

# Taking the YouthBuild Challenge



By MIKE LEWIS & BOB GILSON

*We have a proposition for you ... to inspire and equip at-risk youth with leadership and construction skills to make a serious dent in the shortages of both affordable housing and skilled trades.*

Greater Vancouver – the focal point of economic growth in British Columbia – has grown some big problems. Unemployment among young people (15-24 years of age) is 15% across the province. The rate in the lower mainland is less, but here in the Lower Mainland youth unemployment is more frequently compounded by homelessness, drug abuse, and criminal activity. Affordable housing is tight. Almost 8000 households are waiting for non-market housing in this region.

One more thing: while Greater Vancouver continues to build, the number of capable people available to do the building is shrinking. The rate of attrition in the building trades over the decade 1998-2008 is expected to be 28%, mostly due to retirement. That's an indication of the aging of the baby-boomer generation of plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and dry-wallers. (In 1998, nearly one in three Canadians employed in the building trades was 50 years of age or older.)

These problems are not peculiar to Greater Vancouver, of course; nor are the many small programs and initiatives that have grown up to address each. Skill training and employment development is available for young people facing multiple barriers to getting and keeping a job. There are affordable housing programs and associations. Vocational and apprenticeship programs feed young people into the building trades.

But youth unemployment, the shortage of affordable housing, and attrition in the building trades – these three problems are not small, they're *huge*. They are not particularly new, either; rather, they are post-war phenomena that just keep getting worse in the face of modest counter-measures. They are also intimately linked.

So we have a proposition for you. We put it to you that we have before us an opportunity for a massive CED initiative: to inspire and equip at-risk youth with leadership and construction skills to make a serious dent in the shortages of both affordable housing and skilled trades. We are talking about an integrated system of community renewal, driven by young people in training, by nonprofit and co-op housing developers,

and by progressive credit unions.

What will it take? Money, for darn sure. More on that later. But just as essential are tried and true techniques that can work on a grander scale, a local capacity for organization and collaboration, and local leaders of vision and commitment. All these ingredients exist in the Greater Vancouver area. We think they might in other places too.

## **Tried & True: YouthBuild USA**

Employment development and construction skills training for youth@risk just happens to be the focus of one of the most dramatically successful CED initiatives in North America today.

YouthBuild USA is a hugely successful community-based initiative that unleashes the positive energy of marginalized young adults (16-24) to rebuild their communities and their own lives. Through YouthBuild, thousands of young Americans – mostly men on low incomes who have dropped out of school – learn construction skills, build or renovate low-income housing, earn their GED or high school diploma, and begin to think of themselves as community leaders.

*How has YouthBuild survived the transformation from a site-specific innovation to a national effort? Two major factors are of particular interest to us. First, is the comprehensive curriculum that this program is able to offer affiliates.... Second, is how YouthBuild supporters have persistently leveraged its successes to secure more partners and greater resources, while further entrenching the program's community base.*

Key to the YouthBuild approach is an environment of peer support that promotes a healthy value system and personal responsibility. Each YouthBuild program is governed by a core of youth leaders that make critical decisions about staffing, budget, local policy and community action, and on-site operations. Staff are partners who provide instruction and technical assistance. This dramatically reverses the power equation and counters the effects of the disrespect chronically experienced by young people of low income. Young people set and maintain the program's national standards, including stiff penalties (ranging from loss of pay to dismissal) for disruptive behaviour, absence, or use of drugs or alcohol. This unique partnership of young adults and adult professionals, combined with the visible, valuable work YouthBuild participants do in their neighbourhoods, is achieving some significant outcomes.

A study of nine YouthBuild sites in the '90s showed high attendance rates and over two-thirds of participants completed the program. Moreover, nine in ten graduates went on to college or got jobs paying higher than minimum wage. The YouthBuild program in St. Louis reports particular success. Since inception in 1992, it has graduated 252 people of whom 89% have gone on to full-time schooling or work (earning on average US\$10.95 per hour). Significantly, 7 of its current class of 35 are young women. The program has also rehabilitated 38

units of affordable housing, and built two new ones. Of the 6000 young adults participating in YouthBuild programs across the United States in 2001, 60% graduated. Of these, fully 89% went on to college or into an entry-level job averaging US\$7.61/hour, a rate that is about 50% above minimum wage.

These results are compelling in themselves. The story of how YouthBuild grew from a single project in East Harlem into a major national initiative is also of great importance. It began in 1978 when Dorothy Stoneman, a former schoolteacher, asked disaffected teens how they would improve their community if there were adults supporting them. The teens answered, "We'd rebuild the houses. We'd take empty buildings back from the drug dealers and eliminate crime."

It took them five years to complete that first rehab project, but the logic of the process – connecting marginalized youth to training and community needs – proved inspirational. Riding the wave of enthusiasm generated by their early successes, the young people and Stoneman organized a coalition of 150 New York City organizations in 1984 to advocate for public funding for more projects of this nature. They called it the Coalition for Twenty Million Dollars and it made serious headway with the municipal government. In ensuing years, growing interest across the country sparked the formation of the Coalition for Two Hundred Million Dollars in

1988. It won sufficient congressional support to permit the formation of a national intermediary in 1990, YouthBuild USA, whose task it was to propagate projects across the country. As of 2001, 165 affiliate organizations were running the YouthBuild program in 42 states.

How has this program survived the transformation from a site-specific innovation to a national effort? Two major factors are of particular interest to us.

First, is the comprehensive curriculum that YouthBuild is able to offer prospective affiliates. YouthBuild's Working Hands, Working Minds curriculum guides integrate reading, writing, mathematics, health and safety, and leadership and teamwork with applied work in construction. The curriculum's Housing and Community unit brings an intriguing level of social analysis and action to the classroom and building site. After researching local housing issues, conducting resident surveys, and a statistical analysis, students plan a project that addresses an important community or housing concern.

Second, is how YouthBuild supporters have persistently leveraged its successes to secure more partners and greater resources, while further entrenching the program's community base. Each YouthBuild affiliate is responsible for its own funding, a mix of government and private support (national, regional, and local) in which program grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban



Development frequently serve as the kick-start. Of over 230 applicants for YouthBuild program grants in the 2001 competition, 78 shared a total of US\$40 million.

Despite this mounting federal affirmation and support, YouthBuild remains a movement, integrating local autonomy and energy with national coordination. Major emphasis is placed on helping members develop leadership skills. The Young Leaders Council and the Alumni Council, comprising elected representatives from YouthBuild programs across the country, participate in setting policy for the affiliate network. Under sponsorship of the Department of Labor, a national, registered apprenticeship training program for youth development practitioners was launched in 2001, designed and facilitated by YouthBuild USA but managed by local organizations.

The wider the branches, the deeper the roots – and vice versa. Staff at the YouthBuild Coalition’s headquarters in Somerville, Massachusetts find they are now in demand beyond the borders of the United States. (A YouthBuild rep with whom we have spoken had just returned from an assignment in Sarajevo.)

Here is a best practice that has a track record in analyzing, systemizing, and disseminating its experience. Imagine what youth@risk in Greater Vancouver stand to gain from connecting with this learning!

## Youth Builders of Winnipeg’s Inner City

In February 2002 the government of Manitoba announced another \$100,000 in funding for West Broadway Youth Builders, a construction program for disaffected young adults in Winnipeg’s inner city. That comes in addition to more than \$400,000 in backing the program has received from Human Resources Development Canada and the City of Winnipeg.

Now in its third year, Youth Builders is a 12-month program that enrolls a maximum of 24 participants aged 16-29. They spend 10 hours per week completing high school credits or their GED and 30 hours per week in local construction and renovation earning \$6.25/hour. (The latter, for-pay component also includes a course in lifeskills and lifestyles.) Graduates return to school full-time or accept an entry-level position in a construction trade. Youth Builders has a staff of five. Training costs run at \$18,000 per participant.

Despite the name, Youth Builders is 100% home-grown, a Lion’s Club initiative that outgrew its founders and became instead a division of West Broadway Development Corporation. Leadership, as ever, is critical. Adrian Challis, a local high school teacher, originally saw the connection between houses that needed renovation and troubled youth that needed work and space to call their own. Jim Sinclair, another teacher, is the director and passionately committed to the program. Allan McIntosh, the manager, is himself a vocational school grad. Underemployed in construction, he was considering a degree in education before a chance encounter got him “recruited” to Youth Builders.

Between them, they created the program’s curriculum. Only later did they learn about YouthBuild USA, at a conference hosted by the provincial Ministry of Education and Training. They are now considering affiliation, for it would enable them to tap into the experience (and supplier discounts) of a host of like organizations south of the line. To be eligible, however, they must first create ways to distribute more program authority to neighbour organizations and businesses, and to the participants themselves.

Manitoba Education and Training is very interested in finding local partners for more initiatives of the YouthBuild type. Are we witnessing the beginnings of YouthBuild Canada?

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(above) Cost of labour: 60% of market standard; construction time 2-300% of market standard. In Winnipeg, the West Broadway Youth Builders are an attractive option for customers for whom cost outweighs time, and aren’t averse to the personal history of the workers.



## Can it happen in Vancouver?

The YouthBuild approach needs something substantial to connect with locally, of course. Like other Canadian cities, Greater Vancouver has practitioners and organizations with a record of commitment and accomplishment in training youth@risk and in affordable housing.

Tradeworks Training Society, operating in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside since 1990, provides training and employment programs for young people, including a 24-week program in entry-level construction work. A job placement service also help participants, many of whom are social assistance recipients, to determine a career path and to find job opportunities suitable to their needs, qualifications, and interests. Access to Trades, a new entry-level construction course, offers 24 weeks of instruction and experience to 18 First Nations youth. Tradeworks understands its task as essentially therapeutic, moving individuals from lives marred by social and economic exclusion along a continuum that supports personal growth, meeting basic needs, and specific skills relevant to securing employment.

BladeRunners, a program administered by an agency of the provincial

government, supplies an additional piece of the puzzle: wage subsidies. The program contracts with a community organization to employ a BladeRunners co-ordinator, who works with local organizations and social service agencies to recruit at-risk youth. Prior to being accepted for the program, participants must also complete a life skills/employability training program (provided by Tradeworks, among other nonprofits). BladeRunners supplies a wage subsidy for each participant for a maximum of 34 weeks. In a city like Vancouver, where social purpose enterprises are few in number, a \$2-3/hour subsidy to employers to offset the errors and inefficiency of new hires goes a long way to break the ice with the private sector.

A third key organization, the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society (S.U.C.C.E.S.S.), has a long history of acting as a bridge between immigrants and Vancouver's ways of life and work. It offers a variety of employment, training, and education services. Its board and staff sit on many advisory boards and committees relating to human rights, public order, crime prevention, child protection, health, education, and welfare and employment services. Important here too is the recognition SUCCESS earned in the

early '90s for its employment and community development work among young Asian men in danger of involvement in gang violence.

In terms of employment and training for youth@risk, Vancouver has a significant base of organizational capacity from which to take on the integrated initiative we have in mind. We wouldn't be starting from scratch!

## Wiring in Additional Partners

The affordable housing sector in B.C. is also relatively strong. Despite the withdrawal of federal government backing to affordable housing programs in 1994, the provincial government, until recently, has been supportive of the sector. The Cooperative Housing Federation of B.C. and Tara Housing are active networks of co-op and nonprofit housing developers. Were our initiative to go one step further and make some inner-city heritage buildings the venue for training (as YouthBuild St. Louis has done, to local acclaim), still more organizations could come into play.

How then to connect a YouthBuild initiative to the nonprofit and co-op housing sector? YouthBuild program managers would hire out workers and their supervisors on a labour-only basis, guaranteeing the product but with a wage subsidy to compensate developers for the longer time the construction would involve.

(above left) New construction teaches some things that renovation can't. In September 2001, a glitch in arrangements gave Youth Builders the opportunity to build the basement floor and pony walls for this Habitat For Humanity project.

(above right) Youth Builders awards its participants a "clean record" from which to begin again. For some, that's the ticket. Harlan Bear (with shovel) completed the program in 2000, graduated from high school, became a lead hand in 2001, and is now entering Red River College.

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Apart from wages and building materials, however, the cost of housing hinges on interest rates, land costs, and mortgage insurance premiums. By also reducing some of the latter costs for nonprofit and co-op housing developers, we could make a still greater impact on the affordable housing supply for residents of low and moderate income. To do this, we must add a final piece to the puzzle: financing institutions and, most promising, the credit unions.

When profitable, credit unions often distribute patronage dividends to their owner-members. Typically, a credit union like Coast Capital Savings (with offices in Victoria and Vancouver) distributes \$4-6 million annually in patronage dividends, most of it in amounts ranging from \$10-50 – about the cost of a meal out.

What if this credit union instead received its member-owners' permission to allocate a portion of the dividend pool to a more strategic purpose – to subsidize or eliminate the interest rate charged on loans for the construction of affordable housing, for example?

If Coast Capital applied \$2 million of its dividend pool to this purpose it could make available \$36 million interest-free. \$2 million is essentially the profit margin built in to the interest on \$36 million in loans. By retaining that \$2 million, the credit union could essentially “pay itself” for loaning \$36 million at no interest.

That is just one credit union. There are several other large ones in the Lower

Mainland. Were they collectively to invest \$6 million in member dividends this way each year for ten years, these credit unions could support over \$1 billion in interest-free loans in this period. Just imagine! Other innovations could enable credit union members to build equity resources to cover land assembly and development costs, all of which could help make housing more affordable.

## Leadership

Given a strong education and social marketing program to credit union members, these financial strategies could create a multi-million dollar resource. It would enable credit unions to distinguish themselves in the marketplace as institutions that help neighbours help their neighbours, to the benefit of the whole community. Properly handled, it could also generate many millions more from both the private and the public sector.

That quality of leadership is the fourth key ingredient to a replication of YouthBuild here in Vancouver. Can we – youth employment programs, housing developers, and credit unions – rise above the “silo” mentality to bring about massive change?

It's a tough call. Even organizations within the nonprofit sector, with a mandate for social change, often find themselves too overworked and underpaid to be able to afford the luxury of inspired innovation. Out of a sheer lack



of time and energy, organizations fail to collaborate or share information and instead acquiesce in inefficiency and duplication of services – while competing fiercely for whatever public recognition and funding may be available.

But there are also signs of wider vision. Coast Capital has made affordable housing one of its priorities, and is considering the linkage between a housing strategy and skill training for youth@risk. Organizations in Manitoba are already taking steps to work closely with YouthBuild (see p. 43), as is the Canadian CED Network.

CED doesn't have to be small, and specific to one sector or location. We can think and act outside that box. Given the urgency of the situation and the inadequacy of other strategies, we *must*.



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The Canadian employment and attrition statistics cited in this article originate in “Labour Force Information” (Statistics Canada, April 5, 2002) and “Labour Market Trends and Projections” a publication of the B.C. and Yukon Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ca. May 2000). For more on YouthBuild USA, go to [www.youthbuild.org](http://www.youthbuild.org).

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(above) Youth Builders first project was 288-289 Furby Street, a run-down, 4500 ft<sup>2</sup> duplex rooming house that the program rehabilitated as a 9-bedroom house (with a suite). The house now serves as a Youth Housing Co-op for Operation GoHome.