

## Help for those trying to hang on

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**ammy Lohnes wishes** for the day she'll no longer be needed to do her work. Lohnes oversees the crisis line at SHARE Family and Community Services in Coquitlam. When someone in the North Fraser area feels so stressed they don't know where else to turn, they often end up calling the crisis line.

Tammy Lohnes Crisis Line Coordinator SHARE Family and Community Services
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“Hopefully a day will come when there will be no more need for crisis lines,” she said, “when our social and support and health services reach what I call the 4A standard: available, accessible, acceptable and appropriate to all people when and where they're needed.”

Until that time, though, Lohnes and her team of volunteers are extremely busy. Every month, they talk to an average of 1,200 people — most of them extremely distressed.

“The crisis line is like a microcosm of what's going on in the larger community,” Lohnes said. “Whether it's homelessness, increases in violence, lack of support for the most vulnerable, wait lists, no money for food — I think we're often the first to hear about it. Our services used to be called “Lifeline,” which gives a very good picture of what we do: offering people something to help them hang on.”

Lohnes works with and trains the volunteers who staff the lines. “Our mission at SHARE is to provide the resources needed to strengthen families and communities,” she said. “The crisis line is a shining example of resources in action: people from the community helping others in their community.”

A quiet and thoughtful woman with a calm manner, Lohnes becomes almost effusive when talking about the volunteers she works with. “Not only do I admire the work volunteers do and the commitment they make, but I really respect the knowledge and the caring that they bring to their work, and the respect that they have for the people calling in,” she said. “The volunteers share a need to want to make a difference to others, and what I see are tremendous two-fold benefits to our community.

“People calling the crisis line get access to a 24-hour, free, accessible, low-risk and no-wait opportunity to talk, and the people answering the phones get training and experience and exposure to some of the toughest issues facing our communities today,” she said. “They can take this experience back to their family, friends and co-workers, but also they go back into the community as better educators, service providers, advocates, voters, and concerned and informed citizens.

“In the 12 years I've been with this program, I have had the privilege of training more than 500 crisis line

volunteers, and I'm very proud of being a part of this process of strengthening the community.

Lohnes brings a powerful empathy to her work. "For example, we have a caller who's been in trouble with the police many times for acting out of control and causing disturbances in public. Bill [not his real name] isn't someone from the busy streets of Vancouver's downtown eastside; he's calling from our area: Burnaby, Coquitlam and the Tri-Cities, New West, Ridge Meadows.

"The police take Bill to the hospital and the hospital says they can't help him," she said. Bill regularly refuses counselling or medication. He is extremely isolated, because his family and friends gave up trying to help him long ago.

"But he needs someone to care about him," Lohnes said. "Maybe he calls us because he knows it's safe, it's anonymous, we're going to listen and not judge him and he's free to hang up. And he keeps calling," she said.

"As many as 40 per cent of our callers are repeat callers. Our short-term goal with callers like Bill is to help him stay out of harm's way for one more night; long-term, we want him to trust us enough eventually to lead him to the real help he needs," she said. "Sometimes Bill actually thanks us for listening; a small yet positive sign that we've made a difference."

Lohnes said this is a common story for crisis line workers. "Their conflict may be in any of a number of different areas," she said. "Others are dealing with tremendous loss and the support services they need are simply not there. What most of our callers share in common is the feeling they have no one else to turn to."

After she earned a degree in psychology from Simon Fraser University, Lohnes worked in a variety of fields, including a transition house. "I have a varied work background in volunteer management, supervision, crisis intervention and even cross-cultural training," she said. "The crisis line seemed the perfect job for me."

Lohnes explained that the SHARE crisis line is a distinct service from 1-800 lines for battered women or for those who have experienced sexual assault. "We can take those sorts of calls, but specialized services exist." These, she says, are the services that the provincial Liberal government proposes to amalgamate into one province-wide 1-800 number.

She said although the crisis line she oversees will probably not be part of this amalgamation, crisis line workers have serious concerns about this trend. "I think that's a huge loss to local communities. If you're going to make it that centralized, then there's no way that you're going to be able to give people the information and support that's available right there in your local community," she said.

"We know what free help or goods our local churches and other benevolent societies are providing. We know which local doctors and dentists are offering free services such as eyeglasses or oral care to children whose parents can't afford it. Can a province-wide 1-800 number do that?"

Whereas the volunteers are enthusiastic and altruistic, it's no cakewalk. "Volunteers receive approximately 50 hours in such skills as active listening, empathy, suicide intervention and information and referral skills — a combination of classroom and supervised practicum," she said. "The screening, selection, training and acceptance process takes three months to complete. About one in four people who inquire about volunteering end up becoming a volunteer."

Lohnes said it's a common misconception that working on a crisis line is depressing. "The volunteers say that for someone to call into a crisis line asking for help, that says a lot about their courage and resourcefulness and determination to be heard," she said.

"You're seeing the triumph of the human spirit, and that's very inspiring when you hear the stories about the amount of loss and suffering that we can hear from callers, such as loss of loved ones, loss of health, loss of job and money. To be finding a way to hang in there and hanging on to their hope and their will to live — you can't not be inspired by that." 

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