

# THE RIGHTS OF PASSAGE *Program*

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Created in 1986, Rights of Passage (ROP) is designed to focus on the longer-term needs of homeless youth that are harder to address in a crisis shelter setting. Youth can enter into ROP from the crisis program, outreach services or be referred by other agencies.

While it provides more independence than a shelter, it is **not** independent living; rather it is semi-independent, life skills-based, transitional housing. Youth are subject to rules and guidelines within the housing, must develop a personal plan, attend life skills classes, meet with workers etc.

The duration of stay and the living conditions vary in each Covenant House but the overall focus is the same: helping youth develop the skills needed to live independently or to live on their own with minimal supports. Most youth who come to Covenant House have never learned the skills necessary to live independently, including grocery shopping and cooking, maintaining a budget and paying bills, finding and keeping a job, completing their education and just generally taking care of themselves. Rights of Passage teaches these skills and helps youth move on to independent living (or another form of housing, including permanent supportive housing or further transitional housing).

## *ROP Overview in Toronto and Vancouver*

The Rights of Passage programs in Toronto and Vancouver have similarities and differences, which is true for all Covenant House programs across the Americas.

*“We have a similarity in terms of the principles that guide our work, but the look and feel of each of the Covenant House programs would customize and respond to the needs of the cities within which its set.”* —Bruce Rivers,  
*Executive Director, Covenant House Toronto*

This is to be expected, as it is ideal for a community to customize its program to suit the local climate and population that it serves. In some cases, program differences are the result of logistics, including space, funding and legislative climate. In other cases, youth may present with specific needs that a community must focus on. Agencies should be prepared to adapt to address changing needs of youth and ensure that their programs are culturally sensitive and flexible.

# Steps to Progress in Vancouver

One of the biggest differences between the two programs is that Vancouver uses a six-step framework that guides youth's progress in the program. Each step brings new rights and responsibilities, as well as privileges. These steps are geared towards helping a youth enter and acclimatize to ROP and then move through the program in a supported way.

In order to better understand program elements and rules, and the way in which the two programs are different, it's important to understand the Steps program.

With the recent change to the length of stay, the steps were expanded from five to six.<sup>6</sup> The first step is designed to take a minimum of four weeks, while each of the other steps takes at least eight weeks. If it appears that a youth is going to take more than three extra weeks on any step (besides Step 6), the support team will meet with the youth to discuss the issues. It takes a minimum of 36 weeks to complete the six steps, which are designed to be completed in a 12-month period. Youth may spend longer than the minimum on any one step as long as they are working toward the basic requirements of the program and their own life goals. Given the recent change, the new Step 6 has no completion deadline (except for the age mandate) as long as a youth is working on their program.

*“The steps sort of help you showcase your commitment to a certain goal. It sort of teaches you ‘Hey, if you want to achieve something, you need commitment; you need to show initiative, you need to show responsibility to be able to progress.’”*  
—“Kevin”, 26, former ROP participant, Covenant House Vancouver

## STEP 1: GETTING CONNECTED

**Summary:** Step 1 is a time to adjust to living at ROP. The focus is on making a successful transition into the program: getting used to your new environment, getting acquainted with co-residents, planning and starting to build relationships with staff.

### Requirements:

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless otherwise arranged. A prorated amount is due by the day you move in, unless other arrangements have been made.
2. Make contact with staff at least twice a day.
3. Attend a weekly case planning meeting with your Case Manager.
4. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
5. Take medications as prescribed.
6. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.

<sup>6</sup> In the STEPS video that accompanies the toolkit you may hear references to five steps as we filmed during the transition period.

7. Meet daily curfew requirements (10:00pm on work or school days/12:00am on 2 days off per week).
8. No overnights or extended curfews.
9. Complete Life Skills assessment.
10. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
11. Keep apartment clean, clean after yourself in the common area, and complete common area chores daily.
12. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
13. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
14. Complete weekly program requirements.

**Staff will:**

1. Wake you up and remind you to take your meds as needed.
2. Help you to make appointments and remind you of them.
3. Do chores and room cleaning with you as needed, and make sure you know what is expected and how to do it. (*To pass this step, you must demonstrate that you know how to do all the basic household tasks, such as cleaning dishes, and cleaning your bathroom, so please ask for help if you need it*).

Step 1 is a minimum of 4 weeks. Once you have four successful weeks (*meeting all of the requirements*), you will move on to Step 2.

## STEP 2: ESTABLISHING ROUTINE

**Summary:** During Step 2, you are moving forward with your plan. The focus is on getting established with work, school and/or healthy routines, maintaining stability, and practicing life skills.

**Requirements:**

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless other arrangements have been made.
2. Make contact with staff at least once each day.
3. Attend a weekly case planning meeting with Case Manager.
4. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
5. Wake up and get yourself to appointments/work/school as needed and without reminders. (Staff will remind you if needed, but to pass the step, you need to do this independently).

6. Take medications as prescribed.
7. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.
8. Meet daily curfew requirements (11:00pm on work or school days/1:00am on 2 days off per week).
9. Overnights (up to 2 per month) or extended curfews only with pre-approval.
10. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
11. Open a bank account and get all necessary identification.
12. Keep apartment clean, clean up after yourself in the common area and complete common area chores daily.
13. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
14. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
15. Complete weekly program requirements.

### STEP 3: SKILL BUILDING

**Summary:** By Step 3, you are expected to have achieved a stable routine and are ready to add to your skills for independence.

**Requirements:**

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless otherwise arranged.
2. Attend a weekly case planning meeting with Case Manager.
3. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
4. Wake up and get yourself to appointments/work/school as needed and without reminders.
5. Take medications as prescribed. Be responsible for remembering to do this.
6. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.
7. Meet daily curfew requirements (12:00am on work or school days/2:00am on 2 days off per week).
8. Overnights (up to 3 per month) or extended curfews only with pre-approval.
9. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
10. Keep apartment clean, clean up after yourself in the common area and complete common area chores daily.

11. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
12. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
13. Complete weekly program requirements.
14. Ensure that you are up-to-date in filing your taxes.

## STEP 4: CONTRIBUTING TO THE COMMUNITY

**Summary:** By the time you reach Step 4, you should be actively practicing in all of the independent living skills you have achieved so far and ready to contribute leadership to your ROP community.

### Requirements:

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless otherwise arranged.
2. Start developing your own case plan for review with your Case Manager weekly.
3. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
4. Wake up and get yourself to appointments/work/school as needed and without reminders.
5. Take medications as prescribed. Be responsible for remembering to do this.
6. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.
7. Meet daily curfew requirements (12:00am on work or school days/2:00am on 2 days off per week).
8. Overnights (up to 4 per month); must notify staff.
9. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
10. Keep apartment clean, clean up after yourself in the common area and complete common area chores daily.
11. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
12. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
13. Complete weekly program requirements.
14. Supply and prepare your own breakfast and lunch.
15. Begin a move-out plan or create an extension plan with Key Worker and Case Manager.
16. Offer leadership within your community.

## STEP 5: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY/PREPARATION

**Summary:** During Step 5, you should be generally independent. You are almost ready for your transition from the program or to tackle additional long-term goals. Step 5 gives you some time to get all your plans in place.

### Requirements:

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless otherwise arranged.
2. Case plan reviewed weekly with Case Manager.
3. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
4. Wake up and get yourself to appointments/work/school as needed and without reminders.
5. Take medications as prescribed. Be responsible for remembering to do this.
6. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.
7. No curfew, but must check in daily by phone when staying out late or when taking overnights. (Spending more than 5 nights per month away from ROP will prompt a discussion about whether it is time to move on from the program).
8. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
9. Keep apartment clean, clean up after yourself in the common area and complete common area chores daily.
10. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
11. When you miss dinner, supply and prepare your own meal. (*No saved dinners will be provided*).
12. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
13. Complete weekly program requirements.
14. Follow your move-out plan or create an extension plan with Key Worker and Case Manager. Adapt your plan as necessary with your Key Worker and Case Manager.

## STEP 6: MOVING FORWARD

**Summary:** During Step 6, you should be generally independent. You are almost ready for your transition from the program. Step 6 gives you some time to get all your plans in place.

### Requirements:

1. Pay program fee of \$300 on the first of each month, unless otherwise arranged.
2. Case plan reviewed bi-weekly with Case Manager.
3. Adhere to your case plan, including your plan for school or work.
4. Wake up and get yourself to appointments/work/school as needed and without reminders.
5. Take medications as prescribed. Be responsible for remembering to do this.
6. Sign in and out every time you enter or leave the building.
7. No curfew, but must check in daily by phone when staying out late or when taking overnights. (Spending more than 5 nights per month away from ROP will prompt a discussion about whether it is time to move on from the program).
8. Attend Life Skills sessions as assigned.
9. Keep apartment clean, clean up after yourself in the common area and complete common area chores daily.
10. Attend Community Dinner every Wednesday and House Meeting once per month.
11. When you miss dinner, supply and prepare your own meal. (*No saved dinners will be provided*).
12. Adhere to behavioural guidelines.
13. Complete weekly program requirements.
14. Be a leader within the ROP Community (e.g. *Mentorship, Youth Advisory Committee, planning and implementing activities, and others*).
15. Create your move-out plan and adapt it as necessary with your Key Worker and Case Manager.

"With each step comes more *responsibility*. At the same time with more **responsibility** comes *freedom...*"

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

We particularly like this model. It was originally designed to be completed in a year as the Step program only recently extended its length of stay option. This means organizations who are limited in their time frame can still adopt this model for themselves.

Often, programs create a set of expectations and work to push participants through to graduation. Markers of success are completion rates and number of graduates. At Covenant House Vancouver, rather than a forced set of graduation requirements, the Steps foster a sense of independence and responsibility while still providing supports. The incentive of an increased graduation bursary means that youth are encouraged to stay at least through Step 5 (36 weeks), which is a good length of time in which to provide some core lessons and life skills.

The inclusion of Step 6 and the expansion of the program to allow youth to stay until their 25th birthdays really put the focus of the Steps on the youth and their development rather than on graduation.

The way in which youth are challenged to take on not just personal responsibility but also to get involved in and show leadership in their community is a really nice way to build self-esteem and independence in youth. It also allows for community members to develop another—and more positive—understanding of homeless youth.

## *Program Elements*

In this section, we included a number of program elements that are of primary consideration for the creation of a transitional housing program for youth. These refer, primarily, to onsite housing such as the ROP program, but could be adapted for a program that uses a pure scattered site model.

Elements included here are:

- » [Case Plans and Case Management](#)
- » [Life Skills](#)
- » [Space](#)
- » [Length of Stay](#)
- » [Money – Trust Fund vs Program Fee](#)
- » [Meals](#)
- » [Monthly House Meeting](#)
- » [LGBTQ2S](#)

## CASE PLANS AND CASE MANAGEMENT

The case plan is used to structure activities during the participants' stay at ROP. Youth must have a primary focus on employment and/or education, or if dealing with mental health or addictions issues may follow an alternative track that looks at dealing with those issues. Additional activities in a case plan could include life skills, health, legal issues, identification, discussion of curfews or chores, personal goals, budgeting and financial issues, volunteering, future housing plans and any other issues that arise that are important to help the youth successfully transition to independent living.

*“Case management is a collaborative process at ROP. We are client-driven and client-focused while at the same time balancing that it is a residential program that does ask its participants to identify these goals and to commit to themselves and the program how they want to spend their time and what’s important to them. Case management process is about trying to find meaning in how they want to spend their time while they’re at ROP.”*

*—Dillon Dodson, Team Leader, Covenant House Toronto*

Youth entering the Rights of Passage program have a referring worker (internal in another Covenant House department or external in the community). They also enter the program with a plan in place that has short and long term goals. This plan is initially discussed and agreed upon by the young person and their referring worker.

The application procedure is quite in-depth and includes a written application with support from the referring worker, an interview and a tour of the facility. During the application process ROP staff are able to delve deeper into a young person's ideas and intent to help develop the case plan (as well as make sure the program is a good fit).

Both sites have an extensive orientation period to help youth adjust to living at ROP. In Vancouver the intake is conducted by the Youth Support Worker and the orientation period (Step 1) lasts a month. In Toronto a variety of workers take part in the orientation with the intention that the youth will be required to get to know and interact with the majority of staff. This orientation period usually lasts about two weeks.

Vancouver's Case Plan Reviews Policy says “Youth have aspirations for themselves that do not include living on the streets. Youth made decisions for a variety of reasons that brought them to the streets, but this does not speak to their long-term intentions. They need support and assistance to develop the skills and knowledge to reach their full potential, and to mature and learn from their mistakes in a safe environment.

When a youth seeks help and support voluntarily, it signals that they are ready to begin making positive changes. At this stage, achieving their goals will be much easier. It will be more difficult when a youth is forced or feels forced by external pressures to comply with program goals and objectives that do not match what the youth believes to be their goals and objectives.”

Both Toronto and Vancouver have a significant focus on education, which differs from most American ROP programs where the focus is employment.

In Vancouver, the majority of the 22 youth (19 out of 22 as of November 2014) are engaged in educational plans. This is supported by the extended stay possibility (a young person could finish high school and complete college/university while residing at ROP) and extensive financial support through scholarships that are made available. In Toronto, more youth are engaged in employment, however a significant number are also in school.

In developing case plans both locations use the SMART goal concept. This means ensuring that plans are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely. This makes it easier to break the plans down into manageable chunks so that the youth can quickly develop a sense of possibility and success.

**CHT:** The case plans in Toronto are developed by the Consistent Worker in partnership with the young person. A summary (Case Review Summary form) is prepared by the Consistent Worker and taken to one of the weekly Case Management Team (CMT) meetings; each youth's file is reviewed every two weeks. The CMT meetings are attended by the Consistent Workers and Team Leaders, as well as the Life Skills Coordinator, Mentor Coordinator and other staff from Covenant House or community partners. At each CMT meeting, the Team Leader completes a Case Management Notes report based upon the input of the Consistent Worker and the other CMT attendees.

At the 9 month mark planning begins for discharge and involves the youth's Consistent Worker, Youth in Transition Workers and Housing Workers. This planning includes a very comprehensive assessment that looks at the skills a youth will need to live on their own and where they are in obtaining these skills. This helps determine future housing plans, including whether the youth needs another transitional housing program or is ready for independent living. In some cases, the gaps can be addressed through focused life skills development in the last few months. In others, the Youth in Transition (aftercare) workers may need to address some of these issues with the youth.

**CHV:** During Steps 1-3 the case plan form is filled out by the Case Manager and is discussed during the youth's weekly case planning session, which is attended by the youth, Case Manager, and Key Worker. The Life Skills worker attends as needed.

It is a very collaborative document. In Step 4, the youth begin developing their case plan for review with the Case Manager. By Step 5, youth are writing plans themselves and presenting them during their Case Plan session. In Step 6, the weekly case planning meetings move to bi-weekly and the youth continue to write their plans.

The Case Plan document has multiple components (see example – CHV ROP - Case Plan Sample). It includes basic demographic information, updates in a variety of key areas, notes on new areas/goals/dates and a section for the youth to make their own request of staff.

There is also a Case Management Residential Log, which is a narrative written by the Case Manager each time they meet with a youth or when they need to relay an update to the team (strategies, consultation with the mental health team etc.).

A Program Tracking Sheet forms part of the residential log. This contains steps and progress with program requirements, including curfew, key worker meetings, case plan, community dinners, life skills etc.). This information is formally tracked in Efforts to Outcomes (the evaluation database software) on a weekly basis and becomes one of the metrics used to evaluate the program. Information from this section may be mentioned in the Case Plan, but is not a requirement as it is monitored by the Key Worker.

Covenant House Vancouver recently transitioned to a new Case Management Model. Under the previous model there was one Case Manager responsible for the 22 youth in the ROP program, as well as the youth in independent living with Hollyburn. Other Case Managers followed youth in the shelter program and through the outreach services. When a youth transitioned between programs they were given a new Case Manager.

Now, youth are assigned a Case Manager when they enter any Covenant House Vancouver program regardless of entry point. That individual will stay with and support the youth through their entire journey with the agency. If/when youth move between stages on the Continuum of Care, the Case Manager continues to work with them and support them in their new area of focus.

*“Our goal is to have one youth, one file, and one Case Manager that will work with them up until they’re twenty-five years old. This way they don’t have to repeat their stories over and over again, and it will help them—one of the things we were seeing is we were starting over, every time the youth was coming back into the building. So this way even though that they may leave, they can still come back and we can continue moving forward with them.”*  
—Lisa Ronaldson, Case Manager, Covenant House Vancouver

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Case plans are excellent for tracking goals and activities. The plans are always youth-driven, which allows a young person to develop planning skills and autonomy even within a transitional housing/congregate living situation.

## LIFE SKILLS

Both programs are life skills-based meaning the development of a youth's life skills comprises a large component of the work that is done during the stay.

Life skills are extremely important for this population and are skills that a youth might normally obtain when growing up in a stable family environment.

*“I think the difference for our young people when they come to us, around their life skills, is that they haven't been in stable family situations. They haven't been part of families where they would come together around cooking; where each kid in the family would have a piece to contribute to the meal. Or [where] they would be part of going out to buy groceries and understanding where you should get groceries and how to get groceries cheaply. I think those are normal conversations that you have in a family where people talk about budgets and constraints, and ‘we can do this, or we can take this kind of holiday or we can't take that kind of holiday. We can have hamburgers for dinner but we can't have steak every night, it's a special occasion kind of meal.’ And these kids haven't been exposed to that. So, when they come to us, they haven't got that normal sort of family experiences that help them or give them a bit of a leg up when they go on their own.”*

—Carol Howes, Director of Program Services, Covenant House Toronto



A youth at ROP Vancouver cooking their own meal.

The Covenant House Vancouver Participant Guide defines life skills as “the skills and abilities that help you deal with challenges you face in life. They are skills needed to carry out the day-to-day operations of independent living and that help us live the lives we want to lead.”

Life skills may include, but are not limited to –

- » Money management
- » Job training
- » Employment
- » Housing after ROP
- » Education and training
- » Health and well-being
- » Daily living skills
- » Personal and social development
- » Legal rights and responsibilities

*“Well, we have life skills workers who do weekly sessions with us on skills for life. Some kids might need to learn how to do laundry; some kids might need to learn how to cook. For me, it’s been a lot of budgeting and goal planning.”*  
—“Patrick”, 21, Covenant House Vancouver current ROP participant

Life skills are designed to meet an individual youth’s needs and “help facilitate healthy, positive and productive growth.”

Early on in their stay each youth at ROP conducts an assessment to determine what life skills they already have and where they may need support. This can lead to the development of a life skills plan, which can be revised throughout a youth’s stay. Assessments are also done at departure to show the youth how many skills they have gained during their residency.

*“I think it’s just more of setting a routine of doing these things so that way when you leave it’s not such a big shock that, ‘oh, I’m on my own and I have to do laundry today.’”*  
—Vanessa, 28, past ROP participant, Covenant House Toronto

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to do laundry today.'*"**

—*Vanessa, Past Participant, ROP Toronto*

At times, life skills are offered as part of a class, while at others youth work one-on-one or in a small group with a worker to help develop their skills. For example, at Covenant House Toronto, the overnight staff offer a Wednesday morning breakfast life skills session – youth learn a skill and get a bonus meal.

Life skills are also broken down into practical, manageable chunks. Learning to manage money is an important skill. Youth need to open bank accounts, create a monthly budget, set up debt repayment plans etc. Jennifer Morrison, the Life Skills Worker at Covenant House Vancouver, says,

*“Within the budgeting spectrum, we might have youth track their spending for a week and keep all of their receipts so that we can look at their spending habits. And then we would sit down with that youth and we would go over what their expenses are and what some of their spending habits are, and what some of their needs are versus their wants, and really start to make it make sense for them.”*

**CHT:** Toronto uses its life skills program to provide rewards, such as overnight privileges and extended curfews. A minimum of two life skills are required each month.

A Life Skills assessment is completed at intake and reviews are undertaken at the six month point and upon departure. The life skills assessments lead to a life skills plan which is shared at the Case Management Team (CMT) meeting. The CMT follows the progress of the youth in their life skills plan. The reviews are similar to the assessment and look to map growth in specific life skills areas.

**CHV:** Vancouver uses a six-step program as a framework that guides youth’s progress in the program during the stay. Life skills are a key component of the step program.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Life skills are the foundation of the Rights of Passage program and are essential to providing support to young people leaving homelessness. Best practices in Housing First suggest that it is necessary to provide supports that are individualized and meet the needs of the person who has been experiencing homelessness (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013; Gaetz, 2014b). The life skills training programs offered by ROP form a core means of providing individualized supports.

Agencies looking to develop their own transitional housing program are advised to consider some of the key points about life skills from ROP at Covenant House:

- » Life skills programs are offered in both class/workshop format and as one-on-one lessons to meet needs expressed by the youth.

- » All staff at ROP are trained in, and provide, life skills. While there are life skills coordinators at both locations, all staff can do life skills sessions with the youth. This allows for the creation of mini-learning opportunities to respond to issues as they arise and for youth to bond and work with a variety of helping adults.
- » Life skills are also considered quite broadly – for some youth it is specific skills such as cooking, financial management or job search – but for other youth, inter-personal skills and addressing social anxiety are considered to be just as important.
- » Life skills are mandatory and are connected to rewards and privileges. At CHT this reward system is clear and immediate: completing life skills earns credits, which are equated with extended curfews. At CHV life skills are necessary to progress through the steps. Completion of the steps affects the percentage of the program fee returned to the youth at the end of their stay.

## SPACE

Covenant House Vancouver houses their ROP program in space originally designed and operated by St. James Community Services. Opened in 1998 by the Vancity Place for Youth Society, the board's goal was to “create safe, affordable housing for street-involved youth, supported by programming and training to assist them to live independently.” In 2000, the board decided that it needed to get community agencies involved in supporting the program and issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for an agency to “take on responsibility for the operation, funding and governance of the residence.” Covenant House Vancouver was the selected proponent and took over operations on April 1st, 2001 (from: <https://www.vancity.com/AboutVancity/News/MediaReleases/Archives/MediaArchive2001/Feb5CovenantHousetoOperateVancityPlace/>).

Covenant House Toronto houses their ROP program in the old 21 McGill Club building, an upscale women's health club. Built in 1924, the five-storey brick building originally housed the Central YWCA. Covenant House began their program in 2002 with extensive support from the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC); in recognition of their status as the main funder, Toronto's program is officially called the CIBC Rights of Passage.

In both locations, youth have their own private room. This is not the same for all ROP programs; in New Orleans for example, youth share rooms with 2 to 4 other youth.

Rooms range in size from about 100 to 300 sq. ft. in Toronto and the average footage is 245 sq. ft. in Vancouver. Rooms at CHV also have a full private bathroom and a small kitchen area (microwave, sink and mini-fridge) whereas in Toronto, the rooms have no additional amenities.

In both locations rooms are furnished with a bed, dresser, desk and nightstand. Both Toronto and Vancouver ensure that each room has a window allowing youth to have access to natural light. Upon intake, residents are given a small start-up kit. In Toronto this includes primarily hygiene items, while in Vancouver it also includes cleaning supplies, a clock radio, linens and a lamp.

Both locations have common areas including kitchens, living spaces (including TVs, computers) and in Toronto, common washrooms with showers. Laundry rooms are also provided on-site for a small fee that is similar to the cost of laundry in the local community.

Both locations share some amenities with the crisis/shelter program, while also maintaining privacy and unique space for ROP. Primarily, this means that ROP youth are able to use certain spaces within the shelter; however, shelter residents are not allowed to come into ROP, except in specific cases.<sup>7</sup> Covenant House Toronto also has a full-sized gymnasium refurbished by the Toronto Raptors.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

The differences between the two locations in terms of how the space is designed is an aspect that agencies developing transitional housing need to consider. Much of this may depend on budget and whether the building is a renovation or new build.

Both locations provide kitchen access even though CHT allows youth to access the shelter meal program the entire length of their stay. They found that providing a communal kitchen allows for youth to develop the necessary skills of meal planning, shopping and cooking. For CHV, a kitchen is a necessary component since later steps require youth to prepare their own meals.

For programs that are considering lengthier stays in their transitional housing (longer than one year) an ensuite private bathroom and mini-kitchen create spaces that are more conducive to stays of multiple years. While the ability to provide such amenities is limited by space and financial considerations, their inclusion develops a deeper sense of independent living. In fact, this model of small rooms with micro-kitchens and bathrooms is one used for permanent housing by many homeless-serving programs including [St. Clare's Multifaith Housing](#) in Toronto and [Common Ground](#) in New York City.

Since Toronto focuses on a shorter term stay, the single rooms with shared common spaces provide youth with the independence they need to start preparing for independent living, but do not encourage them to get too attached to the space; after a year, most youth are ready to move on.

It is important to get youth input into the space. Certain fixtures, images, colours and smells may be triggers to a youth. An agency also needs to decide what they will do when there are concerns; for example, can they afford to fix an issue right away to ensure it is not a trigger for other youth in the future?

Recently, CHT added full-length mirrors to the rooms allowing youth the privacy to really look at themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> The Covenant House Vancouver policy on visitors does allow for shelter residents to be signed into ROP by a youth with permission of staff. They would be able to use common spaces while in the presence of their ROP host. CHT does not allow any visitors in ROP, however, shelter youth may be in the space for a meeting, life skills class etc. if accompanied by a staff member.

*“For the first time they can probably stand, without clothes, in front of a full-length mirror, and really look at themselves. Learn to love themselves. Deal with issues that they have. And for a lot of them, they have never had that opportunity that so many of us take for granted.”*

*—Julie Neubauer, Transitional Housing Manager, Covenant House Toronto*

As will be discussed in the LGBTQ2S and Gender section in Program Elements, it is important that agencies with shared washrooms ensure that there are also gender-neutral washrooms – especially showers – available.

## LENGTH OF STAY

In order to stay in the program, a youth must work their program, follow the rules of their respective ROP and engage in their day plan.

**CHT:** Youth in Toronto are able to stay for one year. Occasionally, short extensions are made – particularly for youth who are addressing mental health or addictions issues – increasing the duration up to 18 months. While CHT would like to extend their length of stay options, they are limited by provincial legislation that puts limits on the length of time a program like this can house youth.

**CHV:** The length of stay at Covenant House Vancouver was recently increased from “one year with the possibility of extension to two years” to “up to the youth’s 25th birthday”. This means a youth could technically stay in the ROP program from the time they are 16 years of age up to 25 years of age. John Harvey, Director of Program Services, states that the previous average length of stay was 13 months. He thinks that a realistic estimate (based in part on the experiences of the Infinity Project in Calgary) that takes into account the extension is between two to three years.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Agencies setting up a similar program need to take a few factors into consideration when establishing duration of stay.

- » What are the legislative guidelines that affect duration?
- » How many spaces are available and does a longer stay reduce access for other youth? In other words – is it better to allow more youth shorter stays or fewer youth longer stays?
- » What needs are the youth presenting with and are these issues going to require longer or shorter interventions?

- » What other transitional housing programs exist in the community for the same population (if any)?
- » What kinds of partnerships can be established to provide support to youth in the program that cannot be met in-house? For example, a mental health agency may be able to provide counselling and support services to a youth allowing him/her to remain in the program longer.

## MONEY – TRUST FUND VS PROGRAM FEE

ROP residents in Toronto pay into a Trust Fund. In Vancouver they pay a monthly program fee. While these plans require different contributions (which will be explained below) they have three big commonalities:

1. It is made clear that this is not a rent payment. It is critical to avoid fees/payments being construed as rent as this then leads to rights and obligations for both parties under relevant landlord/tenant legislation.
2. Money is refunded in full or in part to the residents upon departure.
3. By simulating a rent payment it creates a practice of regularly budgeting and setting aside money for housing costs on the part of the young person.

**CHT:** Residents of ROP in Toronto pay into a Trust Fund. The amount of the payment is determined in conjunction with staff and is individualized based upon a youth's income, as well as their anticipated rent after they move out of ROP. For a youth who is receiving social assistance the amount might be \$180, whereas a youth who is receiving funds from child welfare might be asked to pay \$600. Changes in income sources or amounts require a re-working of the budget to determine what the payment should be.

*“When I first came here they set up a budget of how much I was making monthly and we broke it down to ‘Okay, what do I need to spend on hygiene products? What’s my clothing budget for the month? Entertainment? Food?’ and then just kind of allotting ‘Okay, so I’m going to put away \$500 every month because that’s what rent would be.’ The idea is that you try to put as much away as you can budget so that way when you leave here you get that money back. It was a really good opportunity for me because I was able to leave here with some savings. I don’t think if I hadn’t come here I would have been able to do that on my own.”*

*—Vanessa, age 28, past ROP resident, Covenant House Toronto*

Within the first two weeks of arrival the youth will develop a budget and savings agreement with their Consistent Worker. If necessary, youth will be supported to establish chequing/savings accounts at a financial institution.

Frequency of Trust Fund payments will depend on the schedule by which a youth is paid/ receives income; most youth pay bi-weekly. Youth have a 48 hour period after they get paid in which to make their Trust Fund payment. Failure to do so can result in an overnight suspension from the program and a referral to a homeless youth shelter.

When the Trust Fund account reaches \$5,000 the youth meets with their bank and makes plans to move this money into their own secured savings; for example, a tax free savings account. All of the savings are returned to the young person, whether the Trust Fund contributions were made through earnings, scholarships or a form of government assistance (i.e. social assistance, disability payments).

As youth get closer to discharge (usually around the nine month mark), the youth begins to save money in their own account rather than making Trust Fund payments. The amount they save will increase to be a more realistic match with a future rent payment. This may require a reworking of their budget in consultation with their Consistent Worker.

**CHV:** Residents of ROP in Vancouver pay a monthly program fee amounting to 60% of income up to an absolute maximum of \$300 per month. This is due on the 1st of each month. While most youth pay the \$300 flat rate, the Steps guidelines indicate this as the standard payment. A pro-rated payment is made for the month in which they move in to ROP.

Program fees are set aside and potentially available for reimbursement. The policy notes “this does not include program fees that are paid while you are on a youth agreement, income assistance, or employment insurance (EI). It also does not include program fees that are paid late” or any program fees paid beyond the first year<sup>8</sup>. This rule ensures that only the monies the youth themselves pay (as opposed to a government agency) is returned to the youth.

If a youth moves out during Step 1 or Step 2 they are not eligible for reimbursement. If they move out during Steps 3-6, a portion of their program fee is returned in the “form of a cheque, start-up items, or damage deposit for your new place and/or educational scholarship.”

Known as a “graduation bursary” the assistance is designed to help youth transition and succeed in their independent living. The assistance may be paid directly to a vendor such as a landlord or educational institution.

The value of the bursary is as follows:

- » 25% of the fees paid if departing while on Step 3
- » 50% of the fees paid if departing while on Step 4
- » 75% of the fees paid if departing while on Step 5
- » 100% of the fees paid if departing according to plan after successfully completing Step 5 or 6.

For example: A youth who pays the maximum \$300/month and who leaves after one year with a successful completion of Step 5 or 6, would therefore be reimbursed \$3,600. If they left after a year but were still on Step 3 their graduation bursary would be \$900.

<sup>8</sup> This is in the process of being reviewed with the change in limits of stay. These changes only took effect in October 2014 so CHV is working to figure out possible options for the graduation bursary in this new context.



## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

The ability to reimburse youth is definitely an ideal goal. However, it may not always be feasible from an operational point of view. In some cases, the contribution from the youth may need to form part of the operating budget of the transitional housing program. However, the youth may not always make their payments so it would be risky for agencies to count on the payments as a guaranteed form of support.

We support a zero discharge into homelessness policy and do not feel that missing a payment (i.e. Trust Fund payment in Toronto) should be grounds for a suspension. While we understand the intent of showing that actions have consequences, transitional housing needs to be a secure place that allows for youth to make mistakes without resulting in even a night of homelessness.

From a legislative perspective, the act of reimbursing all or a portion of funds to the youth should be an argument against the program and the agency being seen as a landlord under provincial/territorial landlord-tenant legislation.

Whether or not money is reimbursed, getting youth in the practice of paying rent is a great concept. The creation of that habit, along with support provided to the youth around budgeting, makes it much more likely that the young person will be able to maintain rental payments when they move into independent living.

We understand that the change to length of stay is new in Vancouver, and we support their review of the graduation bursary cap. Any agency looking to develop a longer term stay program should consider how a youth who stays for several years will be able to recoup more of their funding even if it is just a percentage of what is paid.

We also feel that Toronto's Trust Fund payments provides youth with a more realistic sense of budgeting and better models the actual payment of rent. We particularly like the gradual increase of the amount paid so that youth first get comfortable with the idea of budgeting and making regular "rent" payments and then begin to contribute more based on their post-discharge plans. We encourage organizations to work to have the youth contribute realistic payments. Even in small communities, it is unlikely that a post-graduation/discharge rent payment will be \$300 (the amount of the program fee in Vancouver) so it is better to get youth accustomed to paying a higher amount (unless they are addressing and paying off debt instead).

The question of returning funds to a youth when the income source was government funding is a tricky one. Certainly, if a government agreement states that the payments they make to an organization are only for that organization itself (and particularly if the payments are made directly to an organization) then the money cannot be returned to the youth. However, if youth are receiving funds directly (i.e. social assistance, disability payments) and are then making their expected practice rent contribution themselves, we believe the money should be returned to the youth as if it came from any other source. This is the practice at Covenant House Toronto and we think it is a good one. The start-up funds provided by the graduation bursary/Trust Fund system is critical to helping youth establish themselves independently.

## MEALS

Both organizations have rules and guidelines around meals and kitchen use. These include orientations to the kitchen and safety assessments. Some of the youth at ROP have never made their own meals. Life skills are a key means of teaching the youth how to create their own meals before they graduate.

*“Cooking would be another example that’s really critical. Before we really beefed up our kitchen program we would have kids that had graduated from the program... it was sad to hear that they were living in the community pretty successfully but they went to a fast food place to get their dinner every night. So that really concerned me; we were graduating kids from the program and clearly they didn’t really know how to cook and do that piece, so we’ve really beefed up that side of the program so that kids leave and know they shouldn’t spend all their money on fast food.”*

*—Carol Howes, Director of Program Services, Covenant House Toronto*

**CHT:** Limited quantities of basic food staples are always available in the ROP kitchen, provided through their Food Services Department. This includes cereal, milk, bread, juice, soup, rice, pasta, onions and carrots. Youth are provided with a bin in the refrigerator to store their fresh food and a small locker area for dry goods.

Youth are also able to go to the Crisis shelter for lunch and/or dinner. The ROP residents go over as a group at a set time. For youth who are offsite (i.e. school, work or approved appointment) a lunch can be made to take with them. Those who are offsite for program reasons during dinner may sign up for a saved dinner. This meal is stored in the lounge fridge and must be accessed via staff. If the meal is not eaten by 5pm the next day it’s transferred to the kitchen fridge for general consumption.

CHT has fairly strict rules in place about kitchen access. In particular, a staff member must be present before a youth is allowed to use a stovetop. At times, this means youth may need to wait for a staff person to be free before preparing their meal.

**CHV:** A limited supply of groceries is available for youth on Steps 1-3, which is intended to supplement a youth’s grocery budget, not replace it. Youth may store their own food items in the kitchen fridge or freezer providing they are not too big and are clearly marked.

Youth are responsible for preparing their own food for breakfast and lunch, either individually or cooperatively with other residents. Youth on Steps 4-6 are fully responsible for providing their own breakfast, lunch and snacks (exceptions include communal meals they participate in, Sunday brunch, cooking class meals or special events).

A dinner is served nightly from 5:20pm to 6pm in the main floor dining room. One of the goals of the meal is to build a sense of community by providing an opportunity for social interaction. Saved dinners are available (must be requested in advance) for youth in Steps 1-4 who are at work or school during dinner time. They will be kept on a tray which can be reheated in the kitchen on the youth’s floor. For youth on Steps 5 and 6 saved dinners are not available and the youth must supply and prepare their own meal if they miss the dinner.

A weekly Community Dinner is hosted by ROP and unless excused by their Key Worker (for a reason connected to their case plan i.e. work or school), all youth residing in ROP are required

to attend. Former ROP residents who are 25 and under are allowed to attend as long as they are not under the influence during the meal or carded (i.e. suspended/banned) by CHV. Youth may invite family or friends to attend under the guidelines of the ROP Visitor's Policy.

At CHV, youth have open access to their common kitchens with two exceptions:

- » no deep frying
- » knives are locked so they have to sign them in and out as needed

Youth are free to use the stove without a staff member present and have access to the common kitchens unsupervised.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

It is critical to develop the skills associated with meal preparation, including budgeting, planning, shopping, cooking and clean-up. At the same time, especially in the early stages, youth may not have the funds or ability to prepare their own meals. The mix of options that both locations offer – provision of basic staples, introduction to shopping, meal planning and cooking through life skills, ability to have meals with the crisis/shelter program – is a good way to address the barriers.

Vancouver's Step program is useful in that it gradually increases independence by ensuring that youth take charge of more and more of their own meal preparation. Access to the dining room meal program exists for dinners even in the later steps (although not saved meals), which ensures that youth are able to eat if they are running low on funds or otherwise unable to prepare a meal for themselves on a particular day.

We found Covenant House Toronto's kitchen access to be too strict:

- » The kitchen passport is overly complicated and does not model what is done in a home kitchen (and perhaps not even a professional one). While recognizing that safety is important we also want to assist youth to begin to develop their kitchen skills as quickly as possible. While CHT recently modified some of its passport requirements they feel that tasks/learnings are necessary to ascertain a baseline of skills.
- » Access to the stove is an area of concern brought up in the interviews and also noted in the review of policies. Again, while recognizing that safety is key, it is also important to give youth a sense of independence. The youngest participant in ROP is 16 years old and by that age should be able to use a stove unsupervised (or at least can with some training). CHT notes that despite the training that exists, two grease fires were contained quickly because of the presence of staff.
- » We suggest that agencies developing their own program consider easing the guidelines so that after a youth has completed a certain number of cooking life skills or has successfully used the stove in front of staff a few times that the youth may move to independent use.

*"Clearly they didn't really know how to cook and do that piece, so we've really beefed up that side of the program so that kids leave and know they shouldn't spend all their money on fast food."*

—Carol Howes, Covenant House Toronto

## MONTHLY HOUSE MEETING

House Meetings at both ROP programs are mandatory. They provide an opportunity for communication to the group as a whole to ensure information is shared promptly and efficiently. Youth can only be excused from a House Meeting if it conflicts with their work or school schedule, or another program requirement, and must communicate this to their worker.

**CHT:** A monthly house meeting is held with staff and residents. This is primarily an opportunity for staff and residents to discuss issues and concerns around the house, upcoming policy or procedural changes, and to share events.

Residents also hold their own meeting as desired, organized by a youth, to discuss issues of concern. Interest in holding these meetings seems to depend on whether there are issues of concern in the program and whether there is a youth who is inclined to organize. Minutes are taken and then given to senior staff.

**CHV:** A monthly house meeting is held to allow two-way communication between staff and residents. Anyone who has an issue to discuss can have it placed on the agenda.

Youth are encouraged and supported –including funding—to organize their own resident-only meetings and events, however there is very little take-up in this regard.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Allowing youth and staff an opportunity to discuss issues is key to building a harmonious living environment. Making the meetings mandatory is also important as it helps ensure everyone receives the same information at the same time.

We particularly like the residents-only option available in both cities, as it does provide a safe space for youth to air grievances they may have with the program or staff. We encourage all agencies to make space and funding available to the youth to organize their own meetings or events.



## LGBTQ2S AND GENDER

Both locations have a floor for male residents and a floor for female residents. Youth identify their gender during the application process and this determines which floor they are put on.

This is a recent switch for Covenant House Vancouver, which had co-ed floors until October 2014. There were fears that a male-only floor would result in increased aggression and as a result staff received training on de-escalation and dealing with physical confrontations. This fear did not materialize.

At CHT, the youth share bathrooms. Bathrooms and shower facilities are gendered – that is, the female-only floor has female-only bathrooms. Within the shared bathroom, the shower stalls are individual. If requested, youth can access private showers in other parts of the program/agency.

Since CHV youth have their own private bathroom in their individual room the overall issue of bathroom privacy is addressed. However, the agency has shared gender-neutral restroom facilities on all floors with appropriate signage.

Both agencies have made a concentrated effort to develop programs and policies that support LGBTQ2S youth. Given that 25-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ2S this is an important consideration for all youth-serving agencies. CHT has a standing LGBTQ2S cross-agency committee that reviews policy, practice, gaps in service and supports. There is also an LGBTQ2S youth group that meets every two weeks. All staff are trained by Rainbow Health Ontario to ensure awareness and sensitivity to the LGBTQ2S community of youth. CHV has mandatory LGBTQ2S training provided by a local agency (PRISM) on a regular basis for all program staff, they have members of the LGBTQ2S community working in all departments and have established community relationships for referrals.

Both agencies have policies around discrimination and harassment. The CHT Rights of Passage manual states “ROP is a welcoming community for people of all sexual orientations, gender identity, and racial diversity. Any homophobic, racist, or derogatory comments and/or actions intended to hurt another program participant will not be tolerated.”

They are both part of a Covenant House International initiative that has joined with the [True Colors Fund](#), an organization founded by Cyndi Lauper. While it is still rolling out, they are working on cultural/inclusion assessments with a goal to strengthen their organizational culture around openness and inclusion.



## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

The issue of co-ed or sole gender floors is going to be one for an agency to consider based on space, layout, numbers of youth applying etc. There are definitely arguments that can be made for each viewpoint (segregated female floors may make young women who have experienced sexual assault or violence feel safer; co-ed floors allow for youth to develop inter-personal skills with a wider variety of people).

Allowing youth to self-determine/select their gender (and therefore their floor) is a good start towards trans-inclusivity. To a certain extent, it allows youth who are transgender or genderqueer (or otherwise “gender non-conforming”) to be housed with a reduced fear of discrimination. However, the limit of “male-only” or “female-only” floors means youth who do not identify with a binary gender are limited and must choose the one they feel “closest to”. Co-ed space, in that sense, is more trans-inclusive as youth are not required to select one over the other.

For an agency to truly make itself an LGBTQ2S positive space there are other factors that come into play. This includes:

- » Providing ongoing and mandatory information and training for all staff (no matter what their role).
- » Providing information and holding awareness workshops for youth.
- » Developing and enforcing a strong policy against harassment and discrimination.
- » Providing gender-neutral washrooms, including shower facilities (especially if youth do not have their own private bathroom).
- » Building networks and partnerships with LGBTQ2S agencies in order to refer youth, find counsellors/mentors etc.
- » Ensuring that non-LGBTQ2S agencies to which youth are referred have training, policies and programs in place to support LGBTQ2S youth or providing them with support needed to create a positive space.
- » Allowing youth to attend LGBTQ2S events and support groups (i.e. through curfew extensions) under the same criteria that would apply to any other external support.
- » Developing inclusive forms (i.e. additional options to male/female for gender).
- » Hiring people from the LGBTQ2S community to work in the organization in a variety of roles and positions.
- » Soliciting volunteers and mentors from the LGBTQ2S community.
- » Ensuring that all policies are reviewed through an LGBTQ2S lens.

**"For the first time they can...  
...really look at themselves.  
Learn to love themselves.  
Deal with issues that they  
have. And for a lot of  
them, they have never had  
that opportunity that  
so many of us take for granted."**

*—Julie Neubauer, Covenant House Toronto*

# Mentorship Program - Covenant House Toronto

The Mentorship Program exists only at Covenant House Toronto, while Vancouver is in the exploratory phase of creating such an initiative.

Similar to the more familiar "Big Brothers" or "Big Sisters" programs, the Mentorship program matches up youth – primarily from Rights of Passage, the scattered site transitional housing and the Youth In Transition Program –with a mentor. The goal is to give the youth an adult, who **is not** a staff member, with whom they can build a relationship.

*“The mentorship program has been a very blessed experience for me. My mentor is someone I actually do lookup to because my mentor contains the same qualities and traits that I always wish I had. I like that things are going at a pace that I can control because I have too many variables in my life that I have little if any control over and sometimes I feel as if I’m being buried alive. I still have much to work on concerning my character and my aspirations and I know things wont change overnight and I don’t expect them to. I also know that its not my mentor’s job to change my situation; it is my mentor’s job to help me acquire the tools and/or resources I need to move myself forward which my mentor has been doing. There are many like me in the mentorship program; lost souls who know what they want and have the willingness needed to get there but they lack the means not because we aren’t bright or lack capabilities but we have come from broken situations like homelessness or abuse or disasters that have impaired our judgement and at times crippled our abilities to possess the skills we need to move forward.”*

– "Aisha", 25, ROP Participant and Mentee

Mentors apply to the program and are interviewed, screened and reference checked. Volunteers go through intensive and ongoing training as well as participate in Mentor Support Groups. They are expected to commit to a one-year timeframe with the program. Once matched, the volunteer mentor agrees to weekly contact (including texts, phone calls and/or emails) with twice monthly meet-ups with their youth.

*“The best part of being a mentor is to see how much she’s grown since we met. It’s like, oh my gosh, the first time we met I did not think the person she is now was under there, or I just didn’t know her. But I mean, you meet your mentees faced with difficult situations in life and it’s amazing to watch how they face them and overcome the challenges and how they grow.”*

—Danna Brown former ROP mentor

The matches are made through a meet and greet process where mentees and mentors get an opportunity to get to know each other. After some introductory games, they sit down one-on-one to answer questions that are pulled from a jar. At the end of the evening the youth and mentors are able to submit their choices to the Mentorship Coordinator. If there is a match, then the Coordinator will connect the two together.

There are very strict rules that are in place for the mentors/mentees to follow during the program including:

- » Each person must pay for themselves. This encourages independence on the part of the youth and helps them with their budgeting. It also reduces the likelihood of a dependence upon the mentor for financial offerings.
- » The mentor is allowed to share certain personal information but must be aware of what they share. They are not allowed to introduce the youth to their friends/family, take them to their home etc.
- » Youth and the mentor must meet in the community, not at Covenant House except in certain circumstances (i.e. the use of the Girl's Lounge at Covenant House, group activities with other mentors/mentees).

Once the program is completed and the youth graduates than these rules are removed as the relationship, if it continues, is solely between the youth and the mentor as independent adults. This often happens –and is indeed, part of the hope of Covenant House—and the relationship is able to evolve.

*"When we graduated I knew that it was a fear for her that she'd be on her own and that would be the end of our friendship. And for me, I spent more time with her than so many other people in my life during the course of the year that it was unimaginable that all of a sudden the program would be over and I wouldn't be that support. So, we've continued. It's been about eight months and we still see each other just as much and we're more in touch. And without the boundaries of the program it's more natural and it's shaped into almost a different kind of friendship because there are less boundaries. But I see ourselves, I see us being in each other's lives for as long as she needs me and I need her."*  
 —Danna Brown, past ROP Mentor



Danna Brown, (past ROP mentor) speaks about having a close relationship with her mentee.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

This kind of initiative is extremely beneficial to the youth. It may be seen as an "add-on" to a transitional housing program, and in many ways it is, but at the same time, it is extremely important for the long-term success of a young person. Particularly, in cases of time-limited accommodation, the ability of a young person to develop and maintain a relationship with a community mentor can help their overall success on the path to independence.

*"I spent more time with her than so many other people in my life during the course of the year that it was unimaginable that all of a sudden the program would be over and I wouldn't be that support."*

—Danna Brown, Past ROP Mentor

## Rules

There are a number of rules to help ensure the smooth running of the Rights of Passage Program. In many cases, these also support the Covenant House International principles of Sanctuary and Structure.

Rules are created to match youth where they are at based on their age and stage of life. In Vancouver the rules are also influenced by the Steps and the stage the youth is at in the program. For example, at Step 1 a youth can get support from staff with waking up, remembering appointments, taking medication, but in later stages these need to be done without staff assistance.

Per the case plan all youth must be in school, working or following an alternative track to address mental health or addictions issues. There is zero tolerance for discrimination, violence etc.

There are also general rules that would apply to most transitional housing programs around cleaning up after oneself, chores and bedroom cleanliness. Both locations, understanding that not all youth have the knowledge, teach youth to complete certain chores, how to maintain their room etc. Room inspections take place (daily in Toronto, weekly in Vancouver) to check for fire safety, presence of unauthorized visitors and cleanliness, including no dirty dishes, no spoiled food, empty garbage bins, no excessive dirty laundry etc.

These chores are also used to help incentivize youth. In Toronto, for example, completion of chores and a clean room is one of the criteria for overnights and extended curfews (conversely, failure to do chores could result in decreased curfews). In Toronto youth do two chores per week, four chores in a two-week period and no more than one per day. In Vancouver they do five chores per week.

Other general rules apply to the use of space and safety. Both agencies have rules about computer use, for example. Rules are in place to address issues such as noise, smoking, keys/fobs, pets, damages, cable/internet, laundry, sexual activity, weapons, pornography, attire, belongings etc.

Below we outline some of key rules that should be considered in the development of a transitional housing program, understanding that other rules may need to be developed depending on a specific agency's needs or program offerings.

*Rules included in the toolkit cover the following topics:*

- » Curfew
- » Overnights
- » Visitors
- » Medication
- » Drug and Alcohol Use

## CURFEW

Both locations have curfews for their youth. In the policy manual for Covenant House Toronto the purpose is explained as: “Curfew is a concrete expression of our Principle of Structure. It serves to assist the residents in developing the skills to discharge their daily living responsibilities (school, work, chores, etc.) during their stay in, and upon graduation from the Right of Passage program.”

**CHT:** The curfew changes as the youth moves through the program and is primarily dependent upon the completion of life skills workshops.

- » Orientation period: Curfew is 10pm.
- » After orientation it is 11pm Sunday through Thursday and 1am Friday and Saturday.
- » It can be increased to 3am/3am depending upon life skills completion. Each month youth are required to attend at least two life skills workshops, which earn them life skills credits. For every two credits they earn their weekday curfew is extended by a 30-minute interval. When the weekday time catches up to the weekend time (i.e. 1am/1am), they both go up together by 30-minute intervals to a maximum of 3am.
- » It is possible for curfews to be decreased if a youth fails to attend life skills sessions or is having other challenges meeting the expectations of the case plan or the overall program. These would be discussed at the weekly case management meeting and the reduction of the curfew could be applied as a means of removing a privilege.
- » Youth who are enrolled in high school generally have a school night curfew of 11pm regardless of the number of life skills they have completed. Once they show regular attendance and prove that curfew is not an area of concern that will impact upon their schooling they may have their curfew extended.

Curfew time is strict and the policy manual states: “late is late.”

- » If a youth is late for curfew they must meet with a staff member the next business day to explain their lateness.
- » If they are continually late they will meet with their Consistent Worker to create a plan to overcome this challenge.
- » If a youth is more than **one hour past curfew** and they have not contacted ROP staff then they are considered AWOL. When youth do contact staff the reason for the lateness/absence is discussed. Depending upon the reason youth who are AWOL might not be allowed into their room at ROP and instead may be referred to a shelter for the night. The next day the youth must speak with the Team Leader to determine follow-up actions.

**CHV:** The curfew is determined according to the step the youth is currently working on. As they work through the steps their curfew is increased accordingly:

- » **Step 1** - 10:00pm on work or school days/12:00am on 2 days off per week.
- » **Step 2** - 11:00pm on work or school days/1:00am on 2 days off per week.
- » **Step 3 and 4** - 12:00am on work or school days/2:00am on 2 days off per week.
- » **Step 5 and 6** – No curfew but must check in by phone when staying out late or away.

Youth who want an extension to a curfew need to make a request in advance. Any time a youth returns after 3am (whether it was approved or unapproved) it will count as an overnight rather than a late curfew. Youth are allowed into their room at this point and they will not be referred to a shelter.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Many youth who come to Covenant House have never had the benefit of a curfew. This structure is something that most youth who live in their family's home experience and generally the curfew time increases with age and responsibility. Determining what the curfew will be and how it will be enforced will be dependent upon a variety of factors.

- » Some communities have established a curfew for youth. While in most cases it applies to those under 16, in some places it includes 16 and 17 year olds. Agencies establishing curfews should align with legislation.
- » In some ROP programs the majority of youth are employed, while in others the focus is on education. Curfews should be flexible (as they are at both CHT and CHV) for youth if they are employed in a night-time or evening job (or night school) to allow for youth to work/attend class as required and to allow for travel time home.
- » Agencies may wish to set a stricter curfew time for youth engaged in school (or just for those in high school).
- » Agencies may choose to develop a graduated curfew time based on life skills (like CHT) or steps (like CHV). If doing so it should be clearly communicated to a youth what they need to do to extend their curfew and the ways in which a curfew can be reduced.
- » It is recommended that agencies do not penalize youth for missing curfew by referring them to a shelter for the evening. Except in cases of breaking a critical rule (violence, possession of drugs or weapons in the building etc.) loss of housing should not be used as a penalty. Transitional housing programs should aim to have a “zero discharge into homelessness” policy and discharging even for a night to a shelter violates that principle.

## OVERNIGHTS

Both CHT and CHV allow for a limited number of excused overnight absences each month. In both locations these must be approved ahead of time. Nights away are earned by completing life skills (Toronto) or steps (Vancouver).

**CHT:** Youth are not allowed overnight passes during orientation period (unless there are extenuating circumstances). An overnight pass is considered an earned privilege rather than a right and can be revoked if a youth is not meeting the requirements of their plan. Youth earn the right to overnights by completing life skills. Youth must request their pass ahead of time and the decision is made by the Case Management Team.

In order to leave for their overnight the youth must have completed their chores and have a clean room (these are confirmed before the pass is issued). Youth must check-in with staff to ensure that the request is approved before leaving. They may be asked to complete a task before leaving such as cleaning their room, completing a chore or submitting their Trust Fund payment. Failure to do these tasks is considered an “unauthorized overnight” and may lead to suspension on return.

Consecutive nights are rarely allowed except during the holiday periods. A maximum of four overnight passes are allowed each month except in special circumstances.

The youth must return by curfew the next day or they will be considered AWOL. Youth who are AWOL may be suspended upon return and must discuss re-entry with the Team Leader.

Youth complete an Emergency Contact Form when they arrive in ROP (mandatory under 18, optional over 18). If a youth is absent for two nights without contact with staff or prior approval the emergency contact will be notified. If the youth is still deemed missing, the Toronto Police Services will be asked to issue a Missing Person report. After seven nights the individual could be automatically discharged.

**CHV:** No overnights are allowed during Step 1 (the first four weeks at least) because youth are settling in and it is deemed important for them to develop the routine of returning to the same location every night (and the resultant stability and security that comes with that). Two overnights are allowed during Step 2, three are allowed during Step 3 and four are allowed during Step 4. Five overnights are allowed during Step 5 and 6. The number of overnights is limited because a youth’s ability to participate in the program is dependent upon being present consistently. Youth who are frequently away from the program may not need the ROP anymore. More than five overnights during either of the last two Steps will prompt a discussion about whether or not it is time to move on.

It should be noted that during Steps 2 and 3 overnights must be pre-approved, while from Step 4 on, staff need only be notified. Permission is generally only granted for one night at a time and extended absences are discouraged. Absences beyond one night must be pre-approved, regardless of Step level.

If a youth is absent without approval for more than 72 hours it may be considered grounds for discharge and a missing person’s report will be filed if there is no contact.



## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Having a strict overnight policy (while allowing for some flexibility) is a good way of developing structure and routine. It ensures that youth are present and accounted for and limits the likelihood that they return to old habits and behaviours.

Providing clear information about absences, discharge, missing persons' reports is beneficial to the youth and staff and is geared at eliminating misunderstandings and confusion. Both CHT and CHV provide this information to the youth in their manual and during orientation.

Referring a youth to a shelter for going AWOL could backfire by creating an opportunity for a youth to spend the night outside of their housing again. As with the curfew policy, we do not recommend that any punishments include a discharge (even for a night) into homelessness. Youth must have security in their housing.

Both CHT and CHV allow for exceptions to the overnight limits in certain cases – i.e. attempted family reconciliation through a holiday or vacation with family members. This is a key component; as a youth gets stabilized they may wish to begin to explore connections with their family. Gradually spending more time with them, including overnights, is a good way of exploring whether moving home is a safe and viable option.

The fact that police will be contacted and a missing person's report filed after an unexplained absence should create a sense of security for youth. It holds them accountable for their actions and shows that they have responsibilities along with privileges. It also emphasizes that their personal welfare is of concern.

## VISITORS

Visitors can help youth maintain or develop positive social networks. At the same time, rules are in place to maintain safety and security of the youth, visitor, staff, other residents and the building itself.

**CHT:** Visitors are not allowed in the ROP program or other areas of the building with the exception of the McGill reception desk.

- » Visitors can ask for an ROP resident between 10am and 10pm.
- » They are allowed to wait in the lobby for five minutes maximum and then will be asked to leave the building.
- » Youth need to organize their visitors and be available for their arrival as it may not be possible for staff to look for a resident.
- » Confidentiality restricts staff from letting a visitor know whether a resident is in or out of the building.
- » ROP residents may not let another ROP youth in their room at any time.

**CHV:** Visitors are allowed at ROP in Vancouver with certain conditions:

- » Youth must sign their visitor in and out at the front desk.
- » The visitor may be asked to show identification.
- » Only two visitors per youth may be signed in at one time.
- » Youth are not allowed to sign in a visitor if they are scheduled to be at school, work, on job search or otherwise engaged in their program.
- » Prior approval must be obtained from the Program Manager to sign in a youth under 16.
- » Visitors are allowed in the common spaces between 10am to 11pm Sunday to Thursday and 10am to 1am Friday and Saturday.
- » Visitors are not allowed in any room occupied by youth.
- » No physical contact is permitted between youth and their visitors.
- » A visitor may not use an ROP computer or eat ROP food (with the exception of the community dinner).
- » Visitors from the other floor may be signed in by an ROP member.
- » Visitors from the Crisis shelter or other programs require advance permission from staff.
- » ROP residents may not let another ROP youth in their room at any time.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Creating opportunities for youth to maintain or create positive social relationships are important for growth and healing. At the same time, an organization has to maintain security and safety of all of its residents and staff. The layout of space may also restrict the ability of an organization to allow youth to have visitors.

Where possible, we recommend that youth be able to have visitors in common areas. This is particularly important in the case of family, close friendships or mentors. Having clear rules and guidelines for visitors (per CHV) is beneficial and important. Not allowing people within the youth's room is a good security measure and can help prevent complaints of theft or damage.

## MEDICATION

**CHT:** Youth are responsible for taking, storing and refilling their prescription medication. They must inform staff of all medications that they take and this information can be passed on to medical personnel in case of an emergency. In certain situations, ROP staff may assist a youth by storing their medication in a secured cabinet.

**CHV:** Youth must inform staff of all medications they are taking. All medications (with the exception of vitamins, birth control and fast-acting medication), such as inhalers, will be kept locked in the office. In all Steps youth are responsible for taking medication as prescribed and will be asked to initial each time they take a dose. In Steps 1 and 2 youth may be reminded by staff that it is time for them to take or use a certain medication. In Steps 3-6 this is solely the responsibility of the youth. At this point, the youth may discuss with their Key Worker and Case Manager the possibility of storing their medication in their room.

### HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

Allowing a youth control of their own medication – perhaps with supports to remind them to take it – is beneficial but needs to be weighed against the risks of the medication being stolen or abused/misused by the youth. It is critical that a youth maintain control of emergency medication (i.e. epipens, rescue inhalers) and that staff are trained in their use and how to administer them.

## DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

Both locations follow similar guidelines in terms of rules around drugs and alcohol.

- » Consuming or possessing drugs or alcohol on Covenant House property or during Covenant House activities is prohibited. This includes prescription medication not prescribed to the youth. Selling substances is also prohibited. Breaking these rules is cause for immediate suspension and possible discharge.
- » Youth who come into the ROP under the influence will be asked to go to their rooms and are not allowed in the common areas.
- » Disruptive behaviour will not be tolerated.
- » If necessary (due to moderate or severe intoxication) safety checks may be conducted (two staff entering room to check on the youth).

- » A young person may be asked to receive medical clearance to stay in the program if there are significant concerns for health.
- » If it is recognized that substance use is creating or contributing to problems in a youth's life, their case plan will be adjusted to address this.

In Toronto, a Substance Use Counsellor works with all youth who are identified as having drug and/or alcohol problems. If they are committed to working on their issues –with a goal of sobriety—they are entitled to engage in the Abstinence Support Program. Youth need to meet with the Substance Use Counsellor within 24 hours of returning to the building under the influence. An Abstinence Support Plan will be developed and the youth must work with the Case Management Team members, including their Consistent Worker and the Substance Use Counsellor, to maintain sobriety.

Toronto's safety planning procedures, which supports the ability of a youth to remain in program while under the influence, is geared at ensuring there is no risk to the safety of themselves, the building or others. These are outlined in the ROP Residents Using Drugs or Alcohol Policy found in the resource section.

## HOMELESS HUB THOUGHTS:

The issue of substance use is always challenging in a congregate living situation. Covenant House supports abstinence-based housing and this is evident in their program design. While a harm reduction model is our preference – and indeed forms one of the core components of Housing First –there may be some youth who prefer and need abstinence-only housing to maintain their own sobriety (Gaetz, Scott, & Gulliver, 2013; Gaetz, 2014b). When an agency has multiple housing options this can be addressed more easily, but when there is only one shared space, rules such as those developed above become more critical.

Age is definitely one consideration, as the ability to purchase, and the legal right to consume, alcohol varies by jurisdiction. Legality of substances is also something that needs to be examined (including the right of some people with certain health issues to hold a legal entitlement to use medical marijuana).

An approach that encourages sobriety but does not punish for lapses is more positive than a punitive approach. In fact, CHT only changed its policy in early 2015. Prior to that date returning to ROP under the influence could result in a suspension and a referral to a shelter program.