

Outreach van makes sex trade workers safer: research

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A van that circled Vancouver streets frequented by sex trade workers made them feel safer and reduced their likelihood of being attacked, according to a University of British Columbia study.

Staffed by women, some of whom are former sex trade workers, the van is part of the Mobile Access Project (MAP). Services provided include peer support, crisis intervention, “bad date” recording, as well as distribution of condoms, clean needles, resource information and referrals for outreach and employment.

The van was grounded after five years of service on June 12, 2009 due to a lack of funding. Funding renewal recently announced by the BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General and the City of Vancouver saw the van back in service on Sept. 7, 2009.

A team led by Prof. Patricia Janssen at the UBC School of Population and Public Health surveyed more than 100 sex trade workers in the city who accessed the van’s services in January 2006. More than 90 per cent of the women surveyed said the MAP van made them feel safer on the street.

Sixteen per cent remembered a specific incident where the van and its staff’s presence protected them from a physical assault and 10 per cent remembered an incident where its presence prevented a sexual assault, according to the study published recently in *The Journal of Urban Health*.

“Women in the sex trade face multiple dangers associated with communicable disease, alienation from family and friends, lack of access to health services and police protection, random and partner violence, and even murder,” says Janssen.

“To our knowledge, the MAP van is the first and only mobile outreach service in the world staffed by peers to serve women in the sex trade, and our study shows it had a significant positive impact on the safety of women on Vancouver’s streets.”

“This study confirms what we’ve known all along - that this service was essential for the health and safety of women who are still vulnerable to unspeakable [violence](#),” says Kate Gibson, Executive Director of the WISH Drop-In Centre Society in Vancouver and co-author of the study.

“For several women, working in the MAP van has been the first square job they’ve had off the streets. It has allowed them to transition to mainstream employment,” says Gibson.

The MAP van costs approximately \$20,000 a month to staff and operate. The program was launched in 2004 through the Vancouver Agreement Women’s Strategy Task Team, WISH Drop-In Centre Society and the Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education (PACE) Society. It was funded for the last two years by the BC Government and other partners, including Status of [Women](#) Canada, BC Ministry of Community Services, BC Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, and Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General.

Since the 1980s, more than 60 female sex workers have disappeared from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, an area characterized by poverty, high crime rates, homelessness, high unemployment, prostitution, mental illness and extensive alcohol and drug use.

Provided by University of British Columbia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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