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Abbotsford Youth Health Centre Gets a Home and Poised to Expand, Thanks to Growing Support and Recognition

July 2013, Abbotsford, BC: "It's a minor miracle, and a testament to dedicated collaboration, that we've been able to operate the Abbotsford Youth Health Centre for two and a half years in temporary spaces, without any significant marketing and no ongoing operational funding," says AYHC co-chair and Abbotsford Community Services Director for Child, Youth and Family Services, Shairose Jinnah, "That, just operating 6 hours a week, we now serve over 500 youth who were accessing no or suboptimal medical care previously, and that we continue to add an average of 3-5 new youth per week – almost all referred by friends – that kind of success had to gather some attention!"

And not a moment too soon – as the AYHC's two 3-hour clinics were both bursting at the seams – with sometimes upwards of 30 youth crowding the lively waiting room. "We have received so much support from the medical community," says co-chair and lead physician, Dr. Elizabeth Watt, "It started with a grant from the Abbotsford Division of Family Practice, which initially allowed us to open the doors, and then there were numerous donations of equipment, supplies and space from local physicians. And without the UBC family practice residents out of Abbotsford Regional Hospital, there's no way we could have handled the huge numbers we've seen. Sometimes we've had our doctor and four family practice residents all seeing patients at the same time. A bit of a madhouse – but a madhouse of passion. It's inspiring how dedicated everyone has been." Dr. Watt's own dedication has been receiving lots of well-deserved recognition as well. She was recently lauded with the Rotary Club's Paul Harris award for service in the community (the Rotary Club of Abbotsford-Sumas has also contributed to the AYHC – not just once, but three times), with the Order of Abbotsford, and was most recently named the City of Abbotsford's 2013 Citizen of the Year.

Both the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Fraser Health Authority have chipped in to cover sessional doctor fees. "How could we not?" says co-chair and MCFD Acting Community Services Manager for Abbotsford, Eric Van Egmond, "Not only were youth practically beating down the door to have their health issues looked after, but by funding one doctor, we actually got three or four, when you include the family practice residents." The Fraser Health Authority also came to the rescue with a temporary home for the AYHC at ARH for almost two years.

It's not just youth who have benefited from family practice resident involvement – now the whole community of Abbotsford stands to be enriched. With a rate of just 87.5 general physicians per 100,000 in population, Abbotsford falls significantly below the provincial average of 112.8. But, now ready to end their residencies and start their own practices, many of the residents are planning to stay right here in Abbotsford on account of the sense of community and meaning they have experienced working at the AYHC. And the residents haven't just been providing direct health services to AYHC youth; they've also been busy with other projects supporting local youth and the AYHC. Dr.'s Kara Aiton and Leslie Meloche, observing significant problems and gaps in knowledge around sexual health in youth who came to the AYHC, conducted a community readiness assessment on adolescent sexual health education in Abbotsford (available on the www.ayhc.ca site), and Dr. Jody Ching has submitted numerous grant applications on behalf of the AYHC, recently netting a \$7,500 grant from RBC Royal Bank for AYHC's Advocacy Support project.

"Our Advocacy Support project was, like most things at the AYHC, borne out of necessity, watered with amazing passion, and now can really flourish with this new donation from RBC," says the AYHC's clinic manager, Krista Kenessey, who has made it her mission to personally get to know at least one thing that is important to every youth who has come to the AYHC since day one on November 9, 2010 – whether their pet, a hobby, a dream or a favourite colour. The Advocacy Support project was started (with a 2011 grant from the Van Tel Legacy Fund) because youth coming to the AYHC were facing numerous barriers to looking after their health – only the first of which was access to a youth-friendly doctor. Unstable housing, relationship trouble, needing help getting connected with available services and subsidies, including for prescriptions – many youth felt too overwhelmed to even take the first step, let alone

navigate the maze that seemed to stretch around them in all directions. And with the ever-growing volume of youth coming to the AYHC, the doctors simply couldn't continue to spend hours with each youth – even though they knew that, without additional support, many of these youth were going to see only temporary improvements as a result of their involvement with the AYHC. “We’ve been blessed with amazing advocacy support workers, who so obviously care that not only have they freed up the doctors by helping youth with the other things going on in their lives that are affecting their ability to look after their health – but youth now come to the AYHC just to follow up with the advocacy support workers,” says Kenessey.

But perhaps the two biggest developments coming on-line with the AYHC are a new, permanent main clinic, and the addition of two full-time nurse practitioners. “We’ve been running a weekly clinic out of Bakerview Centre for Learning for the last school year – and it’s been busy not only with youth from Bakerview’s campus on Marshall, but also with young parents from the Abbotsford School District’s New Beginnings program that is housed at Mouat Secondary,” says AYHC’s nurse navigator, Joanne Hamm – who has volunteered with the AYHC for nearly two years, not only in the two weekly clinics, but fielding emails from youth at nurse@ayhc.ca throughout the week. “Almost every week one or two carloads of young parents from New Beginnings come to see the doctors, and it didn’t take long for them to start asking if they could bring their children too. It broke our hearts not to be able to say yes – but we just couldn’t responsibly care for infants operating just 6 hours a week. With our new permanent clinic space and the nurse practitioners, I’m so relieved to say that we’ll be able to provide medical care to these infants, most of whom haven’t been getting the regular care that helps make sure babies to get off to a good start in life.” Joanne’s family’s charitable foundation, Oak Tree Foundation, has also donated \$15,000 to the AYHC.

The new clinic arises out of an Abbotsford Division of Family Practice GP4Me (www.agpforme.ca) program to increase the connectivity between patients and family physicians, which is enabling the Division to open a clinic. The clinic is located at #103 1945 McCallum Road (across from the Wired Monk and next to People's Drug Mart), and the AYHC will be its first program, operating on Tuesdays from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. starting on July 9, 2013, and expanding to at least one more day by the end of 2013. The AYHC’s existing satellite clinic at Bakerview Centre for Learning (32633 Marshall Road - in the portable behind the main building), will also continue to operate, and will be open to all youth age 12-24 over the summer starting on July 11 on Thursdays from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. A timely \$10,000 grant from the Abbotsford Heat Foundation is helping to fund the new clinic set-up.

The slated two full-time nurse practitioners come from the BC Ministry of Health’s NP4BC program (www.primaryhealthcarebc.ca/resource_np.html), and will focus on providing assertive, customized care to Aboriginal youth and their families, youth with mental health and substance use issues, and young parents and their children – as well as making weekly rounds at the hospital to connect youth and young adults who are admitted through the emergency room to ongoing medical and community services and supports. “We have seen some dramatic reductions in emergency room visits for individuals with substance use concerns who get connected with community supports,” says Fraser Health Director of Substance Use Services, Sherry Mumford, who, along with Fraser Health’s Director of Primary Health Care, Georgia Bekiou, and Director of Aboriginal Health, Leslie Bonshor, helped to develop the AYHC’s NP4BC proposal. “We think the nurse practitioners working with the AYHC and its community partners will be able to further reduce emergency room visits in youth in Abbotsford in the same way that the Riverstone home/mobile detox and daytox program has reduced emergency room visits in adults in Fraser East.”

The AYHC will be hosting an open house to thank and acknowledge the partners, volunteers, staff and funders that have made the AYHC possible, and helped it to grow and adapt to meet the needs of Abbotsford's youth. Tuesday, July 23 from 2:30 to 4:00 p.m. at the new clinic site (#103 1945 McCallum Road, Abbotsford).

Information about the Abbotsford Youth Health Centre: A program of Abbotsford Community Services, in partnership with Ministry of Children and Family Development, Fraser Health Authority, Abbotsford Division of Family Practice, Impact Youth Substance Use Services & other service providers. Our Mission: “Helping Abbotsford’s youth develop the lifelong habit of protecting and enhancing all aspects of their health.” Age 12-24. www.ayhc.ca, 604-746-3392.

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