Photo by Nora Morrison

Community Sexual Assault Response Strategies on the West Coast

A Vital Conversation | 2025

clayoquot BIDSPHERE TRUST

Westcoast Community Resources Society

VITAL CONVERSATIONS: VitalSigns®

For more information:

Clayoquot Biosphere Trust
clayoquotbiospheretrust.org

West Coast Community Resources Society
wccrs.ca

We acknowledge the territories of hiškʷiiʔatḥ (Hesquiaht First Nation), ʕaaḥuusʔatḥ (Ahousaht), ƛaʔuukʷiʔatḥ (Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations), Yuułuʔiłʔatḥ Government (Ucluelet First Nation), and tukʷaaʔatḥ (Toquaht Nation) in the spirit of truth, healing, and reconciliation.

Introduction

This report provides an overview of a gathering co-hosted November 18th 2024 by the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust and the Westcoast Community Resources Society on the issue of community sexual assault response strategies in the Clayoquot Biosphere Region.

Research plays a vital role in the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust's advocacy for community and ecosystem health. As part of it's Vital Signs research program, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust works with community partners to identify priority issues, and hold Vital Conversations to identify sustainable pathways to change and co-create solutions. Following the 2023 Vital Signs report, mental health and physical safety were identified as a top concern for the Clayoquot Biosphere Region, with sexual assault services becoming an increasing need. While it is an issue across all west coast communities in the region, it is direr among those affected by intergenerational trauma, racism, homophobia, and gender discrimination.

The recent launch of the Westcoast Community Resources Society's Sexual Assault Services provided an opportunity to host a Vital Conversation for local community members including health providers, community services, First Nations, businesses, educators, local advocates, and other related organizations to gather and amplify efforts.

Over 70 people attended the Vital Conversation held in Tofino to learn about the current education, prevention, and response practices and explore ways to reduce the frequency and severity of incidents by building on collaborative strengths and supports. A key goal of the Vital Conversation was to empower community members to help shift from a culture that facilitates sexual violence through shame and secrecy, to a culture of consent that fosters respect and dignity.

About the Region

The Clayoquot Biosphere Region, referred to as the 'region' or 'west coast' in this report, includes Hot Springs Cove, Ahousaht, Opitsaht, Tofino, Esowista, Ty-Histanis, Ucluelet, Hitacu, Macoah, and Area C of the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District. There are five Nuu-chah-nulth nations: hiškʷiiʔatḥ (Hesquiaht First Nation), ʕaaḥuusʔatḥ (Ahousaht), ƛaʔuukʷiʔatḥ (Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations), Yuułuʔiłʔatḥ (Ucluelet First Nation), and tukʷaaʔatḥ (Toquaht Nation).

About the Westcoast Community Resources Society

The Westcoast Community Resources Society (WCCRS) is a non-profit organization serving the west coast. They strive to empower and support all members of the community to move beyond systemic barriers, violence and abuse through the provision of safe shelter, education, and counselling services. Examples of just a few programs include Women's Outreach and Transition House, Stopping the Violence, Sexual Assault Services, Substance Use, and outreach to youth, families, community, and those with special needs.

About the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust

The Clayoquot Biosphere Trust (CBT) is a registered charity based on the west coast. Established in 2000, the CBT is the only organization in Canada that is both a community foundation and a UNESCO Biosphere Region. It pairs the spirit of community with the power of global networks to bring more people together for a shared understanding. The CBT builds assets, capacity, and trust within the region to strengthen the development of all citizens, communities, and the ecosystems on which we all depend. Core to this work is building strong relationships across communities and organizations to engage decision-makers and citizens in meaningful conversations.

Sexual Assault Response in Context

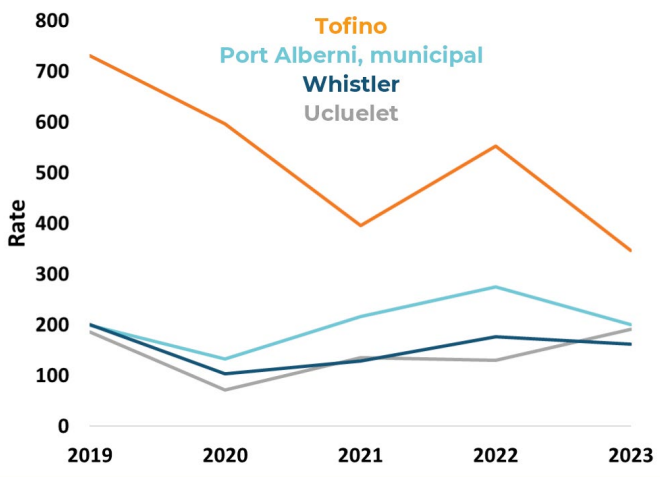
The Clayoquot Biosphere Region's population is estimated at approximately 7,626 (CBT's 2023 Vital Signs Report); however, this does not include seasonal residents that make up a significant share of added summer population.

Data from British Columbia police services (Statistics Canada, 2024) and Island Health show significantly higher rates of sexual assault on the west coast, especially in Tofino and Ahousaht than in other neighbouring or similar municipalities in BC. In 2023, Level 1 sexual assaults in Tofino were at a rate of 347 per 100,000 population, compared to 191 in Ucluelet, 200 in Port Alberni, and 191 in Whistler. Level 1 is defined as any unwanted sexual contact, without the use of a weapon or severe injury to the survivor. Research also estimates that only 6% of sexual assaults are reported to the police; therefore, these figures likely significantly underestimate the actual prevalence of sexual assault in these communities.

With this data, along with the historical lack of access to sexual assault services, and community pressures - such as seasonal population and tourist culture, lack of safe housing options, and increasing substance use - there is greater need to take meaningful steps to end sexual violence.

With WCCRS's Sexual Assault Services; more organizations, community leaders, and workplaces taking proactive measures to shift the west coast culture; and a systemic move to change practices and beliefs within institutions such as policing and health services, it is an ideal time to increase west coast collaboration across sectors and communities on this issue.

Level 1 Sexual Assault Rate per 100,000 residents



1 in 3 women in BC
1 in 10 men in BC
1 in 4 transgender people in BC
1 in 2 Indigenous women in Canada

Are sexually assaulted in their lifetime

Tofino's rate of sexual assault is three times higher than the average rate for neighbouring and similar BC communities.

The Vital Conversation

Over 70 people attended the full day gathering on November 18th 2024 in Tofino. The day began with plenary presentations on emerging topics and the services that support them, followed by small group community discussions to foster dialogue. All participants were welcome to bring forward questions or topics and to move among discussions to help build upon conversations, include new perspectives, and inspire new pathways.

Dezerae Seitcher, Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations, provided a welcome and opening to the day. Rebecca Hurwitz, Executive Director of the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, and Laurie Hannah, Executive Director of the Westcoast Community Resources Society, introduced the Vital Conversation and goals of the gathering. Nadine May and Sandra Tate of Uut Uuštukyuu, a non-profit society that work as Indigenous Healers and health care practitioners, hosted a retreat space on site throughout the day to support connection and healing as chosen by any participant.

Participants

These are the organizations, programs, and groups, as self-identified, represented at the event - often by more than one person. Many community members came to share their individual experiences and stories at the event as well. We have not listed their names out of respect for their privacy.

- Alberni Clayoquot Health Network
- Alberni Drug and Alcohol Prevention Society
- Alberni Valley Employment – West Coast
- BC Emergency Health Services
- Black Rock Resort
- Clayoquot Biosphere Trust
- Coastal Community Resources Coalition
- Cox Bay Resort
- Cultural Support Workers
- District of Tofino
- Family Support Coordinators
- Island Health – Nurses, Response Staff, Counsellors, Liaisons
- Island Health – Public & Population Health
- KU-UUS Crisis Services
- Nurses in communities
- Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council Counsellors
- Pacific Rim Hospice Society
- Pacific Sands Resort
- RCMP Officers
- RCMP Victim Services
- School District 70 – Principals and Teachers
  - Ucluelet Elementary School
  - Wickaninnish Elementary School
- School District 70 - Counsellors
- Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations – Community Services
- Tofino Chamber of Commerce
- Tofino General Hospital
- Tofino Resort and Marina
- Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce
- USMA Child and Family Services
- Uut Uuštukyuu
- West Coast Community Resources Society – Sexual Assault Services Volunteers
- West Coast Community Resources Society Programs – such as Housing and Outreach
- West Coast Doula and Post Partum Programs
- West Coast Multiplex Society
- West Coast Primary Care Initiative
- Wickaninnish Resort
- Youth Advocates
- Yuułuʔiłʔatḥ Government- Community Services

Presentations

Sexual Assault Response: Procedures, Practices ə and Third-Party Reporting
Jenna Pearce, WCCRS Sexual Assault Services Coordinator

Jenna presented on how Sexual Assault Services offers support for survivors of sexual assault (all genders, ages 13+) to navigate their options and begin to heal, emphasizing the new option of Third Party Reporting. This program includes a team of trained volunteers who support survivors through a forensic exam at the Tofino General Hospital. They work in conjunction with other WCCRS programs and in partnership with businesses, communities, health care, police and other social services providers within west coast communities to prevent and respond to sexual assault, including:

- Advocacy and information about medical and justice options, as requested
- Disclosure only confidential and emotional support
- Third Party Reporting: anonymous reporting to the RCMP
- Accompaniment at the hospital, RCMP detachment, and court
- Planning for safety and healing
- Follow-up care and referrals as needed
- Community education, training and collaboration

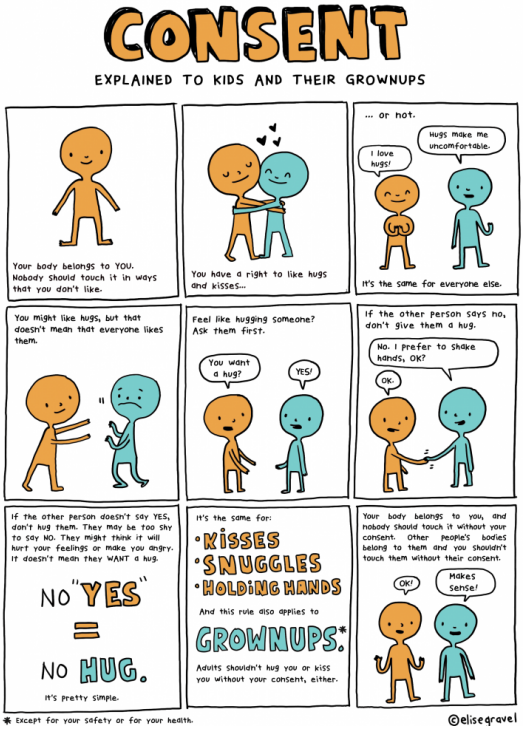
Contact Information:
Jenna
sas@wccrs.ca
250-726-5480

Working with Youth on Consent
Hillary McLeod, Certified Sexual Health Educator

Hillary provided an overview of the approach to consent education within the west coast schools across all age levels. Emphasis on starting young, providing education to parents and caregivers, and modeling respectful behaviours within communities is essential. Some key takeways include:

- Clarity on medical terms and reducing stigma or shame
- Addressing body dysmorphia
- Demonstrating language to express boundaries
- Defining private and public spaces
- Defining what a good or not good secret is and what to do
- The appropriate age to talk about sexual behaviour is when kids ask
- The more education, and the more accurate information, then the less vulnerable kids are to safety risks
- School should be held accountable to teach curriculum on consent and to address barriers that exist
- Addressing safety and boundaries with parents, primary caregivers, and others in the community

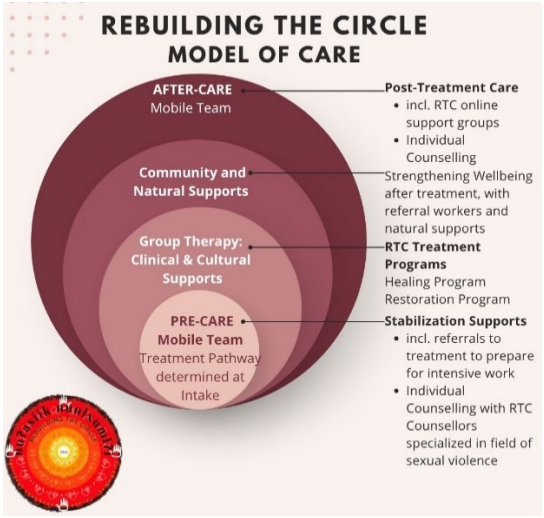
Contact Information:
Hillary
mcleodhillary@gmail.com



Rebuilding the Circle

Tana Thomas & Chris Seitcher, Kackaamin Family Development Centre

Tana and Chris provided an overview of the Rebuilding the Circle Program as well as insights into the program's work on the west coast within Nuu-chah-nulth communities. The program provides men and women with a healing program for those that have been harmed through sexual violence, and a restoration program for those that have harmed others through sexual violence. It brings together Indigenous and western models of care through individual and group care. They emphasize family systems and community building where there have been impacts through harm and long term after care and healing.



Contact Information:
intake@kackaamin.org
778-421-8811

What can you do?

Start the Conversation...

Talk to the people in your life about sexual assault and consent.

Community Discussions – Sharing Our Learnings

The following seven topics were brought forward by participants as community priorities. Participants in small group discussions on each topic were asked to focus on community assets and potential actions that could come from collaboration in the region. They were welcomed to move between different topics to contribute or just listen. Notes were recorded by hosts in each group and then shared back to the greater plenary. Along with additional discussions, each group's key points are summarized here.

1. Consent

Understanding of consent is still a difficult topic, in particular as the conversation is still highly gender and age biased. 'No means no' is still the mantra, but clashes against many socially ingrained assumptions

Current Practices

- Many current practices are in place within schools, as presented by Certified Sexual health Educator, Hillary McLeod

Ideas

- Respect, dignity, worthiness, humanity and universality are principles of consent that apply to all people
- Culture must shift to ensure there is accountability
- Culture must support anyone to know that it is always okay to change your mind when it comes to consent
- Greater messaging tailored to men would be valuable

Actions

- Ensure education on healthy relationships is ongoing in schools across all grades and throughout the school year
- Provide workshop or training on consent to those working with youth outside of schools (camps, after-school, sports, babysitters, etc.) that may not be able to access in school resources as easily
- Skill building for intervention against power imbalances
- Provide more 'meet and greet' for parents and caregivers to meet local support workers and learn about resources or ask questions at places like 'open play gym times' at the community halls

2. Systemic Revictimization

Sexual assault survivors very infrequently (estimated 6%) come forward, partly due to the safety of victimized individuals or groups not being centered in the process, but instead on the offenders and their rights. Much of this comes from systemic gendered attitudes.

Current Practices

- Offenders often have greater legal protection in the system than victims, and the victim' interests are not recognized in resolutions
- A standard of evidence is difficult to obtain

Ideas

- Uphold policies and processes for the region that support victims first, before protecting institutions

Actions

- Are there examples of cases or class action lawsuits against institutions that have established systems that inherently create failure or harm
- Identify gaps in the region for accessing appropriate legal advice. Do lawyers have the specific training or tools needed?

Unresolved Questions

- How to handle right to privacy for offenders in small towns that easily lead to revictimization or recriminalization?
- How does the community work together for protection of its members?

3. Support for Men

It is acknowledged that men experiencing assault face different needs in navigating support, whether they faced violence or abuse in childhood, in relationships, or from systemic structures.

Current Practices

- Very little current men-focused support is available regularly and 'barrier-free'

Ideas

- Changing the language used in resources and communications with men's input on experiences to be more accessible
- Starting the conversation with young men and youth much earlier to make them more socially acceptable and demonstrate strengths in vulnerabilities

Actions

- Organizations work together to create a specific space or day for the region that raises awareness of men's experiences and support available
- Looking to current men's groups, of any kind, to ask what would be needed on this topic
- Look to the youth warriors existing groups to create guidelines on how families, communities, or support workers can create safety for kids to talk, heal, or even support each other

Unresolved Questions

- While allyship is important, who in the region could actually take on leadership and champion this work?

4. Reporting

There is known low rate of reporting. Survivors of assault are vulnerable and often don't report because someone tells them not to, they are protecting a perpetrator, or have experienced long term or intergenerational trauma. They may not be believed, or do not think they can report at a later date.

Current Practices

- There is an existing 'duty to report' for cases of child abuse
- Healing Circles exist, but youth are not frequent participants due to stigmas and low chances of justice
- Strong belief that there is a low chance of resolution in cases on both survivor and offender sides

Ideas

- The region is on the right track moving forward with third party reporting practices, more support works are needed and trained to continue to advocate for survivors
- Greater culture of believing in survivors is needed
- Advocating to governments, why not a 'Ministry of Sexual Violence'

Actions

- Create a letter writing campaign for organizations and community members to collectively advocate for action to the provincial government, highlighting the lack of support and increased need

Unresolved Questions

- How will communities work along with RCMP and third-party reporting moving forward and ensuring a general approach to locally relevant trauma-informed training in sexual violence?

5. Service Industry

The service industry, especially in resorts and restaurants, has a history of a party scene with blurry lines between conduct for managers and staff, and lack of safe workplace policies, procedures and training. A change in the overall culture is important. There is particular vulnerability for young, inexperienced, or foreign workers. Multiple scenarios may have different approaches: harassment between coworkers; harassment between customers that may benefit from worker intervention; and harassment between customer and worker.

Current Practices

- Tofino Resort onboarding training on safety
- Pacific Sands anonymous outreach channel and dedicated staff to handle issues among workers or in housing

Ideas

- Providing templates in collaboration with WorkSafeBC to businesses for policies
- Go2HR connections
- Support post-incident brushing opportunities
- Staff housing policies – need a whole conversation on its own

Actions

- Create a local industry standard for onboarding and policy – businesses need a template to work from
- Get 'Good Night Out' or similar training program for the coast
- Launch a campaign to inform workers of in-workplace and in-housing rights and opportunities

Unresolved Questions

- How to best deal with confidentiality in a small town and small workplaces?

6. Staff Accommodation

Staff living within housing provided by employers can create difficult power dynamics that may prevent best practices in safe housing, reporting, and protection of those in need.

Current Practices

- Anonymous QR codes at staff housing to allow reports to a housing manager
- Guidelines on housing safety are part of staff contracts during onboarding

Ideas

- Staff ambassador network program so there are a variety of representatives, even third party, that are not management, that staff can connect with on local resources or connections
- Workshops or training for HR or housing managers
- Ensuring private rooms that lock in all staff accommodation (no staff needs to roommate with a stranger or someone they don't want to)

Actions

- Create an anonymous survey of people in staff accommodation to learn from their experiences, this would need partnership with businesses who could also participate anonymously
- Paying employees to attend workshops on creating a culture of consent
- Invite a third party (for example from WCCRS SAS program) to attend new staff orientations or staff meetings

Unresolved Questions

- What have resorts or staff accommodation providers learned from their current practices?

7. Youth

The young population, however it is defined, are vulnerable in the region because of lack of service support, need for more safe youth-oriented spaces, and fear of stigma and loss of anonymity.

Current Practices

- There are more opportunities being created for youth to access support on their own (e.g. regular public health nurse visits in high school)
- Consent and healthy relationships education in schools

Ideas

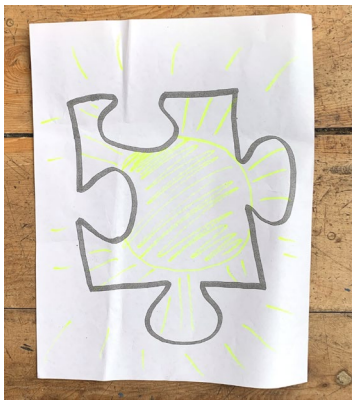
- Language in communicating concepts, resources, and support for youth is important, and youth should participate in crafting resources
- Learning from parents on what they need to have healthy relationships with their kids

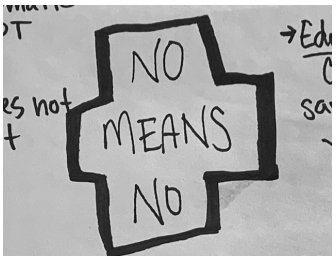
Actions

- Identify gaps in resources available to parents
- Frequent audit in schools and youth spaces to ensure that educational materials (like posters) are present, visible, and up to date
- Working with local doctors, nurses and other providers to create clinic spaces easily accessible for youth on their own, where they are or want to meet

Unresolved Questions

- Are school processes of accountability to the students clear, or do they even exist? How do youth know how the school will be accountable to their safety?





Next Steps

The Vital Conversation on Community Sexual Assault Response Strategies gathered community members together to better understand the issue on the west coast and identify opportunities to collaborate. It is hoped that new and more frequent avenues of communication will open among those attending, but also in the general public. A deeper understanding of underlying patterns that put pressure on services and increase vulnerabilities for local residents can help create a pathway forward for action. There were several common themes throughout the gathering that may assist in supporting this work.

Common Themes and Ideas

1. There is interest in a small action group that could come together from participants to support region wide collaboration and advocacy
2. More advocacy is needed to raise urgent needs to provincial governments for changes to policies and funding
3. More transparent accountability in schools, the criminal justice system, workplaces, staff accommodation, and all institutions, and in particular to those in positions of power to appropriately support survivors of sexual violence
4. Early education with children and youth is essential
5. Increased support for Nuu-chah-nulth led community visions and services
6. Greater ongoing coordinated communications and messaging campaigns for the public, especially for those not engaged with social or health services regularly, to help shift culture
7. Businesses can feel disconnected from community services and need direct outreach and assistance through toolkits, resources, and training to ensure effective procedures and supports are provided to staff

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The Clayoquot Biosphere Trust uses the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to guide local action and connect to global networks to shift our trajectory towards a sustainable future for our people and planet.

Three of the sustainable development goals include eliminating sexual assault violence in their targets.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

3.7 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children

316 Main Street
PO Box 67
Tofino, BC V0R 2Z0

clayoquotbiosphere.org
info@clayoquotbiosphere.org

clayoquot
BIOSPHERE TRUST