

# BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



Urban Native  
Youth Association

## Indigenous Housing Series: Young Bears Lodge

Operated by the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA), the Young Bears Lodge (YBL) is a residential healing lodge for Indigenous youth between 13 and 18 years old recovering from alcohol or drug misuse. The YBL program empowers and supports youth to define their personal healing journey through a ‘two-eyed seeing’ model that combines western and Indigenous knowledge.

The purpose of this case study series is to highlight housing providers and programs that serve Indigenous women, youth, and families who are in need of housing support and facing child welfare intervention. The case studies, developed Summer 2016, provide information on program components and support. They also examine key practices, program highlights, challenges and successes. It is hoped this information may inform practices of other housing providers looking to create or expand wrap around support services to help families stay together.

### PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND SUPPORTS

- › **Housing:** Youth, medium-term supportive housing
- › **Education and skills training:** Psycho-educational workshops, career and life skills training, Indigenous teachings and education from a decolonizing lens, school support and post-secondary planning, land-based healing and traditional medicines, community volunteer work (children, Elders, gardening, events)
- › **Personal development:** Goal setting and one-on-one counselling; group counselling and Wellbriety Circle, art-based therapy, optional weekly AA/NA meeting, on-site gym access and physical activities, outdoor activities, personal health and self-care, plus transport and accompaniment to appointments, help with forms and accessing services
- › **Cultural:** Daily smudge and prayer, talking circles, community and cultural outings (powwow night, longhouse, sweat lodge ceremony, various other ceremonies related to youths’ ancestry), guest artists and cultural facilitators (Elder visits, photography workshops, drumming), monthly blanketing ceremony, traditional feasts, graduation giveaway ceremony
- › **Other services and activities:** Family and caregiver engagement, referrals (support night dinners, connection to UNYA family counselors etc.), transition and after-care planning



**KEY PRACTICES**

The YBL program is based on five guiding philosophies:

- 1) Culture as therapy
- 2) Two-eyed seeing
- 3) Trauma-informed care
- 4) Youth-centered care
- 5) Harm reduction

The therapeutic program has four phases, each lasting about one month. Youth work with YBL staff to set their own goals for each phase of the program. This flexible approach evolves continuously to meet the needs and goals of participating youth at any given time.

Although the YBL program is abstinence-based, relapse is not a condition for automatic discharge. Youth may have abstinence or harm-reduction goals related to substance use upon leaving the program.

Each youth has a Care Plan to ensure their health, safety and wellness needs are met, as well as an Early Exit Plan should they choose to leave the program early. Youth work with YBL counsellors to develop therapeutic, transition and after-care plans.

The YBL program provides an open and safe cultural environment, encouraging the inclusion of all Indigenous backgrounds through the overarching universal expectation of mutual respect and by encouraging a community-oriented perspective. UNYA advocates including cultural practices as a key factor in holistic wellbeing.

**YOUNG BEARS LODGE STATISTICS**

<b>Housing units</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 beds</li> </ul>
<b>Estimated clients per year (#)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12 in the last 5 months</li> <li>• Ages: 13-18 years old</li> <li>• Estimated average age: 15-18 years</li> </ul>
<b>Length of stay</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximum: 4 months</li> <li>• Average: 3-4 months</li> </ul>
<b>Estimated Indigenous clients (%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous specific program: 100%</li> </ul>
<b>Referrals, intake</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application process: youth self-refer or are referred by their families or other agencies within the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority</li> <li>• Intake: Rolling, on-going</li> <li>• Waitlist: 10 people (average)</li> </ul>
<b>Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule: 24/7 staffing, 8-hour shifts</li> <li>• Full-time: 9</li> <li>• Casual: Varies, between 8-20</li> <li>• Other: 50-70% of staff self-identify as Indigenous</li> </ul>
<b>Key funding sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government: Vancouver Coastal Health Authority</li> <li>• Small community grants</li> </ul>
<b>Key partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government: Vancouver Coastal Health, Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD), Vancouver Aboriginal Children and Family Services Society (VACFSS)</li> <li>• Other: UNYA Programs, Watari, Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC), WAVAW, Through An Aboriginal Lens, Native Health Society</li> </ul>

UNYA recognizes the challenging work their staff performs. To help, UNYA provides staff with flexible scheduling, monthly training, educational opportunities and positive acknowledgement and support.



### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- › **Monitoring and evaluation:** UNYA is developing a monitoring and evaluation framework for the YBL program to help determine program outcomes and success factors. The YBL program currently uses a standardized Vancouver Coastal Health youth feedback survey, which is continuously used to improve program delivery.
- › **Four Phase Therapeutic Model:** The YBL program uses a Four Phase Model, where each month youth choose whether to move through another phase of the program. The four phases of the program are informed by the four directions of the Medicine Wheel and the four phases of the therapeutic process.

### CHALLENGES

- › **Staff funding:** The YBL program provides complex residential care alongside challenging behavioral programs requiring a high level of staff planning and communication. UNYA identified the need for additional staff budget to provide more staff hours and enable more frequent contact with youth.
- › **Staff retention:** Due to limited funding for youth-oriented programs, wages are frequently higher at organizations or programs that target other populations. This creates difficulties in retaining experienced staff.

- › **Community Buy-in:** There is a lack of public awareness and funding support for the preventative approaches necessary to effectively address the unique needs of Indigenous youth.
- › **Flexibility:** While flexible, individualized approaches best meets the needs of youth, it requires staff to constantly adjust and learn new skills to meet the demands of a case-by-case approach.

### SUCCESSES

- › **Inclusion of culture:** Youth create gifts to give to their support persons during their giveaway ceremonies and to visiting guests or lodge Elders. When a youth completes a phase of the YBL program, they participate in a blanketing ceremony with invited guests and support persons. Upon completion of the program, youth are presented with a medicine bundle to continue their healing journey.
- › **Redevelopment of YBL:** The YBL program collected participant feedback and worked closely with community partners to develop a new approach more focused on meeting the needs of the community and to provide enhanced clinical support while maintaining a strong cultural lens. These changes resulted in improved program retention and graduation rates.

#### SPOTLIGHT

### YOUNG WOLVES LODGE

*Young Wolves Lodge was a five bed, four month UNYA transitional housing program open from 2003-2015 until it was forced to close due to insufficient funding. The program targeted Indigenous female youth between the ages of 17 and 24 years old who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness. As many housing services and support programs for youth are lost once they reach the age of 19 years old, programs such as Young Wolves Lodge are valuable for individuals struggling through this transition. Given the tremendous need for culturally safe and informed resources for Indigenous youth, UNYA is actively seeking funding to re-establish a residential program at Young Wolves Lodge.*

“The Four Phase Therapeutic Model assists youth in identifying their individual goal, thus empowering them to determine how they choose to identify with and deal with their needs in a more productive and positive way.”



## Aboriginal Youth Safehouse

The Aboriginal Youth Safehouse (ASH) provides voluntary short-term emergency housing for youth of all backgrounds in a safe, drug and alcohol free, and supportive environment. Youth must be working to stay clean from hard drugs and willing follow house rules and guidelines to stay at ASH.

### PROGRAM COMPONENTS AND SUPPORTS

- › **Housing:** Youth emergency housing, housing search
- › **Education and skills training:** Life skills
- › **Personal development:** Employment search support, goal setting, one-on-one support, advocacy, counselling
- › **Other services and activities:** Free clothing closet, sports and recreation, drop-in centre, family services, smudge bowl and other cultural activities, access to computer, telephone, television, bus tickets

### KEY PRACTICES

ASH uses a voluntary self-referral intake model. If another individual or organization refers a youth, ASH ensures that the youth wants to access the safehouse. While at ASH, youth are expected to actively work on their goals, such as housing, job searches or attending school.

An open and safe environment for cultural activities is actively cultivated at ASH. Indigenous cultural activities are youth-driven. Previous activities requested by youth have included: an Elder visit, drum work, medicine bags, and cultural ceremonies.

ABORIGINAL YOUTH SAFEHOUSE STATISTICS	
<b>Housing units</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 units, 7 beds, 2 extra extreme weather beds available as required</li> </ul>
<b>Estimated clients per year (#)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 150-200 per year approximately</li> <li>• Ages: 16-18 years</li> <li>• Estimated repeat clients: 30-40%</li> </ul>
<b>Length of stay</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximum: Technically 7 days, flexible in practice</li> </ul>
<b>Estimated Indigenous clients (%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 40% self-identify as Indigenous</li> </ul>
<b>Referrals, intake</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referrals: Self-referral</li> <li>• Intake: Continuous</li> </ul>
<b>Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule: 24/7 staffing, 8 hour shifts</li> <li>• Full time: 9</li> <li>• Casual: Between 8-20</li> <li>• Other: 3/7 staff self-identify as Indigenous</li> </ul>
<b>Key funding sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government: Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD)</li> <li>• Other: Community donations</li> </ul>
<b>Key partners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government: MCFD</li> <li>• Other: Other safehouses, other UNYA programs (ex: Native Youth Health and Wellness Clinic)</li> </ul>

ASH youth workers focus on connecting youth to resources and helping them with goal planning to meet their individual needs. Extensive wrap-around supports and services for youth are provided due to ASH's successful coordination with other UNYA services and programs. The breadth of UNYA services and programs ensures that staff can correctly serve each youth's needs.





### PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- › **Goal setting:** ASH strongly emphasizes goal setting, inspiring youth to work towards creating stability in their lives. Staff supports are available to help youth with their goal planning, including help with family or cultural reconnection when requested.
- › **Program follow-up:** While there are challenges in following up with ASH program participants, feedback is solicited from residents both anonymously through a suggestion box, in person through interviews or feedback forms.

### CHALLENGES

- › **Funding:** Limited staff funding for youth-oriented programs creates challenges in recruiting and retaining both experienced full-time and casual staff. Fixed funding is also challenging to manage as the costs of many program staples, such as bus passes and food, continue to rise.
- › **Continuum of support:** At 19 years old, youth lose the majority of directed funding and access to services and supports in BC. Youth between the ages of 18-20 years old are typically the most interested in making a change, but it is difficult to finance youth through this transition period when funding ceases on their 19th birthday.
- › **Lack of affordable market and second stage housing:**
  - Youth face barriers like landlord discrimination. Even youth with a government-funded Youth Agreement (consistent monthly funding for housing) frequently have difficulty obtaining housing. Youth who cannot locate affordable rental housing are forced to live in unsafe environments.
  - To locate affordable rental housing, youth are often forced to move out of Vancouver to surrounding municipalities, away from their known supports and community.
  - More outreach and housing transition staff are needed to locate and secure housing for youth by developing a network of 'friendly' landlords.
- › **Youth drug use:** There are insufficient substance use treatment and services for youth, as well as significant challenges navigating the system to access services.

- › **Youth mental health:** There are insufficient mental health treatment and services for youth, as well as significant challenges navigating the system and accessing limited services.
- › **Family-based support:** Insufficient preventative, wrap-around, family-based housing and services.

### SUCCESSES

- › **Program redevelopment:** ASH recently reassessed and refined its program delivery to better meet the population's needs and significantly reduce the barriers to accessing youth housing. Becoming more flexible, permitting longer stays, and reducing mandatory housing search requirements in recognition of the current tight housing rental market helped. ASH now works more collaboratively with youth struggling with substance misuse, instead of simply providing detox facility referrals. Since reducing barriers to housing, the number of nights at shelter full capacity has increased. ASH maintained an 85-90% average capacity each night, reducing the risk of discharging youth into homelessness or unsafe living conditions. In previous years, ASH served approximately 250 youth per year for a maximum seven-day stay. During this short time span, youth were expected to locate housing by completing mandated housing searches. ASH today serves approximately 150-200 youth per year due to greater flexibility around length of stay; which creates the opportunity for more in-depth case management for youth.
- › **Success is individually defined:** Not all 'successes' are captured or reflected through quantitative data. For example, one former ASH youth is now an UNYA employee, and several other ex-residents have gone on to post-secondary education programs or to raise families of their own.