

IMOUTO HOUSING FOR YOUNG WOMEN

A Supportive Transitional Housing Program in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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What is Imouto?

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Imouto Housing for Young Women is a supportive transitional housing program for women ages 16 to 24 in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

The program targets young women who are at risk of and/or experiencing:

- violence and abuse,
- being exploited,
- have no or unsafe housing,
- are pregnant, or
- who face additional barriers to finding or keeping housing, including women struggling with their use of drugs or alcohol, experiencing varying levels of mental wellness, Aboriginal women, women of colour, and transgendered women.

Where did the idea for Imouto come from?

Discussions between Atira Women's Resource Society and Watari & other youth-serving agencies in the Downtown Eastside about a small population of young women, currently accessing health and social services in the Downtown Eastside, who were chronically homeless, often living on the streets, "couch-surfing," and "shelter-hopping"

- In spite of the availability of housing options and rent supplements, this group of women were not willing to consider housing support outside of the Downtown Eastside neighborhood
- Other housing options in the DTES not appropriate - older women, mixed housing, for pregnant women, women who are employable, or have taken clear steps towards addressing their mental health or substance use concerns.

Imouto opened in September 2011

Imouto was developed to be a single room accommodation (SRA) supported housing program for **young women currently living and/or seeking services in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.**

Imouto is the Japanese word for "little sister" and was chosen because the building is located in historic Japantown, kitty corner from the Vancouver Japanese Language School.

The building is able to accommodate a maximum of 16 young women. It includes a communal kitchen, shared bathrooms, and a TV room/meeting space.



The program is operated by the Atira Women's Resource Society and other partner organizations who currently provide services for young women in the Downtown Eastside.

Program staff are available on-site 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Services are provided on site by Atira and its partner organizations who currently provide services for young women in the downtown eastside including:

- Watari
- Covenant House Vancouver
- Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Vancouver
- BC Women's Hospital
- Health Centre Providence Health



Imouto's Program Principles

- **Young Women-Centred**
- **Violence and trauma-informed**
- **Harm reduction**
- **Low barrier**
- **Anti-oppression**
- **Relationship building**
- **Safety first**

Preliminary
Evaluation
Findings

Evaluation

Evaluation started at program inception.

Program-level and individual-level data collected in following areas:

- (1) Housing Status
- (2) Service Utilization and Supports
- (3) Relationships and Safety
- (4) Income, Employment and Education
- (5) Health & Life Skills.

- Monthly meetings with program manager and case manager from an affiliated program (N=12)
- Interviews with other staff (N=4)
- Attendance at staff meetings and program advisory meetings (N=6)
- Interviews with young women at two different time periods in the year (N=8)
- House meeting minutes (started in June 2012) and written feedback surveys
- "Exit surveys" tracking individual changes and successes (N=13)

Moving in & Moving out

In the first year of operation (September 2011 - September 2012), **26** women moved into Imouto and **13** women moved out.

- Over a period of 12 months, the age range of residents was between 16 and 23 years old.
- In terms of ethnicity, nine out of the 13 women who moved out of Imouto in the first year identified as having First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit ancestry.

Table (right) - Length of stay at Imouto, current and past residents

Length of Stay	Current Residents (N=13)	Past Residents (N=13)
≤ 1 month	2	3
≤ 3 months	1	4
≤ 6 months	4	5
≤ 9 months	2	1
More than 9 months	4	0

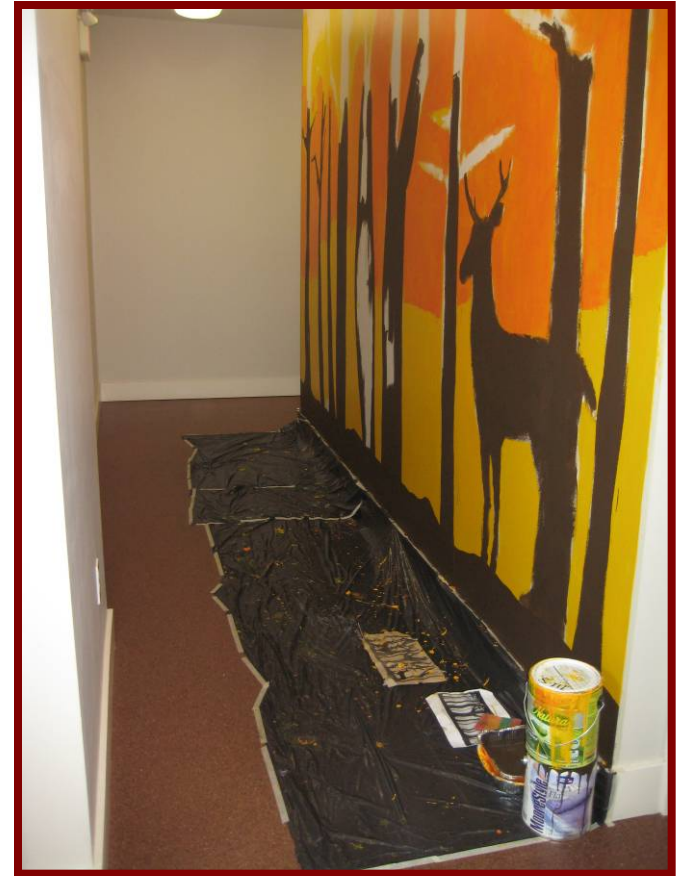
Daily Life at Imouto

A support worker is onsite 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Support workers are providing a breadth of supports, including:

- weekly check-ins
- helping women to access community voicemail or to get ID
- cooking and cleaning
- conflict resolution
- managing health issues (e.g., reminding women to take their meds, checking on women who have been using substances & managing emergencies)
- coordinating appointments
- providing emotional support
- waking women up for appointments, monitoring guests, and household activities.
- weekly house meetings

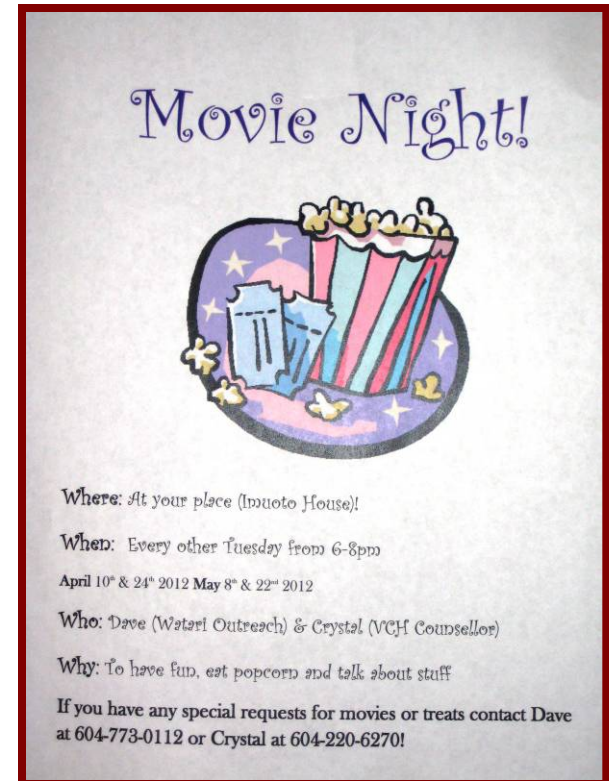
Staff have also initiated mural painting, pancake breakfasts, and birthday and holiday celebrations.



In-reach Services

Over the year, a number of activities and programs have been trialed including:

- biweekly movie night hosted by outreach workers
- pizza night
- beauty night
- yoga
- Aboriginal cultural programming (e.g., healing circle, pow wow dancing)
- art workshops
- digital storytelling workshops
- a community kitchen
- a weekly nurse practitioner clinic
- weekly trips to the community centre
- group counselling through the Stopping the Violence program



In-reach Services – Lessons Learned

- Programming needs to be in the late afternoon/early evenings (many women sleep during the day)
- Consistently offered programs by the same staff are the most successful (slow relationship building)
- In general, most women do not appear ready for physical activities
- Food, especially healthy food, is always a hit
- Although the type and frequency of in-reach services has varied over the past year and there has been changes in residents, approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of residents tend to participate in activities at Imouto.

"I've been connected with a [drug and alcohol] counsellor since I've been staying at Imouto which I didn't have before. And I met her cause of the movie nights they have."

Safety and Relationships

Family

- Many women are re-establishing connections with their family-of-origin
- 3 out of 13 residents who have moved out, went to live with family
- Several mother-daughter relationships developing, repairing, healing
- Other women are requesting support in building relationships with their children in care

Safety

- Women report feeling safe at Imouto
- Describe Imouto as a safe place to escape from the streets or the benefits of having their own home following a fight with a boyfriend
- Feel supported by staff who deny entrance to certain individuals at their request and their readiness to call police, if necessary

Visitor policy

- Initially, no guests permitted
- Safe but limited social interactions, isolating, kept some women out of the house for longer periods of time, less "home-y"
- Guests now allowed before 9pm; staff screen guests (e.g., age-appropriate males) and must stay in common areas (e.g., kitchen and TV room)
- Successful but a constant balance between women's safety, right to privacy and personal space, providing opportunities for women to develop relationships, and helping Imouto to feel like 'home.'

Impact of Housing

Women describe significant shifts in their transition from homelessness to stable housing.

"Before Imouto I was homeless. And I was also crashing at my boyfriend's hotel which is one of the scummiest hotels in the Downtown Eastside. ... Whenever me and him would get into a fight I would be homeless pretty much and I'd try and find someplace else to couch-hop."

"I'm not on the streets anymore and I'm not [engaged in sex trade work] as much."

When asked about what they like about Imouto:

"Big bright bedroom"

"I really like the mini-fridge"

"[I liked] Having a nice, clean, bug-free furnished room."

"[I liked] Having staff there to listen and also help make positive decisions/changes."

Other Changes for Women

- Improved health - sleep, weight gain, hygiene, food, reduced substance use
- Exploring options - pre-employment training program, attending detox and a recovery house
- Developing life skills
- Building social networks - friends, family, professional support

"I think I've got more control of my addictions staying at Imouto. I'm definitely sleeping more and showering more. And doing my laundry more."

Where do women go when they leave Imouto?

Of the 13 women who have moved out of Imouto:

- 3 women moved in with family
- 1 moved overseas to go to school
- 2 moved into other supported housing programs
- 1 found shared accommodation outside the Downtown Eastside with the financial support of a youth independence program
- 2 attended a residential addiction program
- 1 attended a residential program for pregnant women
- 3 women chose to leave Imouto either to move in with their boyfriends or without a clear housing transition plan.

Where to next?

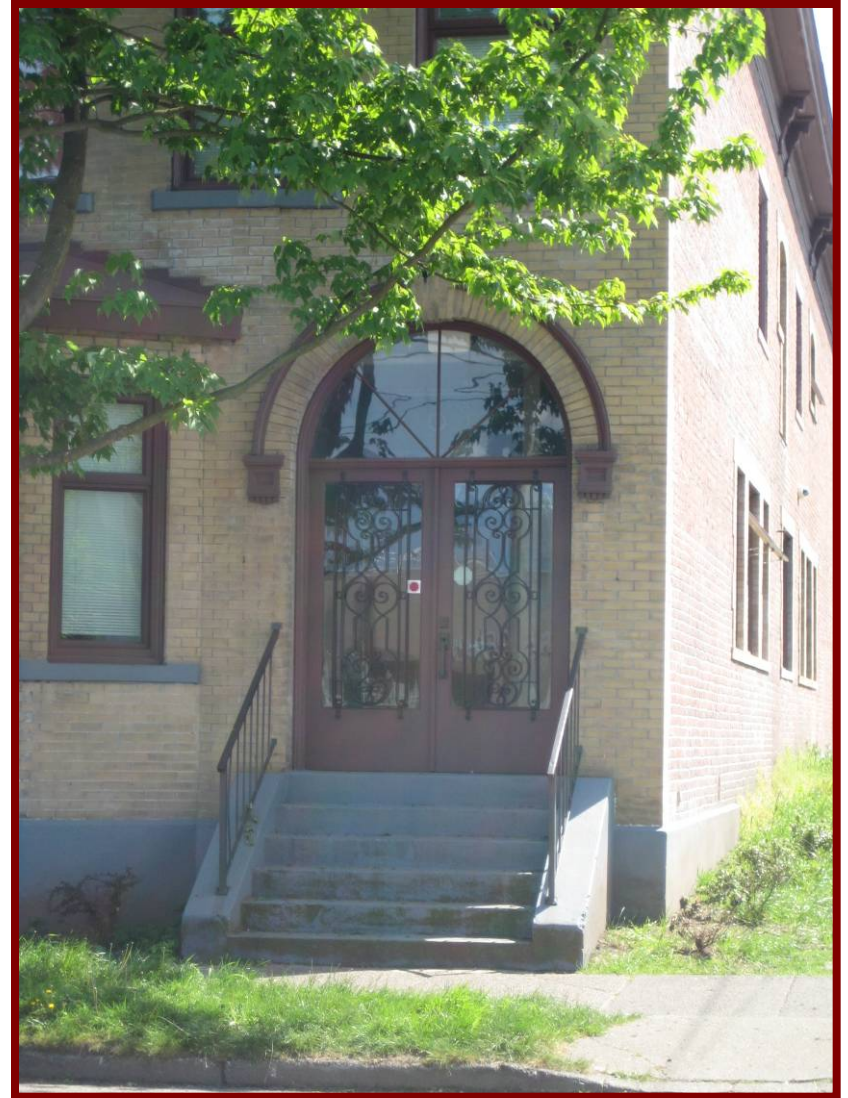
- **Food program**
- **Increased staffing**
- **Container housing project.
Elders in March 2013 -
multigenerational support
and programming?**



Contact Us

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Learn more about Imouto at
<http://www.atira.bc.ca/Imouto/index.html>



Abstract

Imouto Housing for Young Women is a supportive transitional housing program for women ages 16 to 24 in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Imouto (which means "little sister" in Japanese) opened its doors in September 2011. Owned by Atira Women's Resource Society, Imouto is run in collaboration with a group of program partners in the community. The program targets young women who are at risk and/or experiencing violence and abuse, being exploited, have no or unsafe housing, are pregnant, or who face additional barriers to finding or keeping housing, including women struggling with their use of drugs or alcohol, experiencing varying levels of mental wellness, aboriginal women, women of colour, and transgendered women. This presentation will provide an overview of the program model and how it has evolved over the first year of operation and examine the impact of the program on young women's lives. Using data from a focus group with program and community partners, interviews with young women, and evaluation tracking data (e.g., service utilization), the presentation will explore how Imouto is working to support young women in developing autonomy and freedom of choice, to nurture healthy and safe relationships, and to develop partnerships and sense of community.