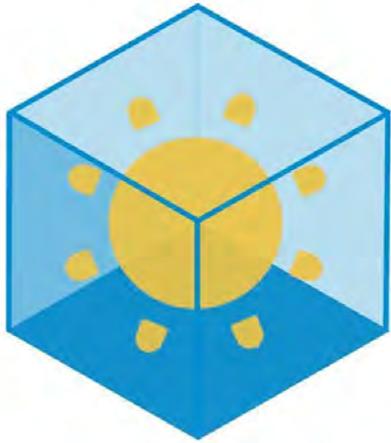


Langara College



**BLUE  
BOX**

## unboxing the stigma around mental health

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# Introduction

BlueBox is a project created for the Environmental Studies 2100 course at Langara College. It is a mental health initiative that strives to reduce stigma by cultivating community through activation of underused space.

BlueBox is based on the observations and experiences shared by team members and our peers that mental illness is a significant issue in Vancouver. Stigma around mental health presents a barrier to individuals seeking professional help with its accompanying struggles, particularly for those in marginalized and underprivileged communities. BlueBox was created to begin to fill the need for an anonymous and accessible means of obtaining professional mental health counsel for the public in Vancouver.

We aim to bring this issue into the public sphere by simultaneously transforming and enlivening areas of bleak, underused urban space, and envision transforming the underbelly of stretches of Vancouver's Skytrain lines into the venues for BlueBox - a space for reaching out, and for outreach to the community on mental health. Because of BlueBox's duality in addressing both mental health and underutilized space, our project addresses many key areas of Vancouver's Healthy City Strategy Goals.

# Methodology

## What is BlueBox?

BlueBox is a box made of repurposed wood, painted blue, and set at an accessible height against one of the supports in the underbelly of the SkyTrain. It will have a ledge to write on, compartments for pencils and paper, a laminated instruction card outlining its purpose and the process for submission, and a small slot to submit paper slips. These paper slips would be QR coded so the submitter can track their response. The public would be encouraged to interact with the box by anonymously submitting slips with written questions or concerns pertaining to their mental health struggles.

These boxes would be emptied bi-monthly by a bike courier, and the submissions inside would be sorted through and responded to by a mental health professional. Responses will be posted on several mediums. First, a website blog, using the QR codes on the paper to make the responses identifiable by the submitter. Select responses would then be shared on our Facebook page and Instagram to cultivate conversation and forge community, making people feel less alone in their struggles - some may be able to get help vicariously through reading someone else's story. These same responses would also be shared on a covered notice board behind the box for the public to read. This notice board would enable submitters who may not have access to the internet to view their response; submitters could indicate this on the submission paper. Submitters would also be asked to provide their age, gender, race(s) and/or ethnicity, and what form of mental health support, if any, they have received before.

In each scenario, the participant would remain anonymous, but the counsellor would have their contact information on the website and notice board for further outreach for users who wished to pursue it. On the website and notice board there would also be a resource page for mental health helplines and services in the Vancouver area.

## BlueBox and the City

BlueBox aspires to help the City of Vancouver reach their targets of the Healthy City Strategy action plan and work towards three of their long-term goals in particular.

To support the achievement of the “Healthy Human Services” goal, BlueBox aligns with the social amenities priority plan, to “increase equitable access to services” (“Healthy Human Services.”). By targeting vulnerable groups that experience barriers to accessing healthcare, Blue Box will help “optimize an effective mental health... system” that responds to the needs of these groups (“Healthy Human Services.”). The data we hope to collect from submissions to the Boxes will enable this specification and help to support progressive improvements in the services. The detailed design will engage with potential clients to ensure accessibility and integration with existing channels of mental health services.

For the goal of “Cultivating Connections”, not only does BlueBox forge connections between counsellors and people in need, it also provides a space where communities can feel included and become engaged in civic life and shared struggles. Creating infrastructure that starts important conversations and encourages the development of social support networks is key to the wellbeing of any city. This will assure that “Vancouverites are connected and engaged in the places and spaces that matter to us,” and serve as a resource for the City’s goal of having all citizens feel there are at least four people in their network they can rely on for support (“Cultivating Connections.”).

Thirdly, BlueBox aligns with the goal of “Being and Feeling Safe and Included”, where the goal is to increase the reported feeling of belonging of Vancouverites by 10%, from 54-64%, in creating spaces where safety and belonging is felt (“Being and Feeling Safe and Included.”). We are aligned with the City in understanding that “a strong sense of belonging is associated with better self-reported physical and mental health, while social exclusion denies us the opportunity for full economic and social participation in society,” and this is why we seek to provide a source of inclusion to neighbourhoods with highest levels of negative social determinants of mental health (“Being and Feeling Safe and Included.”).

The design of the BlueBox services will also support the city’s sustainability objectives. BlueBox submissions are delivered to and from the counselling service providers using green transportation and the Box itself is made from repurposed wood, promoting the circular economy. The mural behind the Box will be painted by an artist who identifies as struggling with mental health. The Box and mural will both be primarily blue. The reason we chose the colour blue for this project is because blue is universally liked and trusted, and has equal appeal to both sexes (Smith, Kate). It is also serene, trustworthy, dependable, and intelligent, inciting a sense of calm for people who may choose to submit their questions or concerns into the Box (Smith, Kate).

The two neighbourhoods for which we propose implementation of BlueBox spaces are around the Main St./Science World and Stadium/Chinatown stations, and the Joyce-Collingwood station. Both neighbourhoods have high percentages of marginalized groups with high rates of social determinants of mental health as well as low social support. Vancouver Coastal Health’s Community Health Reports reported the neighbourhood around the first group of stations as having the highest rates in the city of: aboriginal populations, low income households, and people living in “unaffordable conditions” - spending > 30% of annual income on living

expenses - in the city, and the neighbourhood around Joyce-Collingwood with the greatest percentage of immigrant populations and visible minorities (“Community Health Area 2: A Health and Social Profile”; “Community Health Area 6 - South Vancouver: A Health and Social Profile.”).

## Understanding the Need - and the Potential

BlueBox was primarily born from an identified need for improved access to mental health care in Vancouver. Mental illness directly affects more than 20% of Canadians and indirectly impacts 100% of Canadians in their lifetime (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2017). While there is a variety of public services providing mental health support in the city, there are multiple factors that limit their reach and accessibility.

The perceived stigma and resulting discrimination around mental illness is a major obstacle to many seeking professional mental health services today. According to the 2002 Mental Health and Wellbeing Survey, many people are ashamed about and have been discriminated against because of a psychiatric illness<sup>1</sup>. Because of this, many people may feel the need for a mental health service which is anonymous. BlueBox aims to provide this: a service that people can be used privately, comfortably and honestly<sup>2</sup>. We also aim to encourage communities to gain a greater understanding about mental illness, and respect for both self and others, through providing a space where healthy conversations about mental health can be held and supported within the different and diverse communities of Vancouver.

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<sup>1</sup> 53.5 % of people who met the criteria of a mood or anxiety disorder reported feeling “embarrassed” about their mental health problems, and 54.3% reported facing discrimination due to mental health problems (Carl Lakaski, et al. 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Researchers have found that providing anonymous assessments for mental illness significantly increases rates of reporting symptoms. Treatments that allow patients to remain anonymous and ensure full confidentiality are most successful, particularly in initial stages of treatment and diagnosis. (Gale M. Lucas, et al. 2017)

Another factor that limits accessibility lies in the nature of many mental health services available in Vancouver today. Private counselling services are costly, ranging from “\$50 to \$240 for a one-hour session”, and public counselling services for adults over 24 are often only free through a hospital or clinic if the individual has already been diagnosed with a severe issue, or if their medical plan happens to cover therapy (“How Much Does Therapy or Counseling Cost?”; “Youth & Young Adult Counselling - Pacific Spirit Community Health Centre .”). Many of the free services in Vancouver require high levels of active engagement, and often involve talking to someone directly and are rarely anonymous. Additionally, apart from emergency hotlines, which operate 24/7, most therapy and counselling options are only available during certain hours of the day . While mainstream options like these can be helpful, it is often difficult for individuals experiencing symptoms of mental illness to engage with them. They often require clients to have the sufficient time, knowledge and social skills to access them. They can also be inaccessible to people that may not be available during office hours, that are not able to keep appointments, or to people that may feel shame or distrust in seeking help. Experts see these as “unrealistic” options, particularly to those in socially marginalized groups (Priebe, et al. 2012).

Marginalized communities in particular need greater support in accessing mental health services. Individuals from these groups experience the most financial and social barriers to seeking help, making that first step to seek help even more difficult and resulting in lower-than expected rates of mental health service use<sup>3</sup>. While rates of mental illness service use are lower in lower socio economic groups, rates of hospitalization due to mental illnesses are high -

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<sup>3</sup> Although people from marginalized or lower socio-economic groups suffer from disproportionately high rates of mental illness, they are not associated with high rates of mental health service use (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2017). Financial and social barriers to accessing formal mental health services add to stigma-related barriers for these communities. (Priebe, et al. 2012)

suggesting a tendency to seek care only when mental health issues become severe and require hospitalisation (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2019).

There is thus an evidenced need for “establishing outreach programmes that seek to initiate contact with marginalised groups, establish a relationship of trust [...] and assist them in accessing care” (Priebe, et al. 2012). BlueBox was created to address this need. Our project provides an opportunity for professional help for people who, because of their age or class, may not be able to otherwise access it. We hope to connect people with counsellors and therapists, potentially forging future relationships between individuals in need and certified counsellors. The project aims to give people who have struggled with being heard a voice, and encourage them to seek professional help. BlueBox makes it easier to take the first step, which is often the hardest part in one’s journey to self-help.

This project aims to address these issues through building community and activating space. Vancouver has large quantities of underused space, especially underneath the SkyTrain and Canadeline. BlueBox will help to capture Vancouver’s untapped potential by integrating functionality with public art to activate underused urban space; we hope to create spaces that help to destigmatize, demystify, and educate people about mental health issues and care.

# Budget

## Expenditures

ITEMS	COST
Repurposed wood to make BlueBox from	\$0
Blue paint to paint BlueBox	\$27.26 (“Dynamic Blue SW 6958 - Blue Paint Color.”)
Laminated card with instructions	\$1-3 (“How Much Does Laminating Cost?”)
Pencils	\$10.99 (“Staples® Golf Pencils, 144/Box   Staples.”)
QR coded paper	\$0 (“Frequently Asked Questions.”)
Lock for the Box	\$28.97 (“Master Lock Magnum Padlock And Hasp Combo .”)
Battery powered LED lights	N/A: we have contacted Translink and are waiting for a reply as to the best lights for this project
BlueBox logo	\$13.50/month (“Design a Logo & Create Your Brand.”)
Mural Artist Payment	Avg \$51.19/hr or \$21.18/square foot, plus materials, though the rates are highly dependant on the artist (“ProMatcher.com.”)
Hinges for Box	\$19.67 (“Products.”)
Enclosed Notice Board to post responses on	\$460.97 (“Refurbished NA OPEN BOX QUARTET ENCLOSED CORK BULLETIN BOARD, 38’ X 39’ OR 12 SHEETS, 2 SLIDING DOORS, ALUMINUM FRAME.”)

## Sources of Funding

### Grants:

- Vancouver Foundation: up to \$20,000 for a Systems Change Develop Grant, up to \$500 for a Neighbourhood Small Grant
- Community Action Initiative: up to \$200,000 over 18-24 months for a Service Innovation Grant
- City of Vancouver: up to \$32,000 for Social Innovation Project Grant

Additional funding will be sourced from the following, if the need arises:

- City staff/sponsors
- Vancouver Coastal Health
- Mental Illness organizations

## Conclusion

Our aspirations as a company are to partner with an organization to bring more BlueBox spaces and counsellors on board with the initiative, ideally creating a specialized group with varied fields of expertise to better serve our diverse clients. We also hope to obtain to a space to post responses in a local newspaper, for further accessibility.

Before this project can move forward, we need authorization from Translink for implementation of the BlueBox space, including: painting one of the structural supports of the SkyTrain, affixing the Box into the ground or the support, affixing lights to the support or the Box, and attaching a notice board to the support. We have contacted Translink regarding these permissions but have not yet received a response. We have social media outlets for BlueBox up and running, but need to create a website for the responses to be posted before implementation.

Our intention is that these Boxes come to be used as a viable resource and recognized as a symbol throughout our city, encouraging dialogue about mental health and the importance of seeking help for it. Mental health is a serious and growing problem in Vancouver and across the globe, and suffering cannot continue in silence. BlueBox is an innovative way to provide the

public with the means and agency needed to have their struggles seen and heard - to cultivate a community of support.

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