

# BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



*This report summarizes the case studies in the Community Acceptance Series documenting the experiences of supportive housing sites that gained neighbourhood acceptance. The purpose of this research is to help future sites better address neighbourhood concerns at the initial stages of a project. Sharing lessons learned also helps identify strategies to improve relationships with neighbours of existing social housing sites.*

*Other case studies in this series include: 5616 Fraser Street, Vancouver; Timber Grove, Surrey; Christine Lamb Residence, Abbotsford; Camas Gardens, Victoria and Cardington Apartments, Kelowna.*

## Community Acceptance Series

# Overview of Strategies from Case Studies of Supportive Housing Sites in BC

Supportive housing provides housing and support services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These support services help vulnerable people maintain their housing. Supports can include 24/7 staffing, life skills training, employment preparation, meal programs and referrals to other community resources. BC Housing works in partnership with non-profit societies who operate these projects and provide on-site supports to residents.

In 2014, BC Housing conducted a research study looking at five supportive housing projects for homeless people or people at risk of homelessness that were initially met by concern from their surrounding neighbours. In some cases, these projects were the first of their kind in these neighbourhoods. Over time, initial concerns from some community members developed into positive relationships.

### This report summarizes:

- › The type of concerns raised by neighbours of supportive housing developments and whether these concerns change over time, specifically from site proposal to after-site occupation
- › Strategies and actions taken by housing providers to address concerns and build positive relationships with neighbours
- › The number of police calls in the neighbourhood before and after site opening
- › Lessons learned from this project



### Methodology

BC Housing's Research and Corporate Planning conducted the research for the five case studies. Case studies were conducted with:

- › **Timber Grove in Surrey** (Coast Mental Health)
- › **Cardington Apartments in Kelowna** (John Howard Society of the Central and South Okanagan)
- › **Christine Lamb Residence in Abbotsford** (SARA for Women, formerly Women's Resource Society of the Fraser Valley)
- › **5616 Fraser Street in Vancouver** (RainCity Housing)
- › **Camas Gardens in Victoria** (Pacifica Housing)

BC Housing's Research and Corporate Planning collected data through the following methods:

- › Key informant interviews with staff representatives from each supportive housing site
- › Working with local police departments, data was gathered showing the number of police calls for each study neighbourhood before and after project opening

### Neighbours

Across the case study sites, concerned neighbours typically included a range of stakeholders such as renter and owner residential neighbours, nearby businesses, schools and other community amenities. In some cases, a small but vocal group of neighbours expressed concerns; in other cases, the majority of neighbours raised opposition to proposed supportive housing projects.

### Neighbour Concerns

There were a number of common concerns across the case studies and stakeholder groups, including:

- › Safety issues for residential neighbours, kids attending nearby schools, and local business staff and patrons
- › Higher incidents of crime
- › Decreased property values
- › Increased loitering
- › More noise

### How Neighbour Concerns Were Expressed

Community opposition in all five cases was quick to emerge as soon as neighbours heard about the proposed developments, especially if the property required rezoning. Concerns were expressed through a variety of means throughout the development process, including: public meetings, letters and meetings with municipal staff and politicians, letters and meetings with funders and supportive housing providers, the media, social media and internet, and community advisory committees. One group of opposed neighbours took the municipality to court with a land use challenge which was later dismissed by the judge.

### Strategies to Build Positive Relationships During Development

The case study sites used some common strategies during the development phase to address concerns that emerged once neighbours heard about proposed supportive housing sites in their areas. Many of the case study sites used or suggested the following strategies:

#### At development outset

- › Expect community opposition and prepare for it with a clear plan for public meetings and communications
- › Prepare to justify the need for this type of housing and explain why the particular site was selected
- › Ensure development plans include sufficient time for public input, so neighbours are heard
- › Set a clear timeline for public input to ensure it is not used to delay the development process
- › Develop a community advisory committee with representatives from concerned neighbourhood stakeholder groups to allow neighbours to provide input, voice concerns, and ask questions
- › Budget sufficient resources to cover formal and informal meetings with neighbours and other community stakeholders
- › Set clear boundaries around what type of input neighbours



- can have on the design plans and communicate those boundaries to stakeholders
- › Be clear on key messaging (e.g. how to describe the target client group) before going out to the public because it is hard to change public perceptions once a message is out
- › Ensure consistent messaging: Have one partner, such as the non-profit supportive housing provider, be the project spokesperson for media and other public events, so the public knows who to go to with questions or concerns
- › Give the project a name early in the development process to limit negative project descriptions in public discussions
- › Using a site that does not need to be rezoned helps limit community opposition
- › Create a site review task force, including community service providers and neighbours, to assess whether the site earmarked is the most suitable for the proposed client group (e.g. zoning issues, proximity to services, transit, and other amenities, and the need)
- › Trust that you are doing the right thing and that the opposition will diminish over time

### During Development

- › Hold public meetings and information sessions, so the public can get a sense of the need for this type of housing, who will be served, supports to be provided, construction plans, as well as Q & A sessions
- › Start gathering public input early in the process
- › Be patient with the public input process, even if it feels repetitive
- › Reach out to neighbours and nearby service providers one-on-one to explain the program, who it serves, and be available to answer questions
- › Send letters to neighbours providing them with updates on the development process. Inform them of public meetings and other events
- › Respond to concerns right away and take each complaint seriously so neighbours feel heard rather than dismissed

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- › Allow neighbours to comment on design plans, as there may be some easy design adjustments that can reduce potential complaints (e.g. moving the parking lot to the other side of the building, moving the building to a different spot on the property, or adding trees and a fence to create separation from neighbours)
- › Ensure all partners and funders are on the same page and kept up-to-date on all plans and decisions to make sure all partners are communicating consistent messaging when responding to questions and concerns (e.g. who is the client group, who is involved in the project, what supports will be available, why this site was selected, etc.)
- › Once the site is built, offer tours to neighbours and other community stakeholders so they can see how the building fits into the neighbourhood and safety features of the site
- › Tours can be done before or after the site opens (some supportive housing providers do not want to disrupt residents with site tours, while others want individuals touring the site to meet residents)

Strategies that were not common across the case study sites but helped their particular sites:

- › Offer to take neighbours on tours of existing supportive housing projects in other neighbourhoods, to see who is served, how they are supported, and view the buildings calm atmosphere
- › Invite residents of other supportive housing projects to public meetings to share success stories demonstrating the importance and impact of supportive housing
- › Create opportunities for neighbours to meet residents before and after the building opens, so they can get a better understanding of who will be served
- › Meet with police and ask them to do more regular drive-bys through the neighbourhood to alleviate neighbour concerns and reduce existing suspicious or criminal activities that may already be happening in the area



- › Invite police and fire departments for a tour of the site so they can get to know the site and gain a better understanding of the program when there is no critical incident requiring their attention
- › If the supportive housing provider is new to the community, consider partnering with a well-known and trusted community service provider to provide services on-site to put neighbours at ease
- › Carefully select the construction team and provide clear expectations about appropriate behaviour during the construction process as the construction team will be neighbours' first introduction to the project
- › Ensure there is a plan in place to address any neighbour concerns during construction

### Strategies to Build Positive Relationships after Opening

Several common themes emerged around strategies to mitigate and address neighbour concerns that may come forward after the site becomes operational. Many of these focus on how site staff and management may handle concerns. For example:

- › Continue community advisory committee meetings to provide a formal opportunity for neighbours to express ongoing or emerging concerns directly with the building's supportive housing providers
  - Meetings may become less frequent over time as the number of issues for discussion decrease
- › Empower neighbours to keep a watch out and to report suspicious activity or incidents right away
- › Have regular check-ins with neighbours so they know who to contact if they have a concern
- › Be available and ensure any neighbour concerns are addressed immediately so issues do not fester becoming a bigger deal
- › Ensure neighbour concerns are heard and responded to without being defensive, so neighbours feel comfortable coming forward

- › Install security cameras around the site and monitor the site regularly to immediately address inappropriate behaviour
- › Place office space overlooking the street so staff can see what happens outside the building
- › Invite neighbours to events or building celebrations (e.g. summer BBQ) or ask them to volunteer at the site, to meet residents and get a better understanding of who is being served and to breakdown stereotypes
- › Incorporate community amenities and services into the building to help make the building not just fit into the neighbourhood, but become a space for neighbours to congregate (e.g. a ground floor coffee shop or public art)

There are strategies involving residents too that maintain and promote positive relationships with neighbours, including:

- › Hold residents accountable for their behaviour on-site and in the neighbourhood through agreements such as tenancy agreements, program agreements and good neighbour agreements
- › When a new residents moves in, go over the agreements and ensure they are clear on their responsibilities
- › Remind residents of their obligations on a regular basis
- › Encourage residents to keep a look out and report suspicious activity or incidents right away
- › Encourage residents to volunteer in the neighbourhood (e.g. gardening, shoveling snow, etc.)
- › Encourage residents to access nearby services and amenities
- › Residents can write a letter to the local newspaper to thank neighbours for welcoming them to the area



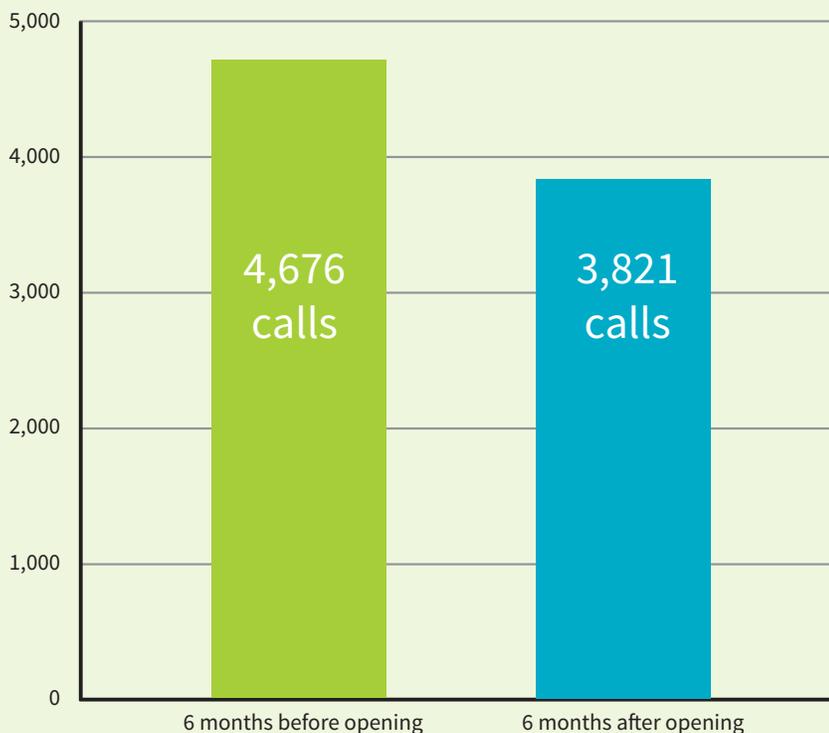
## Police Calls Before and After Opening



**in police calls between the periods 6 months prior and 6 months post opening**

Combined quantitative data provided by the local police departments for all five case study sites show a pattern of decreasing calls to police from the neighbourhoods surrounding the sites following supportive housing project openings. While one of the case study sites did see an increase in the number of calls to police after the project opened, the number of calls was typically below five per month. Calls to police decreased in the other four sites in the six months after the projects opened.

**Figure 1: Number of Calls to Police in Case Study Neighbourhoods Combined Six Months Before and After Supportive Housing Sites Opened** (5616 Fraser Street, Camus Gardens, Cardington Apartments, Christine Lamb, and Timber Grove)



Source: Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, Abbotsford, and Surrey Police Departments (combined data), 2014.

### Data Limitations

- 1) Police call data was requested for the neighbourhood around the case study sites. Neighbourhood boundary definitions vary by police department.
- 2) Key informant interviews were limited to representatives from each of the case study sites. Most other stakeholder groups, such as neighbours, other community members, funders and residents were not consulted for this study. While this limits study reliability, the key informants selected played a lead role in all aspects of the development and operations, providing valuable, comprehensive insights and perspectives. Clear common themes emerged across the case study sites supporting the validity of the case studies. Quantitative data from police departments also aligned with comments from key informants. Further research could be done to broaden the scope of stakeholders consulted to further validate the views expressed by those consulted for this report.
- 3) The case studies in this series only explore the experience of supportive housing sites that have achieved successful community integration. In the future, additional case studies could be conducted with supportive housing providers that have not fully achieved community acceptance. This would help measure the effectiveness of some of the strategies proposed in this report and identify additional lessons learned for future community integration best practices.



## Conclusion

Opposition to the case study sites was mostly limited to the development phase. In all five case studies, neighbours stopped expressing concerns after a few months of the supportive housing sites becoming operational. Now all case study sites enjoy positive relationships with neighbours. Neighbours show support by dropping off donations, volunteering and attending events at the sites, making supportive housing residents welcome in their businesses, and in one case, advocating for additional supportive housing. Through several of the case studies, it was reported that the most vocal opponents to the sites became some of the biggest supporters once the sites were operational.



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(Coast Mental Health)



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## More Information:

To find out more, visit BC Housing's Research Centre at [www.bchousing.org](http://www.bchousing.org) to find the latest workshops, research and publications on the key challenges and successes in building and operating affordable, sustainable housing.

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