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Vancouver symposium to focus on women's safety in homeless shelters



By Yolande Cole, November 14, 2011

It was the death of a former client of an Elizabeth Fry shelter that prompted Shawn Bayes to organize a symposium on the safety of women in co-ed shelters.

Bayes, the executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, said Dawn Bergman had stayed on and off at the organization's shelters, but wanted to be in the Downtown Eastside. However, the homeless woman was concerned for her safety in many of the shelters in that area, according to Bayes.

"The police talked to her – they tried to get her in a shelter, and she wouldn't go," Bayes told the *Straight* by phone. "She had been clear with us and many other people in the Downtown Eastside - she did not feel safe."

Bergman died in December 2008 when her encampment on Davie Street caught fire.

"Dawn Bergman's death for me was the last straw," said Bayes in a phone interview. "We felt that...we had to try and figure out some concrete solutions."

The society is hosting a symposium entitled Effective Shelter Design to Promote the Safety of Women and Families tomorrow (November 15).

The event is aimed at developing recommendations for safety standards for co-ed homeless shelters, including design considerations and staff training requirements.

The symposium will also address the safety needs of groups such as homeless women with children.

"The reason we've made this for families is that nobody talks about homeless children," said Bayes.

"B.C. Housing until two years ago did not even have a way to enter homeless children into their database," she noted. "If you weren't even recording the information... no one was recognizing the homeless children in our province."

The executive director said another issue that needs to be considered is the number of aging women who become homeless. She noted that a quarter of the women in the Elizabeth Fry shelters in the city are over the age of 50.

"We have a whole group of women who are aging and haven't worked, don't have the same entitlements to CPP that others do, find that their partner dies and they don't have entitlement to pensions," noted Bayes.

The symposium is intended to incorporate input from architects, shelter operators, clients, academics and member of government.

"My hope is out of this B.C. Housing takes into consideration...minimum specifications for design for the safety of women in co-ed shelters," said Bayes.

"But regardless of what B.C. Housing does, there are people who are building shelters, architects and builders, who if we can inform their practice, can do a better job. And they have different things they can tell us, that we can learn from."

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A report on the findings and recommendations that arise from the symposium will be made public before the end of January.

The event will take place from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. November 15 at Vancouver's Morris J. Wosk Centre.



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