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Contact: Brian Gross, Development Consultant
Abbotsford Youth Health Centre (a program of Abbotsford Community Services)
www.ayhc.ca, info@ayhc.ca, Cell: [604-897-8066](tel:604-897-8066)

AWARDS, RESULTS AND CHANGES FOR ABBOTSFORD'S FIRST YOUTH HEALTH CENTRE

June 17, 2011: (Abbotsford, BC) The need had been seen among service providers for well over a decade. When, on November 9, 2009 the Abbotsford City Council passed a motion to accept the recommendations of a Child and Youth Friendly Report to council (Report No.SCP16-2009), one of which was for a youth-friendly health clinic, community partners came together to sort out the logistics that led to the opening of the Abbotsford's Youth Health Centre (AYHC) exactly one year later on November 9, 2010. The AYHC has been operating continuously since then, open weekly from 2:30 to 6:30 every Tuesday afternoon.

"While the report to council identified youth health as one of the top priorities, none of us knew for sure how much demand there would be," said Dr. Elizabeth Watt, one of the Co-Chairs and a regular on-site doctor who last week was awarded the Betty Urquhart Award at the UFV convocation for her work with the AYHC. "That question was answered very quickly. There have already been days where, even with myself and a UBC Family Practice Resident both seeing patients, we haven't been able to see all the youth who have come for services."

The Fraser Health Authority has been engaged in a process of reviewing the numerous youth health centres that it operates throughout the region, the closest of which is more than 30 kilometres from Abbotsford.

"Unfortunately, the effect of this review is to delay any permanent plans being put into place by Fraser Health," said Dr. Watt, "But we're so grateful for the support of other partners who have stepped forward to help fill this urgent need."

John Fitzsimmons, Community Services Manager of Operations for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in Abbotsford and Mission has stepped up to serve as another Co-Chair of the AYHC. "The results we've seen in just 6 months," said Fitzsimmons, "have shown that the AYHC is not just needed – it is essential both for the health of the youth of Abbotsford and for the unconditional care that doctors like Elizabeth Watt have demonstrated especially for youth who might, for very understandable reasons, feel that the normal social supports so many of us take for granted have let them down or can't deal with the complexity in their lives."

"Statistics from the AYHC, which has seen nearly 100 youth in its first 6 months of operation, may not be surprising to some, but they should be troubling to all," said AYHC Development Consultant Brian Gross. Nearly 40% of the youth (age 12-24) that the AYHC has seen indicate they have traded sex for money or other valuables. 41% would be classified as having high-risk substance use patterns. 71% report depression. 56% report high stress. 29% report self-harm. Only 43% indicate feeling in control of their thoughts and actions "always" or "most of the time".

The AYHC has been operating out of a temporary location at McCallum Clinic, through a generous arrangement with the clinic's owner, Dr. Jacques West. But that arrangement was only ever meant to be temporary. "Frankly, with the results we've had – reaching youth who have never seen a doctor in their lives, fast-tracking youth to

urgent, life-saving treatment for conditions that weren't being caught elsewhere – we thought we would have found a permanent location within 6 months of operation,” said Krista Kennessey, the AYHC’s unflappable receptionist, who was also heralded for her positive impact on youth in the community last week, winning the UROC award from the Abbotsford Youth Commission. “Thankfully Abbotsford Community Services has an English Language Services for Adults program in the downtown area that won’t be operating during the summer, so the space will be available for us to use until the end of August. But we need a permanent home. Stability is something that is in short supply for some of the youth we serve.”

The AYHC will be open 2:30 to 6:30 starting next Tuesday, June 21, at 102-33711 Laurel Street in Abbotsford.

Research has consistently shown that youth prefer a one-stop shop where many services, programs and activities are offered – so there is less risk of being stigmatized by being seen seeking specific services. For this reason, the vision for the AYHC is to eventually be housed in a Youth Access Centre, where adult-facilitated, youth-directed programs and activities serve as a focal point for youth in the community – and where vital services can be delivered in an environment of confidentiality and support.

“We are pursuing every avenue we can – grants, political sway, appeals to the public for donations – to bring an evidence-based youth-friendly service and activity hub to Abbotsford,” said Co-Chair Shairose Jinnah, Manager of Counseling, Youth and Family Support Services at Abbotsford Community Services, “Empowering and engaging today’s youth to seek help when they need it, look after themselves, and look after each other means a more empowered, engaged and compassionate society tomorrow.”

Information about the AYHC: From the common cold to mental health, the Abbotsford Youth Health Centre’s mission is “Helping Abbotsford’s youth develop the lifelong habit of protecting and enhancing all aspects of their health.” It is founded on principles of confidentiality, impartiality, community connectedness and peer involvement. Funding has come from Abbotsford Community Services, Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Abbotsford Division of Family Practice, and in-kind and monetary donations from many doctors’ offices and individuals in the community.

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