

## Group to unveil outreach bus

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At a time when many organizations are cutting back on resources, one local grassroots agency is expanding its services.

Tonight (Wednesday), PoCoMo Youth Services Society will launch a second outreach bus as part of its award-winning Project Reach Out initiative.

Through Project Reach Out, PoCoMo staff and volunteers tour the Tri-Cities in a mobile youth drop-in centre, the first of its kind in the province.



Jerome Bouvier, executive director of the PoCoMo Youth Services Society, checks out the new outreach bus to be unveiled at a public ceremony tonight. The exterior of the bus has the words Reach Out painted across its side.

Photos by Paul vanPeenen/NOW

And the demand is high for its services, since the number of contacts made through the bus doubled over the past year -- to 4,602 in 2008 from 2,237 in 2007.

Jerome Bouvier, executive director of PoCoMo Youth Services, said the project has garnered a positive response from both youth and the wider Tri-Cities community, as well as piqued the interest of nearby municipalities.

"We've known it has an impact, but to see it to this extent is awesome. Our average age we figured out is 12 to 14, which also speaks to the fact that the youth are younger than anyone anticipated," said Bouvier.

"If we see kids doing what kids do, drinking or whatever, we ask them to be responsible and appropriate. If we see kids that need our help, we'll make sure they're home safe. We will be with them until somebody comes to get them."

Currently the outreach bus visits hot spots like parks and schools each Friday and Saturday night, plus every second Thursday. Youth mentors and adult

outreach workers chat with the kids they meet, and provide them with snacks, resources and an empathetic ear.

With the launch of its second bus, PoCoMo will be able to double up its efforts.

"If we're going to a school dance, for example, then we're there usually for a couple hours so that takes away from the rest of the community. This way, the second bus would be able to go out to different areas," said Bouvier, whose organization recently won the 2008 Crime Prevention and Community Safety award presented by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General.

"And then you've got summertime when kids are going to be out every night. So for two months, we'd like to run both buses. But that's a lot of money to run both buses with two teams of four. That's not including some relief people and volunteers."

The non-profit organization's biggest challenge is funding, said Bouvier, since all costs are covered by fundraisers, donations and grant-writing efforts.

Operational costs are the main expense for the second bus, since TransLink donated an old community shuttle that PoCoMo is refurbishing through a capital grant from the City of Coquitlam.

"Now we have to be creative with how we run it with the minimal financial resources that we have. We're trying to be strategic. We would definitely like to be flexible to try different nights to see what's out there," said Bouvier, who would eventually like to incorporate on-foot staffing along with the bus service.

"But you see changes. You see youth become more responsible in the community. They also become more diligent and more mindful in the community."

PoCoMo will unveil its new outreach bus from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at PoCo Best Western Inn and Suites, 545 Lougheed Hwy.

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