

Women's housing project named after advocate



Marni Ziegler is the director of community initiatives for the Elizabeth Fry Society in Abbotsford.

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By [Neil Corbett - Abbotsford News](#)

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The new Abbotsford housing complex run by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver will be named the Firth Residence, after longtime volunteer Joan Firth who lived in Abbotsford.

One of the society's earliest volunteers in B.C., Firth made it a personal obligation to assist women, according to Marni Ziegler, present director of community initiatives for Elizabeth Fry in Abbotsford.

In the early days, the society focused on the rights and well-being of women in the prison system. She would take a train to Ontario, to the women's prison in Kingston, to escort women who were being released back to B.C. Firth would be shackled to the women for the ride home. She visited female inmates in institutions to help them as much as she could, and in the process of her volunteer work "became an icon" in the Elizabeth Fry Society.

She always advocated that women needed a stable place to call home, and so the Firth Residence honours her.

While Elizabeth Fry was a prison reformer, the work of her namesake society has become much broader.

"A lot of our work is geared toward keeping people away from the criminal justice system," said Shawn Bayes, the society's executive director.

She is overseeing the application of a housing agreement between her group and the City of Abbotsford, that will turn the Motel Rio and Rivers Restaurant site at 31399 Livingstone Avenue into a 22-unit transitional housing facility for women and women with children. Future plans would create 20 units of long-term housing.

The bylaw received first, second and third reading at council's Nov. 22 meeting.

Coun. John Smith said there are a few loose ends to tie up, such as appropriate fencing to satisfy neighbours, but the project should receive final approval later this month.

"There's no question there is a need for it," said Smith. "We have women who are homeless, who are in shelters right now. They are vulnerable, and they need support."

Bayes said the need is obvious. Last year, there were 1,418 visits to the Abbotsford drop-in centre.

Ziegler is there to greet them, offering food, a chance to do laundry, the use of a computer, advice in goal setting, referrals to social services or education, and help in stabilizing their lives. She said 80 per cent of these women have children, although not all of them have custody.

For those who don't, their top priority is to get into a position where they can provide a home for their children again.

Also showing the local need, women from the eastern Fraser Valley were showing up in increasing numbers at the Surrey shelters, where there are two facilities that have 26 beds.

If not outright homeless, many of these women are “resourceless,” said Bayes.

The clients will stay at the Firth Residence for up to 18 months. They will each get a unit that is 275 to 300 square feet, with a small fridge, kettle and microwave in the kitchen area, and their own bathroom. Each day there will be a continental breakfast, and one hot meal will likely be supplied by Rivers Restaurant, although those details are not yet set.

They will have time to secure employment, get education upgrading, take care of unpaid bills and save money for utility deposits. There will be parenting help, and support groups.

The society hopes to open the Firth Residence early in the new year.

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