



A Aboriginal **L** Life **I** In **V** Vancouver **E** Enhancement

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Responding to Inner City Youth at Risk of Suicide

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Late last September, a suicide pact was discovered among 30 young people in Vancouver's Inner City. A coordinated crisis team intervened, admitting 24 to hospital for their own protection. Most of these youth were Aboriginal.

This was not an isolated incident. During the previous spring and summer, groups of young people – primarily 12 and 13 years old -- had been drinking to blackout, with a number treated for alcohol overdose at Children's Hospital.

The youth admitted to hospital in September were fully assessed and wellness plans were put in place. Upon release from hospital, most of the youth went back to drinking. Since then, a few have individually attempted suicide and some have become involved in violent events.

Our children are still very much at risk and we are dismayed at the tepid level of long-term response from those mandated by various systems to care for our youth. The fast approaching holiday season – a time known to increase risk of suicide -- will only add to their vulnerability.

After over 30 forums and listening to our members, ALIVE and our community partners are calling for immediate implementation of a place-based Inner City youth strategy that coordinates resources and strategies – placing our children and families at the centre of planning and funding and calling to account all who fail to properly protect our children.

The current structure is clearly not working. Institutional partners seem to spend most of their time trying to avoid taking responsibility. These young people are drinking on school grounds, parks grounds, and increasingly indoors, yet there is little capacity for those in control of these areas to coordinate responses. Outreach response has been coordinated but work within a model that limits overall effectiveness. A recent local services team meeting chose to completely ignore this crisis to focus on what organizations in the area are doing well. Groups in the community that push for an immediate comprehensive response are met more with resistance than cooperation.

Meanwhile, our young people continue to drink and to place themselves in risky situations with older youth and young adults.

We also blame systemic racism for placing Inner City children, youth and families at risk. Perhaps with good intentions, BC government ministries have funded parallel Aboriginal systems and organizations for education, children and families, and soon for health in the urban setting. These types of programs have long been advocated to reflect cultural relevance for BC's Aboriginal peoples.

However what has evolved are systems where Aboriginal peoples are pressured and often mandated to use Aboriginal-designated programs and organizations. Rather than offering choice, the government has instituted what is effectively an apartheid system. This is morally and ethically wrong, as well as infringing on our basic human rights.

This institutional racism manifests in various ways in urban environments. Most government funding is directed to Aboriginal authorities and service organizations, effectively rendering Aboriginal residents clients rather than full citizens. Aboriginal children are targeted as different at an early age. While immigrant children are systematically integrated into mainstream education, Aboriginal children are systematically separated. Research has shown that more Aboriginal children now live as government wards than were ever in residential schools. Many of our most at risk youth have been sidelined into the alternative school stream before even entering high school, placing them with much older teens.

The current situation must transform. All governments and contracted agencies must restructure how they deal with urban Aboriginal peoples. We are citizens, not clients. Programs must be community driven and targeted to comprehensively address local challenges. There must be accountability back to Aboriginal families and residents on how programs are delivered and the outcomes achieved. The streaming of our kids to alternate schools or to Aboriginal agencies outside their community of supports must end. Our children need a safe community, intensive support and stabilization to build social networks for success.

We need change now. The very lives of our children are at stake.

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