

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: Camas Gardens, Victoria

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

Camas Gardens opened in 2011. Located near downtown Victoria, the site is operated by **Pacifica Housing**. The building has 44 self-contained bachelor and one-bedroom units for people who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, including people facing mental health or addiction issues, either active or in recovery.

Two staff are on duty 24/7 and additional on-site, program staff are available during the day. Supports for residents are client-centered, focusing primarily on referrals and helping navigate community support services.



Camas Gardens 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*

On-site programs include:

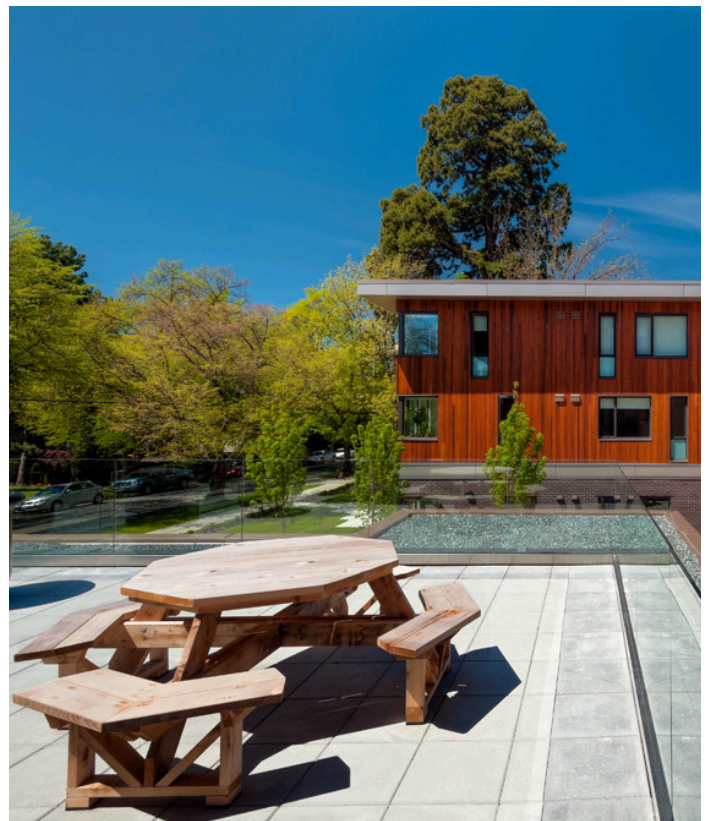
- › Life-skills development such as nutrition, cooking and grocery shopping
- › Recreational activities, such as walking groups and yoga
- › Helping residents access other community recreational amenities such as the library or community centres
- › A Community Work Program provides residents with volunteer site-based work such as cleaning common areas inside and around the site, with residents receiving a \$10 grocery voucher per every hour of work performed.

Originally, the site was developed in the 1950s and owned by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB). It had 14 duplex-style, bungalow units for CNIB clients. Eventually, BC Housing took over the site as part of its directly managed stock and at the time, the buildings were in need of significant repair. Though there were site height restrictions, there was potential for densification, and the site did not need to be rezoned to offer supportive housing. With program funding available through the Provincial Homelessness Initiative, BC Housing and the City of Victoria signed a Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) in 2008 to designate the site for supportive housing. Residents living at the site leading up to the redevelopment were relocated to other suitable, subsidized units.

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



Camas Gardens exterior common area



Neighbours

Camas Gardens is in an expensive and quiet residential area, centrally located near Beacon Hill Park. Immediate neighbours are a high-end, private, assisted-living complex and market rental apartments. Beyond the rental buildings are single-detached homes and a bed and breakfast is at the end of the street. Neighbouring buildings behind Camas Gardens are condominiums.

Neighbour Concerns

Neighbours first heard about the project through the media when the site was designated as one of BC Housing and the City of Victoria's MOU sites for supportive housing. Media attention intensified as the bungalow resident relocation process got underway. Media interest increased when Pacifica Housing's involvement was announced.

Neighbours were concerned that their neighbourhood would be ruined through increased drug dealing and crime in the area. They were also worried their property taxes would increase. It was estimated that about 10 per cent of neighbours shared these concerns and most of the concerns were expressed by seniors living in the various residential buildings nearby. Most neighbours had questions about the plans for the site, but were open to the idea of supportive housing. Others were indifferent or willing to wait and see what happened once the site opened.

How Neighbour Concerns were Expressed

Neighbours expressed concerns in a variety of ways. Initially, most complaints were expressed via phone calls to the City of Victoria and BC Housing. Once Pacifica Housing became involved, they became the public face for the project and concerned individuals were directed to Pacifica Housing. Concerns were also raised by neighbours at open houses. Those who expressed concerns, quickly volunteered to attend the workshops held to get the public's input on the project.

Concerns were mostly raised by individuals rather than any group or organization. Concerned neighbours did not form an official opposition group. The area already had a neighbourhood association, that was consulted early in project development. No strong opposition to the project was raised by the neighbourhood association.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships During Development

Pacifica Housing had a strategy in place based on previous supportive housing development and community operating experiences. This strategy involved both one-on-one and group consultations.

As soon as Pacifica Housing was selected as the supportive housing provider, they organized individual face-to-face meetings with the most immediate neighbours. The purpose of these meetings was to talk about the housing and services they provide in the community. Neighbouring private landlords were not interested in participating in these one-on-one meetings.

Public consultations started early in the process, before design plans were in place. The first public meeting was an open house hosted at a nearby church by the development consultant, architect and Pacifica Housing. The purpose of the meeting was to provide an overview Pacifica Housing's housing and services in the community plus answer any project questions from the public. At this workshop, neighbours were given the opportunity to sign up to participate in two workshops offered by the development consultant and the architect. The first workshop was to discuss the design and neighbourhood fit of the project. The second workshop was to discuss neighbourhood safety considerations.

Camas Gardens interior common area



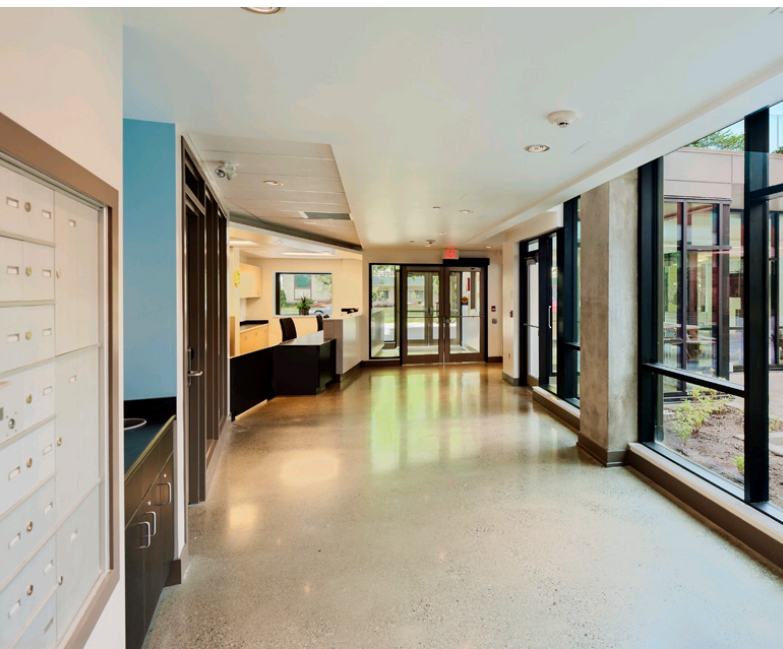


During site development, Pacifica Housing incorporated several measures to keep neighbours informed of site progress. They offered tours or suggested neighbours drive by the site to get a sense of what the project would look like and how it would fit into the neighbourhood. Most neighbours did not request a tour. In fact, several neighbours later reported to Pacifica Housing that they drove by the site and did not notice it, suggesting the project design fits well into the neighbourhood. To keep neighbours up-to-date, Pacifica Housing sent two flyers, though this was reported as being expensive. Neighbours were encouraged to follow site development progress on the website or to call Pacifica Housing with questions. Pacifica Housing used these regular updates to provide on-going supportive housing education, emphasizing the value of this type of housing to the community.

Throughout the public consultations, it was made clear that while neighbours and other community stakeholders' ideas would be heard, they did not have final decision-making power over the design of the site. Messaging at the public consultations was always that the project was going ahead, but that community input was being gathered to ensure the project fit in with the community and worked for both neighbours and residents.

Just before project opening, Pacifica Housing hosted a sneak-peek event. This event provided an opportunity for neighbours, funders, police, firefighters and other interested neighbours, to tour the building without imposing on residents.

Interior entrance for Camas Gardens



It also gave stakeholders a chance to ask questions and meet the staff. Neighbours were able to see how attractive the building was and how the office overlooked the street, ensuring staff could keep an eye on activities going on outside the building.

Another strategy Pacifica Housing employed was to carefully interview construction companies to mitigate complaints during the construction process. While interviewing proponents they asked how neighbour complaints about construction would be handled. As well, Pacifica Housing explained that the construction project was Pacifica Housing's first introduction to the neighbourhood, so the construction process was setting the tone for the whole project. There were some complaints about construction workers parking and trespassing through neighbours' properties to get to the site faster, and these concerns were addressed right away.

Pacifica Housing ensured BC Housing and the City of Victoria were informed about community consultation strategies and site plans, so all stakeholders were on the same page if project questions arose. All three parties were clear about how to direct public queries.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships After Opening

While some organizations use good neighbour agreements to hold residents accountable for disruptive behaviours, Pacifica Housing did not feel good neighbour agreements were necessary for long-term residents. They believed tenancy agreements would be sufficient to hold residents accountable because under these agreements Pacifica Housing must ensure the enjoyment of both residents and neighbours. They emphasized the importance of making sure residents were clear on the details of their tenancy agreements, ensuring staff carefully explain the rights and obligations of residents and landlords under the agreement. If residents engage in disruptive behaviours, staff provide supports to address these behaviours. If needed, the society will end a tenancy, and try to find other suitable housing for the resident, if all other options are exhausted.

Pacifica Housing reported that a clear communication strategy is vital to maintaining positive relationships with



neighbours, so neighbours are clear on who to contact to express concerns. They said always being available is important to ensure neighbours feel heard. In addition, it is important to hear and respond to complaints without being defensive and to not take complaints personally. Staff are encouraged to check in regularly with neighbours to ensure there are no emerging issues. Also, new staff are asked to introduce themselves to neighbours so neighbours feel comfortable reporting issues early on, before becoming larger issues.

Challenges

As Camas Gardens was developed, a significant amount of negative media attention regarding neighbourhood safety with another similar supportive housing site nearby occurred. Many neighbours thought that Camas Gardens would have similar issues. Pacifica Housing explained to neighbours that Camas Gardens would offer permanent housing, not drop-in services, and that there would be staff on-site, 24/7 keeping a watchful eye.

Another challenge: As site construction began, a large sign went up describing the project. The sign raised some concerns from neighbours, especially those whose homes were for sale.

Current Relationship with Neighbours

The relationship with neighbours is now very positive. There are few complaints. Only one complaint was raised in a local newspaper article about residents going through their trash and increased crime. Pacifica Housing worked with the police department to collect neighbourhood crime statistics and found that crime did not increase since Camas Gardens opened.



Camas Gardens unit

Concerns mostly arose when the project was announced because some individuals were afraid of the unknown. Concerns were expressed less frequently once the project was in development, as neighbours saw the building was attractive and learned about the staffing model and resident supports. Once the building opened, neighbours found their fears were not supported.

Now residents enjoy positive relationships with their neighbours. For example, one resident is responsible for looking after the front of the building through the Community Work Program. The seniors next door interact with him on a regular basis while he is out and working. When the resident is ill and unable to work, neighbours will stop by the Camas Gardens office to ask how the resident is feeling. Residents also look out for their senior neighbours who may be vulnerable. For instance, a senior from next door once fell in front of the building and a number of Camas Garden residents ran out to provide assistance.

Lessons Learned to Address Neighbour Concerns

- › Getting the non-profit supportive housing provider involved early helps put a face to the project, so neighbours and other community stakeholders have a contact to discuss concerns and constructive ideas
- › Having a strong communication strategy to gain community acceptance is important to create a positive environment for residents once they move into the neighbourhood
- › Provide opportunities for feedback and input, but set boundaries on feedback so neighbours and other community stakeholders are clear that the project will not be designed by committee
- › Once the building is operational, being open and receptive to feedback helps neighbours feel heard if concerns arise



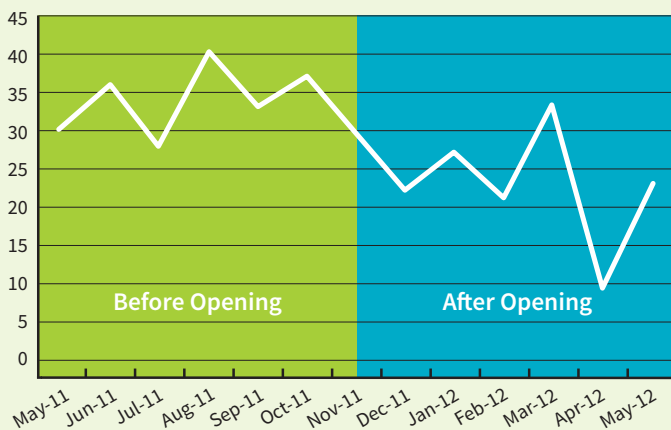
Police Calls Before and After Opening



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

In the six months before Camas Gardens (Pacifica Housing) opened, there were 204 calls to the police. In the six months after project opening, the call number dropped to 135.

Figure 1: Number of Calls to Police in the Camas Gardens (Pacifica Housing) Neighbourhood Before and After Site Opening



Source: Victoria Police Department, 2014

NOTE: Data for November 2011 (the month the site opened was not provided). Data is available for the six months prior to and post opening in the same way as the other sites in the case study series.

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:

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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