

# Report

Date August 20, 2025  
Subject North Cowichan Youth Services Review

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File:

## **PURPOSE**

To provide information on the recreation department's Youth Services Review that was completed in 2024 to identify and analyze youth service needs in North Cowichan.

## **BACKGROUND**

In late 2023, North Cowichan's Recreation Department initiated a review of its youth outreach services to understand better the needs, challenges, and opportunities facing youth aged 12 to 18 in accessing appropriate supports. To support this work, the department engaged Urban Matters to provide a high-level overview of existing youth services in the region and to gather insights from both youth and service providers to identify opportunities for new or enhanced programming.

The review was conducted over thirteen months and divided into two key phases. The first phase focused on developing a community and youth profile through demographic analysis and an environmental scan of current services. The second phase involved active engagement, including surveys, youth open houses, interviews, and focus groups with service providers. These activities informed a gap analysis and led to evidence-based recommendations to guide future strategic planning.

## **DISCUSSION**

North Cowichan offers a range of youth programs and outreach services through its recreation department. While both aim to support the well-being of young people in the community, they serve distinct purposes. Youth recreation programs are designed to provide structured, enjoyable activities in designated spaces, promoting social connection and healthy lifestyles. In contrast, youth outreach services focus on engaging at-risk youth directly in their environments, offering personalized support and connecting them with resources that can help address their specific needs.

Prior to 2010, North Cowichan contracted with the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) for youth outreach services, which provided staff and programs throughout North Cowichan. Over time, the CVRD shifted their focus to traditional child and youth programming while North Cowichan focused on youth outreach services in Crofton and Chemainus. Since 2010, North Cowichan has delivered youth outreach programs, primarily serving the communities of Chemainus and Crofton, which included some satellite programming at Chemainus Secondary School for a few years.

These services are supported by a full-time staff member and several part-time team members. In 2015, the youth outreach team established a key partnership with School District 79, securing space at Chemainus Secondary School to offer year-round on-site support. The resulting Community Youth Room provides a safe and welcoming space where students can drop in before school or during lunch to participate in activities that foster social inclusion, skill development, and food security. Beyond the school setting, the outreach team also offers a variety of low- and no-cost programs, including teen skates, swims, and special events at the Fuller Lake Arena and Cowichan Aquatic Centre. During the summer, pop-up activity booths are hosted in local parks. In 2023, a full-time summer youth drop-in space was launched in the basement of the Crofton Community Centre, continuing into 2024 and scheduled to operate again in 2025.

As part of the 2024 business planning process, Council allocated additional funding to support the continued growth of youth outreach services in North Cowichan. This decision was informed by years of feedback from youth and parents, who expressed the need for expanded services, including a desire for a permanent, accessible youth centre. While this anecdotal input offered valuable personal perspectives, it lacked the objectivity and broader applicability needed for strategic decision-making. To ensure future planning was grounded in reliable data, the recreation department initiated a comprehensive review of its youth outreach program. This approach aimed to assess how well the program was meeting the evolving needs of local youth, identify service strengths and gaps, and uncover opportunities for improvement. The timing of the review was important, as it took place during the global transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic—a period that significantly impacted youth mental health and access to support services.

Urban Matters was commissioned to conduct a Youth Services Review, aimed at gaining a thorough understanding of the needs, aspirations, challenges, and opportunities experienced by youth aged 12 to 18 in accessing appropriate services. The goal of the review was to produce a comprehensive report that would:

1. Map existing youth services across North Cowichan to identify what supports are currently available.
2. Identify service gaps and barriers that prevent youth from accessing the help they need.
3. Engage directly with youth and service providers to ensure their voices and lived experiences inform the findings.
4. Highlight opportunities for collaboration and innovation among service providers and community partners.
5. Provide actionable recommendations to improve service accessibility, coordination, and effectiveness.
6. Support evidence-based decision-making for local government, funders, and community organizations.
7. Establish a baseline for future evaluation and long-term planning of youth services in the region.

From late 2023 until the end of 2024, Urban Matters collected and analyzed existing data and, through a comprehensive engagement process with youth and youth service providers, developed the Youth Services Review report (Attachment 1). This report plays a vital role in shaping how North Cowichan can continue to support its young people. It offers a clear and evidence-based overview of the current youth service landscape, highlighting strengths, identifying service gaps, and pinpointing areas for improvement. By combining data analysis with direct input from youth and service providers, the report ensures that local programs are responsive to the real needs of the community. It also serves as a strategic tool for guiding policy decisions, allocating funding, and enhancing service planning. Additionally, it promotes stronger collaboration among organizations and provides a benchmark for measuring progress over time. Most importantly, the report amplifies the voices of youth, ensuring they are meaningfully included in decisions that impact their well-being and future.

Within the report, the development of the community and youth profile, along with the engagement process, revealed a number of emerging challenges and opportunities, which included:

1. Limited services tailored to Crofton's demographics
2. Need for more Indigenous-focused youth programs
3. Scarcity of mental health supports for youth
4. Geographic disparities impacting service areas
5. Lack of extracurricular engagement opportunities

Although some of the findings extend beyond the direct scope and influence of North Cowichan's youth outreach program, Urban Matters has put forward three recommendations aimed at addressing these broader concerns while also offering strategic direction for the long-term sustainability of youth outreach services. These include:

1. Conduct a feasibility study for a youth centre model
2. Enhance culturally relevant and inclusive programming
3. Improve transportation options for youth

Building on the success of the summer youth drop-in centre over the past two years, early conversations are already underway with the Crofton Community Centre Society to explore the potential for a permanent youth centre location. In parallel, recreation staff are actively seeking opportunities to expand culturally relevant programming for Indigenous youth and to strengthen inclusivity across all youth services.

The timing of this review also aligns with a related study completed in 2024 by the Cowichan Women's Health Collective, in partnership with the Cowichan Community Health Network (Attachment 2). While that study focused primarily on youth mental health services across the Cowichan Valley, its findings echoed many of the same themes identified in North Cowichan's review—including the need for culturally safe programming for Indigenous youth, improved transportation, the creation of safe and welcoming youth spaces, and a more collaborative, community-based approach to service delivery. Staff are actively participating in regional youth services meetings to gain a better understanding of the work of other service providers and to explore opportunities for collaboration on enhancement strategies.

Although this report is presented for Council's information only, staff will further evaluate these recommendations and will bring forward proposals for Council's consideration as part of the 2026 business planning process.

The recent Youth Services Review did not include an analysis of the program's funding or financial needs. Currently, the Youth Outreach Services program is fully funded by North Cowichan, with an annual budget of \$186,555 for 2025. School District 79 supports the program by providing a classroom at Chemainus Secondary School at no cost, while program staff are based at Fuller Lake Arena, a facility funded through the regional recreation budget.

**OPTIONS**

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT Council receives this report for information.

**IMPLICATIONS**

There are currently no financial or policy implications associated with this report.

**RECOMMENDATION**

THAT Council receives this report for information.

Report prepared by:



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Report reviewed by:



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**Approved to be forwarded to Council:**



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Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments:

- (1) Youth Services Review
- (2) Cowichan Youth Services Gap Analysis Report