# Helping Youth with Housing

Announcer: You're listening to Under One Roof, a Covenant House Vancouver production. Under One Roof is your opportunity to hear conversations with subject matter experts on a variety of social justice and public policy issues. Covenant House Vancouver is dedicated to serving all youth with absolute respect and unconditional love, helping youth experiencing homelessness and protecting and safeguarding all youth in need. Please note that the views [00:00:30] of our guests do not necessarily reflect the board, management, or staff here at Covenant House Vancouver. And now, Under One Roof.

Mark S: Welcome to Under One Roof, a Covenant House Vancouver production. My name is Mark Savard and I'll be your host for today's episode. This month. Covenant House Vancouver is thrilled to be speaking with Marc Lefebvre, Covenant House's Housing Support Worker, on the topic of housing for youth. Welcome to the program, Marc.

Marc: Well, thank you for having me.

Mark S: [00:01:00] Well, thanks for taking the time with us. We're looking forward to this episode. And to get started, why don't you tell us a little bit about who you are, your background and what drew you to Covenant House?

Marc: Sure. Well, my background and what drew me to Covenant House, I've been working in social services my entire life. I started out in Ontario. I was working mostly in group home and residential treatment settings with adolescents [00:01:30] who were living with mental illness or significant behavioural problems. So I did that for many years. At some point life actually took me all the way to Chicago in the United States. And I was very fortunate in Chicago. I got this job with a place called Thresholds and I was working with adults who were living with mental illness and substance use disorders. And so I was on a team and our mission was to support these individuals, [00:02:00] to live as independently as is possible in the community. So depending on their, you know, what they needed, there were some individuals that we might see every single day, deliver their medication to them, spend time talking to them and listening to them, accompanying them to, you know, important appointments like with their psychiatrist, for med reviews or medical appointments or legal issues.

Marc: It was really, really a great job, but eventually I wanted to come back to Canada, [00:02:30] and I had some family in Vancouver, family that I'd moved to Vancouver. So 12 years ago, I moved to Vancouver and I remember when I moved here, my mother who's almost 80, at the time was still working as a nurse on the North Shore. And she told me about this place called Covenant House and suggested that I should check it out. And so I did. I called and I asked if I could do a tour. And they said, yes, [00:03:00] I went to our old building on Drake Street, actually demolished now. And we're, we're building a new one. That's gonna open fairly soon. I don't have an opening date yet, but we're very excited. It's a 10-storey building, but at the time it was just a little building. And I remember doing the tour and talking to staff there and I ended up doing an interview for a job. The guy that still worked at Covenant House. He was my manager. Then he's still a manager. His name is Kevin Van Buskirk. And thankfully hired me. And 12 years later, I'm still at [00:03:30] Covenant House.

Mark S: Oh, wow. So you started right away in housing from the get go

Marc: Pretty much. If I recall correctly, I started on a part-time basis. And very shortly after I started the housing, one of the housing workers. I think left for another job. And so this posting came open and I said, I want it. And I interviewed, and I got it. And I've been doing that ever since.

Mark S: Wow. So you've essentially been the program all these years.

Marc: Yes.

Mark S: Wow. [00:04:00] Well, now that we've gotten to know you a little bit better and why don't you tell us about your role as a housing support worker now here at Covenant House?

Marc: Sure. The role of housing worker at Covenant House is actually pretty wide ranging, which I'll explain as we go along. But, in a nutshell, my job involved helping youth who are up to the age of 25 to find housing, if they're homeless or couch surfing, or maybe they're living in our shelter or another shelter, [00:04:30] my job is to help individuals to maintain their housing once they've secured it. And what I mean by that is, that in life, life can be complicated at the best of times, and there's 1,000,001 things that could cause a person who's housed to be marginally housed, or to be at risk of losing their housing. So a big, big part of my role is also to help people to maintain their housing. And I do that in a lot of different ways.

Mark S: I'm very curious about that aspect of it, [00:05:00] because given the challenges that our youth face and where they're coming from, how do you help youth maintain housing?

Marc: So a typical day for me is, I like to get to work early. So I like to get there usually around seven in the morning, maybe 7:30 at the latest, and because it's quiet and I find I can get a lot done before my colleagues start arriving. So, you know, I'll be answering emails from youth or text messages from youth, or maybe, reviewing referrals from Covenant House, social workers, [00:05:30] or youth workers that have sent me questions or things like that. So I do a lot of little things before other people arrive, and I plan my day, obviously I plan my day. And then at some point around 8:30 in the morning, I work on the CSS team at Covenant House—that's Community Support Services. So our team will get together for a short meeting to review, you know, any new information that has come up regarding youth overnight.

Marc: But also so that [00:06:00] everybody knows what everybody else is doing, during the day. And yeah, so we do that. And then our drop-in opens at nine in the morning. And as one of our building services, workers likes to say, “Nine o'clock is showtime.” And that's when youth start, you know, coming into the drop in. So for me as a housing worker, I might have an appointment scheduled right at nine o'clock with a youth, and they might be say a youth from our Pender program [00:06:30] who's come over and want some help to work on their housing plan. So the first thing I'll do is I'm trying to get to know them. So I'll sit down with them and I'm trying to assess where are they at in terms of their understanding of what is actually involved in looking for and applying for housing, what is their budget?

Marc: Which means like how much can they afford for rent? Do they have any preferences or where they want to live? So for example, if somebody's has a job, maybe at a restaurant [00:07:00] in downtown Vancouver, they don't get off work until midnight. And they probably don't want to look for housing. That's far out, you know, in Delta or somewhere like that, where it's going to be hard to get to. So once I've kind of assessed that stuff, then I'll get down to nitty gritty questions with the youth. And, usually the very first question is, okay, you want help with housing? How much money do you have saved in total, in your bank account, [00:07:30] in your wallet, <laugh> hidden in your mattress somewhere? Like how much, what are we working with? How much money do you have? And then depending on how they answer, we'll start to actually develop a real housing plan.

Marc: If the person says, well, actually I don't really have any money at all. Then I'll explain that in order to secure housing, an individual needs to have enough money saved to cover both first month's rent and a security deposit. And I'll start talking about, [00:08:00] you know, how much is rent cost in Metro Vancouver, and it's very expensive. So for that particular youth, if that's the case, then really our first order of business is how are you going to obtain that money? Is that by getting a job? Is that by applying for income assistance? Do they have a disability? Do they have an underlying disability? You know, it's very simple. You don't [00:08:30] have the money, you can't rent anywhere. So that will become the first order of business. You got to understand when, when somebody comes into the drop in, they might be completely street homeless, living in a park or under a bridge and accessing our drop in.

Marc: They come to get their basic needs met. So food, a hot shower, our clothing room, clean clothing, [00:09:00] our laundry, we have laundry machines that they can use. They can wash their sleeping bag or their blanket or whatever clothes they have. It's about meeting their basic needs. So they might come in and ask me about housing, but I got to be careful to build a relationship, but not really push them in any direction. And, and if they don't have money, they don't have a source of income. Then probably connecting with income assistance is going to be number one. We've been very fortunate [00:09:30] at Covenant House a few years ago, I think it was a couple years ago. We started to have a community integration specialist, meaning a welfare worker, I guess it's what you would call them for the ministry of social development and poverty reduction, who was assigned to Covenant House to support our youth two days a week.

Marc: Well, basically two days a week. And what this person does is he, pre-COVID, would attend in person, [00:10:00] during COVID, it was mostly done over the phone or that kind of thing, but he, and he's a great guy, by the way, shout out to Kyle, but what he would do is he will actually meet the youth in the drop in and go through all of the necessary paperwork that's required to apply for income assistance. The alternative, prior to having him, what we would have to do is either: a) give the youth, some bus [00:10:30] tickets, tell them where the income assistance office was and send them on their own, which, I mean, the line, the lineups are long. Some of these youth have a lot of anxiety. Some of these youth, are, struggle with communication. And so, you know, that might be what we do; or we might, if we had outreach workers that were available, the outreach workers might take them, but then that outreach worker would be in the line, you know, for three hours with the youth.

Marc: And not that that's a bad thing, but anyways, [00:11:00] now we have this community integration specialist and that person might actually help my client to gain an income, which then they can start actually thinking about housing. Now, other times, the youth that I meet at 9:00 AM might actually have done a lot of really good prep work. They might already have money saved for rent and security deposit and extra, and really all they need to is help to find a place [00:11:30] they've been trying and trying and trying, but they haven't been successful. So then it becomes a matter of, again, I'm sitting with them usually with a computer in front of us, and we literally go on Facebook Marketplace where we go on Craigslist and we start to search for available rooms or apartments, depending on what they're looking for. So we're sitting there together and we're scrolling through everything and we're looking at the, the postings and we're also talking and I'm getting to know them.

Marc: And I'm already starting to teach them things. [00:12:00] And for instance, one of the things I'm starting to teach them is to avoid scams. I don't know if our listeners are aware, but there are a lot of scams out there that are related to renting housing. One of the most common scams or a variation of one of the most common scams is a situation where a landlord posts something and, you know, the price seems, reasonable and they post some pictures [00:12:30] and it seems right. So the prospective tenant will reply to the landlord via email or text or whatever way and say, you know, I saw your posting, I'm interested. Can I come see the place? And the quote-unquote landlord, they're actually fraudsters. They're actually criminals, but they will then respond in a very flowery, beautiful language and say, well, here's the deal.

Marc: I was [00:13:00] living in this apartment for years and I love it, but I've been, you know, secondered *[note: not an actual word. I think he was referring to secondment]* to do a job in Texas, let’s say, and so I picked up and left for Texas, and I'm there now, and I'm loving my job, but I don't want to give up my apartment because I know I'm coming back in a year. So I'm just renting it out for a year. But what I can do is I can send you some videos and I can send you a tenancy agreement. And if you like it, then you could rent it. [00:13:30] And yeah, and that's a scam that right then there is a scam, it's a hundred percent a scam. What this fraudster is doing is preying on vulnerability. People who are homeless or people who are not homeless, but are looking for housing are in a vulnerable situation. And sometimes they're really desperate and they might fall for this. And so they see the video of the, of the apartment, the so-called apartment and [00:14:00] they say, yes, I like it. And the landlord says, okay, you send me the money, I'll send you the key and they send the money, but the key never shows up. So, you know, anyways, I'm rambling a little bit, but it's important. I'm teaching the youth, while I'm sitting there, about scams.

Mark S: Well, yeah, one of the things I, that came to mind that when you were describing the scams, these are scams that many people fall for, not just people that are coming out of marginalization or struggling with that. It's about life skills [00:14:30] and knowing what to look for. So it's not just our youth that need this help. It's a lot of people that have been taken in are, are embarrassed to talk about it.

Mark S: It's so crucial for them to know this.

Marc: Yeah. The scams exist because they work So it is anybody. It's not just our youth. I happen to work with youth, but if I was working with seniors, I'd be teaching them the same thing.

Mark S: Mm-hmm <affirmative> yeah. It's just a very sad state of the [00:15:00] nation, especially given the rental market in Vancouver and people that are trying to find places and compete for those spaces.

Marc: I agree. Yeah. Now the thing, it's not all sad though. So often, usually, always, basically, eventually we're going to find a posting that does seem like a good fit, a posting from a landlord that does seem like it would be appropriate. So then what I'm doing is I'm sitting with the literally still at the same desk with the same youth and I'm sitting there and I'm coaching them [00:15:30] on what to say to the landlord in a text to them, if they prefer text or because landlords will be very specific. Don't email me, text me or don't text me, email me or whatever. So I'm coaching them on what to say and what not to say. There's a lot of times somebody can say way too much and you're lifting up red flags that you don't need to.

Marc: And also stuff that the landlord doesn't even have the right to know. So you shouldn't even include it. So it's a lot of coaching about that. You know, contacting a landlord can be intimidating. [00:16:00] It can be nerve wracking. So we take the time to draught a message. That's going to get the landlord attention and hopefully a response and ideally a viewing at some point down the road. Now, if we do manage to get a viewing, then we have a really important discussion and that's whether or not they want me to accompany them to the viewing. And you might think, well, that's ridiculous. Why wouldn't you just accompany them? I mean, that's your job, isn't [00:16:30] it? And the answer is, it's more complicated than that. What I explained to the youth is sometimes when an individual is accompanied to a viewing by a housing worker, it raises a red flag for the landlord.

Marc: They start to wonder why does this person need somebody with them? Is there something wrong with them? Do they have a behaviour problem? Do they have addictions? And so it's tough. [00:17:00] And I get it from the landlord's perspective. The landlord has purchased this property and it's their investment and they have a difficult decision to make. So I get it, but at the same time, it's an important discussion that I have to have with the youth. Now other times it's honestly the absolute opposite. I have accompanied youth to, to meet landlords and it's the exact opposite. The landlord [00:17:30] says, oh, you're from Covenant House. I have heard about Covenant House, or maybe they haven't heard about Covenant House, but they're actually extremely receptive to the fact that this individual is youth is working with me a support who wants to help them.

Marc: And there have been landlords that have literally rented the youth because I was there. So it's a really complicated, tricky question. And there's no way to predict ahead of time before you go see a landlord, [00:18:00] what they're going to be thinking. Um, so it's a, it's an important discussion that we have to have. I have had situations where I'll go with the youth and it's kind of iffy the landlord. I can tell the landlord's like, I don't know. And then what I'll try to do is I'll try to steal the deal. And what I'll say is, listen, I'm here. I'm vouching for this person. I've spoken to them. I know their financial situation. I believe they can afford the rent. And I believe they'd be a good tenant. Now, if [00:18:30] anything goes wrong, this is my number. And you can call me not then anything will, <laugh>, nothing is going to go wrong. But if it did, here's my number and you can call me. And sometimes that actually works and the landlord will say, okay, I'll give them a chance. And we go from there,

Mark S: I'm just curious, Marc, just to the number of youth that you work with and go, how many times versus how many times, or how often do you go to a viewing versus not going to [00:19:00] a viewing? You know, is it, by the sounds of a case by case basis? Obviously you said it can be tricky. So I'm just curious.

Marc: It is a case by case basis. I've never, we've never tracked, you know, is it 50/50? Is it 40/60? It's not something I've tracked. If I had to guess, I would probably say, probably 50/50. I don't know. I honestly don't know. But it is a good question, but here's the thing. If, if I don't go with the youth, then I, what I [00:19:30] will do is I will prep them to the best of my ability. I'll tell them what to look for. I'll tell them when you go into the suite, first of all, I'll tell, them bring somebody with you. It's always better to have somebody with you, just for safety reasons, but also a second opinion. So sometimes I'll go and I don't even say I'm from Covenant House.

Marc: I'm just there, I'm just a friend. But it's all, you know, I'll prep them. I'll say, when you go into the unit, make sure you turn on all the elements [00:20:00] on the stoves, make sure it works. You know, uh, be looking for mould, be looking is the property well maintained when you walk up to the building? Is it well maintained? Because if the, if the unit inside isn't well maintained and you can tell that, or the building outside isn't well maintained, it's kind of a predictor of what you could expect as a tenant. So yeah, I mean, I encourage, I try to coach them as much as I can, if they need bus tickets to go to the viewing, we'll give them bus tickets, not a problem. If they need a ride [00:20:30] and I can accommodate a ride, I'll do that.

Marc: Um, yeah. Now eventually, hopefully a youth will secure a place. They will manage to get a landlord to rent to them. Then my, my job as a housing worker kind of shifts because most units are not furnished. Most units don't come with plates and dishes and pots and pans and things like that. And most of our youth saving up enough money for [00:21:00] the rent and the security deposit is tough enough in of itself. <laugh> that having money extra for all these other things is tough. And that's where Covenant House, we're very fortunate that we have some really good partnerships in the community. So for instance, we're partnered with the society of St. Vincent DePaul. They have a couple of thrift stores on Hastings and Commercial and another on 12th and Main. And the people [00:21:30] that run those stores.

Marc: I can't even tell you how nice they are to our youth, how respectful they are and what we'll do is, so, you know, move in, day might come and, and we know that they don’t have a couch, or they know that we’ll make a little list and we’ll go to the store and we’ll talk to the manager. And, you know, there might be, you know, three or four couches and the manager says, yeah, you can have this one for free, or you can have that one for free, but these two, you know, I just got them in, I’m trying try to sell them, [00:22:00] but these ones you could have for free. And we end up furnishing this place from a place like that, from St. Vincent DePaul. Another really good partnership that we have is with Wildlife Thrift Store, in Vancouver.

Speaker 3: They're just so awesome to us. And then for things like little things like plates and dishes and pots and pans, and a lot of our donors pre-COVID were able to donate that stuff. So in the building where I work in the basement, I have a little shelving unit where I [00:22:30] keep that stuff. I keep bedding, I keep single sheets, double, queen. I keep pots and pans and dishes and, yeah, so we call that a startup kit. So if somebody moves into a place, we're going to give them a free startup kit, stuff that I won't have, like cleaning supplies, I'm going to go and buy, I have a budget, so I can go buy some multipurpose solution or some whatever, and, and help them out. And the other thing that we do also at Covenant House is, we have something called Covey’s Cupboard.

Marc: [00:23:00] So any youth that is housed in the community, can come to Covenant House once a week and visit our food pantry and get food to take home. So when they move in on move in day, that's part of it too. They get to come and come to the drop in and grab their food. And we deliver that home to them, with them, when we move them in. So, yeah, the that's another thing that, that I definitely do move in day is usually pretty exciting. It's it moving as stressful? It's stressful for anybody, [00:23:30] but I try to make it as smooth as possible. But yeah, it's actually probably one of the fun parts of the whole thing is being able to help them move in. And then, you know, I drive away, it might four o'clock in the afternoon.

Marc: I drive away and I'm going back to Covenant House and I know that they're housed. And it's just a great feeling. By the way, another thing that I do is, let's say somebody is housed somewhere, but they're planning to move. They're just going to move and they need help to move. [00:24:00] I will help people move from A to B. Yeah. Now once somebody's moved in, I don't just drop them. I try to give them a, shoot them a text or a phone call either the next day or a few days later, Hey, how's it going? You know, how you liking your new place? And I find the youth really appreciate that. And usually it, everything is, oh, it's great. It's wonderful. Thank you for calling, but you know, everything is fine. And occasionally there might be something like, oh, [00:24:30] actually I do have a problem, you know, I've noticed a couple of cockroaches and I don't know what to do so that it's, you know, some education there. I, I do a lot of different things to be honest. And yeah, I'm trying to touch on everything, but I'm, I'm probably forgetting some things, but there you go.

Mark S: No, that’s a very comprehensive picture. And I'm just picturing you with eight arms going here with all the things you do. My goodness. Well, Marc, I know we've kind of touched on some of the barriers that you faced when they're [00:25:00] looking for housing, but I'm wondering if you can just give us a snapshot of the biggest barriers facing a youth when they're looking for housing.

Marc: Well, the biggest barrier is cost. I think that's goes without saying. Vancouver's the most expensive city in Canada. And it's not just expensive for youth, by the way. I have colleagues that work on the team at CSS, youth workers who have diplomas and degrees from university who are gainfully employed, [00:25:30] who are, you know, in their thirties, youth workers. And they have trouble finding good, safe, affordable housing. So like, I definitely, the cost of housing is, is very high. I guess, yeah, I guess a barrier would be life skills. Some youth don't have the life skills, but I can teach that. I can coach people through that. Here's the thing, a landlord wants three things. Really. They want somebody who's going to pay their rent on time. They [00:26:00] want somebody who's going to respect their property.

Marc: They want somebody who's going to get along with their neighbours. And I get it. I get it when a landlord has a difficult decision to make on who to pick, you know, who, how, who are you going to pick? But stigma's real. And unfortunately, some of our youth, just because they are youth, because they're in their early twenties, a landlord might think this person is more likely to party more likely, to less likely to be respectful. [00:26:30] I happen to agree that yes, young people are more likely to party, but trust me that's not always the case. And I definitely work with youth that are very responsible and that would very much respect the landlord's property, but age is, is something that's true. It's a barrier.

Mark S: Mm. Well, which also makes me think of other and even the bigger barriers, potential barrier, bigger barriers for racialized or indigenous [00:27:00] or LGBTQ youth. Have you seen that as well in your work?

Marc: Yeah, unfortunately I have seen with my own eyes. We have a, as a society, we have a lot of work to do. There's no doubt in my mind that this population is regularly discriminated against. It's very, very real. And it makes me mad, makes me very [00:27:30] mad and very sad. These are our siblings. These are relatives. These are human beings who deserve dignity, who deserve respect and, and too often they're discriminated against and society is changing, but it's slow. That's a tough question. And I'm glad you asked it. It's a little bit emotional one for me, because I've seen youth [00:28:00] that I know for a fact that they didn't get the place because of the colour of their skin or, you know, because they're trans or, you know, various other reasons and it's, it's painful.

Mark S: Yeah. And can, and just as an aside, that's, those populations are disproportionately represented on the streets. And for example, about 25% of the youth we serve are indigenous. So, [00:28:30] it's a big chunk of who we're working with and it's, it's just a very sad situation all around when people don't want to rent based on their personal views. So

Marc: It, yeah, I…yeah.

Mark S: It's very sad. Well, I want to move on and ask you a little bit about, yeah, from the landlord's perspective and, oh, we've talked a little bit about that, but also, the types of housing available [00:29:00] and what is really commonly available out there for the youth and what can they actually achieve and hope to get?

Marc: Well, that's a good question. So if somebody's looking for market housing, which market housing is just a regular landlord who's renting out their, maybe a room in their house or who is, has a, a building and they're renting out their basement suite or an apartment, a room in a house. [00:29:30] These days in Metro Vancouver. I'm going to say averages between 800 and $1,100. Are there any for less than 800? Yeah. There's probably a few out there for 700 or maybe, you know, around there. But yeah, I would say a room in a house is generally 800, 900, which is a lot of money for somebody who's earning [00:30:00] minimum wage or who's, you know, a low income, low income earner, um, now basement suites and, and things like that. I mean, they're, they're more expensive obviously, um, you know, easily 1200 bucks or more.

Marc: So that's what our youth are looking at. If they're looking at market housing, they're looking at a room in a house, or they're looking at maybe like a basement suite somewhere or that kind of thing. By the way, some [00:30:30] people don't know that if you, if the landlord lives in a house and so let's say I'm a landlord and I've decided I'm going to rent out a room in my house. And my tenant's going to share the kitchen with me and the bathroom with me, and I'm going to charge them, I don't know, $700 that tenant is actually not covered under the residential tenancy act. And that's important. <laugh> so, I mean, kind of an aside, but yeah, there [00:31:00] are rooms and houses and there are about seven, eight, $900. That's roughly what it is now.

Marc: That's not the only housing out there. There is something called supportive housing, and supportive housing. I would say if I'm going to try to explain it to the best of my ability is, is essentially housing where there's staffing. That's either there 24 hours a day, or, you know, for a good period of time during the day to support the individuals that live there, and [00:31:30] supportive housing can be tremendously beneficial for individuals who are maybe living with mental illness or who are living with addiction. But the supply is, does not come close to meeting the demand. There are so many people on wait lists for supportive housing that it's, it's, it's outrageous really. So [00:32:00] that, but that's another thing that, yeah, we do get youth that get placed into supportive housing and that’s a success. That's a huge success. It makes me feel good when that happens.

Marc: So yeah, those are really the kinds of housing that are out there. I mean, I guess I could also talk about SROs privately run SROs. I try my best to steer youth away from SRO settings. You know, are there any good SROs out there? [00:32:30] I think there's owners that are trying, that are trying hard, but the truth is that these are ageing buildings and they're falling apart. And, um, your neighbour to the right and to the left very well could have a a mental illness or a substance abuse, but they could also, by the way, be working construction across the street. I mean, they could just be a low income person who can't afford anything else. And so they move into an SRO and SROs, I think, [00:33:00] you know, for private SROs, um, you're easily looking at $750 a month and that's for a room.

Marc: There's no bathroom in the room. The bathroom is down the hall, uh, that you share with everybody else on that floor. So yeah, there are youth that, that go to SROs. What I try to do is, if that's the situation that a youth is looking at, then I try to, to explain to them, well, let's okay, let's do that. Let's apply for some SROs, [00:33:30] but let's try to make that like short term plan while we work on finding you something better. So yeah, those are the kinds of housing typically our used get into.

Mark S: Hmm, Marc, I wanted to ask about, you know, from the perspective of landlords, this is on my mind, because I've heard different stories over the years about landlords who may take, might try and take advantage. We heard about the scam story earlier, but then also for youth who may not have the knowledge base or [00:34:00] the life skills to, to deal with things like dodgy practices or things that, pulling the wool over youth’s eyes that a landlord might try and get away with. Do you have stories like that?

Marc: Yeah, of course. I mean, I think the vast majority of landlords are good, honest, hard working people. They have worked really hard to be able to invest in a property. Yeah. And they probably have families that they're trying to raise and [00:34:30] they have, you know, jobs and they have this and they have that. The vast majority are, are really, really good people. But I have seen some dodgy things, as you say, you know, a landlord that doesn't follow through with making a repair request in a timely manner or at all. <laugh> Now why is that, you know, is it because they're too disorganized? Is it because they actually don't have the money to make the [00:35:00] repair? Is it because they're malicious and they're predatory and they're not interested in making the repair and spending the money. I mean, I think there's a little bit of everything.

Marc: There are some bad apples out there. Sure. But my experience has been that the majority of landlords are really good, hardworking people who may be ignorant of the law, who may be ignorant [00:35:30] of the residential tenancy act. You don't have to have a license to become a landlord. You just have to have money to buy a property and you don't have to have read the residential tenancy act. And so some of the things that youth will complain to me is, yeah, somebody, they didn't do the repair, they haven't done the repair. And you know, so maybe it's a matter of my educating the landlord. Well, you have a responsibility to make this repair in a timely manner. Or maybe it's a landlord that's doing shady things like [00:36:00] entering a unit without permission. Right. Some landlords for whatever reason think that they, you know, the tenant leaves for the day and they go to work, whether they just can, willy-nilly walk into the unit and check and make sure that there's no damage or whatever else. Well, no, that's not the case, but you know, I think sometimes it's ignorance and I don't say that in, in a malicious way, they just don't know. They don't know. And so there's an education component there too. [00:36:30] Um, so to answer your question, yes. There's some, I've definitely seen some lousy things, but for the most part, I think landlords are well intentioned.

Mark S: Hmm. Well, that's great to hear. And of course there's education on both sides. Definitely. I've heard this from friends of mine over the years, the things I've heard. so let alone for these young people that are trying to make it on their own and moving out of marginalization. Well, Marc sounds like, [00:37:00] housing and finding housing for youth is a pretty big task. Is there anyone that assists you in supporting youth to find housing?

Speaker 3: Oh, absolutely. I couldn't do it alone. My first line of support are my teammates at, at Covenant House in the community support services program. So we have outreach workers. We have a team of outreach workers. We have drop in workers. We have front desk workers and I rely heavily on all of them every single day. [00:37:30] I think I mentioned earlier, well, I may not have, but you know, when I'm, when I'm starting my day, I I'm trying to determine what my planning my day. And if I know I'm going to need somebody to help me with something, then I know that I can rely on any one of those teammates to back me up. Likewise, maybe I got to be off work at a certain time, but somebody has a, a viewing later in the afternoon or the evening and outreach will gladly accompany that youth to the viewing.

Marc: If that's something that's a good idea. [00:38:00] So my first line is my teammates at CSS. Now Covenant House itself, we have two shelters, a male identified at a female identified shelter. And I think it's about 58 beds combined. And both those programs are staffed with youth workers and a lot of the youth that live in those programs that are staying in those shelters are actually pretty high functioning youth. And the youth workers that work in those programs [00:38:30] actually help those youth with housing searches themselves. They teach them themselves. How somebody ends up getting referred to me is kind of complicated. It’s not always like sometimes yeah, it’s somebody that needs a little extra help, but sometimes they don’t get referred to me because they simply don’t need it because the youth worker in the program where they’re working is doing all the work.

Marc: So they just don’t need me. Now they probably will need me on moving day, which I’m happy to do. But yeah, so that’s my second line. [00:39:00] And I mean, I can’t, I also couldn’t do it without the supports of other youth resources in the community. We work as a team, whether it’s Covenant House or whether it’s Directions youth services or whether it’s aunts in [?], you know, or whether it's U I R C, or wherever else, Aboriginal Mothers Centre, Watari, we all work together. And [00:39:30] I know that I can call, if I'm stuck with a client and I don't know what to do or, or I need some help. I know that I can call my colleagues at those agencies and they'll help me out. And likewise, I get calls from them.

Marc: So if there's something that I can't do, but they can, then they're going to help me out. We actually, a few years ago, we, as a group, these housing providers for youth got together and we actually, now we meet every two months, pre COVID we’d meet in person. [00:40:00] And the purpose of the meeting was to get together and learn about each other’s programs. Maybe some, you know, some places hired new staff. So it’s an introduction or maybe, you know, this particular agency has, you know, now they have a new subsidy. So everybody now knows that, oh, if somebody needs a subsidy, you could go there. Or sometimes it’s complex cases. So maybe I’m working with a case. I just I’m stuck. I don’t know what to do. Well without revealing the youth's name, I can kind of [00:40:30] draw on the expertise from these outside agencies. So yeah, it's a community thing. I got a lot of support. Most of my support is from Covenant House staff, but it's also from the community too.

Mark S: Marc, I would assume that it's a two-way street that they, they come to you looking for, for help as well.

Marc: Absolutely. Yeah. I get referrals all the time. Yeah.

Mark S: Okay, well, I, I can't go on without asking about the impact of COVID because it's impacted everybody on earth. And what about the [00:41:00] impacts of COVID 19 on youth housing and homelessness? How, what has happened there?

Marc: I think, I'm not a social scientist. I don't, I can only tell you my observations and I guess the first thing would be that a lot of our youth, they do something called couch surfing. Couch surfing is where you go and live at your buddy's place and you kind of just sleep on the couch and you don't necessarily, you don't pay any rent or maybe you do pay a little bit, but [00:41:30] it's like not rent really. And, or maybe you contribute to meals sometimes, but you just kind of that's where you spend your nights. A lot of youth do that. And I think during COVID, unfortunately, because of COVID and because of the infection, the risk of infection, that was something that was not as prevalent in my experience. I could be wrong, but I think that was something else.

Marc: That was something that was a little bit less prevalent. Interestingly, [00:42:00] I actually think that during COVID the average cost of housing rooms and apartments actually went down. I don't have any proof. I don't have anything to back me up on that, but in my observations of going online every day and looking for housing, it seems like the cost went down a little bit and I best I can explain why. And I'm sure there's many different reasons, but one of the best reasons I [00:42:30] can explain why is because I think that students that would normally have attended in person say at UBC or at a university or at a college, well during COVID, there were no more in-person classes, things switched to online. And so people that might have come to Vancouver from different area of the province or different area of the country, or even from other countries might not have had to do so, or [00:43:00] might have just stayed where they were and did their courses online, maybe staying with their family or wherever they were.

Marc: And so I know for a fact that landlords a few, not a lot, but a few landlords did call me and say, actually I'm looking for tenants. I don't have anybody to fill my rooms. Do you have anybody that's out there? And they did lower the cost because they had, you know, it's supply and demand. It's economics, right? So, but trust me, that's over, COVID, isn't over, [00:43:30] but that's over the prices are backup. They're higher than ever. And that was, so your question, I guess those are the two things, the two impacts to COVID that I could. And again, I, I'm not a, yeah, I'm just, that's my opinion.

Mark S: Wow. I guess there was one benefit of COVID, prices going down. That's something you never hear around here. So unfortunately that's over, but I, Marc, I wanted to turn to the Rent Smart program. I understand you deliver this program that teaches individuals how to be a good tenant. And, [00:44:00] can you tell our listeners about our, that program? It’s really cool.

Marc: I'm so glad you asked. I love Rent Smart. So what is Rent Smart? Well, Rent Smart, I, think it had its roots in BC. It's basically, how do I explain this? A few years ago, I asked my boss if I could be, if they, if Covenant House would fund for me to go and take a, I think it was a, a week long training to become a Rent Smart facilitator. And what that [00:44:30] means is, I went and basically I learned how to be a better housing worker. I went and learned how to help people to look for housing and things like that. Rent Smart, that basically, it's a course that I teach youth over the course of 12 hours and there's six individual modules that we cover and pre COVID, I did it in person, with youth. I've done it many times.

Marc: During COVID I've, I've kind of switched to doing [00:45:00] a hybrid sort of in person, maybe meet a little bit, but also do it over the Internet. But basically it's six modules that I'm teaching the youth and those modules include things like, well, there's definitely budgeting and managing finances. There's how to apply for housing, there's what are your rights and your responsibilities and your expectations under the residential tenancy act. Nobody's taught this when they're growing up. And so, there's another section of the course [00:45:30] that's on communication. How to effectively communicate with your landlord, how to, you know, how to put in a repair request, what happens if the repair request isn't answered or isn't dealt with, how to, you know, communicate with your roommates? I remember myself, when I, the first time I had a roommate, it was a friend of mine who I, I really liked.

Marc: It was guy I grew up with. And then we went to, we went over to school and we roomed together and it turned into a disaster. We couldn't get along, but yeah, how to effectively [00:46:00] communicate with your roommates, or your neighbours. What if your neighbour is loud and you want to get sleep at night. So it's things like that. There's also a module in, in the course that's on home maintenance, things like fire safety, things like taking care of these units. Remember the landlord, this is their property. This is their investment. And they're renting to you, but they want you to respect their property. And so I'm teaching all kinds of little things to youth that doesn't, you wouldn't [00:46:30] necessarily think like a very basic one is you're making a cup of coffee. So you turn the kettle on, but the kettle is located under, you know, on the counter, but under another counter where you store your cups and a steam from the kettle goes up and it's warping the cupboard, well that costs the money to the landlord.

Marc: If they ask to replace or it'll come out your security deposit, which is also called, they called damage deposit, it's actually a security deposit. So it's little things like that, that I'm teaching [00:47:00] youth. How to maintain your place. What if you do get an infestation of bed bugs? Well, sometimes youth will say, I don't want to tell the landlord, because you're going to think it's my fault. He's going to, but actually you have a responsibility to tell your landlord before it becomes an infestation, you know, before it goes to other units or maybe it's not bed bugs or maybe it's ants or maybe it's something else. So I love teaching the course. It's great. And what's really good about the course is the youth have [00:47:30] a lot of their time to learn this. And at the end they get a certificate and the certificate has a code attached to it.

Marc: That's individual to them, to their name. And it's on, it goes on the Rent Smart website and what this youth can now do is they can take, I, I we've drafted a piece of paper that explains to a prospective landlord that the youth has taken this course they've invested time and it acts as a reference. So some of our youth actually don't have any references, right? [00:48:00] They, they it's their first time renters. And, but this actually acts as a reference. So the landlord will see that and say, maybe I'll give this person a chance because they actually invested some time. Right. And if the landlord wants to make sure that this isn't a scam, they can actually go on the Rent Smart website and see that yes. You know, uh, Jane Doe or whoever actually. Yeah. They completed this course. So it's a great course and I love teaching it. And I'm just so glad you asked, thank you for that.

Mark S: Mm-hmm <affirmative> yeah. [00:48:30] Well, I would imagine that it does help to actually literally open doors if landlords are aware of this. And even if they are aware of it, say they can find out themselves what then the benefits of this course for the youth.

Marc: Yeah.

Mark S: And something we could all use actually, when I think back to when I was a student, but <laugh>

Marc: Yeah, but by the way, I, there's also a Rent Smart for landlords. I should mention that. In fact, I've never actually taught it because I've never had any landlords that are interested in learning it, but [00:49:00] there's act… because you know what, when you become a landlord, there's no license. There's no, there's not. Nobody really teaches you. And so, yeah, there's actually a Rent Smart course that can be delivered to landlords that teaches them about their rights and their responsibilities. It teaches them about effective communication with the tenants that keep teaches them about, you know, all kinds of important things. So yeah, that's an aside, but yeah.

Mark S: Mm-hmm <affirmative> well that, maybe that should be mandatory if you're going to have rental property.

Marc: Well, I'm [00:49:30] not going to go that far. I'm not going to go that far.

Mark S: <laugh> um, well, um, I want to turn to hearing some of your greatest success stories and what you've experienced at work and with the youth that you work with.

Marc: Oh, that's a, that's a tough question. It's tough because there's so many <laugh>, I think every, honestly, every time a youth finds housing, almost every time a youth finds housing, that's a success story. And that happens, [00:50:00] throughout the year, every month. You know, I'm, I'm involved in some way in supporting several youth to find housing and that's a tremendous success. I guess probably the biggest success story would be like a situation where it's a young family where, we have, you know, a young family with a, with a child or an infant [00:50:30] and they've been maybe couch surfing or they're, you know, they're at risk of becoming homeless because they can't stay where they are for very much longer. They need housing and helping them to find housing.

Marc: It's a tremendous success, and it feels so good. That would, that would be important, that's a big success story. I mean, there's so many. I, you know, another, [00:51:00] probably this isn't a success story really related to housing per se, but say, but occasionally, recently, I had a youth contact me who has been housed for a while and actually I hadn't heard from them for a while. So I was kind of a surprise to hear from them and they, hi, how are you doing? Oh, I said, hi, how are you doing? And are you still the same place and started talking? It was great. And they said, well, actually, Marc, the reason I'm calling you is I think I need to go to treatment. I think I [00:51:30] got a substance problem and I need some help and that's a success to me. Like that's no, I didn't help them find housing. I didn't help them, but they're reaching out for help based on a relationship that we developed, you know, maybe months or even years prior. And it's such an honour when that happens. That's not what you asked, but that's a success to me. But every time a youth finds [00:52:00] housing, it's tremendous.

Mark S: Well, I have one particular youth that you mentioned that really truly speaks to the relationship building that goes on with you and our youth workers. That young person could come forward. And, I guess he was creating his own preemptive strike, so it didn't go spiral downwards. So that, that's just so awesome. Well, finally I such great information [00:52:30] and, but I are some of the things that our listeners can do to help support youth in accessing housing.

Marc: I think the biggest thing is if you're a listener and you have a room for rent, give me a call. Yeah, I I'm joking, but I'm not joking actually. Uh, yeah. We're always looking for housing. We're always looking for units that we're looking for landlords that are going to be agreeable to renting to youth. I suppose you could, like I said, I suppose [00:53:00] it is taking a risk. Yeah. You're, but you know what, you're taking a risk when you hire a, sorry, when you, when you rent to a 30 year old or a 40 year old too. Right. But yeah, if, if there's any listeners out there who have, who are considering, you know, maybe renting to Covenant House youth, give me a call, go on the website, go to Covenant House, or just call the main number.

Marc: I would love to talk to you. I would love to [00:53:30] explain to you that if you do rent to our youth, I will be there. I will be able to, to support the youth, if things go sideways, which they probably won't, but if they do go sideways, you can call me. Yeah, I think that's probably the, the big, I mean, I, I would say to our listeners consider it time in your life when you needed a little help. And what did it mean to you when someone took a chance on you? [00:54:00] Perhaps the first place you ever rented, or maybe it was a job or maybe it was something else, but how grateful were you for that? And I'm telling you that our youth will be as grateful to you because they need a chance, they, they really do. And, I'm yeah, that, that would be, I mean, I also need pots and pans, so you send your pots and pans <laugh> send good ones. But yeah, I, yeah, [00:54:30] that would be my biggest message.

Mark S: OK, Marc, thank you so much for this just wealth of information, and I'm sure our listeners really have gotten a good sense of what you do on a daily basis to help the youth we serve to move on to independence and to maintain independence. So thank you for that. And I want to thank everybody for listening as well. So that brings us to the end of this episode of Under One Roof. I'd like to thank my guest, Marc Lefebvre for joining me. [00:55:00] And if you have any feedback on today's episode or suggestions for future topics, please email us at publicaffairs@covenant housebc.org. Until next time, I'm Mark Savard. Thanks for listening.

Announcer: You've been listening to Under One Roof, a Covenant House Vancouver production. If you have questions or comments about today's episode, please email us at publicaffairs@covenanthousebc.org. For more information on Covenant House Vancouver, or to make a donation, please visit our [00:55:30] website at www.covenant housebc.org. Until next time. Thanks for listening.