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Youth bureau offers hope

Services expand ahead of 50th anniversary

By KENNETH JACKSON, OTTAWA SUN

Last Updated: 31st December 2009, 2:41 am

Ask 20-year-old Scynthia Ross what the Youth Services Bureau did for her in 2009 and her answer comes quick.

"I have a job now because of YSB," Ross says, as she grips a stainless steel coffee Thermos and a half-smoked cigarette in her left hand.

It wasn't too long ago that she would have likely been holding a crack pipe and an old Tim Hortons cup begging for a few coins.

That was until YSB gave her hope.

It's that hope that pushes staff and volunteers at the more than 20 locations throughout the city, each working to help a kid who needs a break.

It's because of that hope and several accomplishments made in 2009 that the Youth Services Bureau is the Ottawa Sun's Community Newsmaker of the Year.

HONOURED

"We feel honoured. Our staff and clients have worked very hard this year, both with new services like the health clinic and the ongoing work of helping about 3,000 youth and families every month," executive director Alex Munter said. "This means running 24-hour services like emergency shelters; it means criss-crossing Ottawa every day to bring help to youth in their homes and neighbourhoods."

The Youth Services Bureau celebrates its 50th anniversary in the new year and looks forward to more accomplishments based on the efforts made in 2009.

They include a new health clinic, an expanded summer jobs program and a new ethno-cultural program that reaches youth from different communities. An advisory committee was formed in 2009 for youth from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to meet, empower one another, and help educate their communities on the challenges facing immigrants in Ottawa, Munter said.

"We want to give young people the tools and the voice to make a difference in the community," he said.

Twelve youth were recruited to go out and assess the needs of youth from ethno-cultural communities. The group meets once a week and has also started a weekly after-hours program.

The summer jobs for youth program was first launched in 2007 but expanded by more than 30% in 2009, helping 240 youth from disadvantaged areas of Ottawa get their first summer jobs.

"This is community development at its finest. Summer jobs for youth seeks out and works with youth in 11 disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the city," said Carl Sullivan, a coordinator in employment services at the YSB. "For the program funders, success is defined as participants completing a full summer work experience. (But) for the youth, success is measured in a more tangible way, for example, the pride of earning that first paycheque."

Since the first placement was made in June 2007, almost 600 youth have earned their first real-life job experience.

One of the highlights of 2009 was the opening of a health clinic for street youth. The clinic brings together medical care, mental health and addictions counselling in a youth-friendly atmosphere.

"The clinic will help to improve the physical and mental health of young people who often have no one else they can rely on. And it's a win-win situation, because we proved it could save the health-care system up to \$265,000 a year and ease pressure on emergency rooms. We made our case," Munter said.

IMPACT

"The impact of this clinic will be enormous in these young people's lives," he said.

The YSB sees 1,200 youth every year who are homeless or inadequately sheltered. A study by KPMG Canada for the Youth Services Bureau in 2008 found that street-involved youth have complex issues relating to mental health, addictions, chronic pain and have a higher mortality rate than stably housed youth. They often visit emergency rooms when their problems snowball, and the study showed that 35% of those visits could have been handled -- or prevented -- by other health services.

The clinic operates out of the YSB's downtown drop-in on Besserer St. and is open weekday afternoons for youth ages 16 to 24. The clinic was supported by \$300,000 from the Champlain Local Health Integration Network.

As for Ross, she's trying to pass along a little hope working as a part-time harm reduction worker at the YSB.

"Hopefully, I'm going to continue working here as a part-time staff, continue to have my place that I am renting now, which is my first apartment. Hopefully, more stability for me," she said.

KENNETH.JACKSON@SUNMEDIA.CA

BUREAU STATS

TO SERVE AND PROTECT YOUTH

- The Youth Services Bureau serves between 2,500 and 3,000 youth and families every month.
- The YSB's 24-hour, 365-day crisis line receives thousands of calls from youth in crisis, as well as parents and family.
- The young women's and men's emergency shelters operated by the YSB provided 20,000 individual nights of shelter in 2009.
- YSB counsellors help young people who are depressed, have experienced bullying or trauma, are overcoming addiction or an eating disorder, or who have mental illness.
- In 2010, the YSB will celebrate its 50th anniversary. The theme is "Celebrate, Honour, Build."
- The YSB is a not-for-profit agency funded by the province, city, United Way and private donors.
- The YSB offers a range of programs impacting the lives of youth: A 24-hour crisis line with a mobile team; short- and long-term counselling; school-based mental health services; programs to improve the prospects of youth involved in the justice system; and youth advisory committees that foster leadership.

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