by CVTS are not scientific in nature, they support, nevertheless, the conclusions drawn by local, provincial and national reports.¹³

SECOND STAGE TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

BC Housing defines Second Stage Transitional Housing as *safe, affordable, supportive short-term housing in independent units with stays typically ranging from 6 to 18 months*.¹⁴ Although Second Stage Housing is considered short-term housing, residency *may be extended to meet individual circumstances*.¹⁵ Most providers of transitional housing for women agree that access to a longer residency is best, especially in an environment where affordable, safe housing is scarce. In the Comox Valley the vacancy rate remains a constant .05%.

When asked, the CV Transition Society staff interviewed stated the following preferences regarding second stage housing:

I would like to see a mixture of family profiles so that senior women, women – let, lone parent families, and single women are included – all ages. Self-contained units would work best with a number of communal areas that include a green space, a playground, elevators, a lounge, and kitchen. On-site support services should be offered. These would ideally include help with life skills, budgeting, accessing other community services, childcare, nutrition and cooking lessons, advocacy and accompaniment. A van with a driver would be wonderful.

It would have to be child friendly – a townhouse style for families would be good; apartments for singles. Services would include counselling, employment support, space for other community professionals to meet with the women and children. There would room for fitness activities, yoga for example, so that physical health is included. There would also be a childcare space.

Women should be able to stay for as long as they need to. Some may be there permanently.

I would like to see a big kitchen where older women can show younger women how to cook, can, etc. – and where group meals could happen. I would also like to see a garden included in the outside space.

The building needs to be pet friendly.

¹² CEAS, (Nicole), e-mail communication: August 16, 2012; Healthy Babies Program, CV Family Services (Jane), August 14, 2012 conversation with Anne Davis

¹³ HOMELESS! March 1, 2008. City of Courtenay Mayor's Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness in the Comox Valley; HOUSING MATTERS, 2009, BC Housing; Review of Women's Transition House and Support Program, April 5, 2012. Co-review: BC Housing and BC Society of Transition Houses; Novac, Sylvia. PhD. 2006. Family violence and homelessness: A review of the literature. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Ottawa

¹⁴ <http://www.bchousing.org>; accessed on Sept.3, 2012

¹⁵ Pg. 11 'Women's Transition Housing and Support Program'. BC Housing. February 17, 2012

I would like to see teen girls who are on independent living included – second stage, supported housing would be a much safer option for them and would give them a community of support. The building could be two or three stories with stores below and an inner courtyard.

In Canada, approximately 25-30 percent of single women and women-led lone-parent households live in unacceptable housing conditions (CMHC, 2009a). However, to really understand housing's impact on the health of women, we must conceptualize it as more than just bricks and mortar—safety prerequisites such as freedom from threat, discrimination and violence as well as security in tenure and appropriate community connections are a crucial aspect of women's housing needs (Gabriel, 2008; Madigan, Munro, & Smith, 1990).¹⁶

Single women in the Comox Valley, and their children are in desperate need of safe and supportive Second Stage Transitional Housing. It is the intention of the Society to move steadfastly in this direction until this project has been realized.

CVTS envisions a 32 unit apartment building built to LEED Gold Standard. The building would include a mix of studio and one, two, three and four bedroom apartments. This configuration of space is appropriate for the mix of women and children who will reside there. There will be community meeting space, and amenity kitchen, play areas for children and office and service delivery space. The location must be close to schools and shopping and other services, close to town or at a minimum on a bus route. It is our intention to design, construct and operate a building that will help to facilitate a strong sense of community and social inclusion.

Our plan is to acquire suitable land on which to construct this building. Once we have established a site, we will leverage the assets we currently have, as well as seek further government and community support, to construct and operate the facility.

¹⁶ Pg. 7 "Surviving Not Thriving"