

Giving Us Hope

A toolkit for organizations that work with survival sex workers and sexually exploited youth in the north.



Michele Rhodes

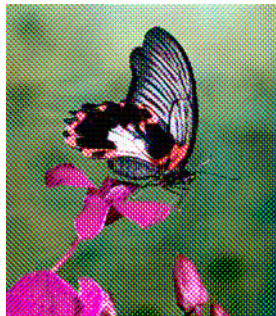
**In collaboration with all of the women who have participated in Taking Action Now
2006/2007**

Edited by Christal Capostinsky

**A document of Prince George New Hope Society
July 2007**

Dedication

We would like to dedicate this document to all survival sex workers and sexually exploited youth living in Prince George and outlying communities in the north region. Thank you to those of us who took the time to break the silence and share our voice. Our voice can be used to make change because we matter!



To live in hearts we leave behind
is not to die.

~Thomas Campbell, Hallowed Ground

In loving memory of TLR, we will never forget you. Your humour, strength and courage will be with us forever.

Acknowledgment

We wish to acknowledge and appreciate the support from the Vancouver Foundation, without whom this report would not be possible. We would like to express our gratitude to the Prince George New Hope Society for their guidance during this project, as the organization brings an abundance of knowledge and experience around sex work and related issues. Thank you to the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union for allowing us to use a space that many of us feel safe in.

Glossary - A Word about Language¹

Experiential—In the context of this report, we define it as having knowledge of sex work and survival sex from firsthand lived experience.

Sex Work—Sex work is defined as the exchange of sexual services for remuneration or goods, where parties consent and negotiate the details of the transaction.

Survival Sex — Survival sex is defined as the lack of opportunity to consistently exercise the right to refuse sex work in any circumstances. This lack of opportunity is due to predatory violence, criminalization of negotiation, poverty, abusive relationships and so on.²

Sex Industry—The sex industry is a term used to describe the vast range of sexual services available to consumers. Workers, especially women, are highly sexualized in these environments. Some examples of the sex industry include street level sex work, pornography, stripping, telephone sex lines, live sex performances and erotic performances, fantasy services (submission-domination, bondage, and cross-dressing), erotic massage, escorting, etc.

Sexual Exploitation—is a practice by which person(s) achieve sexual gratification or financial gain or advancement through the abuse of a person's sexuality by abrogating that person's human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being.³ Sexual exploitation includes sexual harassment, rape, incest, battering, pornography and prostitution. We believe that under no circumstance is it okay for buyers of sex to consort with children. This is sexual exploitation. We also believe that while sex work is not necessarily linked to exploitation, survival sex is most definitely sexual exploitation.

Introduction

This book was written for service providers by sex workers, both active and former. Our intentions are to introduce you to our world and to give you some tips on working with women and girls on the streets who are in and out of the sex trade. We are not professionals with academic backgrounds. Instead we hope to appeal to your senses through our experiences. It has been very challenging over the last year and we, too, have learned a lot of new things. We also know that there are little services exclusively for sex workers in the north. Most of the services are in urban settings like Victoria and Vancouver. This can be damaging because there are a lot of sex workers up here in the north that do not want to go to the lower mainland to get these specialized services. This would be an endangerment to us for many reasons as it could potentially put us at risk for violence, isolation and death. We need to create more services in the north. We, as sex workers, know that there are hundreds of

¹ A Word about Language was taken from our 2007 research report *In the North: From Corner to Corner*. Available on our website www.princegeorgenewhopesociety.ca

² Bowen, R. (2003). E. Shannon (Ed.), *Pathways: Real Options for Women out of Survival Sex* (pp. 2-17). Vancouver: Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education Society (PACE)

³ Taken from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) <http://www.catwinternational.org/about/index.php>

women and girls in the north who are exposed and at high risk of being exposed to sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation. This needs to stop! Until it does, we need to ensure our safety through services that meet our needs. For us to walk into a women's shelter or a soup kitchen is not good enough because even in those very places that are supposed to help us, there is still discrimination.

What is a Sex Worker Organization?

A sex worker organization is an organization usually made up of women who have exited the sex trade and have similar backgrounds as the women to whom they provide services. Our sex worker organization uses a women-centered model to insure the inclusion of marginalized populations.

Our sex worker organization was formed by two women who shared both similar and different experiences. We are looking to see organizations like this started by individuals who are passionate about the issues and/or have personal experiences with the issues. Often they will start to become involved in community activism while they are completing their education. Many of these people will end up working in the non-profit sector. They will make a choice to create change and give back to their communities in an area where there is a definite need. They understand the needs of the women and will offer a safe, secure place to escape from the life of the streets with no fear of sex worker users asking them for a blow job, haggling over prices, bad dates, no cops constantly harassing them, moving them from place to place, asking for ID, and no dealers offering drugs. The sex worker organizations main focus may be finding ways to draw the sex trade worker to their doors. Once there, the next step is to earn the trust and respect of the women.

Prince George New Hope Society



Prostitution and sexual exploitation has been acknowledged as a social issue in Prince George. There has been a long history of visible and identifiable sex work and survival sex in this community. There has been some action taken to implement strategies around prostitution in Prince George. Much of the work involved in taking action has devolved to social agencies and groups that lack the funds to initiate solutions to sex work; furthermore, because sex work and survival sex encompass

concerns at different levels, community entities have been working on targeting different aspects of the issue.

The Prince George New Hope Society is a street level organization for sex workers and survival sex workers. We strive to create an environment of inclusion, thus we are experientially driven. New Hope provides support services for women and girls who are actively, periodically or formerly involved in the sex industry. We started our organization at a time where there were no specialized services in northern BC exclusively for women and girls in and out of the industry. With the help of the BC Coalition of Experiential Communities

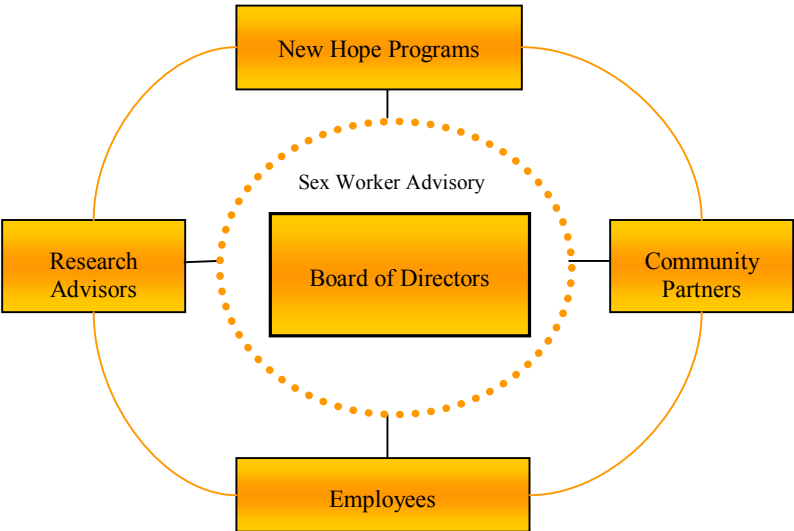
(formerly known as the BC Coalition of Experiential Women), we were able to obtain federal funding to bridge the gap in services for sex workers and provide street level supports to women and youth in a dangerous industry. We have a strong board of directors that works in collaboration with a sex worker advisory to ensure that we are inclusive of the experiential voice. We do this as to give sex workers an active role in being a part of the services and spaces that are created for them. New Hope space is owned and operated by sex workers for sex workers. This gives the women and girls a sense of belonging, safety and ownership over something that has become a part of their survival.



Our logo was created in September 2005 by Sherrice Lucier. It represents light, hope, courage and strength.

Our Agency Structure

The structure graphically represents the cyclical nature of the work and the need for an all-encompassing web of support woven of knowledge, skills and commitment to social justice. We acknowledge the women who access services as part of the organizational structure because we strive to be inclusive. Without the women, we would not have an organization to maintain; furthermore, having direct input from the women supports the many philosophies that we dictate.



Our Mission

At New Hope we recognize that there is a lack of services for women in the sex industry. We strive to bridge the gap in services for sex workers through creating a place of safety and security for women to access support services pertinent to their needs. We offer relationships of hope – that do not try to exploit, manipulate or condemn them. Furthermore, we hope that the society becomes a place for opportunities to develop trust, in others and in self, and willingness to take new steps in life.

Mandate

To identify and address the barriers that women, both adult and youth, face while working in sex work and survival sex in Prince George and Northern BC;

To facilitate educational opportunities that will empower women, both adult and youth, who work and live in this environment;

To improve the health status of people living with HIV/AIDS and HCV; furthermore, to address the issues around STD's and other diseases to individuals and community;

To support and promote experiential leadership, the development of essential services and a continuum of services for active sex workers; and,

To address the barriers and bridge the gap in services around mental health and addictions issues for sex workers in this community.

Vision

New Hope believes in the fundamental and human rights and dignity of sex workers and seeks to bring these women empowerment and support in making informed choices.

We understand that many women involved in sex work and survival sex may have lost a sense of safety and security because of the nature of their experiences and trade. We strive to provide a caring atmosphere of encouragement and safety using a non-judgmental approach to help bridge this gap and restore hope.

We recognize that women participating in sex work throughout northern BC face barriers around the key determinants of health, and as such, need support and advocacy in addressing these issues; therefore, through using harm reduction and mentorship models, we are committed to working toward building a foundation for sex workers to feel equal and supported in making informed decisions around exiting sex work.

New Hope realizes that many women involved in sex work and survival sex are exposed to systemic oppression, and as such, we are dedicated in working towards independence,

education and healthier lifestyles in Northern BC. We intend to advance dialogue around sex worker issues within our community, both locally and regionally.

Our Voice

New Hope is a place that provides a variety of personal services for survival sex workers, such as clothing, food, condoms and other harm reduction materials. New Hope is a drop in centre where we learn about things that affect us and watch movies. They provide outreach and have a large selection of printed materials for information and education. We are able to take part in producing a newsletter called the Goddess Gazette that is all about us and what we want people to know!

New Hope also facilitates numerous workshops, programs, and projects for the sex workers and sexually exploited youth to participate in. It helps them to learn new skills and have fun. It also helps the people who work at these organizations to work with sex workers in a more inclusive way. The sex worker industry is constantly in motion and the people are very transient so it takes having a multifaceted approach in providing services for and with this group of individuals. It is also a place of safety and caring where they can keep in contact with one another and have access to a telephone and computers. We see it as “a place where, for a little while, they can forget about the troubles of the sex trade outside”.

The Do's and Don'ts of Working with Sex Workers

When working with women who are experienced in street level sex work, there are things that one should consider. Here are some tips to better help you.

Do

- Listen: for safety issues, to find out what they need, hear their stories, help them to learn about current bad date information; furthermore, listening can be a strong supportive action.
- Be calm, caring, understanding, and supportive: it's what they need.
- Be flexible and strong both in personal emotions and in setting up personal boundaries.
- Be accepting of others' differences and difficulties.
- Be challenging in a positive way! You might be surprised at what they can accomplish.
- Let the women determine the labels used at the facility as the public often labels them negatively. They often know what they will and will not tolerate. To put it simply, it is one thing for a sex worker to call another sex worker a 'Ho', but when it comes from

someone without the understanding of the work that they do, then it may not be acceptable and can cause further stigma and discrimination.

- Give information and keep a wide variety of pamphlets that are useful. Make sure that you are well informed of your community's services so that you are well equipped to refer women to different services and answer their questions.

Do Not

- Give counseling unless you are trained to do so.
- Accuse because you do not have the right.
- Judge as it is not in the job description and will only chase the women away from your doors. Word of mouth may also keep others away.
- Make sure not to belittle their problems. What seems small and insignificant to you may be totally overwhelming to the sex trade worker at that time.
- Cross boundaries. It is important for the sex worker to feel safe and comfortable when using any organization's facilities; furthermore, it is important for the people that work there to feel the same way.
- Make excuses for others, as it will be picked up on quickly by the other sex workers. Favoritism can and does cause a lot of damage for organizations, as the sex workers will stop using the facilities.
- Enable them in their addiction or criminal activity. As mentioned previously, it is important to set boundaries. Plus you will earn true respect faster this way.

Challenges and benefits of working with individuals on projects and programs

It can be very challenging at times when working with both adults and youth involved in sex work. Often enough when you are working with street level sex workers there are addiction issues. It is important not to overwhelm the women because it may push them away. Give them lots of little things to do and they will slowly work themselves up to bigger projects. Remember that most of the participants have little or no expectations of themselves beyond what they need to do to survive, so quick changes can be overwhelming. In the end it is better to have someone come in and help with projects for three hours a week and stay for 3 months than to have someone come in for 10 hours a week and stay for 3 weeks.

On another note, when you are creating objectives for funders, make sure that they are smaller objectives because it is most likely that you will have participants coming and going throughout the duration of the project. In light of this, you do not want to have lots of pieces

that are unfinished for new participants. They deserve to put their own creativity, their own 'stamp' on the work that they do and not always pick up where someone else left off.

Make sure that there is lots of food available for the women to eat. Many of them will not have adequate resources for healthy nutrition. Our brains function better when our stomachs are full. Sometimes that may be all the women want. Do not get frustrated if no work gets done that day. It is amazing what really can get done when you have women sitting, eating and talking. That is what the real work is all about. Food can be a secret weapon!

It can be difficult to draw them in and keep them interested in the organization. You have to have a broad spectrum of things that they can work on because many of the women's interests and abilities will be different. Sometimes they may be embarrassed to try things because of inadequate feelings. Have projects that build up their self-esteem and self worth. Remember that the women get their self worth from the work that they do and it may not always be positive.

Make projects and programs easy to understand for them. Balance teaching programs with fun projects to do that are not always about computers and research. Be able to do these fun projects and programs along with the women. Laugh with them. Helping them learn how to really laugh, especially at themselves, can go a long way in starting the healing process. Watching them learn to trust you and themselves as they learn new skills will give you a great sense of accomplishment in the work that you do. This work can be very exhausting at times and it is important to get as much as you give. These valuable moments are sometimes far between so grab them when you can and savor them.

Relapse and recovery will also be a part of the work that you do. Make sure that you do regular circles and check-ins with the women. Some of them will want to hurry through this, but others will really enjoy spending this time talking. Seeing them relapse after a period of recovery can be just as hard for the worker in the organization as it is on the sex trade workers herself. Watch your emotions but do not ever get cold or callous with the women. They need to see that they are accepted fully and that you are present in the moment and care at all times. Be encouraging and supportive don't let your hopes for the worker who is in recovery for the first or ninth time color your emotions or perceptions. When the person is ready and strong enough, and has a good support network, they will succeed. Failure is a part of learning.

The women deserve to be adequately paid for the work that they do. Make sure that you are honoring them for their time. It is good to always have cash at hand, but do not fall into the trap of giving out cash advances. Make sure the project participants sign work contracts as this is a way to not only ensure the protection of the organization, but it will also protect and teach the women responsibility.

Our Stories

My background is native. I come from sexual abuse and alcoholism. I ran away from home when I was younger. I am a single mom in recovery. The disability system helped me along the way. A number of shelters helped me too. I learned to respect myself as well as others. I also learned to keep busy so I wouldn't dwell on myself. How I was raised I remembered spending a lot of time building on my talents. My mom taught me lots about crafts and helped me with the skills that I have today. I also put them to work. I volunteer at New Hope and gained new friends. Now I realize how powerful I can be as an individual. Now I can laugh too. I learned to accept everyone. My challenges were saying "NO". My successes were going through counselling for all of my abuse. I now speak at shelters and high schools. I hope to go to school to complete my grade 12. My successes are when people come and shake my hand. I also learned to say sorry for my mistakes. New Hope has helped me to live and grow. It feels good to be a part of something bigger than myself. We work as a team and I am accepted for who I am. They help me with my needs and I feel comfortable sharing with them about what those needs are. I have also learned that I can participate in groups together with other people like me or who have shared similar experiences as I have had. I hope to continue to work at New Hope and volunteering because I have hopes and dreams that I know are possible because people believe in me now and I believe in myself.

2007 Tan Participant



(What the picture says: TAN has shown me a lot about Integrity, empathy, sisterhood, kindness, confidence, trust and patience ~2006 participant)

I am a fifty-year-old non-aboriginal 'womyn' in recovery. My past is one of sexual, physical, emotional, alcohol, and drug abuse. I left home at a young age to escape the trauma of these abuses but I found I had not escaped them all. I tried to find help: a place to deal with my problems but at that time there were none available. What I did, I did myself. There were many challenges in doing this, finding ways to deal with so many things at once can be overwhelming. So I only focused on one thing at a time. Because of this I was able in my life to have extended periods of sobriety. In the past there was little or no help available to me, but over the years that has changed. I no longer have to do it on my own, with places like New Hope opening their doors. New Hope gives me a safe place to go to talk with others who are from the same background as me. I now volunteer at New Hope and work as part of the TAN group. TAN, Taking Action Now, is a way that we as womyn who have experienced street level prostitution can bring public awareness to the different problems and risks that are faced every day by the 'womyn' still out there. It is a way that we, as a group, can make a difference. Participating in TAN is giving me the ability to start using my voice in a positive way, explore my creativity, extend my listening skills, give me new problem solving skills, and

have fun. I am currently a new student at CNC. I will be attending the social worker program in Sept 2007, with hopes of going all the way to getting my BSW at UNBC one day.

2007 TAN Participant



I am a young aboriginal woman. Being involved in TAN has given me hope to do better things. It took me a long time to open up to the other girls in the group, but I came to a place where I felt comfortable to letting people get to know me. I learned about how we are exploited because of our needs. I am a drug addict. I have no family. Or I should say I don't get along with my family. I was on the streets for years with no sense of belonging. When I started getting involved with New Hope, it was great because I knew a lot about the sex trade and I wanted people to learn from my experiences. There is so much stigma and discrimination against sex workers. People think we are good for nothing and that we spread diseases. I always got checked for STD's at the needle exchange and I mostly wore condoms except if I was sick and he said he would give me more money to not wear one. That doesn't make me a bad person. That makes me a drug addict. I just needed people to be patient with me until I was ready to make change in my life. I am grateful for New Hope because it was a place that provided an opportunity for me to grow and help others. I still have a long way to go in my life but now I know that I can do things if I set my mind to it...plus a little bit of a push from all people in the community who care and support me.

2006 TAN Participant



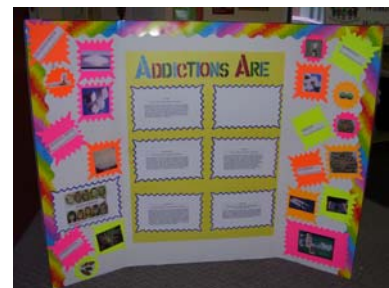
I just started coming to TAN groups. I really like it because all the girls have been on the streets. They understand me. We get to talk and share our stories and we even went to another community to talk to students. It was really good and it made me feel like I was giving back. I don't know if I will stop working on the streets right now, but if I do, New Hope can help me. We just finished doing a brochure for New Hope and it was lots of fun. We want to organize some fundraisers to make money for the girls to do things. TAN has challenged me to be truthful about my drug use. It was hard sometimes coming down to the centre because I used to use in the back alley but I had lots of supports while I was there. I wish we could have our own place away from downtown because then it would be safer for some of the girls. Also some of my friends from the hood would come too. I hope to keep helping out as much as I can because I like it there and they listen.



2007 TAN Participant

Looking Back

During the year the women involved were given an opportunity to create poster boards for community presentations. Some of their boards included addictions, sexually transmitted diseases, violence against sex workers, stigma and discrimination, and the history of sex work. It gave them an opportunity to learn new things and expand their skills. It took them a few weeks to gather all of the information that they needed to create the poster boards, but they did a great job and gave informative presentations. It was also a way for the participants to learn new things and become familiar talking to people in the community about sex work and sexual exploitation. We set the boards up during events at New Hope and took them out into the community at different times. Doing this work was not something that everyone was able to do but the skills of everyone were utilized. The boards were on public display at various times throughout the year, giving the public a chance to see the TAN participants work. Other things the women were involved in were a newsletter called 'the Goddess Gazette', creating brochures, fundraising, and education. Our newsletter is available on our website and in print. It is distributed internationally and we receive great feedback worldwide. To date we have had 3 issues and are currently working on our fourth one. The Prince George New Hope Society and the women who come here participated in the Take Back the Night and Take Back the Highway marches in September 2006. They designed and made quilting squares that were sewn together by a woman in the community (see picture on page 13). The project was used as a banner for the marches to show our support and acknowledgment of violence and abuse against women in our communities. Some of the women started an outreach program using a harm reduction model. This meant that they went out into the community one night a week to talk with other sex workers and hand out needles, condoms, lubrication, information, etc. It was an opportunity for them to find out what the women needed and wanted in our community. Some of the other activities that they were involved in were public speaking workshops, writing workshops, resume writing, addiction circles, journal writing, collages, and cultural activities.



Websites of Interest

Highway of Tears: Missing Women

<http://www.highwayoftears.ca/>

This site is dedicated to help find the missing persons on the Highway of Tears in Northern British Columbia. Highway of Tears is the Yellowhead Highway 16 West which runs between Prince George and Prince Rupert BC.

John Howard Society of the Lower Mainland of BC

<http://www.jhslmbc.ca/sev.html>

Sexual Exploitation Prevention Program. This website gives information on education around sexual exploitation in communities at different places including schools.

Missingpeople.net

<http://www.missingpeople.net/>

This website is dedicated to Vancouver's eastside missing and murdered women.

PAAFE

<http://www.paafe.org/>

Prostitution Awareness and Action Foundation of Edmonton. "PAAFE is a caring community. We work through partnerships to create and pursue strategies to address sexual exploitation and the harms created by prostitution."

PACE Society

<http://www.pace-society.ca/>

Prostitution Alternatives Counselling Education. A website with much information and resources around prostitution.

PEERS Vancouver

<http://www.peersvancouver.org/>

Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society. A website with much information and resources around prostitution.

PEERS Victoria

<http://www.peers.bc.ca/>

Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society. A website with much information and resources around prostitution.

Prostitutes Education Network

<http://www.bayswan.org/>

Providing information about Sex Worker Rights and Related Issues worldwide.

Sex Trade Workers of Canada

<http://www.sextradeworkersofcanada.com/>

Sex Trade Workers of Canada's Web site is an online community with information, networking and education opportunities.

The Naked Truth

<http://www.nakedtruth.ca/>

This site was created by exotic dancers for exotic dancers as a tool to keep each other informed, encouraged and supported.

Vanished Voices

<http://www.vanishedvoices.com/>

A memorial tribute to the missing and murdered women of Vancouver, Canada.

WAVAW

<http://www.wavaw.ca/>

Women Against Violence Against Women

A non-profit organization that provides sexual assault support services to women in Greater Vancouver. They operate within a feminist and anti-oppression framework.

WHORE

<http://www.whore.bravehost.com/>

Women Helping Ourselves to Rights and Equality. A fun and informative website full of tips and information.

WISH Vancouver

<http://www.wish-vancouver.net/>

Women's Information Safe House is an organization based in Vancouver.

BCCEC

<http://www.bccewc.ca/>

BC Coalition of Experiential Communities

A consortium of sex worker activists who work to eliminate the oppressive systems and forces that create harm for individuals in the sex industry. Their website includes resources and tools for people working with sex workers.

Tips for Street Safety

Though none of us really want the women to be out there working, we also know that we do not have a say in it until someone is ready to make that change in their life and leave the streets. What we can do though, is provide information to the new faces that we see out there so they can be safe on the streets.

- Always bring condoms and make sure that you have enough for the night.
- Cover any cuts or sores with band-aids while initiating sexual contact with customers.

Try to carry band-aids with you.

- Use water-based lubricant.
- If you have a cell, carry it with you even if it does not work as it may deter violent customers.
- Make sure you have a pen and paper handy.
- Do not carry money or valuables on your person.
- Try to carry identification.
- Do not work while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.
- Trust your gut instincts.
- Keep emergency numbers on you.
- Wear shoes that you are able to run in.
- Avoid long necklaces, handbags, scarves or large straps that can be used to choke you.
- Work in well-lit areas and try to not work alone.
- Try to be near a payphone for emergencies.
- Have a friend know where you are going.
- Report bad dates to the police, other sex workers and/or sex worker friendly organizations.
- Be cautious when approaching vehicles.
- If you can, try to make sure there is no one else hiding in the car. Do not go with more than one person in the car.
- Check for workable door handles from inside the car before you shut the door.
- If it is not raining roll down the window.
- Watch the customer as he is driving, especially his hands.

- Check hotel bathrooms and suites to see if anyone is hiding.
- If you are being attacked, make lots of noise and DO NOT give up without a fight.

Conclusion

A sex worker organization is one that must function on many levels for the women who will use their facilities. You may want to remember that the women you will be serving come from backgrounds filled with pain, anger and mistrust as well as drug and alcohol abuse. The women have different cultures and ethnicities. They may not necessarily come from poverty but will most likely be currently entrenched in a life of poverty and feel hopelessness and be struggling to survive. Treat them with respect and as individuals. Remember that sex work does not define who they are but rather is just something that they have been forced into because of outside circumstances. It will most likely give them character and strength. The women, whether exiting or still working, need opportunities to explore a different side of life. This may give them a chance to practice healthier lifestyles. In using this guide as a part of your teaching and learning you will have information that has been learned, assembled and passed forward to assist others in getting ready and opening the doors of services that are inclusive of sex workers. We hope that you take the time to fill out our evaluation on the following page as it will help us to improve our services here as well as building capacity regionally.



Evaluation

Have you ever heard of the Prince George New Hope Society? If yes, what have you heard?

Where are you from?

Do you have sex worker friendly organizations and/or services in your community? If yes, do you support them?

What, if anything, does your community need in order to address the issues of survival sex work and sexual exploitation?

Comments and/or suggestions (Please include whether or not this guide was useful to you):

Thank you. Please email us your evaluation at newhopesociety@shaw.ca or send it to us via Canada Post to:

Toolkit Evaluation
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