

## Charity turns house to a home

HomeStart charity team delivers donated furniture for free

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A Lower Mainland charity that furnishes the homes of disadvantaged families is hoping a six-home "housewarming party" will help boost its cause.

Vancouver-based HomeStart Foundation, with the help of 1-800-Rid-Of-It Junk Removal, delivered a whole houseful of furniture to a home in West Vancouver as part of its Vancouver's Biggest Housewarming initiative. The project, which organizers hope will become an annual event, saw six homes in various communities furnished free of charge.

"I think it's important to highlight (the issue)," said Vikki Stevenson, HomeStart's executive director. "I think people forget about people who are marginalized. I think they forget about ways that they can pitch in."

The charity, which started in 2003, collects donated furniture from homes around the Lower Mainland. It consults with front-line agencies such as the North Shore's Harvest Project to identify needy recipients and then drops off the appropriate items for free.

"The frontline agencies . . . are dealing with people, getting them housed, getting them somewhere safe and comfortable and reliable, and then they come to us and say: 'Here's what (they) need,'" said Stevenson. "It's all about having a comfortable home environment. If you don't have a couch to sit on, if you don't have a table to eat your meals at, it just makes you feel bad about everything."

Diana (whose real name has been withheld for safety) moved into a subsidized North Shore housing unit with her children in April. Having left behind an abusive relationship -- and much of what she owned -- she lacked the basics for rebuilding a household. As a part-time residential care worker, she simply did not have the money to buy furniture -- even used furniture -- while at the same time paying the rent and supporting three kids. That's where the charity came in.



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Vikki Stevenson (left), with the HomeStart Foundation, Derek Pace from the Harvest Project and Mike Mckee and James Trever with 1-800-Rid-Of-It Junk Removal team up to deliver donated furniture to needy families.

Diana and her children had fled to a safe house in October, and had later moved to a furnished transitional home while they looked for permanent, affordable accommodation.

The Harvest Project, which had been supplying the family with groceries, advice and other essentials, put them in touch with HomeStart when it became apparent they would need help with furnishings. For almost two months, Diana and her children slept and ate on the floor, until Friday, when the charity, together with 1-800-Rid-Of-It, delivered a living room set, a desk, a night table -- even a patio set -- to their home.

"The HomeStart Foundation helped me a lot to make my place a real house," said Diana. "I'm very happy."

Her children were also thrilled, she added.

"They were jumping on the sofa," said Diana. "My boy, this morning, said: 'Mama, mama, I will help to design the house.'"

HomeStart began six years ago in the Kitsilano Christian Community Church on Vancouver's west side when the minister, who was involved with a transition home for women, began receiving offers of furniture from people who wanted to donate it directly to those in need. The minister realized there was no organization to co-ordinate pick-up and redistribution, so he founded HomeStart.

The charity now has a 1,200-square-foot warehouse, a delivery truck, four full-time staff and numerous volunteers. It has furnished 163 homes so far this year, delivering items worth a total of about \$30,000, based on thrift store prices.

Despite their gains, the challenge they face is growing, said Stevenson. A deteriorating economy and an increasingly unaffordable housing market appear to be behind the trend.

"Every agency I talk to says it's 10 times worse than it was at this time last year," she said. "We've received about a 25-per-cent increase in inquiries (ourselves)."

The organization -- which does not yet pick up from the North Shore -- has a lot of furniture at the moment, but is in desperate need of cash. It takes about \$260 to furnish a home, said Stevenson. It's often difficult to scrape that together.

"That's at the top of our wish list, honestly," she said.

For more information, or to make a donation, visit [www.homestart.ca](http://www.homestart.ca). The charity has asked that no furniture be dropped off at its office without prior arrangements.

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