

PROFILE



Cookie, a resident at Newcastle

A Safe & Supportive Community for Residents

A safe place for many who lived on the street, this complex is a thriving community that embraces the artistic natures and green thumbs of its residents.

Island Care Crisis Centre (ICCS) is part of the Good Neighbour series where we share the stories of individuals and agencies who are impacted by homelessness. The individuals at risk of homelessness, the souls who have experienced homelessness and are seeking a way forward, and those who are the “hidden homeless.”

No one chooses to be homeless. No one hopes to find themselves living on the edge – wondering if they can afford food or rent, searching for a safe place to sleep at night, finding somewhere to settle.

Everyone has a voice. Everyone has a story. Everyone matters.

Hope is transformative

“When we first opened, we took photographs of all the 78 people coming in. Within three months we had to retake most of the photographs because you could not recognize the person who had no hope and no home from the person three months later who had a home, hope, support, meals, and physical and mental health assistance.”

The statement, by Sandra, Manager at Island Crisis Care Society’s Newcastle Place, voices a thought that stays with you as you ponder its meaning and

impact. It encompasses so much more than a visible change in features – it speaks to the hope that transforms that face; it’s the benefits of proper food, it is the result of health care, and it’s a testament to what housing can do for those who didn’t have shelter.

The change is so marked that it’s become standard practice to take another photo three months later when new residents move in.

Where art flourishes

Within the complex is a thriving community, one that embraces the artistic nature of many of its residents. “We have a lot of programs in the evenings and on weekends, so there’s arts and crafts,” says Sandra. “And I mean the artistic talent is through the roof. We’ve got a lot of beautiful artists. We’ve had an art gallery and art show for three years with beautiful pieces carved by some of our Indigenous clients. We also have a lot of musicians on our site, so they might have we call ‘rock’n the jams’ and they’ll get out the guitars and tambourines and have a little music.”

Another hugely popular activity is gardening. “Believe me, there’s a lot of good gardeners,” says Sandra. “They’re fighting over the garden plots in the back.”

Arts and gardening are not the only activities available at Newcastle either. A Life Skills Coordinator works with clients on computer literacy, declutter-

ing their rooms, communication strategies, and other topics under the banner of life skills. There are basketball nets, volleyball spaces, and other sports activities. For a quieter time, clients can spend time in the Rec Room colouring or watching a hockey playoff. There’s even yoga and Tai Chi classes facilitated by staff members and residents.

A supportive environment brings growth

As Sandra explains, “We give people a home with support. So, unlike a rental in an apartment where there are no wraparound services and the landlord doesn’t really care about you, we’re that landlord that does really care about our people.”

Services are as varied as the residents and suited to their needs. “We have psych nurses come on site, they can meet with a doctor every second week, see regular RNs, or social workers. Caseworkers on the site will refer to dentists and counselling...it’s not like a regular rental unit where you’re on your own, we can provide a lot on site but also connect them to further services.” Through ICCS, residents can also access a variety of services including a pre-employment program.

“Once they get that roof over their heads, it’s no longer just about survival. Now they can move on up in the hierarchy of needs. Maybe they can learn a new skill or go to a life skills work-

shop. We can start to work on harm reduction. We also work with them on goal planning and check in where they're at."

The wraparound services are what Sandra considers "the most important." Residents come to them with traumas, addictions, brain injuries, and cognitive issues, all of which led to being homeless for a part of their life.

A safe place becomes the starting point

For many of the residents, Newcastle is a safe place they can find a home. "We had a gal who was really quite, introverted, and maybe a little people-phobic. She was so traumatized she didn't want to go out in the bigger population, so it felt like a safe place where she could pretty much meet all her needs. Probation officers, doctors and caseworkers would come to see her on site. We'd assist her if she gave us a grocer list."

However, adjusting to life in Newcastle can also be difficult for some of the residents. "We meet them where they're at;

truly have to meet them where they're at. There's no point discussing treatment with somebody who's two days out of sleeping rough and just completely shell shocked by having their own room and hot meals. We always let people settle in so they can feel safe and comfortable." It's only after a settlement period that the rest of the services come into play.

Not all find that feeling of safety and comfort though, and for those folks, supportive housing is not a good fit. The rules can feel constrictive with a no weapons, no smoking in their rooms, and no guests allowed. "They don't really want to be helped and we are here to help vulnerable people who are homeless. They may be involved in crime or something. They're usually not in for very long." For the ones who are open to help, despite their initial sentiments, the structure and care helps them thrive.

It takes a village

When we hear the expression, "it takes a village," it's usually in relation to children. However, with a broader viewpoint it's as much about community and a shared sense of responsibility.

Throughout the conversation with Sandra, this becomes a recurring sentiment.

"There's a real sense of community and supporting each other, advocating for each other. It's like a little village."

A sense of community is important when, for more than a few of the residents, supportive housing will be their home going forward. While some do move on, many won't. "There's no end game in supportive housing. This is their home," says Sandra. A village is what it takes to create a home for them, something that can only be done when a sense of community is embraced, and the village supported.

Funding to agencies through The Government of Canada's Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy, administered by United Way British Columbia on behalf of Community Advisory Boards, helps people like those living in Newcastle in our communities.

Submitted by United Way British Columbia.