

#YESINMYBACKYARD

Employment services provide purpose and dignity

For many of us, our jobs are what define us. They give us purpose, social connection, and the financial independence that allow us to live full lives. It is no different for people with mental illness. Indeed, the benefits that work can give are vital in supporting a stable recovery. Most people with mental illness want to work and can make important contributions to the workforce if they are properly supported. More funding is needed for transitional programs and specialized employment services as well as financial assistance for employers interested in building healthy and inclusive communities. These services need to target people whose mental illness has made it difficult for them to enter the workforce, who are in and out of work because of episodic illness, or who wish to return to work after a lengthy illness.

Government employment services often include quantitative requirements from participants as part of helping people find jobs, explore career options, and improve their skills. This type of business model creates barriers for people with mental illness, as it lacks the flexibility needed to respond to their challenges. Many people in the mental health community struggle to find regular work for this reason. Government needs to invest in non-profit programs that support rehabilitation, training, and employment for people who live with these challenges. This way, clients can receive the training and the mental health services they need to gain job-ready skills while managing their mental health.

People in recovery are not always ready to return to full-time work and may need flexibility from their employer. Coast Mental Health offers a Transitional Employment Program (TEP), which offers temporary paid-work contracts in entry-level positions. These allow clients to try various jobs in a supportive environment without the stress of interviews, being trained by strangers, or losing a job because of health-related absenteeism. The goal is for clients to re-enter the competitive workforce with support from Coast Mental Health's certified employment counsellors.

Our counsellors also assist with other skills to prepare clients for work. These include resume building and interviewing skills, grooming, and navigating transit routes.

Flexible employment opportunities promote purpose; they can also lift people with mental illness out of poverty and restore a sense of dignity and belonging. We see this every day: clients enter TEP or another of Coast Mental Health's employment programs apprehensively only to emerge as recognized and beloved caretakers of the community. This can be extremely conducive to their recovery.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Coast Mental Health has taken the opportunity to reflect on its employment services and ways to expand these and better integrate them with our other services. We have emerged stronger and social enterprises like our landscaping program are now more of a continuum of opportunity for our clients rather than running as a separate business.

Our hope is to be able to offer more people with mental illness these opportunities, for other non-profit providers to create similar employment services, and for compassionate employers to be offered incentives to provide jobs to people in recovery from their illness.

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Systemic change needed in the provision of healthcare to vulnerable populations

The stigma surrounding mental illnesses and addiction exists in all settings including places where people go to receive care. Misconceptions and discrimination can and do occur. Negative attitudes of healthcare workers can contribute significantly to adverse health outcomes and can create barriers for people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders in seeking treatment.

We hear often from clients that they feel devalued, dismissed, dehumanized, and rejected by the very services that should be helping them. Such responses from healthcare workers compounds clients' feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem.

Healthcare practitioners are constrained by a lack of training and support. They may feel their hands are tied when the services they want to refer patients to have long waiting lists. Some give patients the impression that people with mental illnesses and substance use disorders are difficult, manipulative, and less deserving of care. Some providers see the illness rather than the person and have pessimistic views about the likelihood of recovery. Healthcare worker burnout and compassion fatigue also contribute to the treatment people with mental illnesses and addictions receive.

This culture of mental health stigma is deeply ingrained in our healthcare system and there is no quick cure. Systemic change is needed in how our healthcare structure perceives and prioritizes people with mental illness and addictions. We need to change how services are developed and delivered, as well as shift attitudes and values of healthcare workers on the frontlines.

Studies show that people with a history of mental illness receive poorer care for their physical health problems. Clients commonly report that healthcare workers do not take their symptoms seriously when seeking care for non-mental health reasons. We find clients receive better treatment when staff accompany them to appointments and act as advocates. Our frontline workers know the clients and have a better understanding of what treatment will work best for them. Funding for more staff, particularly more Indigenous workers, to act as advocates is needed.

We need to integrate clinical care with supportive housing sites to better meet the needs of clients. Having onsite nurses makes a significant difference in dealing with healthcare concerns. The current healthcare system creates situations where clients forget offsite appointments or are challenged when managing multiple appointments at different sites. Clients can also be reluctant to attend unfamiliar sites or places where they have been previously mistreated.

People with mental illness and addictions need treatment plans that are tailored to them and that take into account the chaos in which some of them live. More urgent primary care clinics are needed and we need government to invest in healthcare outreach teams. Community transition care teams, such as the one operating at the Pennsylvania Hotel in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, have been successful in providing acute care in residential settings. We need more such teams so clients can be treated where they are at and with dignity.

British Columbia is recognized for making progressive changes in the treatment of people with mental illness and addictions. But much more work is needed to overhaul the healthcare system. We urge the government to conduct a study to determine the cost-effectiveness of funding the programs we suggest. Investing in these programs is both the compassionate and the fiscally responsible thing to do.

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Permanent housing with mental health supports is key to quality of life

Housing is a fundamental human right and permanent housing with supports is essential for many people living with mental illness. Coast Mental Health provides services across a wide spectrum of the housing continuum, from connecting people who experience episodic and frequent homelessness to providing homes to those who can live more independently. Our goal is to provide as many clients as possible with permanent housing with mental health supports as this offers them long-term solutions as they integrate into a community. When housed permanently, clients feel secure and stable, which is vital for their recovery.

Our support services help clients develop independent living skills. Staff work closely with clients on goal planning and connect them with community resources. Volunteer opportunities and employment training are available as is assistance with education.

Coast Mental Health support services use the psychosocial rehabilitation (PSR) model. Its aim is to enable people to live full lives as independently as possible. PSR teaches emotional, cognitive, and social skills that help people live and work in their communities. It takes a holistic approach and places the person—not their illness—at the centre of the services provided.

We recognize there is no one size fits all model that will serve the needs of everyone. The level of support required is largely determined by the severity of a client's illness. Several of our sites offer 24/7 support with on site staff working closely with residents to promote their own recovery. Our experience confirms that housing with supports allows people to experience a sustainable recovery that can eventually lead to more independent living.

With permanent housing and supports, residents are better able to focus on their recovery and enjoy a better quality of life. There is a decrease in the day-to-day chaos caused by homelessness, substance use, and mental illness. Residents can make better life choices and they are more likely to deal with health issues.

Research confirms that supportive housing residents have better outcomes than those housed in temporary accommodation such as shelters. Data from surveys, ministry records, and interviews suggest these residents experience improved health, housing stability, social connections, connections to supports, access to income, a sense of safety, and fewer interactions with the justice system.

Permanent housing with supports is also an economic driver for communities, providing opportunities for primary and enhanced healthcare services and treatment programs. In emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the essential services we provide to tenants have been instrumental in safeguarding communities. People with complex mental illnesses living without these vital supports often become overrepresented in the criminal justice system and fall through the cracks of our healthcare systems. Supporting people with mental health to live with dignity is instrumental in keeping our communities safe for everyone.

For the important reasons above, we ask government to consider the social and economic value of investing in permanent housing for people living with mental health challenges.

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Housing with onsite mental health clinical supports saves lives

Coast Mental Health provides numerous services for residents at its supportive housing sites and staff also refer clients to other vital resources available in the community. However, experience has taught us that clinical supports work best when they are readily available to clients. There is a great need for in-house supports such as physicians and nurses as well as onsite programming (e.g., psychosocial rehabilitation services, training, and employment) to assist people in drug recovery to prevent relapses and overdoses. Affordable housing combined with these intensive coordinated services can provide the assistance needed for people to maintain a stable home.

Coast Mental Health recently joined forces with Dr. Bill MacEwan, the former head of psychiatry at St. Paul's Hospital and a clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at UBC, to open a one-day-a-week psychiatric clinic for residents living in our Maple Ridge sites. The results are remarkable with the number of residents accessing mental health supports doubling since January 2021. Not only do clients receive an immediate connection to the supports they desperately need, Dr. MacEwan has knowledge of the needs and processes to help them manage their mental health. This is shared with our staff so they can better assist clients. The result? Better treatment outcomes.

This clinic demonstrates the difference greater government investment in in-house clinical supports could make. Non-profit housing providers urgently need access to more professional healthcare practitioners (doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, social workers, and counsellors) to provide in-house clinical supports to assist vulnerable populations living in our communities.

Our Maple Ridge sites have noted other successes. We advocated for funding for a seven-day-a-week nurse to support all three sites. Nurse services provide tenants with onsite assessments, guidance with medications, and referrals to much needed medical resources. Nursing expertise has been key to identifying medical issues that may require a physician and aiding in addressing ongoing medical and psychiatric concerns. Regular onsite physician visits are also happening that allow tenants to address primary health concerns they have ignored for years. As well, these visits allow the doctor to prescribe opioid replacement therapy medications. These and the other supports we offer our Maple Ridge residents have contributed to a significant decrease in drug-related deaths in the district, demonstrating that housing with onsite clinical mental health supports saves lives.

Research confirms that living without stable housing can drastically worsen a person's health. Residents with supportive housing that include clinical services use costly systems like visits to emergency departments less frequently. They are also less likely to be incarcerated. We call on government to calculate the savings that come from providing supportive housing with onsite clinical supports (reductions in the use of homeless shelters, emergency room visits, inpatient hospitalizations, stays in psychiatric hospitals, incarceration) and make the compassionate and practical investment in supporting mental wellbeing.

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Bridging the digital divide: The need for equal access to information technology

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the inequity that exists for people with mental illness in accessing and using information technology. That technology gap also exists between non-profit organizations that serve vulnerable populations and commercial businesses. Technology needs to be regarded as an essential service and access to the internet as a human right. Funding needs to be made available so non-profit organizations can provide essential e-services to their clients. Better technology will allow groups like Coast Mental Health to operate more efficiently and provide more comprehensive and inclusive supports.

Everyone needs access to internet-connected computers and Coast Mental Health envisions a day when each of our facilities serves as a hub where clients can access programming to support themselves. We are currently working on a new initiative to develop e-health programs for community-based mental health care. The high rates of mental illness and addiction combined with the low access levels for traditional in-person mental health and addiction services during the pandemic means there is an urgent need for innovative approaches. Creating these resources now will stand us in good stead for the expected surge in support needs in coming years.

Investments in IT management are needed to help non-profit organizations run efficiently while better serving their vulnerable clients. Improved technology infrastructure along with e-mental health services would provide supports and resources for many more people, including those living in remote areas. Coast Mental Health urgently needs resources to increase internet bandwidth, to enhance security, and to allow us to host e-mental health platforms.

E-learning tools are quickly becoming a critical part of how frontline workers administer essential care to people living with mental illness. Coast Mental Health staff are also keen to get technology into the hands of people who need it the most so they can connect with them.

E-mental health delivers prompt and effective services to vulnerable clients who rely on supports to remain stable. It offers rapid access and shorter wait times and supports can be offered in multiple languages. Services can be customized to an individual's specific needs. Different formats (audio/video) can be used for those with literacy challenges. E-mental health is cost-effective, has the potential to reach a much larger population, and has been shown to be as effective as face-to-face treatment. It can give the right care solutions when and where they are most needed.

This new era of e-mental health offers great opportunities for us to increase accessibility and efficacy of mental health supports. Existing and evolving technologies have tremendous potential to transform the mental health system and positively change how resources are developed, delivered, and received.

COVID-19 has accelerated the need for us to connect with people living with mental illness in new and innovative ways. Investing in technology upgrades and systems for non-profit organizations will build equity and inclusion and ensure that no one gets left behind.

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