



Bus is safe haven for Poco youth

A brightly painted bus that roams the night-drenched streets of Port Coquitlam provides a safe haven for many at risk youth, building relationships that help keep them safe. Funded only by grants, fundraisers and donations, including \$4,375 from Port Coquitlam Community Foundation, Project Reach Out (PRO), operated by ACCESS Youth Services, works from a converted shuttle bus that travels to where youth are, bringing services and support many of them need. Of the 20,000 youth aged 12 to 18 living in the TriCities, an estimated 3,000 are considered at risk, and according to ACCESS, on any given night, 500 youth are on the street. The award winning mobile drop-in centre and outreach program –the first of its kind in BC - operates from 7 p.m. to midnight on weekends. It delivers drug and sexual health education, early & crisis intervention, basic needs such as clothing and food and provides a bridge to community supports. We've been running the bus for 12 years, says Jerome Bouvier, ACCESS executive director, adding that about 70% of the youth accessing the bus are repeat users they know we're coming—with the rest coming from the local area and increasingly from Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge.

The bus spends half its time in Port Coquitlam where more than 200 youth are considered street entrenched according to Bouvier, who says PRO aims to reduce substance use and mis-use, sexual exploitation and abuse, vandalism and crime, and other risky behaviours.



Our goal is to establish meaningful and reliable relationships because research shows that the more relationships we have the safer we feel, he says, adding that relationships are the best form of prevention and play a big part in increasing connections to the community and instilling a sense of belonging and self-esteem in the youth. Bouvier believes that building consistent relationships with street involved youth provide direct benefits to them and also to their family members and ultimately the communities in which they live. He adds that research shows that for every \$1 spent on prevention, \$5 is saved in health care costs. For information on ACCESS and PRO, go to www.accessyouth.org