

VOLUME 7

Belonging

How your support impacts youth.

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CHV Programs Evolving to
Meet Youth Needs



**Covenant
House**
Vancouver

Covenant House Vancouver acknowledges with gratitude that our work takes place on the traditional lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓w̓ú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́l̓ílwətaʔt̓ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.

To our donor community,

When I was asked to write the introduction to this issue of *Belonging*, which focuses on Covenant House Vancouver's supported housing programs, I couldn't help but reflect on how much has changed since I started here 23 years ago. Back then, space limitations meant that youth in the Crisis Program, our short-term housing program, slept in bunk beds and shared a communal washroom. Now, each young person has one roommate, and each bedroom has an ensuite. However, the philosophy behind our programs has not changed: we still know — and see evidence every day — that providing young people with holistic care in a supported housing environment is the key to altering the trajectory of their lives.

As you'll read, we recently completed renovations to our Pender building, which houses CHV's transitional living program, Rights of Passage (ROP). The completion of that work was not only cause for celebration in ROP, which grew from 25 to 44 beds; it also marked the culmination of our multi-year capital expansion project. We've also opened two new complex care housing programs for youth experiencing homelessness, mental health, and addictions challenges: Foundations, which added seven new beds, and Sanctuary, with 28 beds. Alongside these new programs, our purpose-built facilities allow us to provide more wraparound services, such as mental health care, recreation, life skills, and education supports. None of which would have been possible without the generosity of community supporters like you.

Supported housing plays a critical role in helping youth move from the trauma of their early lives towards healthy, and secure adulthoods. Thank you for helping us provide this crucial service.

With gratitude,

Kevin Van Buskirk

KEVIN VAN BUSKIRK
DIRECTOR, SUPPORTED HOUSING



Content warning: sexual abuse

Finding My Voice

YOUTH STORY: ALEX

In Southeast Asia, life for Alex and his family looked good from the outside. However, behind closed doors, it was a different story. As a child, Alex was sexually abused by someone close to the family — something that his family was unaware of.

When Alex was 12, his family moved to Canada. Alex's dad wasn't really in the picture as he worked abroad. He had a gambling issue, and when he was home, fights would erupt.

After finishing high school, Alex began to work and decided to move out of the family home. Eventually, his dad's gambling addiction led the family to become bankrupt and lose everything. Alex supported his family for a while, but he eventually persuaded them to move from BC to Alberta to reduce their living expenses as Alex could no longer support them.

After five years working at the same job, Alex felt stuck. He was paying someone to sleep on their couch, and he needed to work to survive because he couldn't go back to the turmoil that awaited him at the family home.

Alex decided to take out a student loan and go back to school. However, his mental health suffered, and things began to unravel as he failed some courses and his funding was withdrawn. Tension grew between Alex and his roommate because his roommate's brother kept pressing Alex to pay more rent. Alex began to have suicidal thoughts and knew that he needed to make a change.

The Crisis Program was a completely different environment than Alex was used to, but he felt safe.

The roommate had told Alex about Covenant House, but when Alex originally phoned the front desk, there were no beds available. That night, riding the Skytrain with nowhere to go and his phone at only 9% battery, Alex got a call that a bed had become available. At 1am, he arrived at Covenant House.

"I was terrified," he recounts. "What am I getting myself into? I'm scared. Everything's a lot more mysterious in the dark."

The Crisis Program was a completely different environment than Alex was used to, but he felt safe. He did have some arguments with staff, but that was because he was learning to speak up for himself. "There were times when I fought with staff, but things stopped with [my youth worker] James.

I think James got the brunt of everything because he was my youth worker at the time. But I really liked Covenant House's principles, because I could advocate for myself."



During his year in the Crisis Program, Alex participated in recreational activities like hiking. He also really enjoyed the sense of community that was built during the Sunday brunches. After a year, Alex moved into the Rights of Passage program, where he spent the next four years. Alex frequently worked with his clinical counsellor, who helped him work through the trauma from his childhood.



"I want to emphasize that a big part of my success is because of the wrap-around care that I received. It changed the voices that I had in my head. Before the voices were very negative and very gloom and doom. But after leaving Covenant House, if I felt burnt out, I would hear my counsellor's or my life skills worker's voice, which is huge."

Today, Alex has found his voice. He has a great relationship with his mom and has his dad back in his life — "at a healthy distance." Alex is in a relationship, has a place to live and has a full-time job where he trains other staff.

"Before I couldn't dream, but right now I'm thriving. I know who I am, and I know what I need. This is just the beginning."

"Before I couldn't dream, but right now I'm thriving. I know who I am, and I know what I need. This is just the beginning."

ALEX

COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER ALUMNI



A Week in the Life in the Crisis Program

The following composite story illustrates common life experiences and barriers that youth face every day, while protecting the identities of individual youth currently utilizing CHV services.

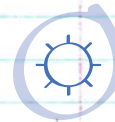


A Typical Week for Kai in the Crisis Program

Kai, a 20-year-old, non-binary youth, had a difficult upbringing; their life was marked by instability as they moved through multiple foster homes and experienced homelessness due to family conflict and mental health challenges. Kai entered the CHV Crisis Program, which became a source of hope and stability that provides Kai with the support and resources they need to start rebuilding their life.

Here's a look at a typical week for Kai:

Monday



Meeting with Social Worker: After a nutritious breakfast, Kai begins the week with their social worker. They discuss goals and create a plan for employment. Kai hopes to work towards getting their first job in a kitchen.



Life Skills Workshop: Kai attends a budgeting and financial management workshop with a life skills worker to learn how to reduce impulse spending and make their money last longer. Kai is currently receiving income assistance, which is \$610 per month.



Recreation: Kai spends time in the common area, engaging in activities like board games and video games with their peers.

Tuesday



Counselling Session: Kai meets with their clinical counsellor to work through childhood traumas and develop coping strategies.



Phone Call with Sibling: Kai takes time to connect with their younger sister, whom they lost touch with over the last two years. Kai's counsellor encourages weekly phone calls between the siblings to provide mutual support and maintain family bonds.



Cooking Class: Kai learns to prepare healthy meals, which boosts their confidence and self-sufficiency. Kai gleefully tells the volunteers who run the cooking class that they want to work in a kitchen soon.



Wednesday



Job Readiness: Kai works on their resume and practices interview skills with their youth worker.



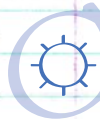
Physical Activity: Kai participates in an on-site yoga class in the wellness room to reduce stress and practice mindfulness.



Study Time: Kai dedicates the evening to studying for their GED test (high school equivalency diploma).



Thursday



Learning the Transit System: Kai spends the morning learning how to navigate the city's transit system, an essential skill for independence and mobility.



Art Therapy: Kai expresses their emotions creatively through art therapy, which aids in trauma processing.



Movie Night: Kai and other youth enjoy a film together, which fosters social connections and relaxation.



Friday



Educational Support: Kai discusses their GED progress with their social worker and confides in her that they are feeling overwhelmed. Together, they adjust Kai's timeline so that they have more time to prepare for their GED. Kai feels supported and less overwhelmed.



Personal Time: Kai pursues personal interests like writing and skateboarding around the neighbourhood.



Cultural Dinner: Youth and staff come together for a special meal to celebrate diverse cultures and strengthen the sense of community.



Saturday



Sleeping In: Kai sleeps in today, since it is the weekend. Kai has learned that getting adequate sleep is an important aspect of maintaining their mental health.



Outdoor Excursion: Kai attends an outing to a Whistler hiking trail for physical activity and to connect to nature. Kai is excited because they have never been out of Vancouver.



Music Room: Kai spends time alone in the music room playing guitar. They are reminded of their younger years when they would play guitar more frequently.



Sunday



Rest and Reflection: Kai sleeps in and reflects on the past week to recharge for the week ahead.



Self-Care Workshop: Kai learns self-care techniques to boost their well-being and create healthy boundaries.



Planning for the Week: Kai reviews their schedule and sets goals with their youth workers, which will prepare them for any challenges. Kai schedules a tour of the Rights of Passage program because they would like to transition to a more independent, supported housing program in a few months after gaining employment.

Through the Crisis Program, Kai is steadily rebuilding their life by gaining the skills and confidence needed to overcome past challenges and to create a brighter future. Each day offers a blend of structure, support, and community, which helps Kai to heal and grow.



Interview with ROP Community Transition Worker

A CONVERSATION WITH MEGAN

Rights of Passage (ROP), Covenant House Vancouver's supported transitional housing program, is focused on building practical life skills as youth commit to an employment- or school-related goal. Megan, ROP's Community Transition Worker, provides support to youth as they move into the program, and again when they move on to independent living.



INTERVIEWER: What is supported housing and why do you think it's important?

MEGAN: It's free or affordable housing with onsite resources and supports. I think that at Covenant House, we are really lucky that we can offer wraparound care. We have access to counsellors, social workers, youth workers, and a life skills coordinator in ROP.

I: Youth in ROP may have different challenges and traumas. Could you speak about some of the obstacles that young people face?

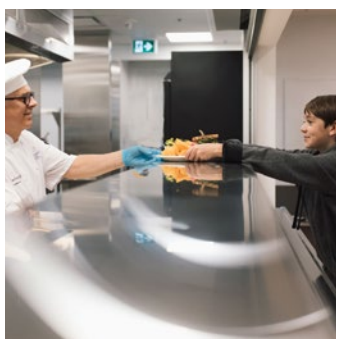
M: I think that ROP youth are a lot like anybody else — like any single one of us working at Covenant House, or like anyone that you'd find on the streets. Certainly, there are mental health challenges. Sometimes there's deeper, scarier things that might have happened to them, but I think that the most obvious thing for a lot of the young people in our programs is that they haven't been given a fair chance to work through any of these challenges and obstacles.

I: What does your role as a community transition worker entail, and what gaps does your role fill within CHV and the wider community?

M: The focus of this new role is to address the needs of youth who are entering and exiting ROP. Right now, we're looking at how we can make it easier to access the program. I'm often the first contact person for folks — be it young people that want to do a self-referral or other professionals in the industry who are looking for supported housing for their clients. I make that process a lot easier by answering any of their questions right away.

And at the other end, I am there for folks that are leaving our programs. It can be scary for many young people because we have youth who have been accessing our programs and services for years through the Drop-In Centre, Crisis Program, or ROP. Our biggest gap happens once folks turn 25, as it can be really challenging to access adult services.

So, we're hoping that with my position, we can bridge that gap and make it a little bit easier for folks to utilize any supports that they're eligible for, even if it's just "I want to talk," or "can we go for a coffee," to continue that connection until they're really confident and comfortable in their new environment outside of CHV.



I: Why do you believe this type of work is so important for the youth at CHV?

M: I think that it's really easy for people to pretend that homelessness isn't happening, or pretend that these young people don't exist or that they don't deserve support. I think it's so powerful to show a young person that they're seen and make them feel important so

that they can build their own confidence and start to look at what they're capable of. A lot of the young people that we work with are capable of doing extraordinary things, but they've not been given the opportunity to try. It's about building that human connection with people so that youth can find out what they're capable of and work through their own challenges.

“I think it's so powerful to show a young person that they're seen and make them feel important so that they can build their own confidence and start looking at what they're capable of.”

MEGAN
COMMUNITY TRANSITION WORKER,
RIGHTS OF PASSAGE PROGRAM

I: What are the long-term successes that you expect this role to contribute to, and what are your hopes for the future of youth who access supported housing at CHV?

M: I think that it's really about long-term stability. Ideally, when folks leave ROP, they find sustainable housing that they can afford. They've learned some new skills while in our program, but we try to make it clear in ROP that we're all still learning. It's not like you come to a program, you stay a couple years, and you learn everything that you need to know. The journey of life is about learning as you go. So, I hope that once young people have left the ROP program, they've got the skills that they need to live independently and that they know where to find supports or resources, if needed.

I: And finally, what is the thing you enjoy most about your job?

M: It's the youth, obviously. I think that we all work for CHV for that reason, because there's a lot of different things that one could be doing. There's nothing more inspiring than to support a young person as they work through their trauma, gain life skills, and work towards the future that they wish for themselves. It can be challenging, of course, but I think that building relationships with the young people is why we do it. That is the best part.



CHV Programs Evolving to Meet Youth Needs

RIGHTS OF PASSAGE PROGRAM: SUPPORTING YOUTH TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE

The Rights of Passage (ROP) program at CHV recently expanded from 25 to 44 beds, marking a significant step forward in CHV's mission to transition youth from housing precarity to independent living. This transitional housing program has undergone a transformation to better support youth, with new facilities and an updated approach to life skills development.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING WITH HANDS-ON LIFE SKILLS TRAINING

ROP offers a supportive environment where youth can develop practical life skills essential for independent living. With the addition of new facilities, including a teaching kitchen, a fitness studio, and a learning room, staff can now provide hands-on training in areas like cooking and food safety.

COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

When youth enter ROP, staff provide them with a thorough orientation about crucial tasks like room maintenance, laundry, and the use of kitchen appliances. This approach addresses any gaps in their knowledge and prepares them for the responsibilities of independent living. Youth are asked to commit to at least one year in the program, with a focus on advancing their education, employment, or other personal goals.

FINANCIAL PREPARATION AND SAVINGS

To help save for the future, youth in ROP are required to pay a monthly fee of \$500, which is saved throughout their time in the program and returned to them when they transition out. This approach teaches youth how to budget by helping to prepare them for the realities of paying rent and managing their finances.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The revamped model of the ROP program is akin to co-op housing. Youth have the chance to participate in various



groups that foster pride and responsibility in the communal spaces. These groups, led and organized by the young people themselves, centre around activities such as gardening, cultural celebrations, and recreational events. This approach not only enhances a sense of belonging, but also cultivates leadership skills among the participants.

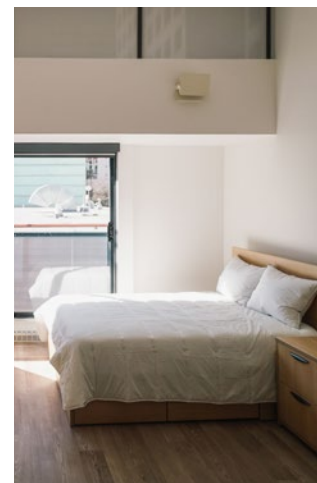
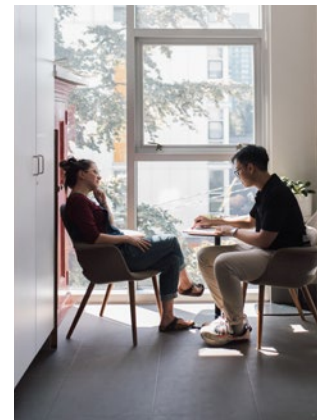
DEDICATED STAFF AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

In ROP, our approach to staffing is all about creating a supportive community, with youth workers on-site 24/7 to offer guidance and support.

The ROP team also includes a life skills coordinator, a program manager, and two dedicated social workers, who work closely together to ensure that every young person gets the help that they need. Many young people stay with us for two years, some longer, and during this time, they build strong, trusting relationships with our staff. These connections go beyond just support — they offer a sense of security and belonging, with staff members who are genuinely invested in the growth and success of each young person.

LONG-TERM BENEFITS OF SUPPORTED HOUSING

ROP helps youth develop the skills and confidence needed to maintain independent housing for longer periods of time. This preparation is vital for those who might otherwise face homelessness or ongoing housing stability. Supported housing programs like ROP offer a crucial bridge to self-sufficiency. They enable youth to live independently with greater rates of success, thereby reducing the downstream costs of assisting individuals experiencing homelessness.



ONGOING SUPPORT THROUGH THE COMMUNITY TRANSITION COORDINATOR

The community transition coordinator plays a crucial role in providing continued support after youth leave ROP. Serving as the primary point of contact, the coordinator offers advice and assistance as needed. Formal check-ins are scheduled for three months after transition, or six months for those outside the program's age mandate, to ensure that youth have the support that they need as they adjust to independent living.

For more information, read our interview with Megan, CHV's community transition worker, on page 14.

DID YOU KNOW? Last year, 100% of youth who transitioned out of ROP moved to a stable setting.

THE EXPANSION AND RENOVATION of the ROP program underscores CHV's dedication to providing comprehensive, long-term support for youth who are moving from homelessness to independent living. By offering a blend of independence, practical life skills, and continued support, ROP empowers youth to build stable, self-sufficient futures. Thank you for supporting Covenant House Vancouver and the youth we serve.

“Providing young people with holistic care in a supported housing environment is the key to altering the trajectory of their lives”

KEVIN VAN BUSKIRK
DIRECTOR, SUPPORTED HOUSING



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