

2016 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS APPLICATION BEST PRACTICES, Excellence in Action

Filled Friday, June 17, 2016

Name of Local Government

District of West Vancouver

Project/Program Manager Name

Sue Ketler

Title

Senior Manager, Community Services

Phone

604-925-7126

Email

sketler@westvancouver.ca

Administrative Contact Name

Arleta Beckett

Title

Manager, Community Development, Youth and Families

Phone

604-921-3404

Email

abeckett@westvancouver.ca

The Mayor/Chair is aware that I am submitting this application on behalf of my local government.

Yes

Project/Program Title:

Diverse Genders/Sexual Orientation Conference

Project Summary Paragraph

Please provide a summary of your project/program in 150 words or less.

In society, gender lines are drawn at an early age. For children and youth whose gender doesn't match people's assumptions, it can be a confusing and frightening time.

Individuals who identify as queer and trans* (see note below) are faced with difficulties that are often greater than other youth face, including higher attempted suicide rates, being under employed, higher medical costs, and difficulty accessing safe and stable housing.

West Vancouver's Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference is designed for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, their families, professionals, allies, and friends. The annual conference is an outcome of "Whatever", a District of West Vancouver weekly youth drop-in group for queer and trans* youth.

Note: Throughout this application, the phrase "queer and trans*" is used to describe youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, intersex and two-spirited (LGBT*QI2S).

Project Analysis

1. SERVICES

How has the implementation of this program/project improved services in your community?

In 2007, West Vancouver youth identified a need to form a safe drop-in for youth who identify as queer and trans*. This led to the formation of "Whatever", a youth drop-in, which was initially held twice each month and now meets weekly for queer and trans* youth, and their allies. Similar to Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in high schools, the Whatever youth drop-in is available to any youth expressing an interest in attending, and while it is often youth-led, a skilled adult facilitator also encourages appropriate discussions and peer support.

In 2013, youth from the Whatever drop-in (age 13-24 years) identified a need to improve services for queer and trans* youth on the North Shore, including the ability to reach out to parents/guardians, teachers and service providers about how to best support queer and trans* youth. This led to the formation of a conference in December 2014 for LGBT*QI2S, non-gender conforming youth, parents, families, professionals, allies and friends, that was modeled after the very successful Gender Odyssey conference in Seattle, WA. 100 people attended the first Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference at Gleneagles Community Centre. Feedback indicated that 79% reported being very satisfied that the conference met their expectations, and 90% reported that they were very satisfied that the presenters created an enjoyable learning experience.

Through the implementation of the 2014 conference, youth expressed a desire for an expanded Whatever drop-in to include increased self-determination and opportunities for leadership, and the Whatever Youth Committee was formed.

2. EFFECTIVENESS

How is the program/project more efficient and/or effective than it was before?

The Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference has evolved each year through the leadership of members of the Whatever Youth Committee, and the dedicated staff that provide support and guidance, and supports inclusive communities in several ways:

The conference provides an opportunity for queer and trans* youth to network and share strategies for making their schools, homes, and communities safer for those who identify as queer, trans* and/or an ally.

The conference fee is low and has often been waived where there are financial barriers. There is a reported increase in the sense of social connectedness and belonging for those who attend, including those who work or volunteer at the conference, and those who present.

The conference helps to build a caring community, and increases the number of allies who can support queer and trans* youth, and it succeeds because it honours

youth's right to self-identity and to express their gender freely. It combines first-hand experiences with world-renowned experts to create an environment of support, learning and independence.

Since 2014, the now weekly Whatever drop-in program, provides a safe landing place for youth, young adults and their allies, and continues to grow in numbers. It has become known as the place to come, and regularly sees youth from West Vancouver, North Vancouver, Bowen Island, and Vancouver. Youth who attend the Whatever drop-in are able to get further involved in planning community services for queer and trans* youth through the Whatever Youth Committee.

3. ECONOMIC IMPACT

How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?

The Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference is a low-cost, accessible professional forum and networking opportunity for youth, families and allies across BC.

West Vancouver's parks, community centres, and programs are available to individuals of any gender, demographic, income, size or shape, ability, or background in a way that affirms their dignity, integrity and knowledge. Creating communities that address the needs of trans* and queer youth can boost their self-confidence and self-esteem and provide them with positive experience that will help them in all other areas of their lives (Transgender Law and Policy Institute 2009).

Creating a community that is welcome to trans* and queer youth means that they will continue to participate in civic life. It also means that their friends and family will accompany them as they participate in their community. By being inclusive, the local economy is positively impacted by the many trans* and queer youth, their families and allies, who chose to live, work, and socialize in West Vancouver.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY

How has this program/project improved accountability to citizens of your local government?

The Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference grew out of an expressed need from, and engagement with, members of the Whatever youth drop-in. Because the youth who attend the drop-in and participate in the conferences also access other services within the District of West Vancouver, there is high degree of

accountability that their experiences with other programs and services be on par with their experiences at the Whatever drop-in and the annual conferences.

Those who are involved with the Whatever youth drop-in and the Whatever Youth Committee are quick to let staff know when there is an opportunity to improve services and/or service delivery. For example, an outcome from the 2015 conference was increased training for front line staff. This training, titled Diversity Training: An Overview of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, was conducted by Elisabeth Cooke, Managing Director of Inclusivity.

In addition, at the request of the Whatever Youth Committee, who wished to "see themselves" in the community, the District purchased trans and pride flags to put up at facility sites across West Vancouver. These flags, which contain the District of West Vancouver's logo and identify its youth service, often fly along busy corridors such as Marine Drive, and are visible several times per year, most notably during the annual Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference, and during Pride Week and Pride month.

5. RESULTS

How has this program/project resulted in excellence in action in your community?

Youth who participated in the two annual conferences are connected to others from across the province who may have similar experiences, and through connecting and sharing, they report feeling less isolated. Youth and their families who participate in the annual Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference make new connections and networks that help them navigate the many complexities of living in a predominantly binary society. Creating a conference that is welcoming of other professionals who support youth and families (e.g. teachers, counsellors, youth workers) broadens community support for queer and trans* youth who may be at risk.

Family Services of the North Shore attended the 2015 conference and in an interview with the North Shore News, said, "What that conference showed us was that across the North Shore there's a lot of families and youth that are really looking for more information, more education and more support." Family Services of the North Shore realized their potential to use their expertise to help close the gap, and are working with Elisabeth Cooke of Inclusivity to have their agency staff undergo additional training. They have also held two focus groups, one for queer and trans* youth, and the other for their families. The purpose of the focus groups is to gather data, stories and insight that will be used in the development of potential new

programs. See the full story at <http://www.nsnews.com/living/health-wellness/fsns-seeks-to-better-serve-trans-youth-1.2264000>

6. TEAMWORK

Tell us about the teamwork involved in making this program/project possible.

The Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference grew out of a 2013 project funded by the Vancouver Foundation's Youth Philanthropy Council for a "North Shore QSA Symposium and Networking Events", which was designed to provide a coordinated, youth-driven engagement between QSAs across the North Shore, as well as an opportunity to educate parents/guardians, teachers and service providers about how to best support queer and trans* youth.

From this initial funding from the Vancouver Foundation, the District's Youth Services team were able to build on the momentum and develop free networking activities to better engage youth who identified as queer, trans* and their allies.

The final outcome from the 2014 Vancouver Foundation funding was the first two-day Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation Conference in December 2014, and was followed by second conference September 2015. The District of West Vancouver is excited to offer an expanded three-day conference in October 2016, and plans to rename the annual event, Genders West.

7. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

In 2015, the Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference was recognized by the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA) for a PERC Award for Management Innovation and Ingenuity. The award was presented at the annual BCRPA Provincial Awards Ceremony in Victoria in May 2015.

While District staff are seeing the start of emerging training and conferences for queer and trans* youth, their families and allies in other municipalities across the lower mainland, the District's two-day, Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation Conference for youth is believed to be the first of its kind in BC. Previous to this, youth and families wanting information on issues related to gender identity and inclusion reported having to travel to Seattle, WA to attend the Gender Odyssey conference. Many could not attend Gender Odyssey because of the financial cost of travel outside of BC, and because of documentation challenges.

Over the two years that the Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference has run, many who have attended said that these conferences were their first

experience being in the same room as individuals “just like them”. Furthermore, having professionals and teams involved in supporting the ongoing health care needs of queer and trans* youth present at the conferences has helped to break down barriers for families who were previously unaware of how to obtain the services their youth want and need.

8. SUSTAINABILITY

What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative?(e.g. staff time, resources, financial)

Existing staff resources support the planning and execution of the Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference from within the District of West Vancouver’s annual Parks, Culture and Community Services divisional budget. .

In addition, the District has been successful in receiving small donations from service clubs and organizations offering grants to cover the costs of the annual conference.

There is a nominal fee of \$25/person to attend the conference for one day, or \$40/person for the weekend. The District’s Financial Access Program is available to support families with low income, where the cost to attend is a barrier: it is common for conference participants who travel from outside the Lower Mainland to request financial support. In 2016, the District will implement a \$75 fee for professionals to attend.

The successful Whatever youth drop-in and Whatever Youth Committee enables the District to put on this annual conference. These two ongoing services provide a connection with youth in all stages of identity.

9. BEST PRACTICES

How do the processes behind the program/project, and the subsequent results, serve as an example of best practices?

Embedding the Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference into the Parks, Culture and Community Services work plan demonstrates the District of West Vancouver’s commitment to continuing the dialogue on ensuring the West Vancouver and its facilities, is a safe and welcoming place for all people, including trans* and queer youth and their families.

As a result of the conference, the District achieved a higher level of engagement with youth and young adults who identify as queer and trans*. Youth reported being more comfortable in community settings because safe and inclusive activities were

offered throughout the year. The District has also cast its net far for the conference and has made connections with professionals whose participation in the conferences has greatly enhance the credibility and experience for conference participants.

The Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference brings together the leading medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologist, and allied health providers with expertise in queer and trans* issues in BC. In 2015, the conference grew to include speakers such as Harlen Pruden, Dr. Melady Preece, Dr. Chris Booth, and the team from the Endocrine Clinic at BC Children's Hospital, under Dr. Metzger, as well as a youth panel and a parent panel. In total 141 people attended the second conference from across the Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and the interior of BC.

10. TRANSFERABILITY

How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?

The opportunity to share health care knowledge with professionals, families, youth, and the community through the conference is invaluable. The conference provides a unique two-day forum to foster empathy through education and awareness, connecting people and their families to service providers, and to enhance peer and community support networks in the process.

11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?

There have been three important learnings with respect to the annual Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation conference:

In order to produce a successful annual event such as this conference, there is a need for continuity of leadership and adequate support throughout the planning and execution phases of the conference.

Credibility must be earned with youth who volunteer their time to help create the conference. Having a lead person with knowledge and expertise on queer and trans* issues is imperative in ensuring that conference attendees feel welcome and safe to participate.

The success of a conference that crosses many divides, requires committed, quality partnerships, working together to support people and their families in their journey.

12. TELL US MORE

Please share any other information you think may support your submission.

We have learned that being involved in West Vancouver's queer and trans* programs, activities and services such as the Diverse Genders and Sexual Orientation Conference, the Whatever Drop-In, and the Whatever Youth Committee, creates a beneficial community circle of opportunity and possibility. By providing supporting environments for youth and families in everything that we do, helps to connect them to appropriate service providers. The sharing of resources gives individuals the information they need to access or get referrals to specialized services.