

# CURRENTS

AUGUST 2025

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homelessness



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VANCOUVER ISLAND MENTAL HEALTH SOCIETY



# Nanaimo comes up short on meeting basic needs of people experiencing homelessness

**CHRIS BUSH. NANAIMO NEWS BULLETIN**

Homelessness continues to grow in Nanaimo, but **the city is coming up short with existing services**, such as meal programs, emergency shelters, supportive housing, hygiene facilities, daytime services and health care to help people who are unhoused, according to a new report.

The assessment was presented in a city staff report at a governance and priorities committee meeting May 12. Creation of the report was directed by city council last fall to as an update on basic needs of Nanaimo's population of unhoused people after **last year's point-in-time count tallied at 621 experiencing homelessness, a figure that climbed from 515 people** in the previous year's count.

"With that we know that **70 per cent of people living on the streets have no access to overnight or daytime shelters**," said Dave LaBerge, the city's director of public safety. "Actually the best estimates about **actual homeless numbers are 1,000 in Nanaimo**."

The report outlines meal programs, emergency shelters, supportive housing, hygiene facilities, daytime services and health care provided by the city and its community partners including Snuneymuxw First Nation, B.C. Housing, Island Health, Vancouver Island Regional Library and Nanaimo Systems Planning Organization.

"**This growing need is really compounded by the loss of key services**," said Christy Wood, city manager of social planning. "In the last 10 years we've lost some very important basic needs services within our community. We've lost a drop-in centre. We've lost some meal provision. We've lost other shower programs in the past ... and basic needs, as you know, are foundational to support of stability and wellness and they're often the first point of contact for long-term services."

**Six organizations currently provide emergency meal services.** Most meals are distributed outdoors through outreach programs or from fixed program locations. Funding is limited and often comes from private donations, volunteers or community grants.

**The 7-10 Club closure in 2021 followed by the closure of the Salva-**

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tion Army's dining hall at the New Hope Centre created a gap in the provision of indoor meal services, Wood said. The city has provided "bridge funding" until other funding sources could be found, but so far, no permanent funding source exists.

"Nevertheless, our agencies are very creative to offer that limited meal service through outreach supported by private donations," she said.

The Salvation Army's New Hope Centre stopped offering drop-in showering to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic and now limits it to shelter guests, so there remains a single shower program at Caledonia Park, a service that is now operated by Nanaimo Family Life Association. On average, 30 people used the facility daily totaling 7,500 showers in 2024 and shower usage there has quadrupled from 2018 to 2024, the report noted.

The leisure economic access pass program allows people to access Nanaimo recreation facilities with showers. Nanaimo Family Life Association collaborates with city staff to adjudicate LEAP applications for

**Nanaimo currently has about 10 per cent of the shelter capacity that it needs...based on the point-in-time count...compared with Kelowna which has 89 per cent of the shelter capacity it needs...and Kamloops with 67 per cent**

clients accessing emergency shelter and other support programs. The overdose prevention site downtown also opens its washrooms to people who are using the site. The city's public washrooms and drinking water fountains are, otherwise, often the only sanitation resources for unsheltered people.

For daytime warming centre services, the city partners

with various agencies during the winter months.

"We know that these warming centre services have acted as essential lifelines, offering food, clothing and safe spaces during the coldest months and we know that after the warming centres close ... often unsheltered individuals have nowhere to go and often relocate to doorways or businesses, playgrounds or parks because of the lack of daytime services," Wood said.

The report noted that RCMP bike patrol and community safety officers had difficulties relocating people experiencing homelessness from public areas because of the lack of purpose-built drop-in or warming spaces, so recreation centre lobbies and public libraries that are not designed to handle people who are "heavily substance-affected" or have "acute or complex needs" have been used increasingly to provide temporary relief from extreme weather.

The city has partnered with the federally funded Reaching Home program to fund a drop-in hub operated by Island Crisis Care Society

at 55 Victoria Rd., which offers **access to food, hygiene supplies and clothing, plus other social and health connections**. The city report tallied 6,200 visits in the centre's first three months of operations.

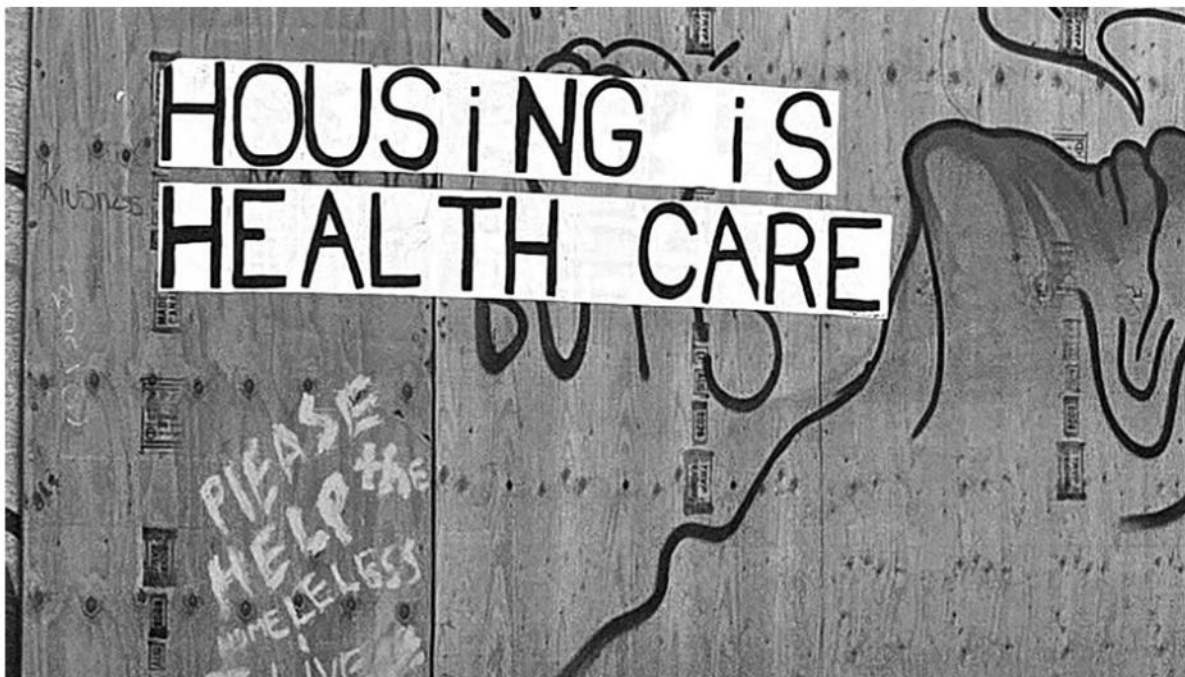
B.C. Housing uses the hub as an access point for the province's HEART and HEARTH programs that link unsheltered people to supports in temporary housing and B.C. Housing has also funded **20 overnight shelter beds operated by Nanaimo Family Life Association** until May 31.

Nanaimo currently has about 10 per cent of the shelter capacity that it needs, based on the point-in-time count, compared with Kelowna which has 89 per cent of the shelter capacity it needs, and Kamloops with 67 per cent. B.C. Housing provides much of the emergency shelter funding, while some service providers that fund their own shelter beds are looking to B.C. Housing for help to expand the service.


Supportive housing unit numbers are set to double in Nanaimo. So far, Wood said, there are 329 permanent and temporary supportive housing units currently providing housing with about 342 more proposed.

A collaboration between the city's public safety and IT and GIS departments is working on the **social services management mapping project to develop a creative interactive online map** to help staff analyze the "relationship between social services and neighbourhood vitality, identify under-served areas or those at risk of social conflict and disorder, and support placement of new essential services including basic needs programs while balancing neighbourhood considerations," the report noted. ■


**Chris Bush** is a photographer/reporter with the *Nanaimo News Bulletin*. His article was published on May 26, 2025 and is reprinted with permission.



# VIMHS ON SOCIAL MEDIA


**Vancouver Island Mental Health Society - VIMHS**  
Published by Hootsuite · June 18 ·

"It has been over a week since I tripped and fell on Blanshard Street. My cuts and bruises are fading, but my memory of who actually came to my aid will be with me for ... [See more](#)



**Comment: Let's look out for each other downtown**  
We never know when we're going to need a hand so let's remember to help each other, says a Victoria resident who was helped by a homeless...

[See insights and ads](#) [Boost post](#)

 701 90 comments 163 shares

VIMHS shares stories, articles, and information across four social media streams: Facebook, X, Bluesky and Instagram. We shared information about a Victoria resident's letter to the Times Colonist about how she was helped by a homeless man, published on June 18 (image above; reprinted right). It generated 701 reactions, 90 comments, and 163 shares. *Find us and follow us across social media...*



FACEBOOK



BLUESKY



X (TWITTER)



INSTAGRAM

*A commentary by a Victoria resident...*

It has been over a week since I tripped and fell on Blanshard Street. My cuts and bruises are fading, but my memory of who actually came to my aid will be with me for a very long time. On Saturday, June 7, 2025, just before 2 p.m., I tripped on an uneven sidewalk on Blanshard at View Street. I landed on my face. Well-dressed people scurried by, careful not to step on me ... but didn't stop.

A man sleeping in a doorway jumped up, surveyed the scene, made sure the contents of my purse was secured and told me to stay put as he performed a primary first-aid sweep. He asked me a series of questions to determine my condition, he then helped me up and assured me that my valuables were secured. He looked at my face, bleeding from my lip and nose.

He apologized that the napkins in his pocket weren't sanitary and to keep the pressure with my hand.

He asked for my name and if he could take me somewhere safe. I explained I was just on my lunch break from work. My work was close by.

I asked for his name. Marcel, he said. Marcel insisted on walking me back to work. I protested, as this would mean he would have to leave all of his valuables behind. He told me that if someone were to take something, they obviously needed it and he would make do.

On our walk he kept apologizing for his state. He was embarrassed that the napkins and tissues he had weren't clean enough to use. He kept checking in on me, evaluating my condition as we approached the office building.

When we arrived, I thanked him for seeing me and helping, when others hurried by.

Marcel said he understood being invisible, "but we need to look out for each other."

I gave him some cash. He said, "no, no, that isn't why I helped."

I explained that it would make me feel better, knowing he had left all his valuables behind to walk me back.

I work downtown, I walk to and from work. Yes, I am sad to see the under-served, but I don't feel unsafe.

This episode of those well-fed, well-dressed, just stepping around a person on the ground who needed help, affirmed my feelings that they, too, are uncomfortable. Instead of approaching our under-served citizens with compassion, they claim safety issues and how it is an "unsightly" mess downtown.

Let's foster a spirit like Marcel, let's look out for each other and if someone needs something, let's help out. I am sure we can all make do.

(P. S. Our sidewalks being uneven are more likely to be a safety issue than those who have to sleep on them.) ■

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**I O A D 2 0 2 5**

## **One big family, driven by hope**

**Every August 31, International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD) brings a global community together to take action on overdose. Hold an event, spread the message, take action today.**

**#IOAD2025 #OverdoseAware #EndOverdose**

**#OneBigFamily**

**overdose day.com**

This International Overdose Awareness Day, we come together as one big family to take action on overdose.

The overdose crisis doesn't just shatter our families; it fractures our communities.

The losses go deeper than one person, one family or one neighborhood. They ripple out into classrooms, workplaces and the spaces we all share. They cross borders between cities, states and nations.

But in a time when people are searching for connection and safety, overdose also reminds us that our lives are deeply intertwined.

We often instinctively protect our own – our children, our parents, our siblings. We believe in second chances for our loved ones but struggle to extend that same compassion to others. But what if we saw each other as one big family, bound not just by blood, but by shared experiences, responsibility and commitment to each other?

This International Overdose Awareness Day let's imagine a new meaning of what family can be. A family driven by hope, love and action. We are one big family – not just because we share in the pain of loss, but because we share in the power to change what comes next.

This August 31, we move beyond awareness. We organize, we show up, and we take action. Because no one should carry this grief alone. Every story shared, every voice raised and every step we take brings us closer to a future free from overdose. ■

## Island Health marks International Overdose Awareness Day events with memorial stations across the region

Island Health invites anyone who has been impacted by the toxic drug crisis to **remember their loved ones** at in-person or digital interactive memorials as a part of International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD), the world's largest annual campaign to **raise awareness about the ongoing toxic drug poisoning crisis.**

International Overdose Awareness Day takes place on August 31. This year's theme, "One Big Family," is a reminder that we are all connected—and that together, through compassion and awareness, we can honour lives lost and support those impacted by overdose and the crisis.

Starting August 25, **purple chairs will be stationed at 18 Island Health service locations** in eight communities around the region: Campbell River, Nanaimo, Oceanside, Comox Valley, Port Alberni, Duncan, Westshore, and Victoria. These memorial exhibits will also include information and resources, purple ribbon pins and an interactive memory board.

"We are nine years into the B.C. toxic drug crisis, and it is unrelenting," says Island Health Board Chair Leah Hollins.

"Purple has long been used as the colour to represent lives lost to the ongoing global crisis.

These purple chairs symbolize the loved ones lost, providing a quiet space for rest, reflection and remembrance."

**Unregulated drug poisoning remains the leading cause of death among those 19 to 59 years old in Island Health**

Unregulated drug poisoning remains the **leading cause of death among those 19 to 59 years old in Island Health.** It is also the second leading cause of overall potential years of life lost in the population, second only to

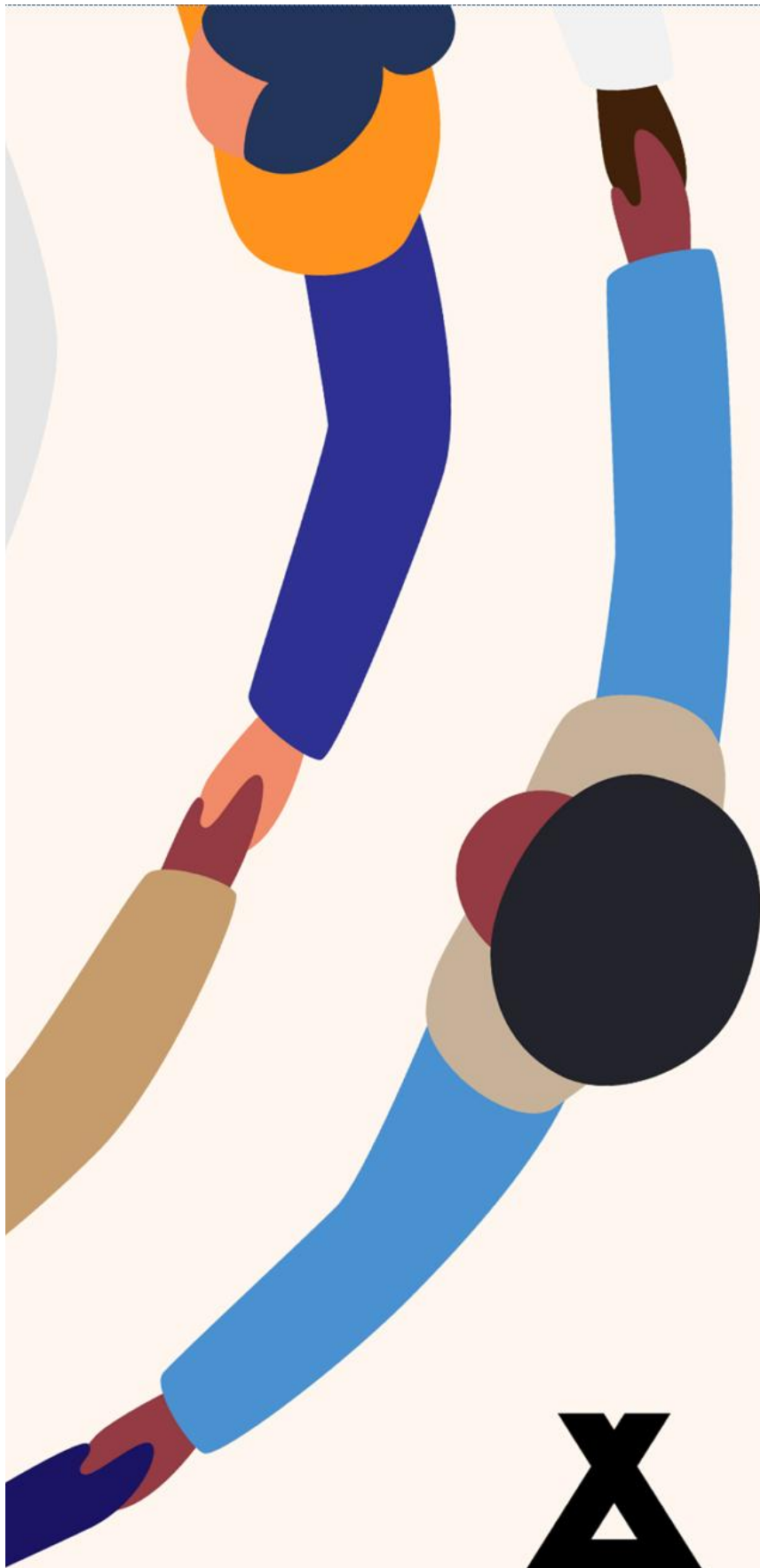
**cancer.** In the first half of 2025 toxic drug poisonings have taken the lives of 163 people across the Island Health region: 30 in North Vancouver Island, 77 in Central Vancouver Island, and 56 in South Vancouver Island.

In addition to in-person memorial stations Island Health is hosting an online memory wall for people to share memories, special words, and photos highlighting the One Big Family impacted. ■

An illustration of several hands of different colors (orange, grey, blue, brown, tan) holding each other in a circular formation, symbolizing unity and support. The hands are stylized with simple, rounded shapes and are arranged in a ring around the central text.

# ONE BIG FAMILY

DRIVEN BY HOPE



**International Overdose  
Awareness Day**



31 AUGUST

—  
INTERNATIONAL OVERDOSE  
AWARENESS DAY

WE NEED  
TO TALK  
ABOUT  
OVERDOSE.

TIME TO  
REMEMBER.  
TIME TO ACT.



International Overdose  
Awareness Day

A Penington Institute Initiative

# A look at our work over the past year

TARYN O'FLANAGAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Welcome and thank you to everyone for attending our AGM this year. I am so pleased to provide this year's annual report.

Although our year started out with some challenges, **our team found a way to turn the challenges into learning opportunities that have strengthened our capacity and our ability to navigate emergency situations.** In October, there were

two fires at VIMHS buildings within 24 hours. Both fires resulted in the displacement of tenants and significant remediation that remains ongoing. Fortunately, there were no lives lost. However, these critical incidents **helped our team to understand more about emergency management planning and protocols on many levels.** I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to our leadership team, who were instrumental in attending the scenes, supporting emergency response teams, and **supporting tenants through the displacement process.**

**Although our year started out with some challenges, our team found a way to turn the challenges into learning opportunities that have strengthened our capacity and our ability to navigate emergency situations.**

In alignment with our strategic plan and a commitment to continual learning, we were able to offer several **training and development opportunities across the organization.** In September and October, we held two Village workshops for all Nanaimo team members. This experiential workshop explores our personal role in supporting **the revival of the values that worked so beautifully**

**in Indigenous villages for thousands of years.** Participants were also supported to explore in-depth **the effects of residential schools and Canada's policy**

**of assimilation.** The feedback from staff was very positive and we intend to continue to offer this workshop for all our teams.

In October, the **Employee Family and Assistance Program was launched** at VIMHS. The absence of an EFAP program was evident, and we were able to allocate the funds to implement and extend this service to all VIMHS team members.

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In November, we sent 8 members of our leadership and front-line team to the **BC Non-Profit Housing Central Conference** in Vancouver. This was a great opportunity to **learn wise practices in housing, make connections, and team build**. We also provided a leadership retreat for all VIMHS managers and front-line supervisors to come together and participate in leadership training facilitated by Vantage Point. This summer, we continued to offer **Non-Violent Crisis Intervention** and **The Working Mind** group mental health training.

In May, The board of directors and staff attended the annual **Board Retreat**. During this retreat, we were facilitated through a process to identify our **organizations mission, vision, and values**. The experience was impactful and resulted in a mission, vision, and values that are reflective of the work the Society does today.

This was another year of new opportunities, and growth. The majority of 2025 has largely been focused on **opening the new supportive housing site at 1030 Old Victoria Road**. In March, one of our long-time staff members **Dolly Earl-Smith** joined the **leadership team** as the manager of both the new site and

the Nanaimo Sobering and Assessment Center. We are pleased to share that we have **fully staffed our team and started welcoming new tenants** in July.

**Gillian Baker** has been promoted to the role of Director of Operations, and this is a well-deserved recognition. For the past 9 years, Gillian has worked tirelessly for this Society. She has been a **mentor and operational lead through all VIMHS growth**. This past year, Gillian took the lead

while I was on maternity leave and supported our leaders and team members. I would like to sincerely thank Gillian for all the support and dedication. I would also like to congratulate

**Kara Balbar** on moving into the Gateway management position and **Camille Eade** on her promotion to housing manager in Nanaimo.

The work of the Vancouver Island Mental Health Society is **significantly diverse, and impactful**. Each day, our teams support well over 200 people to access needed services and support — over 200 people per day in housing, 26 people with sobering and assessment services, and multiple types of education and training sessions to community members every year. The **overdose prevention site in Campbell Riv-**

er has supported over 33,000 visits this year.

Thank you to our Board of Directors who have volunteered and provided their time and expertise. It is challenging to find dedicated volunteers in the busyness of our world. But I can honestly say that we have a board full of compassion and care for our community. **Your support for VIMHS, the staff, and our clients has been your top focus** and has helped us on all levels to feel supported in the work that we do. Thank you for your **quick and efficient decision making, and for dedicating needed funds** to support our staff and our growth.

**This collective impact would not be possible without the heart of the Society—the frontline team members at VIMHS that carry out our mission and vision daily.**

It is with immense gratitude and

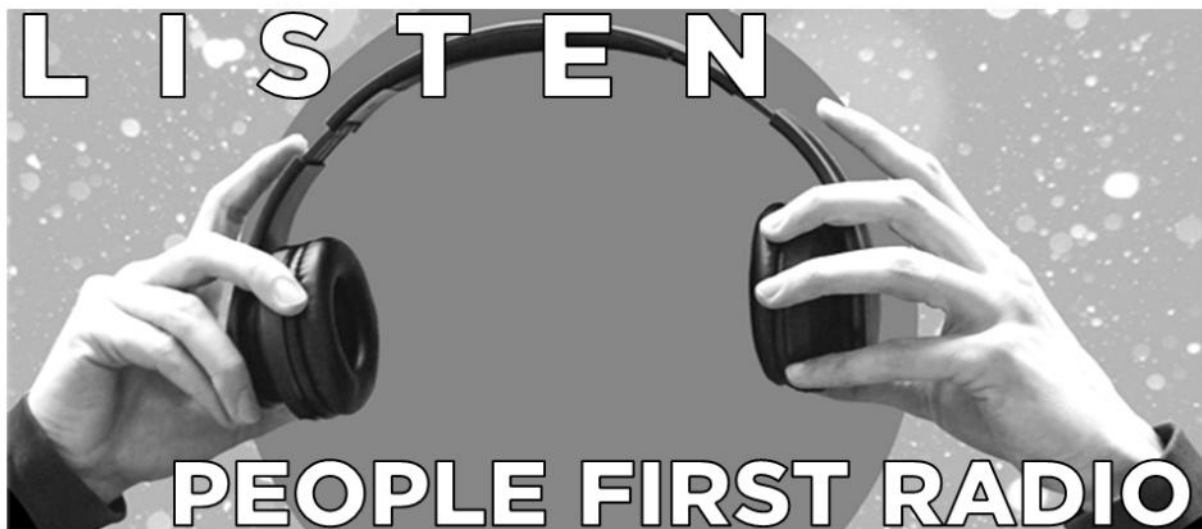
thanks to our teams for their support, and dedication to the individuals that VIMHS supports. **Thank you for choosing VIMHS, sharing your gifts, and taking such great care of our teams and clients.**

And lastly, I must acknowledge and celebrate our leadership and administrative team. The backbone and steady foundation for our teams. **Your commitment and dedication to the Society, the well-being of our teams, and your care for our communities most vulnerable is unmatched.**

In closing, I am once again thankful to be able to share with you the main highlights from yet another great year at VIMHS. I believe that this next year will be spent **building upon our successes and furthering our strategic goals.** Thank you all for your support of the Vancouver Island Mental Health Society. ■



*VIMHS executive director **Taryn O’Flanagan** (right) thanked outgoing board chair **Brock Williamson** for his years of dedication, work and support on the VIMHS board of directors.*



*An artist overcoming  
physical, emotional, and  
financial barriers*

At age 42, Opal Dar has hit a major milestone as an artist.

Dar is getting ready to release their debut album *Birds Hurting Birds Who Hurt Birds*, recorded on Gabriola Island at The Noise Floor Studio.

The Sooke based artist deals with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome, and says despite facing a number of barriers, they were tenacious in putting in the work to make the album happen.

"I really believe that my art has a place in this world, and really it came down to kind of my tenacity when I realized there were a few barriers, but one of them was



money. And when money's a barrier, I say, no, that's just boring. That can't be the reason."

"I have to do everything possible to make sure this is happening without the money."

Dar spoke about some of the challenges people living on disability allowances face. ▀



<https://vancouverislandmentalhealthsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/1094-opaldar-april24-2025.mp3>

**People First Radio is a VIMHS weekly one-hour radio broadcast to educate and raise awareness about issues related to health and wellness — with a particular emphasis on topics related to mental illness and mental health, homelessness and housing, and addiction, harm reduction and recovery.**



**PFR is shared on FM radio broadcasts and Apple, Google, and Spotify podcasts**  
[vancouverislandmentalhealthsociety.org/peoplefirstradio/](https://vancouverislandmentalhealthsociety.org/peoplefirstradio/)



## *Luke Galati's first-hand account of his mental health-related hospital stay*

As a journalist and documentary maker, Luke Galati says he's learned that good storytelling has a through line.

"It has something that takes you from the beginning, the middle to the end," he said.

In the two documentaries Galati has made about mental health, he says he's been that through line.

"Using myself as the vehicle and my experience to then speak to other people and then use some of the other skills that I've developed, like interviewing, like incorporating music, soundbites and storytelling, it's created a way for me to use the best parts of my education with also my passion and with something that I think will help Canadians and hopefully people around the world."

Galati lives with bipolar disorder. He spoke with **People First Radio** about some of his experiences both personal and professional with the condition. He put together an audio documentary about bipolar called **Dreaming of Better**. He says the experience re-affirmed for him the

possibility of leading a successful life.

"I think that sometimes when people hear bipolar, they think like, 'oh, they're crazy forever and they're doomed,'" he said. "But I saw actually the exact opposite."

"You have to learn how to cope a little bit, but you know, you can be incredibly creative, you can be incredibly professional, you can be a lawyer, you can be a filmmaker, you can be anything you want. I just think you just gotta take that extra mile to really take care of yourself and know what your triggers are."

Galati recently shared a first person perspective of a three month hospital stay in the psychiatric ward he went through in 2023 in a piece for CBC.

"When I was going to the hospital, when I was struggling with my mental health, I didn't really know what to expect," he said.

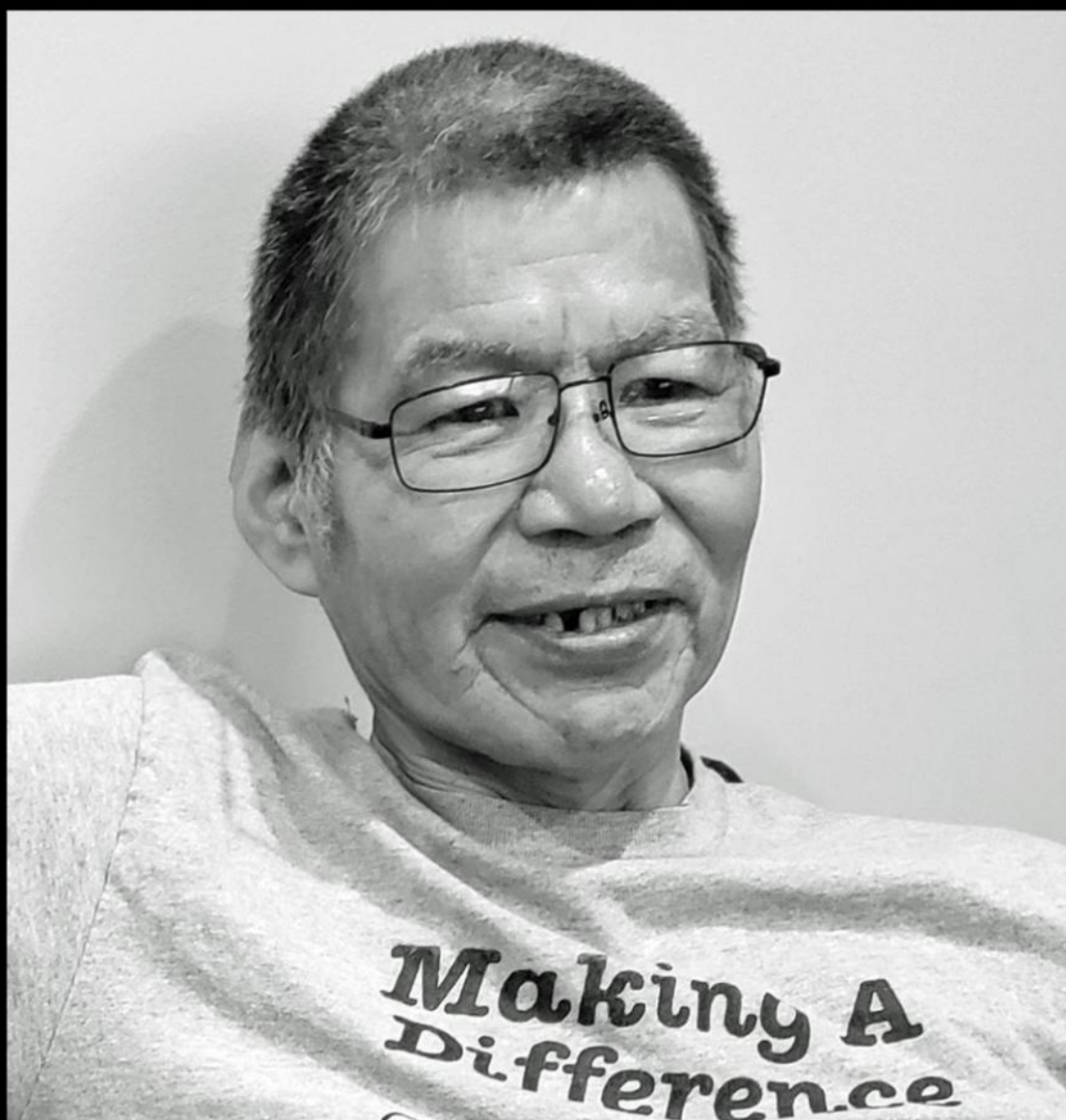
Galati says he'd want someone going into that same experience to know that it's one they can make it through to the other side of.

"I think I'd want them to know just like this is temporary, you know?" He said. "I think like if you'd never like been there before and you're being held like against your will or even if you do consent, I think just knowing hey, this is temporary, it's not a forever thing and it's something that you know, you can get through."

"I also hope that someone in that situation has some kind of family, friends or support who can visit them." ■



<https://vancouverislandmentalhealthsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/1099-lukegalati-jun05-2025.mp3>



Alfred Andrew, beloved VIMHS colleague and long-time team member passed away in April 2025. He was one of our most dedicated, hardworking and loyal team members—with an unwavering passion for giving back to the community. Alfred began his journey with VIMHS as a Sobering Centre support worker in Campbell River, and then worked in housing support at our Rosebowl Bridge to Housing program. Most recently, Alfred brought his steady presence and quiet leadership to the Q'Waxsem housing team and tenants.

Alfred was more than just a valued team member—he was a mentor to both staff and tenants, a calm and constant presence during every shift, and a quiet but strong advocate for fairness, safety, his team, and his community. Alfred's impact on our teams and organization will not be forgotten. He was a joy to work with and will be deeply missed.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to Alfred's family, friends, and all who had the honour of working alongside him. ▪



*Image: harm reduction advocacy collective zine, hractoronto.net*

Vancouver Island Mental Health Society (VIMHS) is a charitable Vancouver Island based organization demonstrating excellence in psychosocial rehabilitation for adults with mental health and addictions concerns, and/or cognitive challenges. We engage communities through programs that promote recovery, social inclusion, safe housing, and public education.



VANCOUVER ISLAND  
MENTAL HEALTH SOCIETY

[vimhs.org](http://vimhs.org)