



NEWS RELEASE

SWIFT Program supporting at-risk youth in Abbotsford

ABBOTSFORD – January 10, 2023 – A new outreach program in Abbotsford is already making great strides addressing at-risk youth homelessness through a coordinated service that goes into homeless camps, high-risk living situations and schools to identify and connect vulnerable youth with the necessary supports, housing options and resources they need to help them realize a better path for themselves.

The SWIFT Program is a joint partnership between the City of Abbotsford, Abbotsford Police Department, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and Cyrus Centre which aims to bring three levels of service and response together to support at-risk youth, aged 13 to 24, and respond to known unsafe circumstances, people, and potential living situations, including homelessness.

Due to the vulnerability of youth, at-risk youth in Abbotsford often intersect with homelessness, substance use and mental health challenges, street disorder, educational challenges, exploitation, and poverty. Prevention and response are often considered as two different areas to address, and as such providing continuity of care for vulnerable youth can be problematic and insufficient to meet their complex needs, which the SWIFT Program aims to address.

Since starting to work together in September, the outreach team has already helped six previously homeless youth move into housing, located five youth who had been reported missing and helped four youth into detox or substance-use treatment. The team currently has a caseload of 60 Abbotsford youth.

Through its coordinated partnership, the SWIFT Program is able to connect unattached at-risk youth to a variety of services, respond to victimization, exploitation and abuse, provide basic needs including food, harm-reduction and housing, and identify already-established resources to help at-risk youth build on successes. The program is funded thanks to the Strengthening Communities' Services grant received by the City of Abbotsford. The Strengthening Communities' Services grant is funded by the Province of BC and Government of Canada and administered by the Union of BC Municipalities. The grant will fund the program for one year, and the City is hopeful the success of the program will help in securing long-term, ongoing funding.

Quotes:

Mitzi Dean, Minister of Children and Family Development

“By working in partnership to deliver coordinated services to youth who are at risk of homelessness in Abbotsford, the SWIFT Program has already improved the lives of some of the most vulnerable youth in Abbotsford. This targeted funding will connect youth to the services and resources they need to change the direction of their lives.”

Anne Kang, Minister of Municipal Affairs

“Funding at-risk youth programs are integral to uplifting vulnerable youths. The complex issues and challenges that affect at-risk youth often make it difficult for them to seek out resources on their own. The SWIFT Program is taking proactive steps to reach out to Abbotsford's youth to connect them to the necessary supports, housing options and resources they need.”

Ross Siemens, City of Abbotsford Mayor

“The challenges faced by the at-risk youth in our community are complex, and trying to find and access the appropriate services and help can be overwhelming for a young person in need. By having team members go and visit with at-risk youth in their own environment and bring the information, make valuable connections and link them with services helps them realize that support is within reach and that people do care.”

Constable Shane Dueck, Abbotsford Police Department

“In addition to linking youth directly to the supports and services they need, through building relationships and rapport with them, the SWIFT Program is also helping to enhance overall community safety. Having members with positive relationships with so many of our at-risk youth is having an effect in solving violent crime. Some youth who would otherwise refuse to cooperate with police have found confidence in reporting violent crimes to SWIFT team members, which has directly led to important arrests in Abbotsford.”

Les Talvio, Cyrus Centre

“Youth Homelessness is a community issue requiring a community response, the SWIFT Program is a community response with MCFD, AbbyPD and Cyrus Centre collaborating and partnering together to serve the youth right where they are, building trusting relationships that begin the process of exiting the streets.”

Additional Information:

SWIFT is an acronym for:

- S: Seek out our most high risk youth
- W: Work alongside community partners
- I: Intervene when necessary
- F: Formulate a plan
- T: Task out / take action

Background:

The most recent Point-in-Time homeless count (2020) by the Fraser Valley Regional District identified 23 youth (under 19) in Abbotsford who are either living homeless, or precariously housed, and a further 64 between 20 - 29 years old; many of which are unattached to services aimed at helping them get out of the situations they are in. Abbotsford Cyrus Centre, an at-risk youth focused shelter, housing, and social support organization, identified 189 unique youth to their shelter in 2021, and a further 75 active youth on their outreach caseload from the ages of 13 – 24 years old.

Between January 2021 and March 2022, the Abbotsford Police Department identified 704 calls involving youth (12 – 17 years old) that were labeled as “suspect”, “charged”, “child at-risk”, or “victim”. Of these, 29 per cent of callers self-identified as Indigenous and 45 per cent as females.

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