

# **Harm Reduction with Individuals in the Sex Trade**

**Sex Workers Outreach Project-Chicago**

# SWOP-Chicago is...

A grassroots organization run by and for individuals in the sex trade, supporting the rights of sex workers and their communities and focusing on ending violence and stigma through education, advocacy, and peer support.

We are 100% volunteer-run with leadership team made up of current and former sex workers.



# PROS Network-Chicago: Overview

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- **Contract-Based Network**
- **Includes:** Mental health, legal, medical, social service, and crisis providers. Community organizing groups.
- **36 network members:** 22 non-profits; 3 therapy practices; 11 individual service providers.
- **Website & Print Materials**
- **Distribution:** through direct outreach, by partner-members



RESOURCES & SUPPORT  
FOR PEOPLE INVOLVED  
IN THE SEX TRADE

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## What is sex work?

- Sex work is a commercial exchange of a sexual service for money or other benefits like housing, transportation or other survival needs.
- This term is used to refer to a broad range of transactions. Sex workers are not a homogenous group. People of all genders and ages are involved in the sex trade.
- **Who is considered a sex worker?**
- Escorts, exotic dancers, dominatrices, phone sex operators, erotic masseuses, actors in adult films, webcam performers, etc. Not all these individuals identify as “sex workers” and may prefer another term, but can be linked under this umbrella term.

# Some of SWOP-Chicago's Core Beliefs

- Trading sex for money is not inherently harmful, damaging, degrading, or empowering.
- Stigma and its byproducts are at the root of harm experienced by individuals involved in the sex trade.
- Intersecting oppressions compound the harm.
- The experiences of individuals involved in the sex trade are complicated and diverse. One individual's experience does not equal that of all individuals in the sex trade.

# Choice, Circumstance, & Coercion

A person's involvement in the sex trade can be broken into three broad categories-

- **Choice**- fully consenting to the work, can leave for other employment options but chooses to stay
- **Circumstance**- Consenting to work in the sex trade but wants to leave. Needs to stay, usually for financial reasons.
- **Coercion**- Individual is not consenting to work, being tricked or forced by another individual(s). Also called trafficking.

# Harm Reduction with Individuals in the Sex Trade- Street Economy Safety Tips

- Encourage workers to work in “buddy” system with a friend who knows where they are at all times
- Carry their own equipment at all times-condoms, lube, toys, etc.
- Study potential customer- car details, door-lock system, surroundings
- Negotiate price and collect money upfront, have set time limits
- Wear comfortable shoes that are appropriate for running at all times
- Wear comfortable clothing that cannot get stuck in car doors or be grabbed at- avoid necklaces or dangling jewelry
- Avoid carrying drugs or illegal weapons on dates
- Do not allow unfamiliar dates to restrain you for any reason, even if this is their fetish
- Give “Know Your Rights” material in case an encounter with law enforcement occurs

# Healthcare Needs of Workers in Street Economy

- May be dealing with other issues such as drug dependency, homelessness, domestic violence, or trafficking
- Previous negative experiences with healthcare providers may prevent them from seeking care
- Information on Naloxone, safer injection, condom distribution, addiction treatment options

# Harm Reduction with Individuals in the sex Trade- Indoor/Internet-Based

- Encourage workers to “screen” clients and get full name, information, and references on a potential client- there are websites that assist with this
- Always know surroundings when visiting client and have a “safe call” that knows where you are at all times
- Don’t allow clients to negotiate set prices, time limit or unsafe acts- boundary pushers always want more
- When business is slow, workers tend to let guard down or take clients they normally wouldn’t- can be at risk for arrest, violence, or unsafe play
- Utilize online bad date lists where sex workers report bad client encounters (Verify Him, Safe Office, National Blacklist)
- Self care is important- Many workers are isolated, unable to disclose work to family/ friends. Encourage them to have a support network and seek out sensitive counseling services if needed

# Barriers to Accessing Care

- Previous Negative Experiences.
- Fear of stigmatization.
- Fear of Negative Consequences (arrest, losing custody of children, mandatory treatment or psychiatric care, record of prostitution or STD testing in medical file) or previous negative consequences.
- Presence of police & security in healthcare facilities.
- Monetary constraints, or lack of information

# Barriers for Delivering Effective Care

- **Lack of knowledge about population or needs of population** --> ineffective suggestions or not providing relevant information
- **Bias informed by mainstream stereotypes** --> assumptions about needs, enacted stigma, providing shorter visits or less careful services.
- **Non-Disclosure** (A study of diverse workers in San Fran found that 70% did not disclose involvement in sex trade to doctors) --> Lack of relevant care or tailored care.
- **Othering, or lack of exposure to population** --> , discomfort with interactions, dehumanizing care, inability to connect with sex worker clients.

# Effect of Barriers

- Not accessing care at all.
- Not disclosing involvement in the sex trade to health-care professionals.
- Not developing a long-term relationship with a health-care provider, or sporadic, irregular care.
- Not receiving adequate care, or unsuccessful complement of care (ex. drug treatment, testing, HIV medication management, etc.)

# Domestic Violence

- Criminalization, stigma, and isolation make sex workers vulnerable to abusive relationships.
- Social support can reduce vulnerability to abusive relationships.
- Sex workers may need to take additional precautions when leaving an abusive situation
- Stalking/harassment/ “outing” all common tactics for abusers to use against sex workers

# Sensitivity Tips - Continued

- Being non-judgemental about number of sex partners or other behavior that is often judged will make a sex worker more comfortable disclosing their work to you.
- Learn more about their understanding of sex work before offering resources or making any statement or suggestion that could imply judgements.
- If a person discloses involvement, it's important that conversations about sex work are brought up by the client and are used to better serve your client...not out of personal curiosity.

# Sensitivity Tips

- When accessing STD testing, substance abuse, health or general mental health services, many sex workers may not want to disclose or talk about involvement in the sex trade with helping professionals--this is okay. Forcing the subject may make the client feel uncomfortable and stop receiving services.
- If in doubt, ASK.

*examples: STD Testing/Medical Services "The results will be ready in 30 minutes. Do you have any questions about anything? / do you want to go over this [form] while you're waiting?" I feel like you're going through a really tough time right now. Do you want to talk about other resources that can give you more support? Therapy: "so tell me about your goals for therapy" "What do you want to work on today?" "I'm sorry you had such a bad experience today. Do you want to talk about that, or do you want to discuss something else?"*

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# Does a past history of childhood abuse contribute to entrance into the sex trade?

## Do individuals enter sex work because of a history of abuse?

- There is some evidence that childhood abuse contributes to entrance in the sex trade for some groups of sex workers
- 22.3% of women in general have a history of abuse. (Gorey and Leslie 1997)
- A high percentage of sex workers are women and any profession dominated by women will have a higher rate of sexual trauma or abuse history

# Trafficking within the Sex Trade

***Trafficking within the sex trade***- any form of sexual labor performed under force, fraud or coercion

***Trafficking in persons*** refers to the transportation and/or compulsion of another person into any form of labor/servitude through use of force, threats of force, fraud, or coercion, or debt bondage

An individual **does not** have to be brought in from another country to be a victim of trafficking.

Oftentimes, individuals are trafficked by individuals they know, such as a partner or family member.

# Common Indicators of Trafficking Victims

**~Are always accompanied by another individual and are not allowed to speak independently to a provider/practitioner.**

**~Allow others to speak for them when addressed directly.**

**~Act as if they were instructed by someone else.**

**~Do not have money or identification documents.**

**~There is evidence that suspected victims cannot refuse unprotected and/or violent sex.**

**~Has limited or no social interaction. ~Work long hours or have few if any days off.**

**Not all of these are exclusive to trafficking victims but could be indicators of trafficking**

# If you suspect trafficking...

- ~ As with domestic violence victims, it should be the individual victim's choice whether or not to leave the situation / whether to contact law enforcement.
- ~ Use motivational interviewing techniques, and share information about options and resources available with the individual.
- ~ Provide information and support to keep the victim safe even if they remain in a trafficking situation, and help individuals create a safety plan for leaving if they express desire.

# Services for Trafficking Victims

~ Trafficking victims will NOT be charged with prostitution, and victims can have prior prostitution convictions vacated from their Record.

(Illinois)

~ Undocumented immigrants WILL NOT be deported if they are trafficking victims.

~ Different immigration status or visas exist for trafficking victims (Continued Presence, T Visa, U Visa, Asylum). Oftentimes victims will need to cooperate with law enforcement to obtain T-visa.

~ Many legal clinics are trained and can provide support (National Immigrant Justice Center, LAF)

# Sexual Violence and the Sex Trade

## What does consent look like for sex workers?

- Individuals in prostitution often negotiate certain rates for sex acts. If an individual agrees to a certain sex act and then has another one forced upon them, that is sexual assault.
- If a client refuses/does not pay or takes back money after sex acts, individual may feel assaulted
- Client forces or tricks worker into unsafe sex acts without consent
- Individuals at legal sex work establishments such as strip clubs may be coerced by management to provide sexual acts for clients in order to keep job

**“Consent can exist under deeply problematic relationships of power and does not imply that one is solely and individually responsible of the act performed consensually.” (E. Koyama)**

# Criminalization and Sex Work

- Prostitution is criminalized in US, except in rural Nevada, where they have legal brothel system.
- In Illinois, juveniles charged with prostitution cannot be charged with a crime and DCFS must be notified
- The majority of people arrested for prostitution are cis and trans women of color from low-income communities working in street economy
- Because of criminalization, sex workers often are often targets of violence but do not report crimes perpetrated against them because they are not taken seriously by law enforcement or "blamed" for the abuse

# End Demand Illinois

- Campaign spearheaded by social workers and social service organizations that seeks to “end the demand” for sexual services by increasing penalties for clients/pimps/traffickers
- IL Safe Children’s Act of 2010, Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act, and Eliminating Felony Prostitution –legislation promoted by campaign
- New legislation introduced this year would create funding streams for “specialized services” for individuals in sex trade through increased fines for clients, pimps, traffickers and special license plates
- Does not work with organizations that do advocacy with individuals currently in sex trade. Sex workers had no input into these policies

# Effects of End Demand IL

- In 2011, 1800 arrests for prostitution (1745F, 55M), only 95 arrests of Johns
- CPD posts photos of “men” arrested in prostitution stings, many are actually transwomen, nearly all are people of color
- “Ugly Truth” campaign in 2013 plastered buses, trains, billboards with stigmatizing messages about sex work. “Human Beings are Not Disposable” “If you’re paying for sex, you could be paying for someone’s pain”, etc.
- Young Women’s Empowerment Project, a harm reduction organization that works with youth in the sex trade, shut down partly because of concerns over effects of ED legislation

# Tips for Working with Individuals in Sex Trade

- Meet individuals “where they are” and use a harm reduction based approach. Not all sex workers may be ready or want to exit the industry, but need resources to stay safe from violence.
- Be sensitive with language. While not all prefer the term “sex worker”, calling someone a “prostituted person” can be equally offensive. Let client dictate what they prefer to be called.
- Seek to have a broader understanding of the sex trade and the reasons why a person is working in it. Oftentimes the sex work is not the harm, but the stigma and criminalization that allows abusers to prey on individuals involved in it.

# Resources

**SWOP-Chicago** [www.swop-chicago.org](http://www.swop-chicago.org)

**PROS Network Chicago** [www.prosnetworkchicago.org](http://www.prosnetworkchicago.org)

Models for Working with People in the Sex Trade

**St. James Infirmary (SF)** [www.stjamesinfirmary.org](http://www.stjamesinfirmary.org)

**HIPS (DC)** [www.hips.org](http://www.hips.org)

**Stepping Stone (Canada)** [www.stepsingstonens.ca](http://www.stepsingstonens.ca)