



Campbell River Sobering and Assessment Centre celebrates one-year anniversary

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It's been nearly one year since the Campbell River Sobering and Assessment Centre, operated by the Vancouver Island Mental Health Society, opened its doors to the public in July 2017. "We've been in continuous operation 24 hours a day, seven days a week since that time," said HSA member and Coordinator Kevin James.

The majority of the centre's guests are homeless or marginally housed. For them, the centre offers "a safe, secure, and warm place for someone to come and sober up from drugs or alcohol in order not to take up space in city cells or in the emergency department of the hospital," said James.

According to James, the RCMP reported 400 fewer arrests from public intoxication in the past year, which they partially attribute to the existence of the centre.

Its service model was inspired by other sobering centres around the province. "We tried to transfer pieces that were applicable to the kind of centre we wanted to open," said James.

"We offer our guests laundry service for the clothes they're wearing, a safe and secure place to sleep, a secure place to lock up their belongings, a shower in the morning, a small snack," James said. "We have an unofficial clothing supply and a safe ear for some of our guests to spout a bit about their situations."

The centre also helps bridge clients to community mental health and addictions services. There's a nurse practitioner on-site twice per month who can provide medical care. In addition to James, there are six HSA members at the site working as community health workers.

As coordinator, James jokes that he's "a jack of all trades and master of none." He's responsible for coordinating staff, stocking materials and supplies, and ensuring that the centre is operational. He examines policies and procedures to ensure that the centre is safe for staff and guests.

In his work as coordinator, James has witnessed some inspiring success stories. "Long-term opiate users have gone back to living sober, getting their businesses back, and reconnecting with their families." He said some guests leave with a future focus that is more positive than when they first arrived.

For others, the centre "raises the bottom."

"Raising the bottom is - instead of a bleak everyday view from underneath a tree or an awning somewhere to stay out of the weather - a warm, safe place to wake up in the morning, with a cup of coffee and an intelligent conversation."

"It's the realization that that could be a possibility, despite the challenges that some of our guests face," explained James. He said the phrase was termed by a street nurse in the community, and he's "sure it's absolutely original."

The impact of the centre has led many of its guests to refer others, which James finds rewarding.

Integrating harm reduction strategies into mental health and addiction services

“Nobody can move on to a better place in their life, dealing with their trauma and addictions, if they’re dead. If they’re alive, then there’s always hope,” said James, speaking to the impact of harm reduction services on substance users.

“Every day you wake up and put your feet on the ground is a good day.”

According to Health Link BC, harm reduction “includes policies, programs and practices that aim to keep people safe and minimize death, disease, and injury from high-risk behaviour, especially psychoactive substance use. Harm reduction recognizes that high risk behaviour may continue despite the risks.”

Harm reduction approaches are diverse in nature and tailored to a community’s needs. A wide range of strategies is used to equip substance users, families, and communities with the knowledge, tools, and supports needed to enhance safety.

While no substances can be used on site, the sobering centre reduces harm by providing supports to people who are substance dependent. Staff can connect users to other people so that they are not using in isolation. They can bridge them to other community services so they can practice safe using.

Harm reduction services have been a major component of B.C.’s response to the overdose crisis, with safe consumption sites playing a vital role in preventing fatalities.

In July 2017, Island Health reported to have eight overdose prevention sites opened on Vancouver Island that distribute harm reduction supplies, ensure timely intervention in the event of an overdose, and bridge clients to community services. As part of a harm reduction strategy, naloxone kit distribution has expanded not just within Island Health, but across the province.

“People with trauma, homelessness, and substance misuse issues are going to have trauma, homelessness, and misuse issues, regardless of where they are,” said James. “To have a safe place to experiment with...it’s important. It’s important to be treated as a person first.”

Harm reduction efforts can include outreach and educational initiatives, and are routinely accompanied by treatment and prevention services, and other forms of social support.

As part of its response to mental health and addiction issues, Island Health has also introduced an Intensive Case Management Team to Campbell River. James said their person-centric, face-to-face approach “has just been amazing.” They assist clients with finding housing, connecting to primary care, and navigating social services.

“They just bring a wealth of information right to the person,” said James. He said some of their staff also bring with them a rich understanding of Aboriginal experiences, which is much needed given the disproportionate representation of Indigenous peoples in Powell River’s homeless population.

“Tailoring to the population and the challenges we have in Campbell River is an ongoing, constant process,” said James.

Despite the challenges, James is honoured to be working in Campbell River to do such important work, supporting people with mental health and substance misuse issues. He’s been pleased by the municipality’s efforts to support the launch of the sobering centre. “Campbell River is a really forward-looking city that understands some of the challenges our guests face,” said James.

[The June 2018 issue of The Report Magazine can be found in full here.](#)

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