

NURSING:

A LEADING FORCE FOR CHANGE

Care-A-Van Nurses Mobilizing Change

This account was written by psychiatrist Dr. Natasha Frolic in support of the work done by the Care-A-Van's volunteer nurses:

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Our Comox Valley community on Vancouver Island has a large number of homeless people, who live in very rough conditions out of doors, as well as many who are at high risk of being homeless. The community has limited resources for affordable housing and has large rural areas where those who are homeless might be staying. These people are an "invisible" part of the community living on the fringes of society. They are not glamorous. Nor do they benefit from any dedicated social programs. Actually, they face a lot of prejudice, including those related to mental health problems and addictions.

Unfortunately, the addictions, mental disorders and interpersonal problems that factor into their homelessness also put them on the fringes when receiving health care. They often come into emergency rooms in acute circumstances, while their chronic conditions go untreated in the long term.

The Care-A-Van, a mobile health unit operated by the Comox Bay Care Society, seeks to address the needs of these people through a group of volunteer nurses. The program is sustainable thanks to 14 highly committed nurses, who often work full days in the hospital, or in home care, community care and public health, and then come to the Care-A-Van to volunteer for their evening shift.

These nurses travel into the community to see people living on the streets. They develop rapport and trusting relationships, and they treat this challenging and difficult-to-reach population, who are often without health-care providers or ties to traditional medical care and social support programs. The nurses also connect these people to community resources for housing, food and social supports, which serves to reduce the number of homeless and improve their general quality of life.



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Since starting in April 2009, the unit has treated over 850 individuals, and it has now expanded to include optometry and dental services. The volunteer nurses have also adapted to the needs of the community in other ways:

- ◆ Serving as a “first responder” to provide care during changing conditions like floods, extreme hot and cold weather, flu season and water advisories.
- ◆ Training in motivational interviewing so they can offer smoking cessation programs, as 70 per cent of this homeless community have been identified as smokers.

As the health of the members of our community improves, so does the health of our community as a whole.

The Care-A-Van has been able to offer experiences to students training in different areas of health care, better acquainting them with this invisible population and its needs. The nurses also regularly meet with other not-for-profit and community organizations to share knowledge, resources, expertise, struggles and joys.

The unit is unlike anything else in the province, and groups around the world have contacted the Care-A-Van in order to replicate the services these nurses provide. Truly, this group of nursing volunteers is having a tangible impact on the health of a very vulnerable population and is a leading force for change.

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