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Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

Esquimalt Neighbourhood House volunteers give back to community

ESQUIMALT – Trevor Oram hadn't anticipated his work as president of the BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union would prepare him for future work as a volunteer counsellor at Esquimalt Neighbourhood House Society (ENH).

It turns out that good listening skills and an empathetic approach to people's problems are "quite transferable to the counselling field," Oram says. Ten years into that work, he's not only continuing to see half a dozen clients a week, he chairs the board that governs the Greater Victoria community social services agency.

For volunteer counsellor Patti Webster, it was the chance to give back to support her community that drew her to the neighbourhood house's 10-month training program. That was 11 years ago. Webster's commitment to the work has never flagged. "To me, it's a huge honour that people will sit with me and speak of things that they may have never spoken of to anyone before," Webster says. "That's a gift, and a really wonderful place where I get to learn."

ENH launched its volunteer counselling program 27 years ago. Between 60 and 80 people apply every year to get into the training. Sixteen are carefully chosen and typically accepted.

Each volunteer who takes the training agrees to give 200 hours of unpaid counselling to ENH in exchange for the free training. ENH currently has a pool of 35 active volunteer counsellors who provide up to 10 free counselling sessions for a diverse array of clients – many of whom could never afford to access counselling otherwise.

"This is absolutely a need-to-have service. The referrals come in from all over," Webster says. "And because there's no exchange of money, the hierarchy isn't there. That's really important for people who are at a point in their life where they're struggling."

Oram says ENH works hard to keep its "radical program" as barrier free as possible. Counsellors range across all ages, genders, diversity, levels of education, income levels and culture, as do the people accessing counselling.

The demand for counselling has doubled during the pandemic. Fortunately, temporary pandemic-related supports from government have helped the neighbourhood house rise to the challenge, says Mary Lynn McKenna, ENH's executive director.

ENH counselling has gone virtual in the pandemic – not to every counsellor's liking, notes Webster. She much prefers to do her counselling in person. But the distance option has proven popular with some clients. "It's not my preference to do counselling on the phone and has been quite an adjustment, but you get used to it," Webster says. "Some clients do actually prefer it, like a visually impaired client of mine who appreciates not having to make their way

to our office every time.”

Volunteering with ENH has felt like such an important way to give back, Webster says. “You just have to give back if you’re going to build community. There would be big holes in our communities if it weren’t for that volunteer piece.”

The B.C. government has proclaimed May 2-8, 2021, as Neighbourhood House Week, in honour of the services and supports to families, children and youth, and seniors that neighbourhood houses provide their communities. Neighbourhood houses are non-profit, charitable organizations that rely on volunteers, in addition to their staff, to create welcoming, inclusive spaces.

Learn More:

Learn more about Esquimalt Neighbourhood House Society here: <https://www.enh.bc.ca/>

Esquimalt Neighbourhood House counselling service: <https://www.enh.bc.ca/counselling-services/>

For the Neighbourhood House Week Proclamation, visit: <https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/proclamations/proclamations/NeighbourhoodHouseWk2021>

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