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Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
Cowichan Valley

## CMHA COWICHAN VALLEY BRANCH OPENS YOUTH EMERGENCY SHELTER WITH SUPPORT OF LEGACY DONOR

**DUNCAN** - In June 2024, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and Canadian Mental Health Association - Cowichan Valley Branch (CMHA-CVB) announced plans to establish a Youth Emergency Shelter or YES pilot project. Less than one year later, the Cowichan YES is now officially open and ready to support the youth in Duncan who need it most.

Youth aged 15 to 18 years who are in crisis, or at risk of harm or homelessness, will have access to critical supports delivered by the Cowichan YES open day and night for youth in need.

Several youth who have visited the YES have echoed the essence of the program's purpose. "Wow, this is a house, and it feels like a home" – youth aged 16. Another youth noted the comfort of the bedrooms. "I can come and stay in a real bedroom with a real bed, some of the beds are huge." - youth aged 17. Another excited youth commented on the program's amenities by joyfully exclaiming, "You have a gym in here? When can I use it?"

"I am pleased to announce that a safe space for the most vulnerable youth in the Cowichan Valley is not only a reality today but will become a legacy for years to come," said Laurie Harding, CMHA-CVB board chair. "This dream was made possible by CMHA-CVB, along with the incredible support of hundreds of local community members volunteering their time, resources, and donations through our annual Coldest Night of the Year campaign."

Approximately \$204,000 was raised between 2022 and 2024 through the CMHA-CVB campaigns and those funds were used as a down payment to purchase a home, which has been transformed into this vital shelter space for youth.

"With the opening of this shelter, the most vulnerable youth in the Cowichan Valley will have a safe place to turn, day or night, when they find themselves with nowhere else to go," said Jodie Wickens, Minister of Children and Family Development. "This home is another important resource to keep Cowichan youth safer by connecting them to the supports they need when they need them."

In addition to the funds from the Coldest Night of the Year campaigns and \$4 million pilot project funding from the Province, the Mischa Weisz Foundation donated \$450,000. That donation will allow CMHA-CVB to pay off the mortgage and to purchase a van to provide outreach to youth in Duncan and outlying communities within the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD). The significant legacy donation will help transform the lives of some of the most vulnerable young people in the Cowichan Valley.

Recognizing with respect that YES Cowichan is located on Quw'utsun lands, and for the generous donation by the Mischa Weisz Foundation, the name **Mischa Lelum** has been chosen to recognize both the legacy of Mischa Weisz and because "Lelum" is a fitting Hulqiminum word meaning home.

“We know that many young people in our community have been facing significant challenges since the pandemic,” said Debra Toporowski, MLA, Cowichan Valley. “It’s so gratifying to see the dedication and hard work of Cowichan Tribes, CMHA, community partners, the B.C. government and even an individual donor, come to fruition to make a difference for vulnerable youth.”

“The creation of this home is reflective of our collective strength as a community, wisdom as an organization, and the unwavering care and concern for those we serve,” says Laurie Harding, CMHA-CVB board president. “Through a commitment to supporting a healthier community, it is our hope that our actions clearly demonstrate that ‘Everyone Matters.’ We cannot do this work alone, and we are extremely grateful to community partners who have supported our work by walking with us, volunteering, and through their generous donations. Thank you as well to MCFD, Guido Weisz, and all of you here today for working collaboratively with us. Through our partnerships, we demonstrate that ‘We are Better Standing Together’ and that our youth matter.”

The Cowichan Valley YES is one more youth- centred service that CMHA-CVB offers.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **YES Cowichan**

The Youth Emergency Shelter is a 24/7 therapeutic community-based crisis service in Duncan that provides a temporary safe placement (one to 14 days) for youth who are experiencing homelessness, or unstable/precarious living situations, and are in need of a temporary placement and support services. Currently there are three bedrooms available. YES consists of three essential elements: overnight shelter, drop-in day programming, and outreach services. Community partners will provide wraparound supports to youth accessing the YES and will work together to ensure youth receive the resources and assistance they require. Youth will be involved in the design and implementation of the programs to ensure those fit their needs. The first YES opened in Maple Ridge in December 2023.

### **Cowichan Youth at Home Team**

The YES program is a result of efforts led by the Cowichan Youth at Home Team: a partnership organization made up of members from CMHA-CVB, Cowichan Tribes, Cowichan Valley School District, Cowichan Valley Youth Services, Island Health Population and Public Health, Our Communities Health Network, and the Ministry of Children and Family Development. “We are grateful to our community partners for their collective commitment and hard work in making a safe space a reality. Together we are making a difference because we believe that ‘Every Child Matters’.”

### **Mischa Weisz Foundation**

The Mischa Weisz Foundation has been supporting unhoused youth by providing a grant that has been delivering food and making critical connections over the past three years. Mischa was an entrepreneur whose life was, sadly, cut short. Deeply grounded in his life values, Mischa believed that youth are the future and that we should invest in them if we want to make the world a better place. He also believed that “while people may be trapped in unfortunate circumstances, or disadvantaged by complex factors, all of us have potential within us,” says his brother Guido Weisz. Mischa created the Mischa Weisz Foundation which has been co-managed by his brother.

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