

How Peer-Led Outreach Connects with Isolated Sex Workers and Increases Access to Addiction Treatment

Background

Studies of people who use drugs have shown that outreach programs that emphasize harm reduction can provide a critical entry point to health and social services, however we know much less about peer (sex worker)-led outreach programs that provide outreach to women in street-based sex work.

The Question

How does the sex worker-led mobile access program (MAP) van help street-based sex workers access addiction treatment services?

The Study

This study draws on interviews with 242 women in street-based sex work who use drugs. Women were interviewed at the start, and every 6 months over two years as part of a longitudinal community-based research project on the health and safety of sex workers in Vancouver led by the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI)/ BC-CfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners. Sex workers participated in this study as research team members and co-authors. The MAP Van (staffed by sex workers) was established in 2003 by WISH Drop-In and PACE Society in response to high rates of violence and health-related harms among street-based sex workers.

The Results

The study found that close to half of the women (42%) used the MAP van. **Use of the MAP van was directly linked to four times increased odds of accessing detox and/or residential drug treatment**, irrespective of other factors. Women who work in isolated outdoor spaces (e.g. alleys, industrial settings) were much more likely to access the MAP van, suggesting this service is successfully reaching the most marginalized sex workers.

Women who use the MAP were more likely to be:

- Over 25 years of age
- See more clients/ week (10+ vs. <10)
- Inject cocaine
- Visit the WISH Drop-In Centre.



The Policy Implications

- This study suggest that sex work-led low-threshold outreach models can provide a critical means to connect the most marginalized sex workers with health and support services, including linkage to drug treatment for those that want to.
- Peer-led outreach models should be expanded to be available at more times and locations, and to meet the specific needs of youth sex workers (<25 years), who were less likely to use the MAP van and often face multiple barriers to accessing health and support services.

Deering KN, Kerr T, Tyndall MW, Montaner JS, Gibson K, Irons L, Shannon K. A peer-led mobile outreach program and increased utilization of detoxification and residential drug treatment among female sex workers who use drugs in a Canadian setting. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2011 Jan 1;113(1):46-54.