



**A YOUTH HOUSING STUDY
for BC'S CAPITAL REGION**

Prepared for

The Greater Victoria
Child and Families Counselling Association
(CAFCA)

and

Threshold Housing Society

a report of



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Tricia Irish completed the research and writing for this report. The Community Council takes responsibility for the content.

1. Introduction

A variety of organizations and agencies have been working for years to provide access to housing and related supports for youth in our region. This work continues with new housing resources scheduled to be implemented this year.

A consensus has emerged among youth service providers that there is a need for further action on youth housing. On November 29, 2007, the Youth Matters Sub Committee of the Victoria Family Court and Youth Justice Committee hosted a community networking event for youth service providers in the Capital Region called "A Bright Idea." At this event, 68 youth service providers from across the region identified youth housing as a top priority. They unanimously recommended that "the regional housing strategy include recognition of housing, transition and homelessness issues (and underlying causes) faced by youth." The February 2008 South Island Training Institute (SITI) training consultation with 23 youth service providers generated a vision of a comprehensive array of housing services that would enable youth to move within them, and accommodate them, according to their readiness for more or less independence.

There is a long history in Victoria of individual and organizational efforts to provide housing and social services for youth as well as young adults. This report is a cooperative effort between several local organizations who have been working to address this issue for many years. Threshold Housing Society and CAFCA invested resources to build on this work and further explore youth housing needs. In March 2008, 36 individuals representing 26 youth service agencies responded to a *Youth Housing Survey*. For the purposes of the survey, "youth" were broadly defined from age 13 to 30 to include the range of young people who access youth service agencies. British Columbia (BC) provincial legislation identifies youth who are under 19 years as children. The government and the community have a legal duty to protect and provide for children. While recognizing the needs of this population this report is also concerned with emerging adults, defined as those individuals aged 19-30.

The survey data, along with a literature review of locally-based research:

- Estimates the number of youth (identified by BC as children) aged 13-18 who lack stable housing
- Estimates the number of emerging adults aged 19-30 who lack stable housing
- Outlines gaps in services, resources, and assets
- Provides a basis for beginning to develop a 10-year youth housing plan (for individuals aged 13-18 as well as those aged 19-30)

How this report complements other work addressing homelessness

This report does not intend to duplicate the work completed by the City of Victoria's *Mayor's Task Force on Breaking the Cycle of Mental Illness, Addictions and Homelessness*, nor duplicate the findings of other in-depth research projects in the community. This report complements past projects by looking at the current environment for youth experiencing homelessness and unstable housing in BC's Capital Region with an aim towards planning for needed capital investments in supportive and transitional housing units. Given that the region has one of the most expensive housing rental markets in the country, there is a need to ensure youth can find housing to fit their needs, especially if they are experiencing poverty and other challenges.

- 10,135, or 25.2% of all Southern Vancouver Island (SVI) adolescent children and emerging adults, aged 15 to 24, lived below the poverty line in 2001¹. This percentage is slightly higher than 1996, and is not expected to improve in the near future.
- Just under 700 emerging adults aged 19-24 were on income assistance in 2006, over 40 of whom were single parents².
- Some youth living on low income are post secondary students, the majority of whom have debt loads over \$15,000 upon graduation and no job waiting³.
- 25% of Victoria's homeless are young women ages 21-30. 10% of these young women earn their primary income from involvement in the sex industry⁴.

Those involved in this youth housing research recognize a local need for housing research—more specifically a youth housing plan. Such a plan involves collaboration with other housing efforts in the community with the objective to identify distinct issues related to adolescent children and emerging adults.

2. Estimating the number of adolescents (aged 13 to 18) and emerging adults (age 19 to 30) who need housing

The *Youth Housing Survey* asked youth service providers to estimate the total number of homeless or unstably housed individual youth they had served over the previous year. Service providers were also asked to estimate the age range of these youth so that the need for housing among adolescents was identified separately from the need among emerging adults. Employing a trial estimation method, these counts of individual youth were used to estimate the total number of youth needing housing in BC's Capital Region.

Based on the numbers that were submitted, we estimate that approximately **220 adolescent children** (aged 13-18), **323 emerging adults** (aged 19-24), and **73 young adults** (aged 25-30) are currently without safe, stable housing in BC's Capital Region. This is a conservative estimate of 616 individual youth who need housing in our region.

It is anticipated that the estimation method used to obtain the numbers would be undertaken annually with youth service providers —both to measure shifts for individual youth who need housing, as well as to gauge shifts in the needs and priorities for the region's youth housing assets.

Finally, although only some agencies' numerical data were used for estimating the final number of youth needing housing, there is a substantial benefit in collecting numbers from various youth service providers. That is, viewed together, the data illustrates the amount of resources youth service providers are engaging to support youth who need housing: whether one youth is using ten services or ten youth are using a single service.

3. Gaps in youth housing assets and services

To better understand the outstanding gaps for youth housing in the region, the *Youth Housing Survey* asked youth service providers to comment on what they saw as the changing needs of youth and priorities for youth housing in the community. Their commentary, along with the literature review of locally-based research, was used to prepare the overview of gaps that follows.

Issues for diverse groups of youth

As noted earlier, youth were defined as those aged 13 to 30 years old (including minor adolescents and emerging adults) for the purposes of this study. Adopting this broad definition, we recognize that there are various issues that affect such a large range of youth in transition from early adolescence to “emergent adulthood”⁵.

“Youth” in need of housing can be young women, they can be indigenous, they can be parents. They may experience mental illness, developmental disorders, physical disabilities or issues arising from poverty, neglect, domestic violence, addictions, and/or re-entry into society after criminal detention. They can be sex-trade workers, pregnant, transient or local. They are often dealing with full independence and concomitant challenges earlier than other youth their age in their efforts to cope with the above life circumstances⁵. They can be high school dropouts or high school graduates, they may be involved in volunteer work, school athletic teams or clubs, and the low-income workforce. Finally, those younger than 19 years are often perceived as having more choices and resources than their adult counterparts, which is a myth.

The survey response from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre underlined an overall need for more Aboriginal housing for Aboriginal youth, ranging from short term to long term and student housing. Supported housing for Aboriginal youth travelling to the Capital Region for medical treatment and/or other services is needed as well. Survey numbers from the Native Friendship Centre also indicate a large need for supported and cost-effective housing for young Aboriginal families, both single- and two-parent.

The range of general housing challenges identified in the past for youth across the entire age range surveyed include:

- Cost: Rents are too high: “Can’t find a decent place at \$325 per month”
- Prejudice: “They [landlords] look at you like you are trouble because you are young”
- Discrimination: “Landlords don’t like youth on welfare, or if you have a baby”
- Safety concerns: “Not having to worry about people shooting up in the hallways”
- Being forced to have a roommate (or live-in boyfriend/girlfriend) to share the cost: “Finding a trustworthy roommate is a problem”⁶.

Some of the housing issues for youth in special circumstances include:

- Few “safe” homes for sexually exploited youth⁷.
- Emerging adults, leaving foster care at age 19, with fragile social supports and the inability to fall back on parental housing if needed, unlike many youth who have stable, supported housing with their parents⁸.

- Adolescent children are not allowed to enter emergency shelters other than the Kiwanis Emergency Youth shelter. This restricts emergency housing options for both youth under 19 and young women under 30 with children; similarly, males who are 16 years and older are not permitted to stay in transition houses with their mothers when fleeing abusive homes⁷.
- Vulnerable young adults (19-30 years old) re-entering society from prison often have to deal with stigma and chaos, which reduces their chances of living in safe, affordable housing⁷.
- All currently operating emergency and transitional housing facilities are owned and managed by non-Aboriginal organizations, yet 30% of clients are Aboriginal (including youth)⁹.

Gaps being addressed in the community

A few initiatives have recently added to existing youth housing services and resources. The Victoria Youth Empowerment Society has open one transitional youth housing facility and a partnership among the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, M'Akola Housing Society and Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services has opened another. However, considering the number of youth identified in this study there is still a need for more resources.

The Greater Victoria Commission to End Homelessness (the Commission) is currently looking to meet the housing needs for 1550 people who experience severe addictions and mental illness (SAMI) by developing a ten year housing plan. The Mayor's action plan also includes integrated service provision through development of the Victoria Integrated Community Outreach Team (VICOT) and the Assertive Community Team (ACT). A prevention strategy that will address the needs of youth (both adolescent minors and emerging adults), and new parents with young children, is part of the proposed ten year housing plan.

Some youth will benefit from the Commission's work, while some needs specific to youth (particularly those under 19 years of age) are not yet addressed by this plan. For example, some youth identified in the service provider survey require more safe housing supported by detox and drug or alcohol treatment as well as more follow-up housing for recovery and maintenance after treatment. Since the Commission is addressing these issues in depth, including a housing plan for youth with severe addictions and mental illness, both adolescent children and emerging adults, would be most effectively serviced if a youth specific plan was coordinated by a working committee of that commission.

Gaps that remain to be addressed

As noted above, some of the gaps in youth housing are being addressed. However, many youth in the Capital Region still face housing difficulties. For example, transitional housing for youth has been identified as a critical need by many service providers (see Figure 1 for a standard housing continuum model).

Other gaps in transitional housing that were identified by youth service providers include:

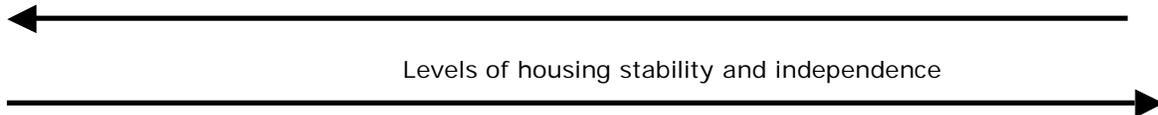
- Immediate access to crisis housing and longer-term shelter
- A housing model for youth in transition that includes integrated service provision (e.g., life skills), until the youth is able to be self-sufficient and independently housed
- Combined supported, transitional housing providing life skills, a house monitor or mother, etc., or some sort of model leading to a semi-independent or independent subsidized housing for youth aged 16-18 and 19-24.
- More transitional housing for youth leaving foster care who cannot fall back on a stable parental home⁸. The needs of youth leaving foster care are also addressed by the Mayor's Task Force's "Action Plan," which intends to prevent these youth – as well as those moving out of hospital and detention centres – from being released into the community where they may not have anywhere to live.

The following continuum was developed by housing and homelessness researchers to identify the range of supports necessary within a range of progressively more independent housing options:

Figure 1. Housing Continuum⁹

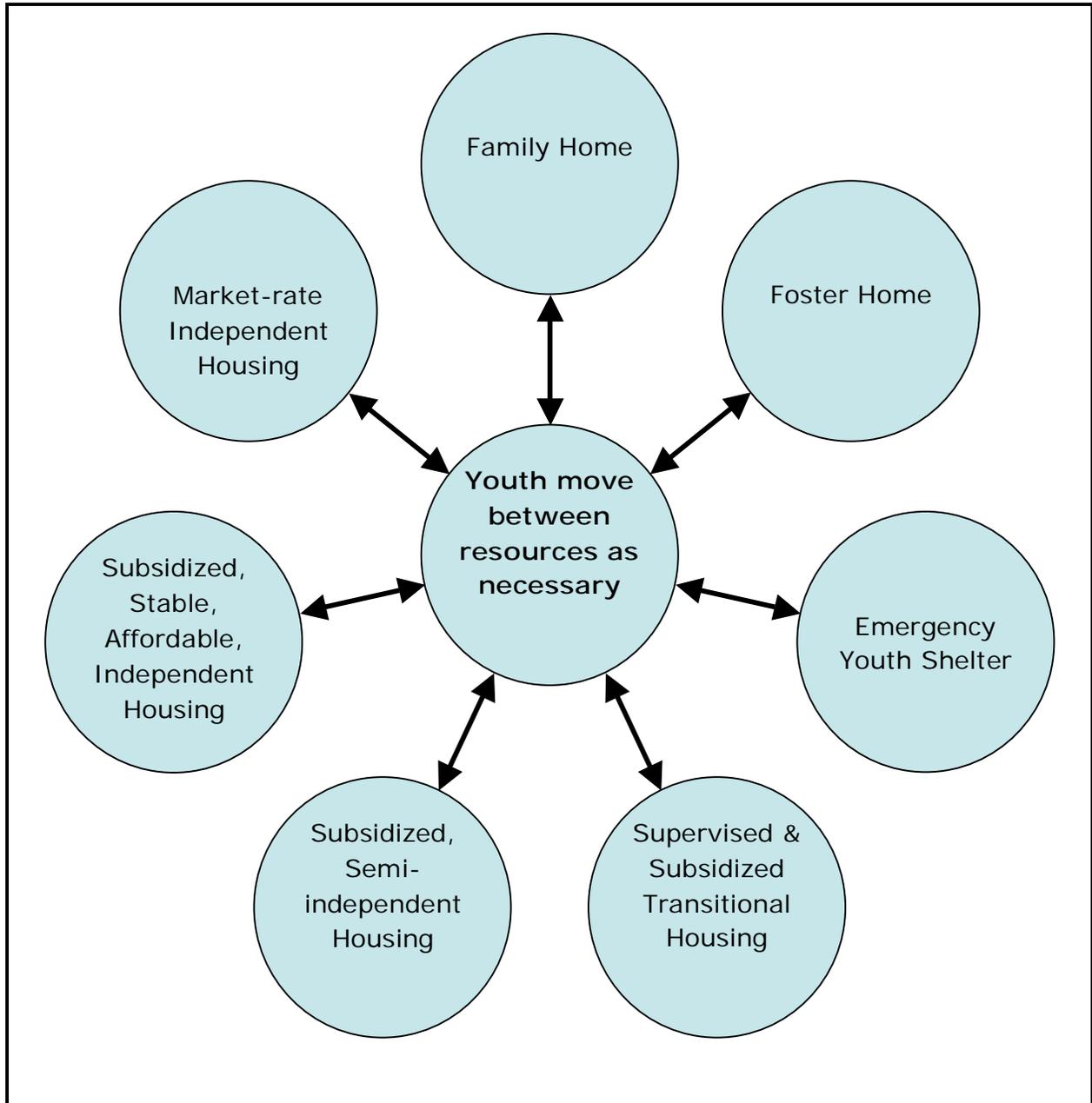
	Crisis (Stage 1)	Short Term/ Transitional (Stage 2)	Supportive (Stage 3)	Independent Subsidized (Stage 4)	Creative Ownership (Stage 5)	Market/Long term no subsidy (Stage 6)
Type	Emergency shelter (≤ 30 days)	Limited term (≤ 2 years)	Long term with supports	Long term rental or co-op	Partially funded to help people “get into” the market Co-op housing	Private rental or owned
Description	Highly subsidized Few supports Limited private space Referral to other services	Subsidized housing and supports Shared or Self-contained	Subsidized housing and services Common amenities Self-contained	Subsidized unit or rent allowance Few services Self-contained	Innovative solutions that move people into the market (there may be covenants on their own control)	Not subsidized No services Self-contained

← Levels of public assistance (financial subsidies, support services, dependence)



The Youth Housing Matrix (Figure 2) is an adaptation of the above continuum, recognizing that youth often need flexibility in moving back and forth between resources. Fluidity between resources is central to supporting youth, who tend to take two steps forward then one step back, en route to full independence.

Figure 2: Youth Housing Matrix



Providing safe, clean, affordable housing would allow youth in transition to get proper sleep, maintain personal hygiene, protect physical health, and establish a home. Each of these is a necessary basis for attending job training, maintaining a work schedule, pursuing high school completion or post-secondary schooling, and participation in the community. The housing resources described in the Matrix are particularly needed for youth leaving home or foster care earlier than 19 (either temporarily or longer-term), and emergent adults (19-24) aging out of foster care at 19 years.

Where do families fit in?

Families must be addressed on two fronts. First, families of origin (including extended family) may need counselling and/ or mediation supports in order to continue providing housing to their adolescent children and emergent adults. These supports may be required on a regular basis for some time. Along the same vein, there is an urgent need for respite homes for youth in conflict with their family. Respite allows youth the possibility to have independent space in a place that will not sabotage parent/ child relationships. One example would be housing for youth with behavioural disabilities such as severe attention deficit disorder. In extreme cases, some parents can no longer house their children due to violent or disruptive behaviour related to their disability. Mental health supports and housing options are critical for facilitating healthy relationships between parents and youth, as well as between youth and their community, while youth transition into adulthood.

Secondly, some families are headed by adolescents or emergent adults, both of whom may need social supports as well as housing supports in order to successfully raise their children. There is a very urgent need in particular for more housing options for youth-headed families. According to youth service providers, there is an increasing need for affordable housing (preferably mixed income) for young families. The housing that is currently available for youth-headed families is often substandard and families are therefore moving out frequently. Furthermore some young parents need extensive and long-term community support apart from housing per se, including parenting skills, employment training, transportation and childcare when employed.

One creative suggestion from a survey respondent was more stage 5 (creative ownership) options for youth through mixed generation housing co-ops. This would include spaces for “easy to house” youth families who are interested in leaving subsidized housing and become more self-sufficient, but could still use the support or influence of older community members (thus freeing up units in subsidized housing for youth who need the support).

But as one youth in the previous section noted, “landlords don’t rent to young girls with babies.” This is a discriminatory action that the Commission to End Homelessness may be addressing with an expanded prevention strategy that includes landlord education, along with its proposed intervention and mediation of disputes and evictions^{4,10}.

While this may not be family in the traditional sense, there is need for more housing that allows youth to keep their pets with them. “[It is] heartbreaking to see youth have to give up their “best friend” to move into available housing” (youth service provider survey). Companionship is a basic human need met for many youth by a trusted pet.

Outlying communities

There is a reported gap in housing services and assets in the Capital Region for youth that are living away from the downtown core. According to youth service providers in the Western Communities, this can be a barrier for youth who need those services but live in other areas of the region.

In this situation there is also a concern that, when successful in obtaining downtown services, youth create a network of relationships away from their home community and often with street-entrenched youth as well. This can impede the resolution of their issues, and make it more difficult for a youth to return to his or her community of origin as well.

Suggestions by Western Communities service providers include a youth focused drop-in centre and an emergency shelter for youth which provides information, activities and support, and would operate 24 hours a day. This service provider community also identified a need for supported housing options for youth in the Western Communities.

It is likely that the gaps and needs identified in the Western Communities are similar to the needs for youth in other outlying areas, including the Peninsula and District of Sooke. It will be important that a housing plan including these areas be coordinated or led by local youth service providers.

Links to crime

The Mayor's Task Force report notes that in 2006, the Victoria Police Department dealt with 2114 individuals "with no fixed address"; 21% were youth aged 11-18⁴. While there was only one instance of youth of this age range being a "core frequent user" of police services (0.3%) over a period of 40 months, 19% of this group were females with an age-range that peaked between ages of 21 to 30 years.

It was noted by one stakeholder that jails (and hospitals) were becoming de facto shelter options for some homeless residents⁷.

The other side of crime is victimization. Looking at youth leaving care, it was observed that while their involvement with crime positively declined when they moved out of care, they continued to be victimized in various ways. This includes physical and sexual abuse in personal and sexual relationships⁸. Unstable housing plays a role in this as it can create reliance on relationships where sex is being traded for food and shelter. Youth also face increased exposure to theft while couch surfing, living in over-crowded conditions, or sleeping in door-ways.

The youth housing providers in this research project emphasized the increasing number of reports of 'vulnerable housing'— a population of youth who are offered shelter and then face the risk of sexual or financial exploitation.

4. What's next?

Some recommendations for consideration:

1. Coordinate with the Greater Victoria Commission to End Homelessness and other groups working on youth housing, including sub regions away from downtown
2. Examine housing issues for youth under 19 (who are still legal minors with distinct legislative and service requirements), separately from emergent adults between 19 thru 25 years, and 26 thru 30. Emergent adults experience different issues, and experience issues differently, than adolescent youth. Skill development and services must be included in every stage of the spectrum to ensure success.
3. Develop a youth housing plan for the region that would:
 - Create a spectrum of resources across the region that respond to the diversity of strengths and needs among youth
 - Enable youth to move among housing resources according to their readiness for more or less independence

- Recognize and support existing resources
 - Coordinate efforts among existing resources
 - Collaborate on developing new resources in response to gaps and opportunities
 - Target resource development tailored to groups facing particular challenges (i.e. aboriginal youth, youth leaving care, youth with mental illness, young parents, youth living on the streets during cold/wet weather)
4. Generate a homelessness prevention plan – supporting families and youth before housing becomes unstable.

Potential next steps:

1. Create a youth housing plan coalition including voices of youth, youth service providers, and other key stakeholders to undertake Phase 2 of this project which would:
- Review the continuum of housing, and the youth housing matrix, so they can be adjusted as necessary to better reflect youth housing needs. In particular, the need for supported, transitional housing that feeds into independent housing
 - Complete and validate the partially constructed list of youth housing assets with youth service providers, requesting corrections and additions (with modifications later on as resources develop, and adjustments to the youth housing matrix as appropriate)
 - Liaise and coordinate with other youth housing initiatives
 - Investigate the development of youth/landlord support services
 - Consider a process to validate the potential impacts of the 10-year youth housing plan on the distribution of housing needs; for example, would the addition of 150 supported, transitional housing units decrease the need for immediately accessible shelter beds, and by how much? This is the sort of discussion recently facilitated by a consultant for the Regional Child Care Council’s business plan for child care spaces in the community
 - Develop best practices
2. Develop housing for youth.

3. Validate the numbers of youth experiencing housing need gathered in this research with youth service providers, and consider a process for annually collecting and validating the number of youth in housing need
4. Use a model like the Mayor's Task Force "Action Plan", including housing and prevention strategies, to begin identifying future areas and projects, as well as measures of success; something similar to the Task Force's "Action Plan" could work with the community to identify immediately achievable actions, 6-month goals, 1-year goals, 2-5 year, etc.
5. Examine existing housing policies that create barriers for youth at each stage of housing.
6. Encourage further engagement of government i.e., an increase of funding and service provision support, from provincial and federal governments – particularly regarding minors.
7. Continue expanding the dialogue and collaboration so participation is as broad as possible – the goal is to build a strong mutually supportive community of resources around this issue.

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