

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



This study series documents 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.

A summary report is also available: *Overview of Strategies from Case Studies of Supportive Housing Sites in B.C.*

Community Acceptance Series: 5616 Fraser Street, Vancouver

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 the housing projects and provide on-site supports to the 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.

Project Background

5616 Fraser Street in Vancouver opened in 2007 and is operated by **RainCity Housing and Supports Society** (RainCity). Previously a parking lot owned by the City of Vancouver and now leased to RainCity, the City rezoned the land to allow supportive housing development on the site. The building has 30 self-contained studio units providing transitional housing for those with concurrent mental health and substance use issues in addictions recovery. Residents are expected to abstain from drugs or alcohol. This project offers a fixed-term residential program of up to two years allowing residents to transition into longer-term stable housing.



5616 Fraser Street exterior



This study examines:

- › The types 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

Project Background *continued from p1*

The building is staffed 24/7. Site staff focus primarily on: assistance and referrals for drug and alcohol counselling, other forms of counselling, mental health supports and life-skills. Vancouver Coastal Health mental health teams attend the site as needed by residents. A community integration worker helps residents develop relationships outside of the building, broadening social networks in the local community. Residents are required to have a case worker.

On-site programs include:

- › Life-skills training
- › Medication dispensing
- › Alcohol and drug recovery supports
- › Access to a common kitchen and BBQ
- › Computer access
- › Recreational activities, workshops and events

Methodology

BC Housing's Research and Corporate Planning conducted research for these five case studies by collecting data through the following methods:

- › Interviews with housing provider representatives from each supportive housing site
- › Working with local police departments, gathered data showing the number of police calls for each case study neighbourhood comparing before and after project opening



5616 Fraser Street interior common space



Neighbours

5616 Fraser Street is surrounded by a mix of residential, commercial, community amenities and support services. The building is located directly across from a cemetery and a few blocks from a secondary school. Nearby residential housing is a mix of single family homes and multi-unit apartment buildings with both renters and owners. Many support service agencies are in the area, making the location ideal for those who require supports but want to live outside the Downtown Eastside.

Neighbour Concerns

About 1,500 people raised concerns about the proposed supportive housing site during the development phase. The high school was the first to raise concerns and eventually business owners and residents also complained.

All stakeholder groups expressed similar concerns. For instance, it was thought that the project would attract violence and drug-related activity to the neighbourhood, as well as increased property crime. Businesses feared the perceived changes to the neighbourhood would scare off patrons, and home owners worried about decreasing property values.

How Neighbour Concerns Were Expressed

During the project's development, neighbours expressed concerns through several avenues. Many were very vocal at public meetings and information sessions while others made several phone calls to City Hall and to the housing provider to express their concerns. They created a website protesting the

site, posting several articles and complaints. Neighbours also physically protested the construction site and patrolled the area to keep a close watch on the site during the construction process.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships During Development

As part of the rezoning process, the City of Vancouver hosted public meetings and information sessions to create an opportunity at the beginning of the development process to share project information and for neighbours to voice their concerns.

A community advisory committee was developed consisting of neighbouring residents, health authority representatives, business owners and school administration representatives. This created an outlet for stakeholders to raise their project opposition.

Informally, RainCity also worked closely with local police and schools to ensure they were informed and educated about the housing program.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships After Opening

Neighbourhood opposition waned by the time the project opened. Some residents monitored the building with walk-arounds shortly after project opening, but these stopped after a month or so.

RainCity continues to apply an open communication approach with neighbours; it's easy for local neighbours to contact staff to ask questions or voice concerns. Any concerns are immediately addressed. The community advisory committee continues to meet regularly, providing an on-going opportunity for neighbours to voice their concerns. As issues decreased, meetings were less frequent. Staff informally and regularly speak with neighbours to maintain positive relationships and neighbours are invited to the RainCity site for BBQs in the summer months.

Residents also do their part to actively participate in the community, building positive relationships with neighbours. They assist neighbours with yard work, cleaning, and other chores; they deliver cookies to neighbours plus they keep an eye out on the neighbourhood, reporting suspicious activities to staff or neighbours. Residents take pride in their neighbourhood, and ensure neighbours know they care about the people who live around them.



5616 Fraser Street
residential unit



Challenges

Initially, the lack of understanding about the project and the people it would serve led to frustration for both sides. Both neighbours and new residents felt that they weren't being heard.

Current Relationship with Neighbours

Since opening, many of the former neighbourhood protestors have become strong project supporters, some even advocating for more supportive housing in the neighbourhood and across the city. In the past, when the housing site was a parking lot, kids loitered, smoked, and did drugs, but now there are cameras and staff 24/7 keeping an eye on the street.

Residents help too, asking loitering kids to move on, taking pride in their building, and helping to keep the community safe.

Neighbours created opportunities for resident participation in neighbourhood activities. For example, neighbours often help residents gain work experience with volunteer and paid job opportunities such as gardening and cleaning. Residents feel comfortable and are regular customers of nearby stores and services such as restaurants, cafes, medical and dental offices, banks and grocery stores.

Lessons Learned to Address Neighbour Concerns

- › **Be quick and responsive:** Address neighborhood concerns right away
- › **Encourage engagement:** Invite neighbours to building events to meet residents and break down stereotypes
- › **Share and celebrate success stories with neighbours from other supportive housing projects to help achieve buy-in and demonstrate the need for this type of housing**
- › **Provide education about the program's benefits and the people who are served, so neighbours learn to understand the program**
- › **Be open and willing to have discussions with neighbours, even if they are not initially positive**
- › **Be patient, trust that you are doing the right thing**
- › **Once neighbours meet residents through site tours and other opening events, they will become more comfortable with a better understanding of the project purpose and the people it serves**
- › **Share facts at public meetings: Provide statistics demonstrating that supportive housing does not harm property values and increase crime**
- › **Give people time to learn about the site, voice their concerns, feel heard and become comfortable with the site. Short development timelines do not provide neighbours the time they need to accept new housing projects**



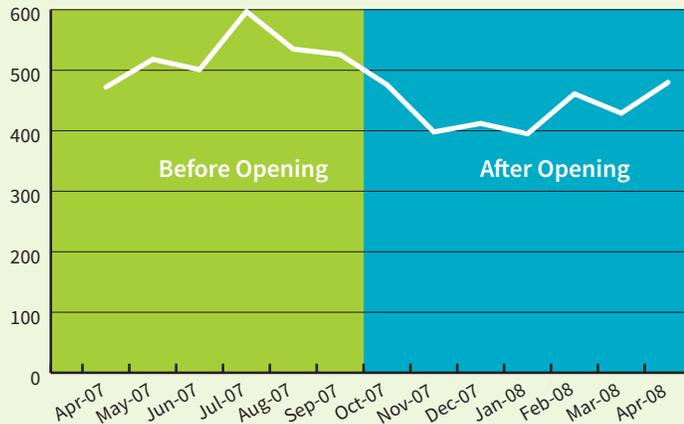
Police Calls Before and After Opening



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

In the six months before 5616 Fraser Street (RainCity) opened, there were 3,149 calls to the police. In the six months after project opening, the call number dropped to 2,575.

Figure 1: Number of Calls to Police in the 5616 Fraser Street (RainCity) Neighbourhood Before and After Site Opening



Source: Vancouver Police Department, 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 tenants 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.

More Information:

To find out more, visit BC Housing's Research Centre at 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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