With the opioid crisis taking thousands of lives each year, harm reduction has never been more important as a strategy for saving lives — especially when dealing with a young vulnerable population.

“Harm reduction is an essential first step and the basis of everything we do,” says Kyrsten Boucher, manager of Directions Youth Haven, a new five-bed, low-barrier safehouse for youth under 20. “Our resources are fundamentally low barrier, meaning we acknowledge clients may be engaging in risky behaviours, and we meet them in their journey — without judgment. By removing shame and stigma, the harm reduction approach helps Directions staff build authentic connections with youth.”

Haven is the newest addition to Directions Youth Services, a collection of services around Vancouver supporting youth who are at risk, street-involved, or experiencing homelessness. Run by Family Services of Greater Vancouver, Directions Youth Services includes a 24/7 drop-in centre, outreach teams, pre-employment programs, two safehouses, and a youth detox centre. The trauma-informed and client-centred philosophy creates safety for youth to access a full spectrum of supports, including primary care, mental health, and substance-use resources. For more information, visit www.directionsyouthservices.ca.

Since opening in Vancouver in January 2018, Haven has had a 95 per cent occupancy rate. Youth can stay at Haven for a night, a week, or as long as a month. From Haven, they can work on goals, get one-on-one counselling, and connect with medical professionals, Indigenous elders, and other service providers in a confidential, comfortable, home-like environment.

“Harm reduction is especially important when dealing with youth who may not be familiar with all of their options or know where to seek help,” explains Boucher.
“Whether it is drug use, survival sex work, smoking, eating disorders, or gang-related activities, if youth are going to engage in these behaviours, we want to minimize their risks. We provide youth with the education to make safer and more informed choices, all while respecting their autonomy by allowing them to make decisions for themselves.”

“When youth begin to feel cared for and aren’t shamed for their choices, their feelings of self-worth increase and they’re more likely to care about themselves,” says Boucher. “We spend time with youth, and once connection and trust are in place, we discuss how they can reduce harm and better protect themselves. It can take time to get to this point, but by regularly checking in and demonstrating that they matter, eventually youth feel comfortable enough to speak up and ask for help without fear of judgement.”

Boucher recalls one client who felt a lot of shame around his drug use. Haven staff engaged in open conversations about his drug use and encouraged him to exchange his used needles for clean ones. Eventually he obliged, admitting to staff: “I never realized I was worth using a clean needle before.” Since then, the youth, who had previously been living on the streets for several years, secured his own housing and is working on building a healthier life.

As part of education and conversations about harm reduction, supplies such as naloxone kits and clean using materials are distributed. Youth are trained by staff on what to do in the event of an overdose and youth support each other by discussing safety options and making sure they carry their kits. Naloxone kits made available to youth through Directions Youth Services have already provided life-saving assistance to youth experiencing overdoses.

“As a community, we’ve made some progress in terms of recognizing the devastating opioid crisis and offering support through drug test sites, safe injection sites, and naloxone kits and training. By slowly removing the stigma, lives are being saved. And we still have such a long way to go,” says Boucher. “The more trauma-informed we can be as a society, and the more compassionate we are with our fellow human beings, the more positive impact we can make together.”

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THE REVIEW PROCESS
UNDERSTANDING VOLUNTARY SELF-REGULATION AND THE CREDIBILITY IT GIVES BCACC MEMBERS

“I write to inform you that BCACC has received a complaint regarding an aspect of your counselling practice.”

No matter how many years of counselling experience you have, receiving a letter that starts like this is upsetting. Even when you know you have done the best job you can, receiving a complaint and having your work questioned and scrutinized is uncomfortable at best.

“We acknowledge that receipt of a complaint can be stressful,” says the BCACC’s Registrar, Angela Burns, RCC. Because of the obvious conflict of interest, BCACC cannot provide member consultations with respect to a complaint while also investigating the complaint. However, BCACC strongly encourages RCCs in these circumstances to get peer support and/or a clinical supervisor not only to assist with understanding the complaint and review process, but also for support — a measure of self-care in a difficult situation.

It also helps to remember why the review process is such a valuable part of your BCACC membership.

“Counselling in B.C. remains unregulated — anyone can call themselves a counsellor and open a counselling business,”
says Burns. “Membership in BCACC is voluntary. Our members are rigorously screened to meet our entrance criteria, and they open their practices up to scrutiny when one of their clients lodges a complaint. Voluntary self-regulation is definitely morally and ethically above that required by statute.”

As a BCACC member, your clients have access to a fair complaint review process, which is reassuring for clients and gives you professional credibility. “Third-party payers, like EFAPs and insurance companies, recognize the RCC credential and make referrals based on BCACC’s regulatory processes,” says Burns. “Clients of non-regulated counsellors — those operating in isolation outside of any association — have no recourse other than civil suits if they receive unethical or unprofessional treatment.”

Understanding the process also helps to ease some of the discomfort. One of the first points to note is written right into the Registrar’s letter: “This is not a disciplinary process — it is a formal peer inquiry. As you continue the dialogue initiated here, you remain a member in good standing throughout.”

Moreover, if the Inquiry Committee’s investigation determines the complaint allegations are justified, the
recommendations for the counsellor are educational.

“This is a non-punitive review,” says Burns. “It can end up in someone having to take a course, having to do clinical supervision, having to write a reflective letter about what they’ve learned going through this process — it’s not the same thing as a disciplinary process.”

As a BCACC member, your clients have access to a fair complaint review process, which is reassuring for clients and gives you professional credibility.

THE COMPLAINT IN PROCESS
In 2016, BCACC received 15 complaints, and 29 in 2017. Mid-way through 2018, 13 complaints have come into the BCACC office. To date, only one complaint received at the BCACC office has ever resulted in a referral to the Disciplinary Committee, a circumstance that could occur if a member chose not to cooperate with the inquiry or its recommendations.

“The majority of our complaints have been successfully addressed by Consent Agreements,” says Burns.

The full review process (see page 40) takes about a year.

“The Inquiry Committee meets monthly and reviews completed investigator reports and comes up with recommendations in the form of Consent Agreements,” says Burns. “Head office works with potential supervisors with regard to committee approval and receipt of investigation materials.”

In some cases, experts are called in to review reports, such as “Parenting Coordinator” or “Views of the Child” reports.

“A complainant may not like or may disagree with the content of such reports,” says Burns. “Once the court has used the report to frame an order, we do not step in, but if the court has criticized or thrown out a report, we have room to examine the report and provide feedback.”

In almost all cases, the counsellor continues to practise as usual; the only stipulation is if that counsellor is also a member of the BCACC Board or a BCACC committee, they are expected to take a leave of absence until the complaint is resolved or to resign.

“In very rare circumstances, we have suspended a member pending the outcome of an investigation — mainly if we hold evidence that could lead to criminal charges,” says Burns.

The complaint letter also indicates counsellors may be required to inform their insurance provider that a complaint has been filed.

It is also important to note that not every complaint becomes an official complaint.

“The Deputy Registrar and I screen all of the potential complaints by telephone — often without any names,” says Burns. “A potential complainant may ask about issues that are outside of our jurisdiction, such as a counsellor making a complaint to the ministry about possible child abuse. We use these opportunities to educate the public about counsellors’ legal responsibilities.”

Burns says the office has received a number of calls from people claiming they had perfectly good relationships until their partners sought counselling — that counselling was ruining their relationships.

“Again, it’s an opportunity to educate,” says Burns. “This is a type of third-party investigation we cannot undertake. Counsellors cannot reveal the names of or speak about any client without that client’s permission, and while some exceptions apply, generally a subpoena is required.”

Other examples include a potential complainant asking about access to their own clinical record or that of their child, issues about how termination was handled, and questions about confidentiality.

“Many complaints are not formalized because we have no jurisdiction — the person in question is no longer a member or was not a member during the period in question, for example — because the client is deliberating the consequences of bringing forward a complaint due to their current stress level, because the issues discussed are not unethical — for example, making a referral to other professionals if the counsellor deems the client issues to be outside their area of expertise,” says Burns. “We do not keep a record of RCC names mentioned in these preliminary conversations.”

COOPERATION IS KEY
Cooperating with the review process and Inquiry Committee is written right into the BCACC constitution and bylaws.

“Part of being a member of BCACC is, right at the door, you have made the declaration that you are willing to open up your practice to scrutiny in the face of a complaint,” says Burns. “Our credibility comes from the fact that we will accept complaints and we will review them with the intention of bringing all our members up to speed.”

And when the Inquiry Committee dismisses cases, members have the BCACC backing and receive confirmation that they are fully operating within the Standards of Practice.

While no one welcomes a complaint about their work, the review process aims not only to protect clients but also to protect our standards of professional excellence.

WHO IS ON THE INQUIRY COMMITTEE?
The Inquiry Committee is a provincial committee with representation from every region. When a spot becomes available on the Committee, the Office of the Registrar for BCACC sends out a call to particular regions and reviews submitted resumes to find the best fit for the role, taking into consideration such factors as background and diversity.