

Christian recovery programs in Vancouver respond to opioid crisis

by [Alicia Ambrosio](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

Freddy's addiction started with alcohol and moved up to methamphetamines and heroin. He was in and out of juvenile detention as a teenager and ended up in jail as adult. After trying four other rehab programs, he came to Luke 15 House, a faith-based recovery center in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"I always felt like there was something missing," said Freddy, 33, who asked that his full name not be published. "Other programs don't talk about God or faith."

At the other centers, he was sometimes able to pay off house managers to let him stay out all night or get high: "Facilitators didn't really care. I don't think anyone got clean."

On a recent day, Freddy was one of 20 men singing Christian praise and worship songs in the dining room of Luke 15 House, named after a chapter of the New Testament that contains parables of loss and redemption.

"When I first came here I was nervous, and I questioned everything," said Sean Wild, 34, a resident who has been off drugs for a year. "But there is such a sense of peace from the moment you walk in the door, and people are so welcoming, you feel like 'Wow, I'm loved here.' I changed totally."

In 2016 more than 900 people in British Columbia died of drug overdoses, a record number and an 80 percent increase from 2015. The culprit: fentanyl, an opioid painkiller 100 times more powerful than morphine. The smallest error in dosage can be fatal.

Overprescription of opioid painkillers created demand for the powerful drugs. In the early 2000s Canadians were being prescribed opioids such as oxycodone even for chronic pain. Illicit manufacturers soon began producing fentanyl pills using cheap, easily imported chemicals from China. First responders started seeing staggering numbers of overdoses.

Under British Columbia's health-care system, a person is eligible to receive \$30 Canadian (\$21 U.S.) per day for treatment, which goes to Luke 15 House. The rest of the center's funding comes from fundraising initiatives, private donors, and local churches.

The center, on a quiet residential street, has space for 24 men, who often arrive straight out of jail and are encouraged to stay for at least ten months. They go on a 12-step program that combines an Alcoholics Anonymous-type plan with scripture study and are assigned a structured daily routine that includes daily prayer and dinners with former residents to see that a drug-free life is possible.

"We don't tolerate fighting, and there is no swearing in the house," said Jeremy Ruud, the program director at Luke 15, who is in recovery from heroin addiction himself.

While publicly funded agencies focus on harm reduction measures—such as distributing naloxone kits to counteract overdoses—the 19 Christian-run recovery homes and other Christian outreach services in the area seek to address the spiritual emptiness that pastoral workers here believe is one of the key factors in drug addiction.

"Having an encounter with Jesus breaks every chain in our lives," Ruud said.

Still, recovery centers are not regulated and neither the faith-based homes nor the British Columbia Health Ministry defines standards for success.

"Because addiction is a lifelong process, there is no conclusive way" to keep statistics on recovery rates, said Nigel Vincent, the executive director of Luke 15 House. To him, success means being able to give people a chance "to work on healing they've never done before."

Matthew Johnson runs the Street Outreach Initiative at St. James' Anglican Church on downtown Vancouver's east side. The goal of the program is to bring the church to the area's residents who are homeless and addicted. Johnson spends his days walking the neighborhood, talking and praying with residents.

"A lot of people whose lives are characterized by chaos find great power in structured liturgy," he said. "It makes an enormous difference when you address issues of the human spirit. It strengthens the part of the person that is capable of

resilience.”

When a parishioner decides to change his or her life, Johnson helps the person figure out which options are best and how to access those services. This brings him face-to-face with the holes in the government-run health system: “When people decide to quit they have to wait a long time for detox. After detox most do not end up in a program to help them shape a drug-free life.”

A report by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation published in 2016 revealed the challenges of finding a bed in a recovery program in British Columbia. Aside from the lack of a centralized database to track available beds, there is no regulation of recovery programs, so cost and effectiveness can vary widely from program to program.

“If somebody wants to quit, they can’t,” says Scott Small, who manages a staff of 15 at the Catholic Charities of Vancouver Men’s Hostel. Those who do get clean often cannot find affordable housing and continue to rely on shelters, where they live side by side with people who are still using drugs. “Try staying clean in that situation,” Small said.

The lack of affordable housing has been a growing concern for several years in the metro Vancouver area. Small’s hostel serves 102 men. The relatively small size of the hostel means staff can spend time working to find longer-term solutions for each guest.

Similarly, at Luke 15 House, a cap on the number of participants allows the staff to focus on each resident individually.

Freddy thinks back on his previous life. “I was totally different,” he recalled. “I was a jerk, always in a bad mood, and I was really skinny.” Now his housemates and the staff describe him as “a teddy bear.” —Religion News Service

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