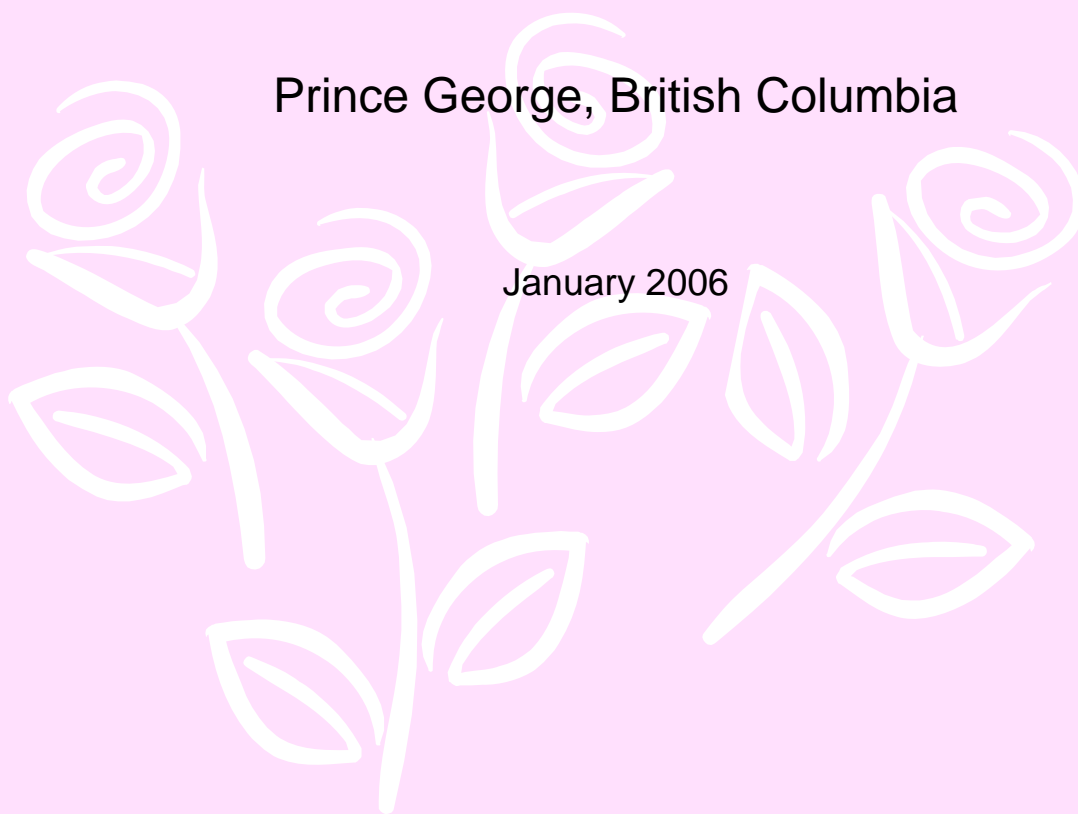


BC Coalition of Experiential Women

Organizational Policy Review

Prince George, British Columbia

January 2006



Written by Amanda Bonella

Edited by Christal Capostinsky

Funded by Status of Women

Background

The B.C. Coalition of Experiential Women (BCCEW) is a consortium of sex worker activists who work to eliminate oppressive systems and forces that create harm for individuals in the sex industry. We operate under the principle that members commit to creating an environment of inclusion.

We support diverse perspectives and experiences except where they contribute to harm toward sex workers. The BCCEW does not support enforcement or rehabilitation models that promote the continued criminalization and dependencies of sex workers.

In November 2004, the BC Coalition of Experiential Women undertook a policy review of services and programs in Prince George British Columbia that sex workers either were accessing or could access. Myself, Amanda Bonella went to Prince George for 4 days and spoke with various service based organizations, community groups, RCMP officers and active and former survival sex workers in the region. The following is a report on my experiences in Prince George and recommendations for enhancement of services, shifting of attitudes and opportunities for the reduction of harm.

Survival Sex Work

Survival sex work has been defined by the PACE Society (an organization established by and for sex workers in Vancouver more than 10 years ago) “as a state in which an individual lacks the opportunity to refuse sex work. This lack of opportunity is primarily due to poverty, unsafe working conditions, health and addiction issues, exploitation, predatory violence and the ‘criminalization’ of negotiation –Section 213 of Canadian Criminal Code”¹.

In Prince George there is a significant number of men and womyn working within the survival sex trade, during my brief stay in Prince George I made contact with at least 40 sex workers (all were womyn and most would be considered as survival sex workers). While this member is also aware of a great number of less visible sex workers (i.e.

escorts and independents) this policy review was aimed as the survival sex trade and so no contact was made with this group of sex workers.

Prince George

Known as BC's northern capital, Prince George is a bustling city of over 77,000 situated at the crossroads of Hwy. 97 (north-south) and Hwy. 16 (east-west), and at the confluence of the Fraser and Nechako Rivers. The major industries in Prince George are Forestry, pulp and paper mills, wood products, Government services, Business and Financial Services, Retail, Education and Health Care, Road, rail, and air transportation

As a major City of the Pacific Rim, Prince George, like many communities in British Columbia struggle with addiction issues, over representation of Aboriginal men and womyn in the survival sex industry and a strained relationship with RCMP. It was therefore important during this policy review that we make contact with the RCMP, the policing agency for Prince George as well as serviced based organizations and local sex workers.

RCMP

I met with two RCMP officers in Prince George on two separate occasions and feel strongly that the relationship I initiated will be extended to the greater community of survival sex workers. My second night in Prince George, I was able to schedule a meeting with Officers: Rob Robertson and Wayne Hubbell. We discussed ideas for improving the relationship between survival sex workers and police. Some ideas we discussed were:

- Matchbooks be created with resource information for survival sex workers (resources need to be accessible and relevant so brochures tend to be less user friendly)
- Collaborated bad date reporting (organizations are fragmented in their reporting and distribution)
- Safety training for sex workers

¹ Bowen, Raven (2003) "Pathways: Real Option for Women out of Survival Sex".

- Sensitivity training for officers and new recruits
- A liaison between police and the survival sex workers
- The challenges of “Jane School’ or other forms of forced help or assistance as opposed to services ready and available when one is willing
- Proper and appropriate approaches used by the police

We talked in length of the reality in Prince George and the struggles of the community as they attempt to respond to both complaining citizens and vulnerable men and women in the survival sex trade. I was told that the police are taking the issue seriously and want to work in partnership. We discussed the challenges the police face with mandates coming from higher places and more often than not by citizens who only care to not see it ‘in my back yard’. The police asked many questions and nearing the end of our meeting committed to coming by the organization ‘New Hope’ the following night.

The next night at “New Hope” (a very grassroots service founded by Christal C) the officers received a tour of the organization and information on the services provided. There was discussion around the officers providing a safety training class once a month in order to begin the relationship building that will lead to improved relations and ultimately a reduction of harm to survival sex workers and the greater community. We discussed the importance of building these relationships at times when the sex worker is not in his/her immediate work environment so as to not cause harm (being seen talking to a police officer can mean street consequence, regardless of what was discussed) or jeopardize the transactions (police presence can make the sex worker nervous and so may not feel free to negotiate safety and payment). The police offered to accompany us for our night of outreach, it was a special collaboration that I believe will be maintained long term.

Outreach

Christal got together supplies of condoms, needle exchange equipment, hot chocolate, candies and resource information. The officers drove myself and Christal first to the

needle exchange where we met with staff and users and got a feel for the services provided. We were also able to introduce Christal's services. The needle exchange was highly accessed and very informative. I was able to just watch for a while and felt that the members accessing services were treated with dignity and respect. The staff was very informed about harm reduction methods and offered constant unsolicited advice that set a tone of understanding. The officers then drove us to the residential neighborhoods where they knew of sex trade activities and between Christal's knowledge and the officers knowledge of where to go, we were able to reach out to a large number of womyn especially when considering this was the very first street outreach to sex workers in Prince George (Christal has since continued this service voluntarily as another dynamic of New Hope). The womyn we met with were able to access outreach services, speak with myself, Christal and the officers, and were invited to attend a focus group the following night. While some were aware of either the officers or Christal and her service, it is fair to say that a majority of the sex workers I met in Prince George were very isolated and fearful when we approached, though visible relieved once they became aware of our purpose. The womyn were most often very happy to speak with us and were touched by the gesture. It was sad to realize that for many of the womyn we spoke with that night no one had asked them before how their night was and if they needed anything. It was clear that this population has been mistreated, isolated and vilified by their community. I am so grateful they will continue to see a friendly face. Later in the evening the police took us to where the womyn and men are taking their dates.

Workplace

When the RCMP took Christal and I to the locations where the men and womyn are bringing their dates it was nothing short of frightening. We drove a long stretch of highway away from the few city lights and as the road began to darken and the passing cars become fewer and fewer, they took a right hand turn onto a dark dirt road. I was sitting in the back of a police vehicle and even I was terribly nervous. As we were driving further into the brush the thought occurred to me that even if the date's first intention was not to harm the sex worker, what would stop them from if nothing else, not paying or demanding the money back. The environment and creepy silence almost raises the idea

all on its own. In fact when I spoke to the group of womyn who agreed to chat with me they said it is a constant problem. Often the men and womyn are not paid, paid poorly or the money is taken back, largely due to the lack of options for the womyn to refuse the transaction and make her way home. One womyn talked about times where she was just happy to receive even a ride back to the spot she had been picked up from. If a sex worker in Prince George has a bad date or a disrespectful date, it almost always, according to the womyn I spoke with, ends with the sex worker being thrown from the vehicle and a ride back into town denied. The risk to the sex worker dramatically increases as now she is a lone pedestrian on a quiet dark highway. This literally means miles from home or the nearest phone. The police also took us to a few locations that were not highly used yet had increased safety measures such as a payphone, a garbage can, very good lighting and in a residential area that was close yet removed from view. The reason these areas were hardly used was because no one really knew of them. The womyn that work in residential neighborhoods do not often see much less share information with other sex workers. During the focus group the womyn shared locations with one another and committed to keeping a discrete and respectful approach if using the area as to not ruin it for others or themselves should the neighborhood begin to complain.

The focus group

Approximately 6 womyn met with me at my hotel room and we talked about a range of topics. The focus group was meant to be low-key, casual and steered by the womyn. For this reason there was not a series of questions asked, more was revealed by simply listening. Some wonderful things took place at this focus group that I believe were made possible by this organic approach. The womyn shared stories of police interactions, discrimination from serviced based organizations, harm from the dates, lack of locations and safety measures and the steady decline in the payment one could expect. We also shared solutions and tips in the trade. Womyn shared ideal locations with one another; we discussed how best to approach the organizations that were discriminating against sex workers either through policy or personality and all of the womyn made commitments to:

- a) support one another as much as possible,
- b) demand fair prices,
- c) try to form a relationship of understanding with the police through mutual, respect, and
- d) volunteer with New Hope.

I asked the womyn what their major concerns were and this is what they said:

- everyone blames us for every problem the city has
- organizations don't know what to do with us
- you never know what to expect when you access a service as many choose who they help and when rather than follow policy
- police are making it difficult for them to negotiate safely and without repercussions
- the dates are not treating the womyn fairly and playing one off another
- the community doesn't want it in their neighborhood yet all the dates and the sex workers come from these neighborhoods
- there is no street outreach or access to supplies after hours.
- We don't really work together
- Younger girls with pimps come out here and cut prices
- There's not really been a place for us to go

One of the womyn who I had met on a previous trip to Prince George with the coalition said, "the last time you guys were here and we met each other, we've been nicer to each other ever since. Now again we are all just hanging out and so we're nice to each other". Indeed, they were doing each others makeup and hair and smaller more intimate conversations were going on about children and partners. If we just did this more often, she said, we would probably stick up for each other more and work together. We discussed the power of numbers, the costs of sharing a hotel room so no one has to be driven so far away, the power of unanimous stances. I believe New Hope is the place where these bonds will be strengthened further. All of the womyn committed to helping out at the organization in order to increase its hours and services.

Some of the recommendations the womyn made were:

- keep an outdoor storage place for condoms so it can be accessed at night time
- sex workers should volunteer for services to increase their capacity i.e. New Hope could offer more services if womyn would donate their time once week
- neighborhoods be tolerant so long as it doesn't harm the community (i.e. discreet and tidy)
- police seek ways to protect and help them rather than arrest or intervene
- cell phones (recycle used phones, they do not have to be working) be given to every sex worker so they can at least pretend to be calling their spotter when their date decides where he is taking them
- pay phones be installed where police know sex workers are going
- if a place is safe right now, police need to keep it safe by not deterring the dates who go there
- cards with credit for payphone be given to sex workers for emergencies
- chalk be given out so sex workers can write down messages such as license plate numbers etc.
- sex workers report bad dates to one central place and then that info needs to be made available at all services
- hospital, police and other service providers receive training on how to best help particularly survival sex workers
- Police discreetly patrol known areas in order to assist in case of harm, with no arrests (if the men get arrested they will start to refuse to go to the new safe places, if the womyn get arrested they will stop going to the safe places as well and will continue to not view the police as a resource)

Meeting with the womyn was a wonderful bonding experience. Many of them I had met on the coalition's previous trip and their shared feelings of discrimination had brought us back to speak with the organizations they had felt so discriminated by.

Service providers

I had the opportunity to meet with several service organizations. Prior to my arrival Christal had asked the womyn accessing New Hope to put forth names of organizations it was important for me to meet with. Based upon their recommendations and others I met and/or had discussions with the following organizations:

Prince George New Hope Society	AWAC (Advocating for Women and Children)
PEERS Prince George	
Phoenix Transition House	CASEY (Communities Against the Sexual Exploitation of Youth)
The John Howard Society	Positive Living North
The Needle Exchange (AIDS Prevention Program)	Active Support Against Poverty

At all of the organizations I gave a history of the coalition and the purpose for our visit to Prince George. I asked the organizations to explain the services that they provide and what services they felt were accessed by sex workers. All of the organizations I met with had some understanding of the sex trade; however, few had received any specific training while others had clearly been educated through media or select reports. Even fewer had ever spoken with a sex worker about the services they needed or what their barriers were. At a few organizations there was a definite feeling of 'those people'. The majority of organizational staff was full of questions and displayed a genuine interest in improving services and training staff. Some organizations were hesitant when I first called and some needed confirmation that meeting with me was a good idea. While this was somewhat annoying I will assume it was because I was from out of town. Hopefully all services that are publicly funded can also be publicly scrutinized.

One organization shared with me a story of a young man they had been working with. We discussed safety tips and ideal servicing. The whole time we were talking she was taking notes and asking better and better questions. We could have talked all day. That was my experience with many of the organizations; in fact, every organization stated an interest in receiving sensitivity training and/or program development assistance. My overall feeling is that the services and programs in place are not all that effective or

relevant to the survival sex workers in Prince George and that there are a full range of services that are immediately required. Services ranging from housing, detox/treatment that is accessible and timely, support services with no strings attached, night time services, harm reduction materials during their hours, training programs and access to education (scholarships etc). There is a need for the services in place to support one another and fill in the gaps, for a continuum to be developed by the community and for grassroots initiatives to not be overshadowed by better funded yet less relevant and accessible services. While there is need for change there is also a community spirit which is genuine and ready and eager to move in the right direction. It was exciting to hear the passion with which people spoke and the honesty they displayed in acknowledging their barriers. A very common problem seemed to be that while management and directors were completely on board, the staff had no experience with or understanding of the population. These beliefs perpetuate the beliefs of the greater community. Beliefs such as these include harboring moralistic and discriminating views against sex workers. It is likely this breakdown that has caused the feeling of us and them between the Prince George sex workers and their supposed allies, the service groups. It is important that service providers are properly informed and educated as it provides an opportunity to break the cycle of many of these beliefs.

There are two organizations which have newly formed that are much more relevant and specialized in their services.

PEERS Prince George and Prince George New Hope Society (New Hope) are both organizations that attempt to harness the real life experience and expertise of sex workers with direct servicing. PEERS Prince George is a spin off of PEERS Victoria and PEERS Vancouver. They share identical mandate, mission and vision statements. PEERS Prince George was first conceived at the local University as part of a class project. While the formation was academic, the PEERS organization is historically a grassroots organization. On the other hand, New Hope was developed with the endorsement of the BC Coalition of Experiential Women by a sex worker in Prince George. The organization was developed in response to a meeting with local sex workers and provides harm reduction materials and various supports. Prince George New Hope

Society has been operational for 5 months while PEERS Prince George has yet to open its doors. Both services aim to assist sex workers of all walks, the two differ greatly however in accessibility. The PEERS organization predominately assists in the exiting and re-training of sex workers. New Hope aims to offer direct and immediate services relevant to the reduction of isolation and harm. Initially there was fear that one organization would eventually swallow up the other, particularly considering the powerful endorsement of a university and the easy access to funds that are geared towards exiting. It is always challenging to keep grassroots organizations afloat particularly if the focus is harm reduction and 'recovery' or 'integration'. The meeting between the two founders was very productive and the final recommendation was an amalgamation of the two organizations. It was felt that the two would be more efficient if they shared resources while still keeping the vision of the two as separate services. For example, while New Hope operates at night time, PEERS is a daytime program. The amalgamation of the two services could see PEERS offering services during the day and New Hope at night time. The two organizations would share boards and financial staff. Things like computers and phones would be shared keeping costs lower and maximizing all the resources. The two boards were going to meet and discuss the proposal. Should they be successful in the merge, it could greatly eliminate future conflicts in funding and the politics that sometimes arise between organizations that serve a similar population.

Recommendations

My strongest recommendation to the service providers is immediate sensitivity training, delivered by an expert with lived experience. Additional recommendations include:

- hiring of persons with personal history of sex work;
- greater opportunities for consumer involvement;
- matchbook resources (as mentioned previously);
- a sex worker liaison position for the community to use as a resource for program development, referrals and peer support;
- improved sensitivity to the reality of survival sex work;
- offer support to emerging grassroots initiatives that are by and for sex workers;

- elimination of policies that discriminate based solely on how one achieves their economic standing (e.g. sex work);
- a no tolerance policy on discrimination between staff and consumers of services;
- mandatory training for all staff;
- an open dialogue with sex worker organizations;
- a guarantee that services will not be denied or reduced if someone makes a formal complaint;

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all those who met with me during my stay in Prince George. On my third morning I had an accident and was unable to walk for the remainder of my visit. Instead of becoming a handicap the community actually made it enjoyable...Christal brought her son and we played together in the hot tub to take the pain away! All the lovely womyn of the focus group piled into my hotel room, some lounging on the bed others had legs dangling over a chair, a room full of strong and beautiful womyn! The police even drove me (unmarked car, instead of the back of a cruiser!!) around saving me further discomfort and adding some holiday cheer with a tour of the Christmas Lights what was it, merry lane?

Kerry loaded the box for Prince George with all sorts of goodies that she and her partner donated with love and she even managed to get it on the bus in time to be handed out during outreach. Raven and Leanne got me home (whey close one!) and Crystal put her life on hold to chauffeur me, such a heart and inspiration to all of us. And of course to the organizations that opened their doors to me, thank you and we'll be in touch! ;)