

Youth services hub Huddle opens downtown location

By: Karen McKinley

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A new space designed to provide care to young people physically, mentally and spiritually has officially opened its doors in downtown Brandon.

Brandon's Huddle space is one of five that opened on Wednesday, along with three in Winnipeg and one in Selkirk. Another, Huddle NorWest in Winnipeg, has been open since 2017.



KAREN MCKINLEY/THE BRANDON SUN

Several youth advisors and invited guests who attended the official opening of Huddle in downtown Brandon gathered outside to cheer on the unveiling of the youth social and mental health service's sign on Wednesday. Among them were Reg Helwer, MLA for Brandon West; Len Isleifson, MLA for Brandon East; Sarah Guillemard, minister of mental health and community wellness; Dwayne Dyck, executive director of Westman Youth for Christ; Sachi Villanueva, Youth Advisory Council for the City of Brandon; Cliff Cullen, minister of economic development, investment and trade and Brandon Mayor Rick Chrest.

In March 2021, the Manitoba government invested \$1.92 million for the creation of the five Huddle sites to expand integrated services for youth in the province. Charity organizations led by United Way in Winnipeg agreed to invest an additional \$3.41 million over three years. The exact amount for Huddle Brandon was not available by press time.

Created in partnership with youth, this is more than a social service site. Huddle Brandon is a community space where youth can find comprehensive help without judgment, said Dwayne Dyck, executive director of Westman Youth For Christ, one of the agencies involved with Huddle Brandon.

This initiative not only makes access to mental health care easier, but creates a safe space for young people seeking help. There had been a soft opening to get people connected with services, and now they are eager to get the word out.

There has been a real need for a space like Huddle for years, Dyck said. Agencies have been having trouble providing wraparound services for youth.

Dyck recalled Westman Youth for Christ and several other stakeholders, including Prairie Mountain Health and the City of Brandon, had a virtual meeting to talk about an integrated service site and found out they could apply to have one, but they had very little time.

"We heard about this and thought this was great, but then found out at the time we had a week to get the application in," Dyck said. "Everybody involved pulled together to get everything we needed, and it shows how great of a need we have for this."

Having a location in downtown Brandon has its advantages, such as being visible and central, but there are some drawbacks to being in the downtown like accessibility to youth that don't live in the core, Dyck said. The important part for him, though, is the organization is open to all young people.

Having multiple Huddle locations shows it is OK for young people to want to seek help for their challenges, said Sachi Villanueva, a member of the city's Youth Advisory Council. Having one place to get multiple related services in the city will make finding help less overwhelming for those seeking help.

"It is crucial to get youth involved in making decisions, and creating Huddle ensures there are ways to deliver mental health that are approachable to youth who have had challenges in getting supports in their journey," she said. "I believe this is built on a strong foundation of trust with the best interests of youth in mind."

She said the team at Huddle includes a diverse range of ages and gender identities so they can identify with a variety of people looking for help and address gaps for groups that are under-represented.

The provincial government has been aware of the growing need for and gaps related to youth services, said Mental Health and Community Wellness Minister Sarah Guillemard.

"We are here to celebrate the work being done at these sites to support the mental health and well-being of young adults of this province," Guillemard said. "They are giving hope to all who struggle."

It isn't just about accessing formal services but making a connection with someone who understands their plight as a fellow young person who has lived similar experiences.

A service like this would've been great to have when she was a teen, Guillemard said. Services were available in pockets through churches or community gatherings, but you had to travel between them to get the care needed.

In many cases, individual groups want to help but may not have the expertise. At Huddle, everyone is tied in immediately with all aspects of care.

"This addresses a years-long need and we are only going to see it grow," she said.

To find out more about Huddle, visit huddlemanitoba.ca/.

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