

**Project Case Study
Urban Native Youth Association
Native Youth Hostel
Vancouver, B.C.**

1. Introduction

This case study of the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA), Native Youth Hostel is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

UNYA was founded in 1989 in response to the growing number of native youths who were migrating to Vancouver. Many lacked employment skills and had minimal education and limited access to support resources. Originally, UNYA provided services such as emergency housing, drug and alcohol treatment, employment services, a drop-in centre, health and wellness services, outreach counselling, life skills training and advocacy support. UNYA has a number of ongoing partnerships that support their programs and services. These include but are not limited to: Ministry for Children and Families, Circle of Eagles Lodge Society, Aries Project, and Chehalis Healing Lodge.

Through the operation of their Safe House program, UNYA provides emergency accommodation to youths between the ages of 16 and 18. UNYA staff felt that many youths aged 18 to 24 were experiencing challenges similar to those under the age of 18 and needed emergency housing, counselling and support programs, but there were no shelters available to meet their needs.

Older youths are considered adults and are expected to access existing shelters, where many clients have mental illnesses, drug and alcohol addictions and behavioural problems. Youths who have accessed men's shelters reported that the older clients would often take advantage of and victimize young clients. This led to many choosing to live on the streets rather than occupy beds at men's shelters. For the same reasons, youths were also reluctant to use services that were frequented by adults such as soup kitchens, clothing banks and referral agencies.

What the project involves

In order to provide temporary housing and support services for this age group, UNYA received \$57,000 in 1999 from the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) homelessness fund, to establish a Native Youth Hostel. In 2000, they received \$65,500 from SCPI and in 2001 they received \$416,000. However, at present no ongoing funding is in place, so each year, as funding expires, UNYA has had to close the shelter. The shelter re-opens after new funding is secured. This gap between funding periods means that services provided through the hostel have not been available consistently.

The UAS and SCPI funds are used to cover operating costs while UNYA provides in-kind contributions of staff time, furniture, office equipment, etc. There are no other financial partnerships and the hostel does not have a sustainability plan. UNYA has made several

attempts to develop partnerships with both the private and public sector and while they have not yet been successful, they plan to continue pursuing partnerships. UNYA does have a working relationship with Covenant House, another local shelter, in which the agencies refer clients to each other.

The hostel provides services to homeless males and females between the ages of 18 and 24, including sex-trade workers, persons with AIDS/HIV, sexually exploited youths and substance abusers. Although 50 percent of the clients are of Aboriginal ancestry, all cultural backgrounds are welcomed. The hostel particularly targets those who, either by choice or because of lack of resources, remain “street-entrenched.” The staff works with housing workers, social workers and other individuals or organizations to help older youths obtain the basic knowledge and economic resources to find adequate, safe and affordable housing.

The hostel is located in downtown Vancouver in an area that is known to street youth and allows easy access to community services, employment opportunities and educational services. The hostel can accommodate up to 10 people at one time in five bedrooms with two same-sex youths in each room. There is common space for meal preparation and socialization; residents participate in meal preparation and clean-up and are expected to clean their personal space and do their own laundry.

While most shelters in the lower mainland limit the time a person can stay to seven days, UNYA allows and encourages longer stays. They believe that an extended stay is crucial to adequately assist youths in getting off of the street. UNYA encourages a minimum two-week stay, which allows time for residents to find adequate housing and connect to resources in the community that may reduce their chance of becoming homeless again.

House rules include being drug and alcohol free for 72 hours and respecting curfews and the zero tolerance policy for sexism and racism. In addition, residents are encouraged to identify and develop realistic, achievable and positive personal goals with their staff workers. Goals typically include: obtaining safe housing, securing employment, returning to school, applying for income assistance, staying drug and alcohol free, and receiving proper nutrition and rest. Once the goals are identified, clients are responsible for pursuing them independently, however they are expected to discuss their progress each day with the staff. This goal-setting exercise allows them to gain experience with day-to-day issues, develop life skills, increase self-esteem and assume responsibility for their actions.

Objectives of the project

The two main objectives of the Native Youth Hostel are (1) to provide a safe and healthy environment for youths 18 to 24 years to work toward finding alternative living arrangements,

Final - February 17, 2003
Alderson-Gill & Associates Consulting Inc.

and (2) to help older youths to connect to resources that will provide them with a broad range of knowledge and services to help them live independently.

3. Implementation to Date

To date, the longest continuous operation of the Native Youth Hostel has been three and a half months. In 2000, the shelter operated at 94 percent occupancy, even though summer months are usually a slow time for shelters. They were forced to close due to lack of funding even though the need remained and has increased.

With each re-opening, the hostel has expanded its operations and services, undergone staff changes and experienced a changing client group. Having a temporary location and a short-term arrangement makes it extremely difficult to provide a responsive and cost-effective approach for services to the client base. Some of the operating difficulties have included finding a suitable location and getting it known to potential clients, equipping the hostel, and hiring and training staff for short periods of employment. A permanent year-round hostel for youth is seen as urgently needed.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the Native Youth Hostel on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- Awareness in the community about the hostel continues to grow each year among youths aged 18 to 24 and service providers. This is indicated by the increase in referrals from other service providers, agencies and youths who have used the hostel's services.
- Due to growing demand for emergency housing by this age group, along with the increasing visibility of the youth hostel, UNYA has had to turn away 50 people each month because they are operating at full capacity. These youths are forced to remain on the streets or access existing adult shelters.
- Not all youth using the hostel achieve their goals and some inevitably return to the streets. Approximately 30 percent of the clients return to the shelter each time it re-opens. UNYA staff feel this is at least a positive sign that youth are comfortable returning and continuing with the goal-setting exercises.

- While the hostel provides shelter and support for older youths it does not provide a cultural program. UNYA is well connected to events in the Aboriginal community and encourages all residents, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to attend these events. In some cases transportation is arranged. The youths we spoke to attend such cultural events and reported that it increases their awareness of Aboriginal culture and activities in the community.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent time at the Native Youth Hostel having informal conversations with two clients. The researcher asked the clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

In general, the youths spoken to stated that the hostel made a significant improvement in their lives. The hostel, though temporary, offers them stability, safety and security while they look for a more permanent housing solution and pursue improvements in other areas of their lives. Both spoke highly of the good work being done by the staff and indicated that they frequently encouraged other street youth to visit the hostel.

One said, "I feel very comfortable here, the staff are kind and decent to me and treat me as a human being. The staff are always here to talk to me when I need them." The other client noted that "The staff are very supportive and helpful, they allow us to be ourselves. The daily goals we set allow us to grow as an individual and at our own speed."

Winter 2002