

impossible, eh?



the story of
peers

prostitutes empowerment, education
and Resource Society

by JANNIT RABINOVITCH and MEGAN LEWIS



Save the Children
Canada

The Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS) was founded in 1995 by and for sex trade workers. This is the story of PEERS as told by the women who created it. This book provides a guide for others who want to support women and men in the sex trade in their community.

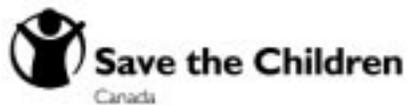


Jannit Rabinovitch, MES, is well-known for her work with marginalised populations. She is currently working for Save the Children Canada on their national prevention campaign on the commercial sexual exploitation of youth in Canada. Jannit has developed some of Canada's most innovative programs and services. In Victoria, BC, Jannit's work has included the Downtown Women's Project, documented by CMHC as a Best Practice; the development of the Sandy Merriman House, an emergency shelter for women; Victoria Street Community Association; Medewiwin, a long-term housing project for homeless men and women; Margaret Laurence House, second stage housing for battered women; and Victoria Women's Transition House Society's new house as well as PEERS. She is a member of the Victoria Police Board.



Megan Lewis left PEERS to work at Street Outreach Services, a needle exchange operated by AIDS Vancouver Island. She is an experienced workshop presenter and facilitator and has worked on a number of research projects related to the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. She co-facilitated a national consultation leading up to Out from the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth. Megan worked in the sex trade throughout her adolescence. After leaving PEERS, she attended college part-time and eventually hopes to get her doctorate. She is currently living in the country and learning all about chickens and life without crisis.

Funding provided by:



Community Solutions, BC Ministry of Volunteers,
Cooperatives and Community Development
Pacific Coast Savings Foundation

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Designed and produced by
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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the women of PEERS, past, present and future for their incredible courage and hard work. Without them there would be no story to tell.

Thank you to the women who read this story in draft form, Ally R., Barb Smith, Darci Bruneau, Kathleen McVey, Mary Kay MacVickars, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha and especially Lyn Davis who acted as first reader and who read it many, many times. Thank you also to Save the Children Canada for supporting the creation of and distributing this labour of love.

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peers

introduction

“It’s the oldest profession in the world.” Those words, with their implied message that there is nothing wrong with the status quo, are the most common response to the sex trade in Canada. And yet the status quo hasn’t worked very well for large numbers of women who are or were sex trade workers.

This is the story of one group of sex trade workers in one community who decided they wanted a choice and set out to create one for themselves. Their stories are not unusual and yet what they have accomplished together most certainly is.

Most of the women who began the Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS) and those who have followed in their foot steps becoming volunteers, staff and Board members entered the sex trade as children. In fact, the average age of entry in Victoria has been estimated at 14 (CRD, 1997), and the women of PEERS are typical. Most had been in the trade on and off for ten to fifteen years before they decided they wanted out.

For many, PEERS represents the beginning of a new kind of connection and community—a healthy kind.

This is the story of PEERS as told by the women who created and who continue to maintain PEERS. Their priority is reaching women and girls who are in the trade in other communities. This story will be useful to anyone thinking about starting a PEERS of their own. It is intended to be used by a number of different audiences—sex trade workers, activists, social workers, teachers, policy makers, researchers and community development practitioners. It is much more than a “how to” handbook; it’s a picture viewed through many lenses.

Although this book has been divided into sections and incorporates several perspectives, it would be useful for everyone to read the entire text. The sequence is meant to set the stage, create the environment, tell the story, describe the details and then reflect on them. Certain sections are, however, of particular import to certain audiences.

The first section includes some of the specialized vocabulary used in the document, why this story is important, some background on the sex trade, myths and facts of the sex trade developed by PEERS and a brief description of Victoria. This section is meant to provide some background and context for the development of PEERS.

The second section provides the details of PEERS, i.e. how PEERS works. It includes a brief summary of PEERS with its philosophy and mission statement, sex trade workers

and community supporters coming together, the pro-trade versus pro-choice debate, the need for and function of an outside facilitator to get things started, where the money to fund PEERS comes from, how PEERS has incorporated capacity building, men and PEERS and some of the important lessons of PEERS. It also includes some important insights from the perspective of ex-prostitutes on how it feels to “fake it” as a square, what it’s like to constantly disclose your story, what it was like for a group of ex-prostitutes to set up and run an office and the personal process of learning to “fit in”. This section is of particular interest to those who may be thinking of starting their own PEERS-like agency.

The third section is the core of the book—the chronological history of PEERS sprinkled with the words of many of the members of the PEERS community, examples of their writing, and media coverage. There is a great deal of information contained in this story; however, much is not included as well. The focus is more on the early days of PEERS than on the present—not because the current situation isn’t impressive or interesting but because what PEERS did to get started will help others who want to start their own PEERS. As this book is being written, PEERS has just moved all of its various programs into one consolidated office, is waiting to hear about many new sources of funding and has just opened an apartment building that will provide second stage housing for homeless women. PEERS continues to do amazing work and to grow in new and exciting directions all the time.

The fourth section provides an overview of what PEERS is doing and what PEERS has done over the last six years. It begins with some passages from PEERS information package about current programs and services, a summary of all the research projects in which PEERS has been involved, a description of *Out From the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth*, some background on PEERS Place housing project for homeless women and information on PEERS’ community partners. This section will be helpful to those supporting the creation of an agency and those assisting in fundraising.

The fifth section offers a number of alternative ways of looking at PEERS. It looks at PEERS as an organization, albeit a unique one, as a process of empowerment, as health promotion, as community development, as a best practice, and reviews the importance of participation of people with experience in the sex trade. This section could be used by policy makers, teachers and workshop presenters helping activists, professionals and students to better understand some of the theoretical constructs that PEERS brings to life within a specific context.

At the end is a bibliography and a copy of PEERS first funding proposal which is attached in the hopes that it will be of use to others applying for funding to start their own organization.

Throughout the document, the reader will hear a variety of voices—the voice of the women who started and continue to build PEERS; the voice of Megan, one of the ex-prostitutes who founded PEERS; the voices of friends and community supporters; and the voice of Jannit, the community facilitator who played a central role in the early days. Each voice brings its own unique experience and perspective. Sometimes the same activity can be very different depending on who is experiencing it. Understanding and anticipating those differences is crucial in creating an environment of safety and respect necessary for PEERS-like organizations to emerge.

Throughout the book, the real names of the authors are used as are the names of the community supporters. Of the women at PEERS, Barb Smith and Ally R. have chosen to use their real names. All other names have been changed to pseudonyms, with first names only.

This report is not intended to take the place of a formal evaluation of PEERS. An evaluation would traditionally include a specific set of methodologies that is not in this publication. This report does include some of the information that an evaluation would encompass: a description of the programs, feedback from participants, interviews with staff, a review of written information and an overview of the process of ongoing growth and change that has emerged in response to the needs of the PEERS community. The authors of this publication, Jannit Rabinovitch and Megan Lewis, each have their own long and distinctive history with PEERS.

Jannit has been involved in PEERS since its inception as a mentor, community supporter, bridge builder, fundraiser and facilitator. She was PEERS' first paid Executive Director and is currently a member of the Board of Directors. Jannit's professional career as a community developer in Victoria has included the development of a number of local not-for-profit organizations, including Sandy Merriman House, Victoria Street Community Association and Medewiwin House.

Megan Lewis came to PEERS very early in its development when she was newly out of the sex trade. She quickly became a spokesperson for PEERS as well as instrumental in program development, community building, and outreach. PEERS operated out of Megan's home for almost a year before it was funded and moved into an office. Megan was the first experiential Director of PEERS. She left PEERS to go back to school in 1999.

The creation of this report is being sponsored by Save the Children Canada as part of *Out from the Shadows and Into the Light*, a national campaign to raise awareness on the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Canada. Funding was received by Community Solutions, the BC Ministry of Volunteers, Cooperatives and Community Development and the Pacific Coast Savings Foundation. The report is available through Save the Children Canada's Western Office and on the *Sexually Exploited Youth Speak Out* website at www.seyso.net.

section one

setting the stage

Section One begins with some specialized vocabulary and then answers the question, “Why is this story important? The answers may help readers understand how best to use the story of PEERS within their own context or community. In order to fully appreciate the story of PEERS, the reader needs to know a little about the context in which the story takes place. In this section, there is some information on the sex trade in Canada including some of the myths and facts. Much more detailed information is available, some of which is listed in the bibliography at the end of the report. Also included in this section is a description of Victoria, the community within which this story takes place.

specialized vocabulary

A Man Pimp. For example, “Do you have a man?” or “You can’t work here without a man.”

Bad Date Violent or abusive trick.

Bogus Call About one in ten calls, the address can’t be confirmed or it’s a joke by a neighbour who is watching.

Booking On Phoning in to an escort agency to report being available for calls.

Booking On Fee This is a fee in order to be able to book on, which can be up to \$300/month or a per shift fee of \$10-\$20.

Boystown The stroll that the men and boys work.

Break Get a customer.

Call Trick or date sent by an escort agency.

Cancellation Fee The \$30-\$100 fee charged if the date cancels because the woman is late, the driver can’t find the address, or he doesn’t like the look of a particular woman.

Coffee Fund Escort agencies charge of \$50-75/month for beverages available to clients.

Date Customer, trick or john.

Deposit First \$100-\$500 earned kept by the agency. Non-refundable.

in this section you will find:

Specialized Vocabulary

Some words and phrases used in the sex trade not commonly understood by others, p 5-6

Why This Story is Important

Eight perspectives reading this book will provide, p 7-8

Sex Trade 101

Background information on the sex trade in Canada, p 8-9

Myths and Facts About Prostitution

Two pages taken from PEERS information package, p 10-11

Victoria, BC

Information about Victoria as the back drop to the development of PEERS, p.12

Like combat veterans, prostitutes suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, a psychological reaction to extreme physical and emotional trauma. 130 prostitutes from San Francisco and 110 from Thailand had higher PTSD scores than 123 Vietnam veterans requesting treatment and 1,006 Gulf War veterans.

Melissa Farley, 1995

Driver Someone who drives women to their calls and waits. Mostly men.

Escort Service or Agency Business where people buy time for money. They say what the two consenting adults do with their time is their business.

Exiting Leaving, quitting the sex trade.

Experiential People with direct, personal experience in the sex trade.

Fines \$50-\$100 charged to woman by escort agency for any number of transgressions from not wearing the kind of lingerie the client wants to being late for work.

Forced Indebtedness Period of partying which precedes entry into trade. No indication that repayment will be required and no mention of future payment. Girl is then told that she has spent thousands of dollars on drugs and someone else paid for them and repayment is demanded.

High Track Sex trade workers who ask some of the highest prices, and tend to be the 'best kept' looking sex workers on the street. High track is almost always pimped.

John Customer, date or trick.

Keep Six Take down the license number of cars as girls get in. Usually done by street kids for \$5-\$10 a car. Is also an expression for watching for the cops.

Kiddie Track Generally 17 years old and under. Often pimped or working in partnership with other exploited youth.

Late Fine \$25 for every half hour booked on late.

Leaving Fee Money paid to pimps or an escort agency to leave the trade. Generally a substantial amount, like \$2,000-\$5,000 in 1999.

Low Track Usually in industrial areas. More of the women are older, or more noticeably drug addicted and/or with mental health issues. They charge less but often make up for that in volume.

Mid Track or Renegade Stroll Higher-end women who work without pimps or without formal pimping. Sometimes boyfriends or husbands act as pimps.

Regular A customer that a sex trade worker sees regularly. Often have a slightly more personal relationship with one another.

Renegade Sex worker without a pimp.

Sexually Exploited Youth Youth in the sex trade, used to differentiate them from adult sex workers or prostitutes. Sexually exploited youth are under 18 years old.

Sex Trade Worker Adult who works in the sex trade. Used interchangeably with prostitute.

Spotter Person who takes down license numbers of cars. Could be arranged by an escort agency or individual.

Square Not in the sex trade and have never been in the trade.

Squared Up Exited from the sex trade.

Stroll Area where street prostitution takes place. Also called the track.

Track Prostitution-heavy streets. Also called the stroll. Tracks are divided up into sections.

Trannie stroll Where male-to-female transsexuals and cross-dressers work.

Trick Customer, client. Also: John or Date.

Trick Charge Fee some hotels charge for taking a guest to the room.

Working Engaging in the sex trade. "I've got to go to work" as compared with mainstream employment "I have to go to my job."

Working clothes Clothes worn for the sex trade.

WHY THIS STORY IS IMPORTANT

1. Telling the story will make it possible for other communities to develop organizations like PEERS to support women and men in the sex trade within their community. Over the years, PEERS has had requests from many places for information. The questions vary depending on who the caller is: a prostitute, a service provider, or a government representative. The most common questions are:

- ◆ How did PEERS get started?
- ◆ Where does the funding come from?
- ◆ How did sex trade workers get involved?
- ◆ What are some of the things PEERS has learned?
- ◆ What are some of the challenges PEERS has had to face?

This book is designed to answer those questions and to help people who want to start an organization like PEERS. The intention is to make it available across Canada and beyond. Throughout the book the experience of PEERS is described fairly specifically, along with some of the lessons learned from that experience so that it can be applied more generally to any community.

2. PEERS is an excellent example of grassroots community development. Far too often, excellent and innovative work is being done by community organizations but the practitioners of these organizations don't have time to document and share their stories. PEERS has developed a model that works. Everyone can learn from that experience. PEERS provides programs and services to women and men who have been alienated and isolated from mainstream society for a very long time. Many, possibly most, of the people who access PEERS' programs and services are reluctant to access any agency services. They come to PEERS because it is different. That difference needs to be looked at, understood, documented and replicated.

3. PEERS' story is an interesting and hopeful story. Even for those who are not in a position to influence the development of new programs and services in their community, reading the story of PEERS will fill them with hope; it will encourage them to continue doing whatever they can within their own context to make a difference. It will remind them that it is possible. Hundreds of people have had their lives dramatically affected by PEERS in a positive way. It is extremely important to be reminded that there are many signs of positive change all around.

4. PEERS is proud of what has been accomplished and wants to share those accomplishments with others. The story of PEERS is a story of overcoming enormous obstacles; of changing community standards; of redefining, for many, who prostitutes really are; of ceasing to be a community of insiders and outsiders and recognizing that we are all part of the same community. For many "mainstream" members of the community, PEERS has forced them to rethink their assumptions and misconceptions about the sex trade and about sex trade workers. There are still some members of the community who would say that PEERS is impossible, that a group of ex-prostitutes cannot develop and operate a functional non-profit society. They say that such an organization cannot exist and would fail if someone were to try to create one. They are wrong.

5. PEERS is an important story about sharing power. When people approach PEERS and ask how the organization managed to get sex trade workers involved, they have missed the point of PEERS entirely. PEERS did not *get* sex trade workers involved. PEERS was *created* by sex trade workers. It is their organization. The story of PEERS is an important addition to the current dialogue about how to incorporate marginalized citizens into the process of creating healthy public policy.

A sex worker friend of mine and I sat down one night and figured out how many tricks we'd had in our illustrious careers as street sex trade workers. We came up with about 10,000 each, so anyone who says there aren't very many men out there buying sex are just wrong.

Megan

Headline

"Baby-faced rapist attacking hookers: It's possible he's already raped two prostitutes, he could just as easily pick up a woman who isn't."

Edmonton Sun, February 10, 2000

**Oh Boy, better stop him before he picks a woman who is not a prostitute!¹*

6. Much of PEERS' funding comes from the federal government and is available to communities in all parts of Canada. Some of PEERS' funding is provincial. The specific programs and Ministries vary from province to province but information on PEERS experience can help others know where to begin looking within their own provincial government. Some communities will have access to funding sources that PEERS hasn't because they are in rural or northern locations or because they have a significant number of Aboriginal sex trade workers. PEERS has also received support from private foundations, local service clubs and private donors. Sharing PEERS' experience will help others learn how they can find support too.

7. PEERS provides an excellent working model of a population health approach in action. Looking at PEERS through the lens of health promotion and the determinants of health helps bring these abstract concepts into focus. If Canada has a genuine commitment to addressing population health, then PEERS can help inform the public policy process by making the concepts real and understandable.

8. Through reading the story of PEERS, a great deal can be learned about the sex trade in Canada. PEERS provides supports and services to a group of people who remain largely invisible despite their numbers and despite the significant cost in human suffering and community resources over their life times. The story of PEERS brings some of these women alive and helps make sense of their experience within the fabric of Canadian culture.

sex trade 101

When people think of the sex trade, or prostitution, they generally think of street prostitution. However, sex work is far more varied than commonly assumed. Sex work in Canada happens everywhere. It happens on the street (5-10%), but it also happens in escort agencies, massage parlours, bawdy houses, bath houses, bars, night clubs, schools, private clubs, logging camps, fishing camps, conferences, apartments, carnivals and anywhere people (read men) gather. Evidence suggests that "there is a substantial prostitution trade flourishing in every city in Canada" (Lowman, 1988).

The average age of entry into street prostitution in Canada has been estimated at 14 (Capital Regional District, 1997). In 1984, the Badgley Report, a national "juvenile prostitution" survey of 229 youth, reported that over 80% had turned their first trick before they were 18, with some youth as young as 8. According to a recent report published by the BC Assistant Deputy Ministers' Committee on Prostitution and the Sexual Exploitation of Youth, "the most common factor that identified at-risk youth was their isolation and disconnection". Fully 75%-80% are female (Scott, 1998). Aboriginal youth are over represented (Kingsley & Mark, 2000). In BC, there is evidence that Aboriginal youth are entering the trade younger and younger (BC ADM's Committee, 2001).

For some, the sex trade can become a trap. With the average age of entry at 14, most sex trade workers do not have access to the range of experiences that other members of the community have. They may not have finished high school or even junior high; they may never have had a mainstream job; or ever been inside a library or a museum. They feel very isolated from the square community. Further hampering their integration, they are not able to share their sex work history with colleagues or new friends as the response to this kind of disclosure is rarely positive. This puts them in the uncomfortable position of having to "live a lie." This can occur in a wide range of daily activities, for example, when filling out an application to rent an apartment or house. Having long unidentified periods on one's resume can continue to be a problem even after exiting.

¹ Editorial comment by PEERS Staff member.

The sex trade on the street and lesser so, in escort agencies, is a subculture to itself. When speaking of integration into the mainstream, it is important to take into consideration the differences in culture. Some of these differences will be illustrated in Section Two. Social cues, language, courtesies, and symbols of friendship and trust are very different than in the mainstream. Integration into the mainstream is a long and often painful process. It can be lonely, and frustrating, particularly so without a sense of community support.

The sex trade can be very dangerous. Research indicates that sex workers are 60 to 120 times more likely to be beaten or murdered than any other person (Lowman, 1997). Because often prostitutes are seen as subhuman, the repercussions for harming a sex worker are often less severe. Treating sex workers as less than human is almost justified in the language used to refer to sex workers (whores, trash, sluts, ho's). Simply put, if 'it's' not seen as human, who's going to care if 'it' gets killed? The stigma attached to sex work is pervasive and fatal. Many serial killers start by assaulting and killing sex trade workers.

A week after Christmas in 1981, Kim Wrebeky was hitchhiking to a friends' house in New Westminster, BC. A man picked her up, even offered her a job. Then he stopped by a wooded area, violently assaulted and raped her, then left her for dead. Somehow, she survived the attack and made her way to the RCMP, where she gave them a 5 page statement. The police and prosecutors took her very seriously, and charged the offender. Until, that is, they found out that in her past, Kim had been a "child prostitute." Then the case was dropped because in the prosecutors words, she was "not credible, a liar and a tramp." That man went on to then commit more violent crimes, and then 11 murders. That man's name is Clifford Olson.

MYTHS and facts About prostitution

(from PEERS information package)

MYTHS

Here is a list of commonly heard myths about the sex trade. Some of them sound ridiculous but they are heard from even the most intelligent members of our community. It is our job to expose these stereotypes and increase public awareness.

There is no chance that your daughter, sister, mother, brother, father or cousin is ever or ever will be a prostitute.

Prostitutes love sex. They are nymphomaniacs.

Male prostitutes are all gay.

Prostitutes are diseased and are responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Female prostitutes all have magical sexual secrets that 'normal' women just can't do.

Prostitutes are all big money makers and are very rich.

Prostitutes are all poor and desolate.

Prostitutes want and need to be rescued.

Prostitutes all work for the Mafia, pimps, or biker gangs.

They will rob you in a second.

They have no morals and can't be trusted.

They are all drug addicts.

They all work on the street or out of sleazy bars.

Prostitutes are all mean and tough.

You can tell a prostitute by what she/he's wearing.

They will try to 'steal your man'.

Prostitutes come from broken homes and have a poor family background.

They are all smelly, dirty, pockmarked peasants.

They are stupid.

They are cunning.

Once a prostitute, always a prostitute. That's just the way 'those types' are.

All prostitutes make lousy parents and abuse their kids.

Prostitutes all fight amongst one another and will kill each other for a quarter.

They are all criminal, tattooed bikers.

Prostitutes are totally indiscriminate about who they sleep with.

They will do anything for any amount of money.

You can't rape a prostitute.

They like to be degraded.

It's okay to beat them up. They have no feelings.

All they worry about is their hair and nails. They are totally shallow.

Prostitutes are not part of your community.

All women fantasize about being a prostitute.

All men fantasize about being with a prostitute.

You can't be a 'real' man unless you have been with a prostitute.

Facts About prostitution

- ✓ Street prostitution makes up only about 5-10% of all prostitution. The rest is found in independent escorts, escort agencies, massage parlours, independent masseurs, brothels, bars/clubs, grocery stores, malls, schools, community centres...
- ✓ 14 years old is the average age of entry into the trade. *[Remember, if 14 is average, then you know many are much younger...]*
- ✓ Most prostitutes, after working for some time, display common symptoms of sexual abuse even if there was no abuse prior to working.
- ✓ The chances of a prostitute getting beaten up, raped, murdered or mutilated are 120 times more likely than any other demographic.
- ✓ Common problems that sex trade workers face include feelings of isolation and alienation, suicidal tendencies, alcohol or drug dependency, eating disorders, self-mutilation, lack of 'stick-to-it-iveness', workaholism, depression, vague gynaecological problems, sexual disorders, 'all or nothing' thinking, obsessive compulsive disorders,...
- ✓ A large portion of addicted prostitutes were not involved in substance abuse before they started working, or in their beginning years.
- ✓ Only about 40% of sex trade workers have drug & alcohol issues.
- ✓ Heterosexual, non-drug using prostitutes have the lowest risk factor for spreading STD's, including HIV/AIDS (2%). The highest risk group is bisexual men (89%).
- ✓ Many prostitutes do not work for a pimp.
- ✓ Being involved in, or having a history of sex trade work does NOT make a bad parent.
- ✓ Sex trade workers come from all types of families, not necessarily dysfunctional ones.
- ✓ Prostitution is not illegal in Canada for those over the age of 18. Communicating for the purposes of prostitution, pandering, procuring, living off of the avails of prostitution, controlling the movements for the purpose of prostitution, however are.
- ✓ 85% of street prostitutes identify themselves as survivors of child abuse.
- ✓ Many people see prostitutes as victims. Many prostitutes see themselves as finally being in control of who they have sex with, where they can live, when they work...
- ✓ In many places, you are not allowed to work on the street unless you have a 'man'.
- ✓ There are people who rob other people, and rarely does this have anything to do with prostitution.
- ✓ Sex trade workers are no more likely to fight and kill each other than commissioned sales people. Some sex trade workers are kept completely isolated, and do not know or work with anyone else within the same profession.
- ✓ Some sex trade workers have to appear 'mean and tough', in order to protect themselves while working alone at night and meeting strangers. This is a coping mechanism used when there is potential for being attacked or appearing vulnerable. When they are at home, in a safe environment, they do not appear 'mean and tough'.

victoria, bc

PEERS is located in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia. The sex trade is very discreet in this affluent island community. Many of the clients are tourists; the rest are locals and regulars. Approximately 80% of the workers are female and 20% are male (Goulet 2001). Estimates of the number of people working in the sex trade are difficult to determine because, among other reasons, sex trade workers are very mobile and move within Canada and into the US on a regular basis. PEERS' staff estimate that there are 3,000 people actively working in the sex trade in Victoria at any given time.

Victoria is the second largest city in BC with a stable regional population of 320,000. It is at the southern end of Vancouver Island and can be reached by ferry, air or private boat. There is no road or bridge to the mainland. The city is surrounded by water with lots of public beaches and waterfront. Although Victoria is a relatively affluent community, a recent report finds that "poverty is widespread and increasing in the region" (Reitsma-Street *et al*, 2000). As the capital city of the province, Victoria is home to a large number of government employees. There are two universities in the area, one community college and many other training institutes and post secondary schools. Many of the area's biggest employers are white collar.

Victoria's primary industry is tourism with an estimated 3,600,000 visitors to the region a year. It is also a community with a surprisingly large number of locally owned businesses. For example, the area's major grocery store chain and the big book-stores are locally owned unlike many Canadian communities. Historically, Victoria was known as a retirement community with a high percentage of seniors, although the profile of the community has shifted so that currently the population is evenly distributed across all age groups. There is a fair amount of visible wealth with many neighbourhoods of large homes.

It is against this backdrop that PEERS has become a large and respected service agency receiving referrals from many community agencies, including Corrections, Probation, public health, social workers from the provincial government, and many other local programs and services.

In addition, a local group of women have created their own social service league to support and assist PEERS to work effectively within Victoria. Although no one speaks about it directly, there is little doubt that by getting to know each other as individuals, league members and PEERS' staff attitudes and values have been dramatically altered.

Certainly in 1995, when PEERS was first getting started, there was nothing to indicate that the attitudes and community standards in Victoria were any different from those in the rest of Canada. Over and over, the women described their reality as being seen as other than human by their customers and presumably by their customers' spouses.

The scope of the need for PEERS became apparent within the second year of operation. Other agencies, researchers, and sex workers came out of the woodwork to connect with PEERS, to find out more information, or to send a client that they didn't know how to deal with. Since no one else at the time worked specifically with sex workers, PEERS became very busy, very quickly.

section two

How peers works

For any one thinking about starting a PEERS-like organization, this section will be particularly important. It begins with the role of the sex trade workers and then moves into the role of other members of the community. The section looks at what other communities might be able to learn from PEERS and describes some of PEERS' experiences in terms that could apply to any community. It includes pragmatic information like where the funding comes from, who our partners are, and what the role of men is at PEERS. It also includes reflections on what it's like to continually disclose the gory details of one's history and how to support sex trade workers through a time of tremendous change and transition.

summary of peers

The idea for PEERS began with two ex-prostitutes in 1994. During 1994 and 1995 a number of other current and former sex trade workers joined them and in the fall of 1995, PEERS was incorporated. In 1997, PEERS received funding to set up an office and begin developing programs and services specifically designed by and for current and former sex trade workers. Over the last six years, PEERS has grown into a highly respected service organization with sixteen staff and a full range of programs and services. The programs reflect parallel commitments of supporting people who are in the trade and thus helping them stay safer and happier, and helping people who want to exit by facilitating their integration into the larger community. The operating budget for 2001 is over \$500,000.

peers mission and philosophy

PEERS is a non-profit society established by ex-prostitutes and community supporters and dedicated to the empowerment, education and support of prostitutes.

PEERS Vision Statement reads:

We are dedicated to continuing our work to create a safe, respectful and healthy environment for those with a history of sex trade work. We strive to meet the needs of our members and continue to provide services that remain flexible and relevant to the changing needs of our community. We will continue to be a voice to speak out publicly against the abuse and stigmatization of prostitutes and continue to add our voice to creating more sensitive public policies and programs.

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Lessons Learned, p 29-30

Anybody who volunteers needs to come with an attitude that in no sense is preaching a gospel. I didn't feel I was there to create change as much as to create an environment in which change was possible.

Rory Kirby,
former Board member



PEERS has always been an organization of sex trade workers. Volunteers, Board, and staff are almost all people who have been in the sex trade themselves. The constitution states that the Board must be over 50% experiential members, and most staff positions are reserved for experiential applicants only. Non-experiential, or mainstream people, are called in or hired for their specialized skills such as research coordination or housing development, when needed.

PEERS' philosophy is to support sex trade workers, not force them out of the trade. PEERS encourages empowerment in the sex industry and education on issues that have an impact on sex trade workers and their work. PEERS provides resources for all active and exited sex trade workers. All services are free to experiential people regardless of their current status.

prostitutes and squares coming together

There seem to be two widespread and contradicting beliefs about starting an agency for sex trade workers. The first is that sex trade workers cannot organize themselves into a useful and productive group. The second belief is that the only people who know how to work with sex trade workers are other sex trade workers.

Both beliefs are true and untrue. Of course sex workers can organize. They have all over the world. However, what must be recognized is that to complete a project like PEERS, the participation of the mainstream community is essential. One of the things about PEERS that makes it such a useful and unique agency is that it acts as a bridge between mainstream populations and sex workers.

In order to create this bridge, two things must be present: a group of peers that can relate to and support each other and mainstream community members. One of the important functions of community supporters is bringing in other people and developing relationships with the sex workers. At PEERS the women felt that it was important, however, that mainstream people were not in positions of power over sex workers. For them, the relationship must be as egalitarian as possible.

The perspective that non-experiential people bring to an agency like PEERS is important. Community supporters bring with them a diverse range of experiences, histories, and ideas. They cannot be discounted as irrelevant or dismissed as 'do-gooders'. They are, in fact, a vital component to agencies like PEERS.

PEERS has addressed the balance between experiential and mainstream people in this way: although several projects have involved non-experiential people, the agency as a whole is run by a large majority of experiential workers. Therefore, although individual programs may have non-experiential people in positions of responsibility, they will always answer to the larger group.

commitment to choice

PEERS has been clear since its early days that its goal is to provide people in the sex trade with choice. This often leads to their decision to exit the sex trade but it is not the intention of PEERS to exclusively support people who want to stop working in the trade. Personal choice is an important tenet in PEERS' philosophy. PEERS' mission states:

We respect those involved in prostitution and we work to improve their safety and working conditions. We assist individuals who desire to leave the sex industry and strive to increase public understanding.

It is a complicated balancing act, however, to maintain. Some women say that they won't come to PEERS because they believe there is a strong bias toward leaving the trade and this belief is reinforced by the reality that most people who come to PEERS, regardless of their original intention, do decide to quit in time. The staff provide important role modelling and, for many, make it possible to truly believe that they too can quit and find a meaningful alternative.

There are exceptions to the commitment to choice. PEERS has had clients referred by Probation and Corrections who are required as a condition of their parole, their probation or as part of their sentence, to work at PEERS. Even with such individuals, it is essential that they come to PEERS willingly, albeit within the constraints of a much more limited set of options. Often, people have chosen to remain on as volunteers after their required commitment has been completed. In some cases, they have even moved on to become part of the staff.

Members of the Victoria Police Department have had trouble with this concept in the past, believing that by supporting people wherever they were at, PEERS was/is enabling dangerous and unhealthy behaviour to continue. Many professionals, especially those working within the criminal justice system, see the issues as a little more black and white. Either people quit the trade and move on, or they are part of an underworld that deserves no support and that is linked directly to criminal activity and the "bad guys." Fortunately such attitudes have changed as relationships have developed between PEERS and the police and communication has improved. Now PEERS Outreach Staff meet regularly with the Vice Squad to discuss conditions on the street for the women.

Experience has borne out the importance of supporting anybody in the sex trade who comes to PEERS for assistance even if all they want at the time is a bus ticket or a condom. Making connections and building relationships have proven over and over to be the first step in beginning to move toward a healthier life for the women and men who come to PEERS. One of the biggest reasons they come to PEERS is because they know they will not be judged. PEERS knows that it is very important that they are supported wherever they are in their process.

Everyone's experience in the trade and in recovery is different. PEERS has to support them where they're at.

Barb Smith



Faking It—Creating a New Identity

The transition from working in the trade to working at PEERS is a long and interesting one. I was at an extreme point in my life. On the one hand, I was severely depressed. I had left the trade 10 months before, and I had just attempted suicide. On the other hand, I found the idea of PEERS very exciting and it gave me a sense of future that I didn't otherwise have. I also found it very scary. I was constantly feeling like I was faking it. Like I was just bluffing people about what I was capable of and what I wasn't. Part of the difficulty in working out who I was, was that I didn't have all the tools to pull off a new identity. I had to pretend. I had to pretend that I had it all together, that I knew why I did what I did. I had to pretend that we, at

PEERS, knew best. Sometimes we did, and sometimes we didn't.

I would take something on, only to find that I had no idea even how to start it. Often I would sit there for hours looking at blank pages trying to figure out exactly what it was I was supposed to do. Then, when I finally just started it, the work was of poor quality, not reflecting my intelligence but certainly reflecting my level of competency.

I wasn't used to following through over the long term, and I found it very difficult to stick with a task until it was done unless it was a very short-lived task. This isn't to say that I had no attention span. It was just that I had no experience or confidence to keep going back to the same task. It was always a bit of a shock to me when I would check on a task only to find that there was still more to do.

I found it very difficult to attend meetings where there were many bureaucrats. I didn't understand their language or manner of speaking. It wasn't that I didn't know what the words they were saying meant, but the way they used them was confusing to me. I was accustomed to people saying what they meant in clear terms. If you disagreed with someone, you said so; you didn't sound like you were agreeing with them. It took me a long time to understand and analyze what people were saying. It didn't take as long to realize I was being patted on the head by many of them.

At first I thought that the bureaucrats were really supportive. I remember wondering why I was ever scared to tell people about my sex trade history, these people were so nice! Then I started to notice that mostly I was there as a token to involvement and that I wasn't taken as seriously as originally I thought. This is when I started consciously mimicking them so that I wouldn't seem as 'different' from them. The idea was that if I could trick them through visual and speaking cues that I was one of them, they would start to take me more seriously. This was a small success. I found I did get taken more seriously as my dress, language and demeanor changed. I don't think anyone really ever forgets that you were a hooker, though.

I began buying more conservative clothing. I was careful to hide my tattoos at meetings, I changed the tone and pitch of my voice, and I began to copy their style of talking, at the same time analyzing what they were saying. I still felt like a fraud or like I was faking it, but this time I felt like it was for the greater good - like my faking would actually get the agency somewhere. Eventually it became more natural and now I switch from one to the other without thinking about it, depending on whom I am with.

the role of the facilitator— getting outside help

There is no question that the only people who could have created PEERS and made it what it is today are people who are or were in the sex trade themselves. At the same time, help from a dedicated person who was committed to supporting and facilitating the process over a period of many years was necessary to provide some skills needed to attain funding and build networks within the community.

In fact, one of the least understood roles in grass roots community development is the role of the facilitator. I'm not sure if facilitator is even a very good word to describe the role I'm talking about. The easiest way to understand the role that the facilitator plays is to describe my own experience. [Jannit Rabinovitch]

I had been "doing" community development for many years in Victoria and it was through a project with street women that I met a number of women who had left prostitution and found themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, depression and a constant battle with the temptation to return to the trade.

The women I met weren't sure exactly what was needed to help other women in their situation but they were very clear about one thing - whatever it was didn't exist. The stories I heard of women who had left the sex trade described one of three experiences:

1. They had pretty much stayed alone and isolated not wanting to associate with their friends from their former life but not knowing how to connect with "squares."
2. They had attended programs with a life skills component where everyone is encouraged to share their personal story and be open and honest. As soon as the group learned that they had been working as a prostitute, often for many years, they were treated completely differently like, in their words, an alien. They usually quit the program at this point.
3. They participated in programs and services and lied about their background and experience until they decided to quit because it seemed pointless or because they couldn't keep track of all the lies they felt forced to tell.

I began to learn more about prostitution both from the women I was meeting and reading on my own. I learned that many, probably most, enter the sex trade as minors and that after hearing their stories, one by one, it was pretty difficult to think of prostitution as a career choice. I learned that there are certainly men selling sex, too, but the two worlds are quite separate.

At the beginning, I never imagined that helping the women I was meeting would turn into a source of employment for myself or anyone else. I offered to help them connect with a few women I knew who worked in various provincial government ministries who I thought would share my concern over the lack of appropriate programs and services. Most of my government contacts were very sympathetic, although a few people didn't seem to understand why sex trade workers needed specific programs and services of their own. They suggested ex-prostitutes should just use existing services designed either for street people, addicts or the unemployed even though these programs had been tried unsuccessfully by everyone I met. In fact, many had become "service resistant," a term used by Ministry staff to describe people who won't use existing services. I knew that what they wanted was something different.

A primary function of my role as facilitator during those early days was acting as an interpreter between the sex trade workers and the square community.

It was a life changing experience. I don't think I would have been able to achieve what I've done without the experience of having someone have confidence in me like Jannit did.

Barb Smith

I remember one time when we were all meeting to talk about a PEERS research project and some of the questions it would include. Judy, the research coordinator, suggested asking a question about having enough money for basics and she used as an example "hose." I knew she meant pantyhose but in the glazed silence that followed I could see she had lost the group. I suggested we stop and I translated. Judy had never heard the word ho's for prostitutes and the women had never used the word hose for stockings. To each, "hose" had a completely different meaning.

Jannit Rabinovitch



I always knew that their need for a translator was time-limited. It was obvious that the women were very bright and capable and would learn how to manoeuvre their way around the various bureaucracies and systems in time. But in the meantime, I needed to translate between the two groups.

Another part of my role was as a link to other people. I introduced them to people I knew through other projects I had worked on - people who became funders, people who helped with the incorporation, people from other agencies. I set up a meeting with women from a number of government ministries that I knew would be interested in the idea of supporting a group of sex trade workers. We managed to convince them to commit \$2,000 each, a small enough sum that it doesn't usually require a complex proposal or outcome measures. It did require that some legal entity receive the money, so the next step was to help the small group of women incorporate as a non-profit society. I convinced a friend with skills in that area to help put together incorporation documents and get the group registered. The \$8,000 we raised through this process meant we could have a phone, buy basic supplies like paper, pens and stamps and pay to get incorporated.

One of the women came up with the name PEERS, which, at the time, stood for the Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Recovery Society. They fairly quickly decided that the word recovery was a bit too judgmental and changed it to resource.

Over the next year, as the group began to meet regularly and to develop an identity, they talked about their priorities. They wanted to let women out on the street know that someone cared and a few of them started spending their evenings, often into the wee hours of the morning, walking the streets talking to the women while they worked. It was clear from the outset that it would not be appropriate for me to join them on the stroll. The women wanted to talk to someone "who had been there."

Sometimes the women would start sharing war stories with each other and forget I was there. I was horrified to think about them as kids learning how to survive in such a violent and complex underworld, avoiding the police and the social workers as much as they could. They would talk about drooling old men and men with guns. I remember sitting in a restaurant eating french fries and listening to what it was like for them at first when they were so young they thought they had to do what they were told. I couldn't help putting my own kids in their situation.

I began to see my work with PEERS in the same way I saw my community development work with other groups. My role had two very distinct parts that ran along parallel tracks. One was to support them in finding their voice and helping them create a society, organize their activities, let other agencies in the city know about them, etc. The other was to begin to seriously talk to potential funders so that when the group began to develop strategies that would require funding, it would be available.

Spending time spreading the word within government circles and planting the seeds paid off significantly down the line. In my experience, many people who work in the civil service are well meaning and when presented with an opportunity to, as one said, "do the right thing," will at least try. Most people that I spoke to agreed that there was an important need here that had not been identified before. Most felt helpless to do more than give their verbal support but they began to give it thought.

I had to explain over and over why the women I was meeting couldn't get what they needed within existing services and why specialized services were necessary. I also found myself explaining over and over why it was, and still is, essential that

these new services be designed, developed and *delivered* by ex-sex trade workers. As a consequence, I began to explore a way to fund some research to document and demonstrate why specialized services were truly necessary to support ex-sex trade workers.

As it turned out, accessing research money without the active collaboration of an academic is basically impossible, but it took us a few years to figure that out for ourselves. The first few proposals PEERS submitted were not successful but they put us on the map and helped make the organization credible to other agencies in the community and to the funders. As the facilitator, I took responsibility for putting together funding proposals while I tried to work closely with a few of the women to help them begin to understand the process. I also chose to work with well-established agencies so that our first proposal for a training and support project was for a joint project that would have been delivered in collaboration with two other agencies - one that worked with street youth and one that worked with abused women. It was not funded but it made PEERS legitimate to many people.

By the second year, we had been granted two small sums - one to be used to put together a comprehensive research proposal to the provincial health research foundation and one to tell the stories of people who had grown up in the sex trade to help inform the new Ministry of Children and Families. I worked on both projects in collaboration with some of the women of PEERS. Others were uncomfortable with the idea of writing proposals or doing research and were happy to let me take primary responsibility for the work.

Whether it was mere good luck or a direct result of having done so much behind-the-scenes work, when the Minister of Skills, Training and Labour announced that his Ministry was going to develop a project to train ex-prostitutes, the Ministry staff came to PEERS. Thus began months of negotiations with the Ministry and discussions among the women about what the project should look like. We were clear about a number of things right from the start:

1. PEERS would be managed and staffed by ex-prostitutes, not social workers or professionals.
2. Expectations had to be realistic about what they could accomplish in one year.
3. A significant portion of the budget had to be available for support of the staff who were, after all, the clients as well. The support would take a range of forms, from courses at the community college to sessions with a private therapist.
4. We planned on continuing after the first year despite being told the funding was for one year only.

It took several months to write a Schedule A, which is what the province calls the description of this new agency, that included its tasks, outcome goals, target group, budget, etc. It is attached as Appendix A to this report.

setting up the office

There were so many things that we didn't know how to do. Sometimes we thought we did and did them wrong. Sometimes we knew we didn't have a clue and tried to muck it together anyway. Record keeping was a good example of this. We didn't keep any records. We didn't think that it was important. Then we were told that we should really be keeping some records. I thought, "Okay. I'm game" and tried to keep them.

Unfortunately, although we were told we should keep records, we were never taught how to create a records system, how to maintain it, how to make sure other people used it properly, and what we were keeping them for. What is important to keep and what isn't? How do you file something so that you can find it again?

Although we had some guidance, there was so much that we didn't know, we lost things that would have been useful to keep. The clippings file, old contracts, the original copies of pamphlets, posters, and packages were all lost. Phone numbers were lost, messages were lost, and calendars were lost.

These were skills that we simply didn't have. I think that there is the assumption that if you tell someone what to do or even how to do it, then they'll know how to just pick up the ball and run with it. But there is so much negotiation in doing small tasks that people aren't even aware of.

I will use my history as an example (as I have for the last six years). I never filed anything in my life until I started working for PEERS. In fact, I did almost no organizing of paper at all. I was never in school at a level that I had to organize any paper. People start learning to organize paper through doing little bits of it at school. They have five classes in high school and have to keep pieces of it separate, and in some kind of order. Not everyone does this, but many do. Then they get a job somewhere and move into their own apartment. They have bills and warranties that they have to keep safe. Eventually they have bank statements, tax returns, book club memberships, car payments, and chequing accounts. Maybe they go to post secondary school. They have papers and research to organize, classes to keep separate, handouts, labs, exercises, tests, and drafts to keep organized. Then, if they are thrust into a brand new agency, creating a simple filing system is not a trying chore. The basic understanding of what goes on is there.

I file everything by the name of who I'm working for or by the project name. There may be sub-files like PEERS Story – chronology. But any more than that and I get confused or start to cross-reference. Or I will use a certain system of filing for part of things, find out it doesn't work, try to amend the system to accommodate what I want it to do. Eventually I find myself with a filing system that I can't find anything in because it is running on several different filing strategies. The PEERS filing was like this for some time.

As a Board member and retired school teacher, it was hard to come into the office and see people not doing anything and getting paid. The files were a mess. There didn't seem to be any systems. The staff didn't want any square person to come in and help set up the office.

June

The other problem to organize was time. In order to organize your time like the rest of the world, you have to know a couple of things. Here's an example of some of the questions you have to think about if you have stuff to do and an appointment. a) What time is it now? b) How long is it going to take you to get there? c) What is the mode of transportation and do you have the means? d) Is it more important to be on time or to finish what you are doing and will the person you're meeting care? e) How long will you be there?

We also had to negotiate tasks and projects. I used to just do one task until it was finished so that I was assured of getting it done. This proved to be unwieldy, as I had to put so many things on hold in order to finish the first task, that I would have 17 other things waiting for me when I finally finished. I was also well known for biting off more than I could chew. I would take on so much that there was no way I could complete it in the allotted time, or I would get scared of it all and avoid it. Then I would think, "I'll do something else right now, I can always work through the night." Then I would fall asleep and scramble to catch up with it in the morning. We didn't know how to decide how much time you should spend on a task, what to do if you are having a problem starting, whether you should spend time staring at the computer screen or do you put it away and then start on something else. Other people just didn't do it at all, or would lose track of what they were supposed to have done and it would disappear. There were some staff who were excellent at keeping things organized but for most of us it was a challenge.

where the funding comes from:

Like many non-profit organizations, PEERS has more than one mechanism for funding. The main ways PEERS receives funding are:

Core Funding—Core funding supports the ongoing operation of the agency and is annualized, meaning it continues from one year to the next. It is important to note that core funding is never fully secure since it comes from the government, in this case the Province of BC, and can be changed or cancelled but not easily.

Project Funding—Project grants are provided for specific projects or programs such as training or research and usually are time limited. They must be applied for individually and must meet the criterion of the funding program. PEERS has received program grants from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) for their training programs. PEERS reapplies to HRDC to renew these grants every year. Currently more than 50% of the total budget comes from program grants, most of that from HRDC. Also, PEERS has received one time only grants for two research projects.

Foundation Grants—PEERS has applied to local and regional foundations and successfully received grants for specific purposes from the Vancouver Foundation, Victoria Foundation, Pacific Coast Savings Foundation, VanCity Community Foundation and the Real Estate Foundation. PEERS continues to look to local foundations and to appropriate national foundations such as the Canadian Women's Foundation for support.

Donations of Cash—PEERS has received significant gifts from local service clubs and individuals and has been the recipient of the proceeds from a number of fund raising events held to support the organization.

One time Megan told me to phone a government office for their address so we could send them a proposal. They asked me what the proposal was for and I said, "Money."

Ally R.

Donations of Services—A number of professionals have donated their time and expertise over the years to help PEERS. These have included computer services and organizational development consulting.

Each of these are described in detail below.

Core Funding

Many of PEERS' funding sources are local and therefore not accessible across the province or country although similar programs may very well exist in other locales. During the first year of PEERS' existence, funding was needed to establish and develop the organization. PEERS went to the provincial government for the initial development funding.

There are a number of possible places to approach a provincial government and to some extent it will depend on where there are supportive individuals who are willing to take a risk and try something new. In BC, the Deputy Minister of Skills, Training and Labour recognized that helping women exit the sex trade would fit within the Ministry's mandate. That Ministry didn't have a program that directly related to PEERS and so they were forced to journal voucher their contribution to another Ministry in order to give the money to PEERS. This meant that though the funds were from the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour budget, the contract was with the Ministry of Children and Families. Both ministries have changed names since.

In many provinces, quite possibly in most, there will not be a ministry designated to take responsibility for the issue of prostitution or for the needs of sex trade workers and ex-sex trade workers. It may be necessary, as it was in the case of PEERS, to provide some education to policy makers on the specific needs of sex trade workers and why it is important that specialized services be created to meet those needs. Potential ministries to approach would include those responsible for health, mental health, social services, human resources, community services, attorney general, or women.

In Canada, there is a growing understanding of the issue of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth. A fair number of policy makers are now aware of the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children and youth in the sex trade as a result of the Save the Children Canada report entitled *Sacred Lives*.² Research has consistently shown that the average age of entry into prostitution in Canada is 13 or 14 and the experience of PEERS has confirmed that by far the majority of the prostitutes that access PEERS were very young when they began working.

The majority of the women, and the few men, are able to clearly articulate their need for targeted services especially considered in the light of their having spent their adolescent years involved in a dangerous and isolated underworld. They found it almost impossible to access existing programs and services that don't create an explicitly welcoming environment for prostitutes. Many, with good cause, are very "service resistant" and only feel safe in an environment that is non-judgmental and staffed by former prostitutes who can empathize with their experience.

Project Funding

Many of the larger sources of project funding that PEERS has accessed are federal programs that are available to communities across Canada. PEERS has received funding from five different HRDC programs, all of which are accessible in other places: Local Labour Market Partnerships (LLMP), Youth Internship Canada (YIP), Employment Assistance Services (EAS), Job Creation Partnerships (JCP) and Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), part of the national response to homelessness. Another

²*Sacred Lives* records the voices of 150 commercially sexually exploited Aboriginal children and youth from consultations that took place in 22 communities over a five month period during the fall of 2000. The consultations were conducted by two Aboriginal women, the authors of the report, Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark.

potential federal source available across Canada is Justice Canada's National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention especially the Community Mobilization Program which "helps communities develop comprehensive and sustainable approaches to crime prevention."

Research project funding has come from Status of Women Canada's regional office, in our case, the British Columbia/Yukon Region. Other regions for Status of Women Canada are the Atlantic Region, the Quebec Region, the Ontario Region and the Prairies/NWT Region. Some large urban areas have Status of Women funds available, as well. The second source of research funding was the B. C. Health Research Foundation, Community Research Grants. This was an arm of the provincial government funded directly through the Ministry of Health but the Foundation no longer exists.

Foundation Grants

In Canada, there are a large number of private foundations, some of which give grants in a specific geographic area and others give grants around a theme or issue. Most public libraries have a comprehensive listing of foundations that is well worth the time it takes to go through. It is always a good idea to contact the foundation staff and talk to them directly about what their objectives are and how the work of a society meets those objectives. Several of the foundations from which PEERS has successfully received funds are administered by local credit unions.

Donations of Cash

The first group to provide funds to PEERS was one of the local Men's Newcomer's Clubs. Churches are regular contributors. Individuals sometimes choose to make monthly contributions, and sometimes donations in memory of clients who have died have been contributed. To get donations from local service clubs, direct solicitations need to be made to them both in writing and in person.

A group of local women approached PEERS a number of years ago and offered to help organize some fund raising events on behalf of the organization. These women have done fund-raising for more mainstream groups such as the opera, symphony and art gallery. Their interest in PEERS was unexpected but extremely welcome. They now describe themselves as the PEERS Service League. To date, they have organized three very successful events including two dinners and one afternoon tea and fashion show. Each event has been sold out and brought in from \$6000 to \$10,000 each. Their involvement has helped PEERS spread the word about the existence of the agency and raise awareness about the realities of the sex trade. Apparently the husbands of some members of the group were uncomfortable with their wives' involvement and refused to allow any current or former prostitutes into their homes. Fortunately, this hasn't stopped any of the women from participating.

Donations of Services

Some of the professionals who have donated their time have initially worked for PEERS and then continued to provide their assistance and expertise after their term of contract has ended. For example, PEERS contracted with an organization development consultant to work with the staff and Board of Directors in 1998 for one year using funds donated by a local foundation for a capacity building project. At the end of the year, there were no additional funds available; however, the consultant continues to meet with Board and staff two to three times a year and donates her time to facilitate these sessions.

Other professionals offer to provide ongoing support in areas where PEERS staff do not have the expertise to manage without help. For example, computer repair and maintenance is an area where a number of individuals have helped out over the years.

I did public ed for about a year and constant disclosure is incredibly emotionally exhausting. At one point I decided not to tell my personal story anymore—but that's what people wanted to hear. It made the speaks so much more effective, but that much more exhausting at the same time. I never knew what to do with myself after a speak. I couldn't go back to work in the office though.

Ally R.

I had been out of the trade for ten years before I got involved with PEERS. For me, going to the meetings, working at PEERS was like going back but being a different person. It brings stuff up. You might think you've distanced yourself but it depends how you distance. For me it was—I just quit. That's it. I quit and never looked back. The work at PEERS was a constant reminder of my stuff.

Gabriella

constant disclosure— sex worker as primary identity

The whole issue of disclosure is complex and has to be given serious thought. There is no question that the media and “square” community members want to hear stories of real life experience. When someone is willing to stand up and tell their story, the impact is incredibly powerful. Many, many people have come to support PEERS as a result of hearing one of the women tell their story. A story does, however, have to be freely given. Not everyone feels comfortable talking about their experience and that has to be okay too. Some people can do it for awhile and then need to stop. It would be ideal if the public would be satisfied with a general picture but making it personal seems to shift public perception in a substantial way. Someone has to do it.

At the same time, it is critically important to be aware of the effect of constant disclosure on the public spokes people and of the impact of being immersed in dialogue about the trade and being with people who were all in the trade. It can become one's primary identity superceding other facets of one's personality and life experience. It can also be risky for some people. As Barb Smith reminds us:

“Talking about it all the time put those of us who were the founders of PEERS at risk because of the stress. It can be like trying to sober up and being in a bar every day.” For Barb, it was too much. *“At the beginning, it was incredible, exciting, huge. I had an inflated sense of what I could do. Then I just crashed. Started using drugs and working. I relapsed for six months.”*

Many of us working in the ‘squared up’ field were unemployed and in transition prior to employment at PEERS. We were poverty stricken and unsure of our futures. When we began to be paid, there was a feeling of abundance. We were getting paid regularly, and while many of us struggled with budgeting our new found wealth, we still had a feeling of security and safety. This safety and security rested on our telling our stories over and over again. There was a direct causal link.

Mostly it was an exhilarating experience. Speaking gave me a chance to separate from my story and understand it in an objective manner, almost like looking at some one else's life and analyzing it. However, it also meant that I could objectively pick it apart for the juicy bits to feed the waiting public.

Sometimes it felt like I was being trotted out, the token hooker. We used to joke about it, but there was a truth to it. Fact is, you need some one who will tell their story and tell it well. Some one who can elicit emotion in the people who are listening and that someone has to have experience.

After I'd speak, lots of people I never knew and were never a part of my life would come up to me and tell me how proud they were of me. What a good job they think I'm doing and how brave I am to speak. It was very weird. I didn't like it.

The thing about living in the ‘ex-sex worker’ identity is that it gave me a defined place to get myself together. I didn't have to stretch myself about a lot of things because I didn't have to think about who I was. I knew I was an ex-prostitute. Because I wasn't sure of where I was, I always felt like I

was on constantly shifting sand. It wasn't until much later that I actually did some soul searching to find out who and what I was.

Disclosing your history over and over does a couple of things:

1. Because your history is used as a story, it becomes almost a disassociative activity. You distance from your story and this, among other things, can lead to questioning the validity of it. Because you end up using small pieces of your story to illustrate things and to use as examples, you end up giving weight to parts of your history that would not otherwise be weighted. This also can make you feel fraudulent. It's as if the story becomes so far away from your own perceptions of what your life was like that it doesn't feel true. The above two things together have led several people into feeling like the telling of their story was fraudulent in some way or like they were 'prostituting' their stories. No gray area of what is a choice, what is not, what were the good parts, what was not so good. It all gets boiled down to the Cole's Notes of my life.

2. The constant and regular talk/work/energy of one perspective or aspect of your life turns this into your primary identity. On the one hand, it allows one to deeply explore one's sex trade history; on the other, it dismisses the variety and complexity of life. I think it does a disservice after a time. I also think that it needs reclaiming after one stops working on the one issue. Becoming so immersed in this identity allows one to explore thoroughly and exhaustively their sex trade history. There are constant revisions to our story being made as another layer of insight is revealed. Often this is coupled with much discussion among colleagues. Lots of questioning, clarifying, and comparing to other experiences and perspectives. All this adds up to a lot of thinking. Thinking about what we are saying, why and where it came from. Also how our story is seen by peers makes a difference. Eventually I needed to dig through my old life and find the pieces that got no attention for the five years I was with PEERS. I felt that I would become trapped in my 'story' if I didn't.

peers and capacity building

Often capacity building is viewed as the development of the skills to build and maintain a community, an institution or an individual. PEERS plays a significant role in building capacity on all three levels. PEERS has taken this responsibility very seriously. A commitment to capacity building has been reflected in the financial priorities of the organization and can be seen in the ways funding has been allocated from the beginning.

Within the larger context of the Victoria community, PEERS has helped create a climate of tolerance and acceptance that has helped build the community's capacity to recognize its most marginalized as full members and to begin to meet their needs.

As an institution, PEERS will always be dedicated to building its capacity. Every organization must dedicate time and resources to such development in its early days but one of the many unique things about PEERS is that the need for institutional capacity building is ongoing. This is a function of the essential nature of PEERS.

One of the problems with working on issues pertaining to the sex trade at work, and also working on it personally is that eventually, it becomes your primary identity. It becomes the centre that you circle. Other parts of you are tucked away, quieted down, shushed.

Megan

Being involved with PEERS and PA triggered post-traumatic stress disorder. I was stressed, overwhelmed and it led to panic. Part of the overwhelm was becoming the only Canadian contact for PA. The founder, who lives in the US, stated referring all Canadians to me. I started getting calls from men and women across the country who were desperate for help. It was too much. My own recovery was too recent. There were no old timers. No one for me to turn to.

Patricia

PEERS didn't change my life. It showed me how to change it myself.

Leslie



At various times in PEERS' history grants have been solicited and received specifically for strategic planning, organizational development and organizational capacity building. These have often required the help of an outside facilitator.

Of course, there is a need to build organizational capacity both in the traditional sense of helping to develop the organization but also in more basic ways. For example, when PEERS first opened its office, staff began their day at noon because nobody could imagine getting up earlier than that or see any good reason why they should. In time, as more and more relationships began to develop with organizations that began their day at 8:30 or 9, PEERS staff started coming in earlier. Now the office opens at 10 every morning.

It is important to put the concept of capacity building into perspective. The women who come to PEERS have already developed the skills to survive in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances. Often they have had to survive abuse since early childhood. They have both the capacity and the ability to live in a world many others could not. When professionals talk about capacity building, they are referring to a particular skill set that is needed to live and work in the world of the dominant culture. It is a central objective of PEERS to build this type of capacity and provide support to the individuals who make up the organization so they have as many options for the future as possible.

At the outset of being a funded agency, PEERS hired five former sex trade workers, most of whom had had very limited experience working in the mainstream. They did, however, have a number of transferable skills acquired while being in the trade—good people skills, good listening skills, experience in sales and negotiation, excellent instincts and an understanding of the importance of boundaries.

The budget during PEERS' first year made personal support and training a high priority. In subsequent years, funds were solicited from additional sources rather than taking them out of the core budget to pay for training and support of staff.

The kind of skills usually referred to by the phrase "capacity building" that PEERS incorporates into its programs for staff and participants include:

- Basic life skills such as getting up in the morning, being someplace at a specified time, dressing appropriately, using a phone book, riding a bus, buying groceries, preparing meals, etc.
- Basic employment skills such as using a computer, using other business machines, writing a letter, attending a job interview, planning and organizing appointments, etc.
- More advanced employment skills such as meaningful work experience, writing reports, tracking activities, designing programs, working with clients, etc.
- Personal healing as part of an individual process that many choose to go through using such tools as reading about others' experiences, writing in a journal, attending a twelve step program, attending a treatment program or seeing a counsellor,
- Group development such as collectively creating a mission statement, vision, strategic plan, sets of goals and objectives, participating in regular staff meetings, collaborative decision making, etc.

The primary capacity building activities at PEERS are listed below. Unfortunately it was not possible to afford every activity every year. The dates in parenthesis identify the year that resources were allocated for that activity.

Personal healing for staff

- Individual counselling with a professional therapist (1997)
- Individual meetings with a training consultant to develop personalized training plans (1999)
- Access to therapists through an employees' extended benefits counselling program (1997-2001)
- Access to up to \$500 a year in counselling through an employees' extended benefits medical package (1997-2001)

Individual training for staff

- Tuition and books for courses in areas of basic skill development such as computer literacy, public speaking, bookkeeping (1997)
- Tuition for programs such as three month full-time Life Skills Coach course (1997)

Facilitated group process

- Team building and emotional group process work facilitated by a counsellor (1997)
- Strategic planning sessions with Board and staff facilitated by an organizational consultant (1999)
- Facilitated quarterly visioning workshops (ongoing)
- Facilitated organizational development process over six months (2001)

Staff development

- Participation in weekly staff meetings (1999-2001)
- Access to internal movement within the organization (ongoing)
- Mentoring and support from more experienced staff (ongoing)

fitting in...or not

The first couple of years, I felt like I was between the worlds. I wasn't a sex worker anymore, but I knew that I didn't fit in with the other people working in other agencies. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know what I was supposed to believe in, what perspective my story should take, who I was allowed to be friends with and who not, what I was supposed to do when my friends became clients, how to negotiate that. I didn't know what to do with my free time, so I just arranged it so that there wasn't any. Often I felt like a good pet.

Mostly I was at a loss. I was still struggling with depression and felt very alone. Sometimes I would feel connected with someone who wasn't a sex worker, and then the next time I saw them I would feel very self conscious. I would feel very close to a 'client' and know that I wasn't allowed, nor was it ethical, to become close friends with them at that point.

We were pretty close, the women at PEERS. I think some of this was due to just not knowing where else that we could go for companionship. Certainly our joint enthusiasm was part of it too, but I think some of it was that many of us didn't have lots of friends. We had gotten rid of old friends that we found unhealthy for us, or we physically had moved away from them, and we really hadn't made new ones at this point.

Some staff still fear the threats their pimps made. PEERS made policy last year that we will not offer our services to anyone who is or has been a pimp or madam. Just something STW's (sex trade workers) have to think about.

Ally R.

What if the interviewer of the job I'm applying for is a trick I've seen? Before I met my birth father I was terrified that he would be a trick I'd seen at a motel! I figured that at least the ice would be broken!

Ally R.

I finally figured out that I had no cultural references with the square people. Or I had very few anyway. Things that I found funny, they didn't; things they thought were funny, I didn't get. I also couldn't tell what they thought of me. I had no yardstick to measure other people's perceptions. I chalk this up to not being able to read each other's different cultural cues.

Several people that I know felt like they didn't fit. Neither fish, nor fowl, nor fine red herring. You didn't belong with the sex trade workers anymore. They don't perceive you as one of them, but often as a role model, goal to reach, or the one that got away. This is not an equal relationship.

Also, you're not one of the other human service workers. Often it felt like I never would be either. That I was different enough that I would never be able to form close relationships with anyone who didn't have street or sex trade experience. That I would never find people who didn't care about my past, or rather, who cared about it, but didn't think less of me or stereotype me.

All this did was make me feel very alone. On the one hand, I was receiving a lot of strokes for the work I was doing and on the other hand, I was in a huge personal transition. This didn't afford me a real peer group of my own. I know that PEERS was supposed to be it, but I knew ours was a marriage of necessity.

MEN AND PEERS

Pimps:

In some ways, it is an enormous relief and in others ways, it is very depressing, but the pimps working in Victoria and environs do not seem at all concerned about PEERS' existence. It is certainly easier for the staff to do the work of PEERS without the added anxiety of worrying about the response of pimps. This is, in part, due to the fact that many women work independently and do not have an ongoing relationship with a particular pimp; in part, because PEERS provides support and services to a large number of women who have already left or decided to leave the sex trade; and, in part, because the number of sex trade workers is so large that PEERS is a drop in the bucket as far as affecting business is concerned.

PEERS works with the Victoria Police to identify violent pimps and to support women who would like to charge their pimps. This has rarely happened.

Tricks, Johns, Customers:

PEERS does not work directly with men who buy sex. Indirectly, some of PEERS' work is designed to change community attitudes towards sex trade workers which may result in changed community standards around the buying of sex, especially sex with children. PEERS' primary commitment is to the women themselves - supporting them to leave the trade if that is their choice and helping make it safer for those who choose to continue to work.

PEERS is aware of the need for significantly more research in this area. Given the numbers of customers each woman who comes to PEERS has had during her career, there appear to be a lot more johns than is commonly assumed. Their motivation is not well understood and there is little research to show whether there is anything that can or does significantly change the men's behaviour or whether the incidence is changing over time.

Some of the information about men who buy sex comes from the media:

- Former Social Credit MLA George Kerster arrested for trying to solicit sex from a minor on the Internet (*BCTV News*, February 4, 2000).
- North Vancouver RCMP officer charged with seeking the services of a prostitute (*Globe & Mail*, March 1, 2000).
- Dr. Philip Alan Baker, procuring the services of an underage prostitute. The coverage included 4 pages of quotes from shocked friends and colleagues about Dr. Baker's good qualities, his love for jazz, his contributions to society. Not one word of the 'underage prostitute'. Dr. Baker did consulting work for several social agencies, some involving counseling and rehabilitation for young prostitutes (*National Post*, March 2, 2000).
- Saskatchewan MLA Jack Goohsen, 57, found guilty of buying sex from a 14 year old for which he received a four-month conditional sentence. He's planning to write a book about his 'painful ordeal'. In all the news reports on this story there was no mention of the 14 year old, or her ordeal.

Male Sex Trade Workers:

PEERS was started by women in the sex trade. PEERS has never excluded men and boys from any of the programs and services offered; however, very few men have accessed PEERS and rarely more than one at a time. As a result, the men who have come to PEERS tend to feel isolated and find that PEERS does not currently have the expertise to appropriately address their issues and needs.

Recently, a group of men have asked PEERS for help in developing their own organization designed to specifically address the needs of men in the sex trade. There is now a men's stroll and a men's drop-in group with some limited financial help coming from the local gay men's bars.

some of the Lessons

There are some important lessons that PEERS has learned during these initial years. Five of the key lessons follow.

1. Participation has to be meaningful

The role of sex trade workers at PEERS and the roles they are attempting to move into in the community must be personally meaningful. The structure of the organization must allow for genuine participation in decision making. Employment training and employment opportunities must provide people with work that captures their interest.

Participants in PEERS' training and employment projects have been much more likely to find and keep employment when they have had the opportunity to engage in work that excites them and feels like it matters. In this, they are not really different than others. However, they do have the option of returning to other employment which, while it may be dangerous and unhealthy, can pay fairly well.

2. Recognize and expect cross cultural differences

From the outset, it is important to realize that the sex trade constitutes a separate and hidden culture with different values, life style, cultural norms, behaviours and language from the mainstream. It is important to recognize and anticipate these cross cultural differences between experiential people and community supporters. Otherwise there can be constant culture clashes.

For example, almost all of the experiential people who have come to PEERS, whether as staff or participants, smoke cigarettes. This has been problematic, at times, for the

When I was in Aurora centre (a residential treatment centre for alcohol and drugs), there were two doctors that we could see if we needed to see a doctor. It turned out that one of the doctors was a regular of mine and had been for at least 2 years. After I proved it—by telling staff where he lived, his phone number, his day off—they were so shocked!!! They couldn't believe it. I don't know if he is still one of their doctors.

Ally R.

You might be assisting people with stuff that really brings stuff up. There needs to be a recognition of triggers. Lots of debriefing.

Gabriella

Part of the discomfort of being around sex trade workers is the difference in values from our own. Like being on time.

This is considered a virtue [to mainstream community members] but time has a different relevance to sex trade workers.

Marlyn Horsdal,
former Board member

When I first started going to the support group, I didn't like being touched and there were a couple of people that were very huggy. It is pretty common with many sex trade workers that they don't like being touched. You often couldn't control who touched you or how you were being touched by people you didn't like very much anyway so you stopped it where you could. ...It was the first time in my life I really related to other women. I didn't really trust other women before that.

Shannon

community supporters, none of whom smoke. Among other things, smoking means taking constant smoke breaks.

Dear Jannit,

I was going through my files on PEERS and remembering some interesting times. Especially, as we discussed the history of the organization, I remembered one devastating day for me.

I had carefully kept a whole file of chronological clippings from almost three years, each with the date, source, even the page, all the info needed for listing in a bibliography and/or looking up the item again in the archives of newspapers or the library.

Others in the organization had kept articles too, but usually jammed haphazardly into an office file without any idea that it was important to know the date and source. But mine was thorough and I gave it to the office when the Board discussed keeping good record of the organization.

Do you remember what happened to all those things? Nobody else had a clue about how to keep records, of course, and were looking around for something Terry could do (which was certainly a challenge). She said she would do a PEERS scrapbook. She first cut off all identifying info, all dates and sources from the articles and clippings in the file, cut up the pictures and pasted them (permanently) into a scrapbook according to her own idiosyncratic arrangement. The result, of which she was proud, was about the ability level of a Grade Three student, and all meaningful records were destroyed. Nobody else seemed to think this was a disaster, but I sure did.—June

3. Have realistic expectations.

Both the staff and the community supporters have to have realistic expectations. Although there is so much work to be done and plenty of people eager to get started, it is important to create realistic and doable goals incorporating enough time for people to learn how to accomplish tasks and how to decide what to do next.

4. Debriefing is critical

It is important to do regular check-ins with people and maintain a structure for debriefing. Working in this field brings up many issues for both participants and staff. Everyone's healing process is different and while it may be very cathartic for one person to tell their story, or do outreach, for some it can become triggering and emotionally damaging. What is healing at one time can become harmful after a while. This is why it is so important to continue to gauge one's emotional response to the work. There must be the flexibility to move from one area of the organization to another if it becomes detrimental to one's healing process to stay in one place.

5. Small things can make a big difference.

Paying attention to intuition is important. Creating something new means doing something that hasn't been done in the community before, so it is hard to know what's important. For instance, an ad in the 'escort section' of the local newspaper became a huge deal. No one expected it would. It wasn't a big thing and didn't take a lot of work, but it ended up becoming one of the main ways that PEERS became known and familiar to inside workers—a population that PEERS had had a hard time accessing in the beginning.

IN THIS
SECTION
YOU WILL
FIND:

A year by year description of PEERS in the voices of many of the women of PEERS.

section three

the chronology of peers

Section Three describes the chronological process of the creation of PEERS. It includes women's stories and the development of programming, staffing, funding and working with the community. To make the story meaningful, each person is identified by name. When a first and last name or initial appears, it is a person's real name; if only a first name appears, a pseudonym has been used.

before peers began—1994

During 1994 a couple of women from the trade got together and decided to start a group for others who had exited or wanted to exit the sex trade.

Although PEERS was incorporated in 1995, the seeds of PEERS began to grow during 1994. The germ of the idea that led to the creation of PEERS first emerged during the Downtown Women's Project (DWP)³. DWP was a community development project with street women conducted over a two year period in downtown Victoria. During the process of consulting with and creating a construction training program for street women and building Sandy Merriman House, an emergency shelter for homeless women, a few ex-prostitutes met Jannit Rabinovitch, DWP project co-ordinator, and asked her to help them create an organization for women and men with a history in the sex trade.

peers is born—1995

During 1995, a support group was started; it became Prostitutes Anonymous (PA) which grew as many new women joined; and, by year end, PEERS was incorporated.

Barb Smith, who approached Jannit to do some community hours through the DWP, became co-ordinator of a short term drop-in program for prostitutes that took place in the DWP training space during spring evenings in 1995. Barb had entered the sex trade at 14, and by the time she came to DWP, she had quit and re-entered many times. *[At 14, she gave birth to her first child, who died in the hospital. None of the*

Helping start PEERS was such an empowering experience. It changed my life.

Barb Smith

At the beginning, we weren't sure if there would be enough people to need this (PEERS).

June

³For further information on DWP and Sandy Merriman House, see *Documentation of Best Practices Addressing Homelessness* by Luba Serge, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1999; *Building Futures*, documentary by Friday Street Productions and Educating Toward Change Society, Victoria, 1996; and *To Live In My House*, documentary for CBC by HJF Productions, Victoria, 1996.

I wanted to address the shame and self loathing I felt.

Kathy

I don't know any other 60-year-old former sex trade worker. I know they are out there, though, invisible thousands of them, because few sex workers stay in the trade their entire lives. They get out one way or another, sooner or later. Once part of the mainstream, few risk disclosing experience in the sex trade. They have grandchildren now, careers in the mainstream, go to yoga classes, maybe even golf. I have short gray hair and glasses, wear sporty clothes. I look like a teacher. I don't look like a sex trade worker. The sex work was long ago and lasted two years; public school teaching was my life for 26 years.

Sex work financed my university training and ended at twenty. I didn't mention it to anyone until decades later, in the security of an excellent counsellor's office. She connected me with a local ex-sex trade worker attempting to

continued next page

hospital staff ever asked her how a solitary 14-year-old had come to have a child. Barb's struggle became much more difficult in her later teens after meeting a man, older than she, in an alcohol and drug treatment program, who led her into much heavier drug use than before she entered the treatment centre.]

[Kathy was older than Barb. She was in her forties, and had been an IV drug user and prostitute for a very long time. Kathy had been clean for three years when she came to DWP.]

As Jannit began to get to know Barb and Kathy, one of the DWP participants, she was struck by their intelligence and ability to articulate and reflect on their experience. She invited them to join her in Vancouver to address a conference of health professionals on the determinants of health. They told their personal stories and had a profound impact on those attending.

After the conference, they talked about what it had been like to stand up in front of a room full of squares and tell their stories. They were aware of just how easy it would have been to scam such an innocent and sympathetic crowd, made up almost entirely of women. During the conference, there had been a draw for a prize and without discussing it with each other, they had both figured out how to cheat so they could win. When their names were called, the conference organizers were so pleased with the wonderful coincidence, but Barb and Kathy just looked at each other and began to laugh.

When they came home, Barb, Kathy and Jannit talked about putting together a training program for sex trade workers. The initial idea was to produce a magazine that would help them in their recovery by giving them a place to tell their stories while teaching them skills like typing, computers, sales, reception. Barb put together a proposal but could not submit it anywhere without a society sponsor.

[They met with Barb's friend Patricia, who had run away from neglectful parents when she was 12 and by 18 owned her own escort service. After having her agency exposed in the press, she quit the trade but found it difficult to deal with the feelings she was left with—feelings of shame and depression.] Patricia immediately got excited about the whole idea and spent all her waking hours looking for agencies who worked with sex trade workers. She found PACE in near-by Vancouver, founded by Paige Latin who gave her a contact in Boston. Through this connection, Patricia received a book called *Sold Out* about how to recover from prostitution. She started up a support group called Prostitutes Anonymous (PA). The attendance at this group was overwhelming and it was through this group that most of the members of PEERS came.

Patricia knew Sally from Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and convinced her to join the group, too. *[Sally had worked in the trade for many years and had a regular clientele who preferred her when she was pregnant. Over her career, Sally gave birth to four babies, turning each one over to Social Services after their birth. When Sally joined the group, she was well on her way to healing, already living in a church-sponsored house and going to school full time.]*

[June, who was sexually abused by a member of her family, worked in the trade in the United States to put herself through university. She quit the trade while she was still young and became a teacher but years later found herself dealing with a nervous breakdown and took early retirement.] June attended an early PA meeting and from this nucleus of five women, PEERS as an organization began to emerge.

The early days were exciting. The weekly meetings consisted of talking about a number of possible directions for an organization of sex trade workers, as well as the Prostitute's Anonymous meetings. Some of the ideas discussed were the creation of a drop in centre and the magazine. Barb got busy writing proposals and putting together the society.

In the spring of 1995, a PA group began and continued to hold weekly meetings through the summer and fall. The group had lots of information from the United States on how a PA group was supposed to be run.

After Patricia contacted the founder of PA in the US, she started receiving calls from all over Canada from people who were desperate and needed help. Apparently the founder was so happy to have a Canadian contact, she started referring everyone from Canada who called her to Patricia. It was too much for Patricia, whose own recovery was too recent for her to be able to support so much need. As Patricia observes, one of the obstacles to successfully using the 12-step model was the lack of sponsors. The meetings kept getting bigger but there was no one for Patricia to turn to and so she quit PA for several months to look for personal support. The women who became PEERS original staff met at those meetings.

Megan joined and she and Patricia began screening people before they came to the meetings because the women were all afraid that pimps would show up or “some psycho would want to come to the meetings and then axe murder us.” Megan “had a really hard time with the premise that hooking had something to do with addiction” and so started moving the group out of its 12-step format and into a discussion and support group.

When Patricia left, Megan took over the leadership of PA. In her words, “We started changing PA into a more generic support group.” *[Megan, one of the co-authors of this document, got into the trade through a pimp at 13 years old after being raped by two guys. She left the pimp after about three months. She went back to school in grade eight but soon dropped out to go back to the trade. She went back and forth between school and work a lot. She worked independently on the street and had a brief stint working in escort agencies before quitting the trade at 24 after a bad date.]*

[Ally R. was 12 when she began being groomed for the sex trade. Soon after, she left home and moved to the city where she began working for an escort agency. She got into agency work through an ad in the paper. Ally ended up working for a pair of pimps who kept her isolated and on drugs and took all her money for many years. She finally escaped them and called the police who assisted her in pressing charges and convicting them. To this day, she is still scared that they'll find her. She never learned the verdict of the court case.]

That summer, the *Times Colonist*, the local daily newspaper, ran a column about PA and the emergence of PEERS. After this public introduction, women from the group started speaking in secondary schools. Sally suggested the name PEERS. A phone line was rented in PEERS' name and lots of calls started coming in, especially for advocacy and support. Several child apprehension issues were successfully supported. In one instance, a woman called after her social worker threatened to apprehend her kids because she had shared that she had a history in the sex trade. The women all immediately dropped what they were doing and joined the mother in her house ready to argue on her behalf. They took turns staying with her for several days until the social worker agreed to treat her like any other parent. They didn't even know her, but they knew that a history as a prostitute did not make her a bad mother.

In the earliest days of PEERS, the founders discussed starting a magazine by and for sex trade workers and also of starting a second-hand clothing store. Women wanted to create a way out of the trade that didn't lead to poverty and the isolation of living on social assistance. Some women wanted to rescue kids from the kiddie stroll, others wanted to create a place for people to stay and to get help without judgement where they would be treated like a human being.

Barb and Patricia took the idea of the magazine to the Ministry of Women's Equality (MWE) and asked for \$10,000. MWE set up a meeting with sympathetic representatives

organize a support group for sex trade workers leaving the trade. Through this group, I found I could help myself by talking about my experience and hearing other peoples experiences and at the same time I could help others. PEERS wasn't named yet but was emerging. It was composed of two groups: people with sex trade experience and mainstream community people. It felt strange to fit into both categories. This often was an advantage, but it was also a constant challenge for me. I cared passionately for the women PEERS was there to help. I also cared passionately that we do an excellent job of helping, which to me meant an efficient office, focussed meetings, and making the best presentation of our cause publicly to the community. It was in those areas that I felt the most conflict. I had long experience with, and valued, the reliability and methods of middle class organizations, so it was difficult for me to let those go.

June

You know there has got to be something better out there but you can't get out to find it.

Kathy

When I was 12, I got a job cleaning a trailer for a man—his trailer was spotless but he'd pay me to drink and we would talk. I didn't have many friends so I really appreciated the company. He would put porno's on the tv and tell me he knew I was mature enough to watch them. Around the same time I started walking a man's dog for him, and cleaning his house. He too would put porno's on, telling me the same thing. He would give me \$\$ whenever I called him, and I'd always tell him I'd meet him after and 'make up for it', which I never would—then one day he took me for a ride in the middle of nowhere and demanded "tit for tat," as he put it. I never knew how to say no to either man. No one had ever told me what to do in such a situation. I just went along with it because I did not know what else to do. Then I was
continued next page

from five ministries and suggested that each Ministry commit \$2,000. Jannit had worked with a number of these government women in the past and, in the end, four of those ministries provided \$2,000 start-up grants each. As a condition of receiving any funding at all, the women were told they would have to set up a legal entity. That day, the incorporation process began.

Everyone agreed that this new society they were creating had to be managed by current and former sex trade workers. They knew from experience that they had to ensure that it couldn't be taken over by well meaning do-gooder types. As a result, the constitution states that at all times over 50% of the members of the Board of Directors have to be current or former sex trade workers.

And so on October 27, 1995, the Prostitutes' Empowerment, Education and Recovery Society (PEERS) came into being. A computer was purchased and an office set up in Barb's house. Barb and Patricia began meeting with various government departments with committees set up to address prostitution without input from prostitutes. Barb and Patricia became the "token prostitutes" and began to work on research projects and act as consultants. They joked a lot about the irony of receiving consulting fees for their expertise. They were very aware of the fact that the authorities said they were concerned with the subject of prostitution and really didn't have a clue about the issue.

A few community supporters were sought out to be Board members, people who were close and trusted friends of one of the group. Community supporters were often looked to for guidance and direction. They were also the ones that first talked to the mainstream community or did 'technical' work such as fund raising. Board and staff were not separate. PEERS hired Board members to do the various contracts that were received.

At this point, Barb started having trouble. She found it very difficult to work professionally on issues that were so personal for her, as she had not been out of the trade for very long. She likened it to staying sober while working in a bar. In time, she obtained a social work degree, always with the intention of returning to PEERS, which she did in 2000.

peers begins to grow—1996

In 1996, PEERS began to look for ongoing funding, supported the DWP research project, set up an office in Megan's house and submitted a letter of intent for a larger research project.

During these early days, the emphasis was on helping people exit from the trade, but it didn't take long to realize that the name was a bit limiting, because PEERS wanted to be there for women who weren't planning to quit, as well. The name was soon changed to the current one, the Prostitutes' Empowerment, Education and Resource Society.

Ally recalls the early days with PEERS: "When I first got to Victoria, I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know if I would start working again or not. Especially now that I was clean. I started volunteering at PEERS when it was at Megan's. I remember when my mom came to visit, I was scared to tell her what I was doing. I brought her to the office and Megan helped me tell her. It was a very supportive environment. It was calm and easy to talk."

PEERS started keeping track of the number of calls coming in to document the need for services for sex trade workers. Barb and Patricia conducted a survey of health needs of street women sponsored by DWP and funded by the Community Health Promotion Centre at the University of Victoria. It is described briefly in the research section of this report. Completed for \$5,000, the report includes an enormous amount

of important information. In the attached cover letter, Barb writes, “One of the most disturbing results of the survey is that most of the issues and concerns were echoed by almost every participant. Of the 30 interviewees, four have since died; one from suicide and three from drug overdoses.”

The executive summary is short and has an unusually subjective quality that speaks volumes. It states:

It was clear from the first few interviews that the central issue of this study was not about living on the street; rather, it was about quality of life and about the circumstances that lead women to choose the street. These are not readily measurable. In fact, they are complex and confounding: they involve human behaviour, human failings, social issues and political issues. Unless there is a greater understanding on the part of the general public of who “street women” are, where they come from and where they are going—all elements that have gone into their present state—then I fear that our collective conscience will not compel us to assist them.

One of the common themes throughout the interviews was that society views these women as “losers”—that it is the women’s choice to live this way. When one examines all the issues involved here, this attitude boggles the mind. Where does it all begin? Where will it all end?

The client profile in the report is also very interesting and informative. Eleven of the 30 women interviewed were over 36 years of age. In interviewing the women, it became clear that the younger women are more able to find places to live - most of them are prostitutes and live with friends or in motels. As the women age, their hopes and dreams are shattered and they are reduced to living on the street and in emergency shelters.

At that point, Board and staff were just Board. Although there were volunteers who did not join the board, I think that everyone involved was considered an honorary PEERS member. It always seemed to me that one became involved in PEERS and once they were comfortable, they would join the board. Decisions were made as a group by discussion and consensus. There was nothing formal about the way we made decisions, and our ‘consensus’ style decision-making was never really challenged as at that time, we didn’t have many disagreements. There was sort of a ‘leadership-by-knowledge’ that was tacitly agreed upon. —Megan

PEERS was trying to find a direction. There were many good ideas but not much in the way of organization. There was a sense of urgency in getting started. In Megan’s words, “We were learning more and more about the sex trade and the more we learned the more we felt that something had to be done. In addition, we were attracting more people, as our media profile was high at the time. The more people that became involved in some way, the more we felt that we had to get the agency going in a more structured way. The best way to do this was to apply for funding so that we could concentrate our efforts on the task at hand instead of worrying about whether our welfare cheques came or not.”

For a year and a half before PEERS became funded, it was run out of Megan’s house.

As most of us were on welfare, several of us moved into a house together — at one time, five PEERS members and all of their cats living in the house that held the office. This was very useful to us at the time because it gave us ample opportunity to discuss things, bond, and work. If someone had to go out, there was always someone else to answer the phone or take faxes.

too scared to tell anyone in my family what I was doing, so I kept doing it and using the money for drugs so I could be stoned next time, so I could get money for drugs so I could...I was not connected with my family or people my own age. I started spending less and less time with my family, more time with these older men, babysitting for people who paid me in drugs instead of money and I would party with them and their older friends.

Ally R.

When I first started working, I met a cop who gave me his card and said to call him if I ever needed help. I asked him what he did and he said he helped girls get away from their pimps. I didn’t even know what a pimp was.

Ally R.

The main thing that the mainstream community should know is to be totally open to learn from what these people have been through. To listen. Not to impose your own frame of reference. You want people who are interested in them as people, not just well-intentioned. Also don't talk too much. Be quiet, listen, ask questions and learn.

Marlyn Horsdal,
former Board member

Even when I relapsed and OD'd twice, I maintained the vision. I realized I needed more distance to be useful. PEERS gave me so much. Confidence I could do it. I didn't have to hide. I could use my experience to help others.

Barb Smith

Also, the house gave the opportunity to shelter people who were otherwise un-housed. Twice in the year, sex workers moved into the house while hiding from pimps. Very rarely will one find that kind of instant safety and support. Now that the office is in a real building, this safety will be achieved by creating housing.—**Megan**

Rory Kirby, one of the Board members, got \$200 a month from his Men's Newcomers Club to cover the costs of renting the PEERS office at Megan's. By then PEERS was starting to get calls from social workers, parents, and concerned community members, as well as sex trade workers. The grants from the government were used to cover the costs of transportation, telephone, office supplies and basic expenses. It was becoming obvious that PEERS had identified a significant need in the community and efforts began to find funding to meet that need.

The office and the telephone line were located at Megan's and when someone called who needed a place to stay she moved in. There were no boundaries or distinctions made between clients and PEERS.

Outreach started in March after women from PEERS read a story in the newspaper about a young woman in Victoria being badly beaten by two guys who left her for dead. They had picked her up on the stroll. That was when PEERS decided that they wanted to have a presence on the street so the women would know someone was there and cared about them.

Outreach consisted of two people going downtown at midnight and staying out until 3:30 or 4:00 am if it was busy. Megan began trying to do outreach with the street nurses but for four months they refused to acknowledge her or really even speak to her. Eventually Megan was able to convince them of her usefulness and commitment and they began to work together as a team.

Megan was the subject of several newspaper articles about creating an organization of sex trade workers and about the sex trade in Victoria.

Although small amounts of limited support were emerging, PEERS kept running into the argument that sex trade workers could and should access existing services. Very little was understood about the extent of isolation experienced by people in the sex trade or their specific and unique needs. It was at this point that PEERS figured that it was necessary to establish the need for specialized services before they would be able to receive funding to develop such services. Jannit took responsibility for either writing or coordinating all of PEERS submissions.

As a result, in May 1996, PEERS submitted a Letter of Intent to the BC Health Research Foundation (BCHRF), Community Grants Program to conduct a survey of a large number of sex trade workers in Victoria to establish a profile of the population and to find out what they needed to exit the trade should they decide they would like to do so. The letter of intent was successful and PEERS was granted \$5,000 and invited to submit a full research proposal. The first of three versions of this hundred-page research proposal was submitted in November 1996.

Every time PEERS discussed its direction, creating alternatives to the sex trade was mentioned as a priority. So, in the spring of 1996, PEERS applied to the Ministry of Social Services, Community Services Fund, to create a special needs pre-employment program. The application was submitted jointly with two well-known community agencies, the Youth Empowerment Society (YES) and Women In Need (WIN). Although the request for funding was not successful, it gave PEERS legitimacy to have such well-established agencies willing to partner with them. Work on setting up a training and employment project had begun in earnest.

NEWS FOCUS

Ex-prostitute says you see only a fraction of the sex trade on the streets

By Susan Danard
Times Columnist

As few as five per cent of prostitutes work on the streets, says a woman who's been there.

The remainder work out of their homes, clients' homes or places like the Saanich apartment building where police believe girls as young as 14 are meeting men for paid sex, says Megan Lewis, who was a prostitute in Vancouver for 10 years.

Saanich police know of at least three girls between 14 and 17, who live in group homes as wards of the Social Services Ministry, but who regularly turn tricks at a Glasgow Avenue apartment. The police are investigating the matter, but say there's little they can do to stop the girls unless they're caught in the act.

Raiding the apartment wouldn't do much good anyway, says Lewis, 25, who moved to Victoria after quitting the sex trade about two years ago.

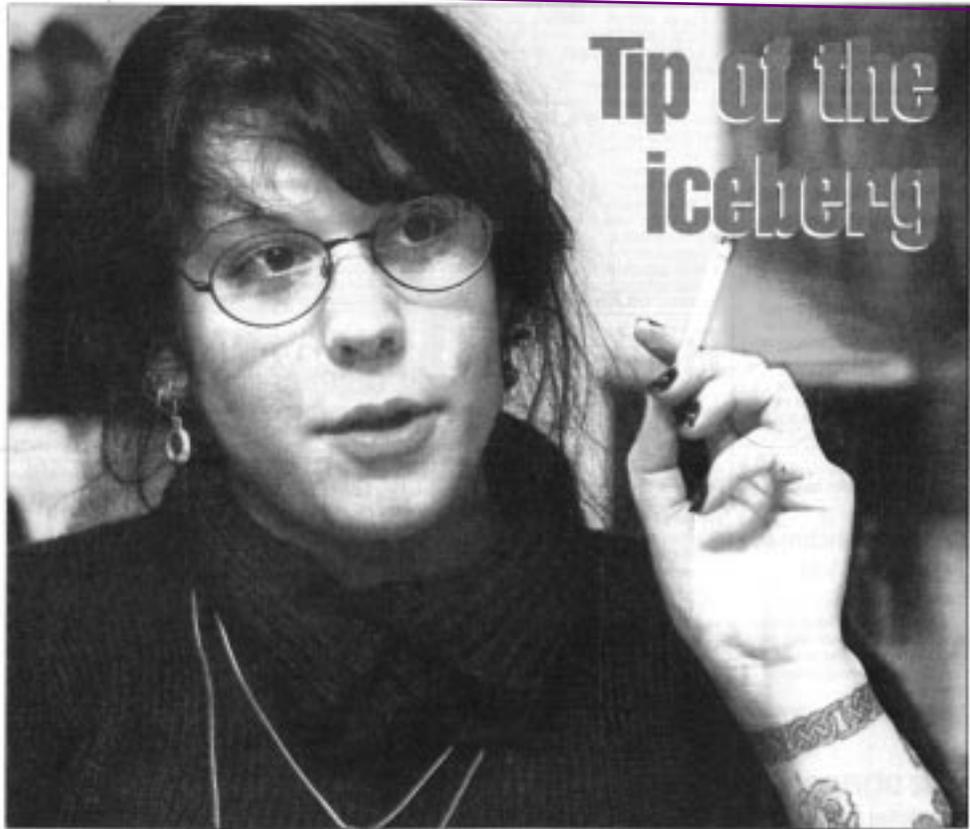
Police crackdowns "just move [prostitutes] to the next available place and all everyone does is keep shuffling around. . . . [The police] end up making it more dangerous for the girls because it forces them to go underground, where there's a greater risk of violence."

Lewis — who was only 13 when she got started in the sex trade — says she's not surprised at the girls' youth. "Wherever there's prostitution, there's going to be teens doing it."

Nor is she surprised at the location. The prostitutes people see on Government Street are just the tip of the iceberg, she says.

"You don't have to be on the street to be propositioned."

Lewis was in Grade 8, living at home in Vancouver, with all the trappings of a middle-class family, including ballet and piano lessons, when she fell into the sex trade.



Tip of the iceberg

Former prostitute Megan Lewis says she worked the streets in Vancouver for a decade

“You don't have to be on the street to be propositioned”



Her dad's business as a guitar maker was failing, and her parents' marriage was falling apart. She had also had a horrific introduction to

sexuality, having been molested as a child by a stranger. But she says she honestly can't say what prompted her to turn to prostitution.

tion. She turned her first trick for a pack of cigarettes in the back of a shop that sold souvenirs. "I just did it and went home and didn't think much about it," she recalls.

The problem with prostitution is it becomes "self-perpetuating," she says. The man she got the cigarettes from soon became her pimp, and after working for him for a couple of months, she dropped out of school and started working on the streets for herself.

Prostitution, in turn, led to drug and alcohol abuse. Although she was frequently raped and beaten up on the streets, she found it hard to

quit the business "because my self-esteem was so low, I felt like I had the word broker tattooed on my forehead."

She tried other jobs, including construction work and waitressing, but they paid significantly less than the \$300 a night she could earn for sex.

She finally gave it up because "I realized I wanted to have a life. I didn't want to end up dead somewhere."

Lewis is now working for Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Recovery Society

SEX TRADE A4

During the fall, PEERS successfully applied for and received a small grant (\$10,000) from MWE's Stopping the Violence Program to tell the stories of people who had "grown up" in the sex trade. The final report, *Creating an atmosphere of hope for all children and youth: Teen prostitutes speak up and speak out* is described in the research section of this document. It was circulated in government for several years after its completion.

Some members of PEERS were invited to join a newly-forming committee to address the sexual exploitation of youth in the region. At one of these meetings, Megan met Cherry Kingsley, a young woman who had just attended a conference on child sexual exploitation in Stockholm, Sweden. "We were the two token ho's." said Megan. Through that committee, several PEERS members (Megan, Shannon and Cody) were hired to conduct interviews with youth who had traded sex for food, shelter or money. Megan says, "That summer we did the City Sexually Exploited Youth Capital Regional District [SEYCRD] project. Shannon, Cody, and I interviewed 75-90 people and it was intense. We were doing 3-4 two-hour interviews a day for a month on top of doing the outreach and office stuff. It was very hard. Out of this came the SEYCRD report.

It takes a whole village to create a prostitute.

Anon

Out from the Shadows was probably the highlight of my work with PEERS. I felt so privileged to be involved. I was a recorder and got a chance to use some of my Spanish to listen and talk to some of the young women from South America. I got to hear bits and pieces of their stories. I was struck by the similarities although there are differences because of the context of their lives. Not many of us who had never been in the sex trade got to be there. I was lucky to be a volunteer recorder.

Carolyn Showler,
PEERS Board chair

This report was widely distributed and is now used in many cities around the country.”

[Cody was adopted at birth by a wealthy family and had been educated in private schools in Canada and Great Britain. As he became an adolescent, it was more and more obvious he was gay. When he came out to his family at 14, they rejected him completely and essentially returned him to the Ministry. After being taunted and beaten up by other kids in the group home where he was placed he ran away to a big city and began to work in the sex trade. He left Victoria soon after PEERS was formed and now works as a hair dresser.]

As a result of involvement in the CRD project, PEERS began getting referrals from other agencies. There were more clients and more volunteers. The YM/YWCA provided peer counsellor training for PEERS members who were beginning to provide volunteer services.

Finally, at the end of 1996, interest was expressed by the BC Ministry of Skills, Training and Technology to support a training and outreach project for ex-prostitutes. The Ministry gave a development grant (\$200,000) to identify and create programs and services specifically designed to meet the needs of this marginalized population.

Also during that fall, Cherry began talking about organizing a world congress of sexually exploited youth.

I think most of the members of PEERS thought Cherry was a bit crazy and that the possibility of such a conference actually happening was extremely unlikely. As a member of the Board, I decided it wouldn't do any harm to attend the first planning meeting just in case this thing actually came together. The planning meeting brought together a number of people that Cherry had worked with before and it was immediately decided that the University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care along with the BC Ombudsman's Office would sponsor the Summit. It struck me right away that the participatory nature of the gathering would really be strengthened by offering PEERS as the third sponsor. It took a bit of doing to convince the women at PEERS that this would be of any use to them but they figured as long as I went to all the meetings and did whatever was required, it wouldn't hurt to use PEERS name.

—Jannit

peers is funded and moves downtown—1997

In 1997, the core group of PEERS became paid staff, an office downtown was opened, work began on organizing the international youth summit, PEERS began to develop as an agency, and the first issue of PEERS' newsletter was published.

After months of negotiations and proposal writing on February 1, 1997, PEERS opened an office downtown and five ex-prostitutes began working full-time as PEERS staff.

At the beginning the group decided that they needed someone to be in charge, deal with the government, coordinate the day to day operations, supervise the creation of a brand new agency, and support the personal transition each staff was making.

The project was to create an agency that acted as an education project. This would give ex-sex trade workers skills, work experience, confidence and time away from the trade to be competitive in the labour market and to ensure that their transition into mainstream society was a permanent one. The design of the project included pieces the group thought would be useful. Everyone started off at 25 hours a week, as most of the women had not worked at office jobs for a long time or had never worked in an office. There was money for a counsellor since it was obvious that people would need somewhere to take their personal troubles to keep stress to a minimum. A structure

was created that would allow everyone to work together with Jannit as Executive Director, Megan as Program Coordinator, Lorraine as Bookkeeper, Ally as Public Education, Gabriella as Office Manager and Shannon as Outreach Coordinator.

Eventually Gabriella was made Advocate and Ally was made Office Manager and Receptionist. *[Gabriella got involved in the trade when she was 14 hanging around with street boys. Her family life was chaotic and she fell into the trade simply by being around it and being poor. Although the boys she was with didn't want her to work, she wanted to make money. She also felt "it was almost like it made her a grown up like the rest of the women she was around." She worked the street of a major city for about ten years until she quit working and went back to school for a two year paraprofessional program.]*

[Lorraine got into the trade in her late teens through her boyfriend who was a doctor. He had her work high end places and see friends of his, many of whom were lawyers and doctors. She describes it as a good working relationship. She left the boyfriend and ended up with another man who was more controlling. She still worked the high end sex trade, attending University the whole time because her clients liked the idea she was a student. The new man ended up being more of a typical pimp although, again, a professional. When she escaped from him, she went into hiding, calling PEERS for help.]

[Shannon didn't get into the trade until she was in her 30's. Her boyfriend turned out to be a pimp and had her working for escort agencies. He would also take her on the circuit into the United States. She had very little control. She ended up owning an escort agency, but her pimp was very abusive. She ditched him by calling immigration and continued to run the agency. She 'weaned' herself out of working in the sex trade slowly, and in fact, continued to work after she was involved in PEERS.]

The first year's budget had money for personal and professional development. At first, this money was allotted to the staff as a lump sum that staff could spend within the year. Over time, there were several incarnations of professional development described in more detail in the capacity building section of the book.

When PEERS got its funding, we scrambled to find a site for the new office. We found an office space in what's known as the "Save the World Building," an odd building downtown with cheap rent that is filled with other not-for-profits. The Central Building, its real name, is very centrally located, in a busy retail section of downtown. Being downtown was very important for PEERS.

It is an old, old building that has been maintained reasonably well. It is beautiful with a marble staircase worn with age, brass fixtures, huge beveled mirrors and intricate mouldings. There is a sense of grandeur when you walk into the foyer.

By the time you get to the offices, this sense is dissipated by the water-marks on the ceilings, the patchy walls, the years and years of layers of paint, and the electrical system that probably was installed in the Roaring Twenties.

The office itself was a tiny space. The reception area was barely big enough to hold a couch. It had two other rooms—really one room which was divided by a plastic divider that went up nearly to the ceiling. There was a small kitchen space in it with a counter and a sink and plugs for a microwave and coffee machine. We thought it was perfect. The entire office was about 300 square feet.

The beginning at the office downtown was also about getting to know each other and forming relationships with each other. Often we would close the office down and go shopping together, or go for something to eat. This drove some people like June nuts!

Ally R.

During that summer, PEERS had its first full day of staff development. It was pretty unstructured, just the staff. Jannit suggested we hold it at the beach and someone else decided it should be a tent party so Jannit brought her tent and food and picked us all up. There are beaches all around Victoria and Vancouver where many of us had worked and lived for years, but we had never been to the beach. Just spending a day at the beach was a big deal. We spent the first three hours filling each other in on our love lives. That's when we learned squares could have just as dysfunctional a love life as any of us.

Ally R.

When the SEYCRD project was going on that's when I started going from a client to a volunteer because they needed someone in the office. Megan was sneaky the way she did it too, because at that time I did not believe I would ever have the skills to manage an office. She would just ask me to do small things, and then the list of things to do grew as my confidence did.

Ally R.

People had time in the early days to figure out what they were good at and what they weren't. At first, people weren't sure what to do.

Ally R.

After a couple months of having us all working in that space, we realized that maybe it was a little small for six people. We began working on ways that we'd be able to pay for another room in the building. We were able to pay for a small room that would hold the outreach program and the book-keeper would work from home. This took a lot of the pressure off, but broke up the group somewhat. It meant that we didn't have the continuity with all the staff because we weren't all together anymore.

The 'culture' of the building is worth noting also. In the building were many different not-for-profits. We maintained a good relationship with several of them, like the Women's Sexual Assault Centre, Together Against Poverty (who let us use their photocopier for months and months until we got one that worked), a doctor or two who took on addictions patients, and Volunteer Victoria. We were able to refer participants to various places in the building.

We were also able to learn from the various agencies around. As we built relationships with members of other agencies, we were able to ask questions, learn from the work they were doing and informally use them as mentors. I'm not sure that they knew that that's what we were doing, nor am I sure that we always knew.

Although our first BCHRF research proposal hadn't been successful, we were given the chance to re-submit and the second version was submitted in May 1997. Unfortunately this time there was no funding to put the proposal together. Again Jannit wrote it, trying to make the recommended changes. They asked for twelve copies of the hundred and some page application which was difficult for PEERS without funding. Luckily, Jannit knew someone who worked in a print shop and so they made the copies in the middle of the night, binding each with a different colour of card stock to demonstrate PEERS' creativity and uniqueness.

The same year, several of PEERS staff attended a conference organized by the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW). Megan was part of a panel that included some of the world leaders in prostitution i.e., Margo St. James, the founder of Coyote, Gail Pheterson, the author of *On the Vindication of the Rights of Whores* and Priscilla Alexander, of the North American Task Force on Prostitution.

Another unusual event that summer was a fund-raiser called "Paintings and Poems for PEERS." A local philanthropist organized it and brought together the Canadian artist, Mollie Lamb Bobak, and poets Bill Richardson, Susan Musgrave and Lorna Crozier. The evening was hosted by Jody Paterson, an editorial writer for *The Times Colonist*. Held in a real horse barn on the outskirts of Victoria, just getting there was a challenge for the women of PEERS. Luckily Laura Acton, a member of city council who had just unsuccessfully run for Mayor, had recently joined the Board and she owned a van. She offered to drive everyone out there as a kind of initiation. She was honoured to be asked to join the Board of PEERS.

The trip out to the barn was fun. They taught Laura how to play murder in the car where each player is required to name a form of murder that starts with the next letter of the alphabet. The group had agreed to come early to set up although as soon as they arrived they realized that none of them had eaten so they made Laura take them all in to the nearest town to McDonalds. By the time everyone had eaten and had their cigarettes, it was too late to help set up.

The event itself was a bit odd. The loft of the barn was crammed with people, mostly

elderly and monied. The rough wood walls were covered in beautiful water colour paintings. The air was filled with the smell of hay and horse manure. Once the crowd had settled, Megan spoke articulately about the reality of life in the sex trade. Jody, the host, seemed shocked and moved by what she heard. Then each of the nationally-recognized poets had their turn at the microphone.

One poet began with something inoffensive and then proceeded to read a poem about “a bored house wife who starts thinking of turning to prostitution.” The women from PEERS were furious. The words made it clear the poet didn’t understand at all. The presentation of prostitution was very unrealistic and was contradicting everything PEERS stood for and “went against the very message they were trying to communicate.” Part way through the poem, all the PEERS women stepped outside. They wanted to leave right in the middle of the event. Jannit convinced them to stay but they were not impressed.

Back at the office, Ally describes another form of summer fun.

It’s a non-smoking building and we all smoked. Jannit used to come into the office, look suspicious and say, “If you get caught smoking in here we’ll be kicked out of the building.” And we’d always say, “We’re not smoking,” but of course we were. One time when she came in, we all looked really sad and said, “We’ve been kicked out.” Right away she was all business-like figuring out who she knew to call to talk to the owner so we could get another chance. Then we told her it was a joke. She was so easy to tease. She always believed everything we told her.—Ally

In August, Lorraine and Cherry went to Taiwan to talk with the government there about sexually exploited youth. They came back with the feeling that the government in Taiwan was more committed to looking like they cared about the issue than really doing anything about it.

By the fall, the PEERS office had become the central office for the international youth summit. Cherry and Tathra Street, a student hired to organize the volunteers, began working out of the office full-time. The space they shared was essentially a closet in an office that was only about 300 square feet in total. This created a strain but it also meant that there was more teamwork.

That fall, Megan and Cherry travelled across Canada conducting consultations with sexually exploited youth in six communities. They spent three days in each community connecting with agencies, walking the stroll and holding a focus group. A professional rapporteur attended the focus groups and recorded the proceedings for the consultation report. As they travelled they stayed in hotels and Megan recalls one night.

By the end of the year, PEERS began to realize in a big way that there was a lot to do and not enough staff or money with which to do it. It was time to focus on fundraising. During the year, Patricia left the Board as she was finding it very hard to cope, leaving only June of the original group that had incorporated PEERS still involved.

Carolyn Showler, the current Chair of PEERS Board, first learned about PEERS in 1997 when staff came to speak to her nursing classes at Camosun College. A volunteer at the needle exchange, Carolyn was always looking for opportunities to make a difference and when invited agreed to join the Board of PEERS. An important function for members of the Board was giving staff rides since none of the staff had a car or even a driver’s license. There was no budget for large cab fares and PEERS was often invited to present at workshops and conferences. Carolyn enjoyed getting a chance to talk to individual staff as she drove them to events and recalls, “I loved listening to them speak. I learned the most from the stories.”

At the end of 1997, PEERS received a commitment of core annualized operating funding from the Ministry of Children and Families even though the original commitment

Cherry and I had met some people and invited them to come back to our room at the hotel with us for a visit. As we came into the hotel, I went up to the front desk to ask how much the visitor or trick charge was. Cherry poked me in the ribs and said, ‘Megan, they don’t charge for visitors in square hotels.’ I didn’t even know that.

Megan

Standing there with Lorraine smiling and greeting everyone, I saw another side of her. Outgoing, Friendly. It occurred to me that this was like if we were working. I couldn’t keep it up. When I saw the barn full of people, I went into the house. That’s one of the great things about PEERS. People knew I wasn’t into crowds and it was okay.

Ally R

had been for a one year development grant only. Although there was no formal evaluation conducted, the number of referrals and all the work PEERS was doing made it clear that there had been a large number of women in the sex trade who needed services and supports. Until PEERS came along, they remained invisible.

peers begins to offer training—1998

In 1998, PEERS was very busy. HRDC funded the first training program, the youth summit took place, Megan went to Saskatoon, two more issues of the newsletter appeared and work on PEERS Place began.

By this time, PEERS was being invited to lots of community meetings. When the minutes of one City Hall meeting came out, PEERS was listed as the Prostitutes, Empowerment Education and *Recruitment* Society! The minutes had been sent out all over the city. The PEERS' staff were very upset. It seemed like a terrible disaster to them. No one at City Hall seemed too concerned though.

This same winter, Human Resources Development Canada approached PEERS with the idea of starting a pre-employment program for women still working in the trade to help them recognize their options and begin to develop the basic skills needed to consider leaving the trade. It was a wonderful opportunity and so, almost overnight, the RISE program was born. The name RISE, chosen by the first group of participants, stands for Re-education Initiatives for the Sexually Educated.

Initially RISE was contracted through an agency that provided training for people with disabilities. It was precedent-setting for HRDC to recognize that spending one's adolescence in the sex trade is an employment disability.

There were a few obstacles to getting the program underway. HRDC requires the names and Social Insurance Numbers (SIN) of the participants in any program and because of confidentiality, not to mention criminal histories, no one was keen on giving the federal government their names. As the women said, "We have lots of names, which one do they want?" None of them had a social insurance number though, at least not one for a person still living.

Our project officer at HRDC was having trouble approving a project without this basic information. Without it, there was no way HRDC could verify that there really were program participants. Finally, PEERS convinced the senior staff at HRDC to come and meet the women so he would know they really existed. In person, they were able to explain to him why most of them didn't have a SIN and why many had used a variety of names throughout their careers.

This first training program was created somewhat abruptly because the money was available at the end of the government's fiscal year and had to be used. Once again staff had to figure out what they were doing by doing it. A couple of new people were hired to create the program, Donna and Sylvia, a student from the university doing her social work practicum. *[Donna had spent much of her childhood in-care and on the street. She was in and out of "secure care" thirteen times. Eventually she made her way into escort agencies. Sylvia is not open about her story as she fears that if this knowledge were to become known, it would hinder her professional career.]*

Many of the women who attended RISE were still using drugs and working in the sex trade. RISE was intended to provide an initial bridge to those women so they could begin to see what options might be available to them.

[Maureen was one of the first group. She told staff later that she came to RISE so she could get the \$50 per week incentive and the free bus tickets which she sold to buy dope but during the three months, something began to change for Maureen. She had grown up in Victoria. Her dad still lives on the streets. During the RISE program, she

came to see for the first time that maybe she could have other choices. She finished RISE and staff helped her get into a three month residential drug and alcohol treatment program for women in Vancouver. When she came back to Victoria clean and sober, she began to volunteer at PEERS. PEERS had just recently received some funding to put a few women through a training program and Maureen enrolled in a life skills coach certificate program eventually becoming a PEERS staff. She is now married, has a young son and lives in Vancouver where she works for a social service agency downtown.]

Since that first time RISE has been transformed into an ongoing Employment Service that people can attend as many times as they choose. It has a three month format but people are welcome to come back more than once whether they complete the program or not. RISE now has secure annual funding for two staff and a part-time counsellor.

Around this time, relations with the police were at an all-time low. In the January 1998 issue of PEERS' newsletter *The Life*, Megan wrote, "The police continue, (and it seems like its mostly one shift of cops that are involved in this) to harass, degrade, abuse and otherwise disturb the working women in this city...There have been reports of women being pulled out of cars and cabs, being shouted at with such epithets, as 'We're cleaning the trash off the streets. We don't want to see whores like you here.'" Officially the police department said they were trying to address unprofessional behaviour on the part of their officers but that required that the women come forward to personally testify against an individual officer. The women on the street were not willing to do that so Megan and Ally decided they should get arrested and then testify to their unfair treatment.

We had recently created a pamphlet that outlined everything that was not illegal, i.e., standing on the corner with someone...so, we figured we'd do everything we could under the law - stand together laughing, maybe flirting a bit, smiling, showing some skin. But wouldn't you know it, never a cop around when you need one. It was fun though!—Ally

Megan became the Director of PEERS in February while Jannit devoted her time to a new initiative called PEERS Place. PEERS Place was an ambitious concept that had been developed by the group in dialogue and discussion over a period of many months. PEERS Place was a combination training, employment and housing project. It involved the purchase and operation of a "welfare motel" overlaid with training in hospitality sector related skills and sheltered work experience. Once there was a coherent idea, development proposals were submitted to a variety of Ministries and private foundations.

During the winter of 1998, Megan spent a month in Saskatoon assisting Susan, a woman there who wanted to start a group based on the PEERS model. Megan agreed to assist her and headed to Saskatchewan in the middle of winter.

This was very exciting to me as I envisioned little PEERS across the world all holding hands and singing Kumbaya.—Megan

Megan spent a month in Saskatoon trying to help get a group started. They had some community support and held meetings at the Y but a month wasn't long enough for Megan to establish a rapport with the sex trade worker or social service community. At this time, PEERS did not have any detailed description of its process or programs so it was a lot of work to provide concrete support to another community. Without anyone to facilitate a connection with government and no access to any funding, nothing much happened after Megan left. Also as Megan learned, winter is a crazy time to leave the west coast and go to the middle of Canada.

In March of 1998, PEERS co-hosted *Out from the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth*. PEERS shared the role of co-host with the University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care, and the BC Office of the Ombudsman. The

One of the biggest things PEERS did for me was help me understand how I got into the trade, how I got involved with pimps, how to put my experiences into words.

Ally R.



RISE was a great success and we received funding to do it again. It gained a reputation as a program that was fun and easy. It was a first step program. It helped people get their ID put together, helped with housing, welfare, and gave incentives to show up so that the women had a little extra money. The program also dealt with some simple life skills, and counselling.

Megan



Summit was co-chaired by Cherry Kingsley and Senator Landon Pearson and was funded primarily by the Canadian Government and UNICEF. It was an enormous undertaking and again brought PEERS to the attention of the media.

It was a busy and stimulating time at the PEERS office. Ministry of Human Resources provided the first grant to get the motel project going in February. The Summit happened in the middle of March. Everybody put a lot of energy into making the Summit happen and afterwards everyone fell apart to varying degrees. Megan's back went out badly, Tathra got pneumonia, and Ally did not show up regularly for work for a while. It seemed that everyone needed a break. The office limped along without Megan and Ally but it wasn't easy.

Along with PEERS' incredible success came more and more referrals. Even the courts made volunteer work at PEERS a condition of some people's probation or parole. One of those people was Tina. She applied to participate in the RISE program but as soon as staff began to get to know her, they realized she had the potential to do much more than be a participant in a program. PEERS paid for Tina to attend the same Life Skills Coach course that Maureen had attended and after graduation she became one of the staff for the RISE program. She continued in that role for the next two years.

Finally in 1998, PEERS hired two researchers to re-submit the BCHRf research proposal for the third and final time. This time the proposal included a partnership with a well known academic at the University of Victoria, Dr. Cecilia Benoit, which seemed to be what the Foundation needed to be confident that the research would be conducted with the proper rigour.

During the summer, Megan realized she needed to take a break and so in September Gabriella became the Acting Director. Although it eventually became obvious that PEERS was not going to be able to raise the capital to buy and operate a motel, the training component of the PEERS Place proposal was successful. There had been quite a bit of media attention for the motel project, in part because it was such an outrageous idea. The publicity attracted some very important people. One was the Director of the Travel and Tourism Department in the School of Business at the local community college. When she read in the newspaper that PEERS was trying to buy a motel and operate it as a hospitality training centre, she called to see how she could help.

In time, she helped PEERS design a training program that provides training in partnership with the college. Called Second Chance, this six month program is again funded by HRDC, Youth Internship Canada and operates out of PEERS' offices. The first two months is a life skills program which takes place on the campus of the college; the second two months provides skill certification in a variety of areas; and the final two months allows participants to have work experience in the community. With the support of the business community, Second Chance has proven very successful although when the staff were looking for work placements at first and mentioned the name of the program, one businessman asked, "What did they do with their first chance?" Many of the participants for Second Chance come through RISE. In Second Chance, they receive a wage and at the end most either find employment or decide to go back to school.

Through the PEERS Place project, PEERS also met the women who were to become the PEERS Service League. It started with one woman who is very active in the community and was, at the time, a member of a municipal council. She asked some of her friends to join her on the PEERS Place Advisory Committee because she recognized that their fund raising skills and community connections could benefit PEERS substantially.

The first event they organized was a launch held at the office of *Focus on Women* magazine to introduce PEERS to the business community and to the spouses of some of Victoria's business elite. They were able to solicit donations of wine, gourmet

savouries and desserts and to attract an impressive crowd to find out more about PEERS. The MC's for the event included Elizabeth Cull, a New Democratic Party Cabinet Minister and, Sheila Orr, then a city councillor and now a Liberal MLA. For many of those present, it was the first time they had heard about PEERS and they realized that these young women hadn't chosen to become prostitutes.



Jannit, Cherry and Megan at the *Focus on Women* Event, May 28, 1998
 Photo reprinted with the permission of *Focus on Women* magazine

Later that year, the same women organized a fund raising dinner held at one of Victoria's most prestigious private golf clubs. Included in the evening was a fashion show and silent auction. The staff were a little disappointed that they weren't invited to model any of the very expensive clothes. Instead the models were all either the staff in the stores or the daughters of the organizers and their friends. Proceeds from the evening topped \$10,000.

When asked why she wanted to help PEERS, Sandy Evans, the coordinator of the Service League says, "I have personal experience in the results of believing in somebody, in trusting them. Making a difference. That's what does it for me." In fact, unbeknownst to the women at PEERS, Sandy's great aunt was a call girl and prostitute back in the 1940's. Eventually she married a rich Englishman and quit her work. For Sandy, though the expression, "There but for the grace of God go I," has personal meaning. As she says, "My involvement with PEERS puts my life into perspective a little. It gives me a bit of life worth."

Intermittently over the years PEERS has produced a newsletter. The first issue came out in late 1997. The first three issues were called *The Life* and included a range of articles and poetry by local women, interviews, excerpts from books, information on health, the law, the police and far too many obituaries.

Standing Alone

from *The Life*, September 15, 1998

Did you see her there, just standing there?

Or did you pass by, unaware?

Did you ever stop to look in her face?

Did you wonder how she got to this place?

She's your daughter, your sister,
 your mother in youth.

But on the way she lost the truth.

Did you see the wind bite her skin
 through her coat?

Did you feel even the slightest
 lump in your throat?

Did you turn away, not look in her
 eyes?

Did you miss that small tear?

Yes, she does cry.

She's lost in a world where nothing
 is real,

Where everyone lies and no one
 can feel.

She remembers her plans

Her hopes and her dreams.

How far away now it all seems.

The motel project was interesting. There was a lot of resistance to the whole idea. We spent much of our time talking people into seeing the project as a rational idea. It was amazing how many people did not think that sex trade workers could live and work in a motel without getting high on drugs, smashing the walls in and destroying the place. The idea that sex workers could or would integrate into the mainstream was beyond audience comprehension. In the end, we let go of the motel project. We could get money for development of the project, we could get money for many things, but we could not get money to buy the actual motel.

Megan

peers continues to grow and change—1999

In 1999, PEERS focus became more internal as staff and Board worked on the structure of the organization.

At the beginning of 1999, as a condition of receiving funding from the BC Gaming Commission staff were required to leave the Board. Up until this time, almost all of the staff had been Board members and therefore the staff played a very central role in making decisions for the organization. As well, the constitution of PEERS requires that the Board must be made up of more than 50% people with personal experience working in the sex trade. When staff left the Board, they decided that they wanted to maintain their primary decision making role and so the core group of original five staff took over the decision making and acted as a collective.

Soon, as projects received funding and programs expanded, there were a number of other people working for PEERS on time-limited contracts who began to feel left out of this decision making structure. PEERS successfully applied for some funding to help explore things like the relationship between the Board and staff. An organizational consultant was hired in the spring to help PEERS develop a strategic plan, support staff in developing individual training programs and help develop evaluation tools for the organization. Part of the process included facilitated staff/ Board retreats, the first of which took place in May 1998.

At the retreat, staff and Board decided that all staff would be included in the decision making which was described as collaborative acknowledging those who have the most wisdom on a given topic. A follow-up retreat took place in September at which a more formal agreement was reached on decision making.

PEERS had changed the way we structured the staff several times. These changes were attempts to create a structure that was both egalitarian and effective. The troubles we had were:

- *dealing with personality conflicts;*
- *following through with decisions;*
- *trying to figure out who did what job and how to get stuff done that did not fall within any one's job description; and*
- *deciding who makes the decisions, who has authority (contract workers versus full time, core staff versus staff that are paid out of other funds).—Megan*

During the year, the community continued to actively support PEERS. The Service League women organized a Sunday afternoon tea in June 1999 that took place in one of the biggest houses in Victoria, a city with a lot of very large homes. The home, perched on top of a hill, had been built at the turn of the last century. The owner, a woman who had never married, was thrilled to have the opportunity to help out the women of PEERS. Again the event included a fashion show this time accompanied by a formal afternoon tea. The Victoria police chief and his wife attended. He and the hostess's brother were the only men present.

The money raised at these events had originally been intended for PEERS Place. When it became clear PEERS was not going to be able to buy a motel, the money that had been raised was placed in a scholarship fund for women who wanted to attend a course or go back to school. The fund was named after Elizabeth Spedding, described in the *Globe and Mail*, December 23, 1995 as "Canada's oldest whore and undoubtedly the country's most famous madam."

At the end of 1999, Megan, who had been the face of PEERS to the Victoria public, resigned. "I had been working on this issue so exhaustively, so consumingly for so many years. I wanted my life to be about more than just my work at PEERS and my history in the sex trade. I wanted to grow and expand. PEERS gave me the opportunity to do that up to a point, but I had to make my own opportunities for growth after that. After seventeen years, I went back to school."

new faces come to peers—2000

In 2000, some of the original core staff decided to move on. Megan went back to school, Gabriella found permanent employment at the courthouse and Shannon became a support worker at Sandy Merriman House.

In January, at the Board/staff retreat, the group decided that there was a need for program review and evaluation. Volunteers from Board and staff agreed to begin developing a process for evaluation. As well, the statement established by staff after the last retreat describing the decision making as collective was officially confirmed.

At the May retreat, Board and staff stated explicitly that there was no distinction between core and contract staff. At this retreat, a new topic of concern emerged. Over time, a number of staff had been hired who had both formal education and experience in the sex trade. For some staff, a fear began to develop that soon PEERS would look much like any professional service and people who had come directly from the trade would no longer be welcome as staff, only as participants. It was important to state that PEERS would always need a balance of staff who had acquired some skills through education and training and some staff who were recently in the trade. This reflects PEERS' commitment to being a peer-run program.

In 2000, the name of the PEERS' newsletter changed to *Real Trade*. One issue appeared with a significant face lift (see page 50) and included media excerpts on prostitutes around the world, *whorescopes*, and dates to watch out for (i.e., bad dates).

peers place opens—2001

In 2001, PEERS has moved into a new and larger office, purchased and opened an apartment building for homeless women and added a number of new programs.

No one at PEERS wanted to give up on the idea of finding a way to provide housing to women who need it. It is obvious with every new intake in RISE how important stable and supportive housing is to moving beyond a life of crises and out of the sex trade. Judy Lightwater, the project manager of the BCHRF research, had a background in fund raising and agreed to help look for dollars to once again begin the development of some kind of housing project. Various options were discussed.

Some people wanted to buy a big house which could house the office as well as provide a residence for a few women. However, the priority was housing, and in the end the decision was made to buy a small apartment building that could house 10-20 women.

Early in 2001, another fund raising dinner for the housing project was organized by PEERS and the Service League. It was accompanied by a silent auction and again was sold out. Sandy Evans describes the women she works with to put on these events for PEERS:

We're all mothers, with good connections and good contacts. We see ourselves as a link with the business community. There are about eight of us who are the core group. There's another 20 who have a special connection. I can call on them for donations and to help organize events. Then there's another 50-70 who will help out by telling their contacts, who will always buy tickets, and give money. Beyond that there are hundreds of others that can afford to contribute who come to the events.

Prostitution is a complex trade. There are no right or wrong answers when dealing with people involved. One always has to look at it case by case. It may evoke uncomfortable feelings when you think about it. You may want to pick a side of the fence to sit on. We urge you to keep an open mind and listen to all sides with equal weight. Not everyone wants to get out of the trade. Not everyone wants to stay. Not everyone wanted to get in it. Only by seeing all with compassion can we hope to help those that want it.

Official PEERS document

It's because we're all from the trade that there's so much excitement and energy. That's PEERS' essence.

Barb Smith

THE SPEDDING SCHOLARSHIP



Thanks to the hard work and dedication of the Spedding Fundraising Committee and PEERS, there is now a grant available for Sex Trade Workers - new and old, past and present - to enjoy the trappings of post secondary education!

Yes even you, the fearless street walker and you the diligent agency worker, can apply for this twice a year opportunity to get that education your parents figure will finally make them happy.

But in all seriousness folks, you have a unique opportunity to get this grant BECAUSE you are or were a prostitute, rather than in spite of it. If you are clean for at least 6 months, demonstrate financial need (outside of working in the trade), you are 19 years or older, you have a place to live that secure and safe for the duration of your schooling and have people around you that care, believe and support you in all your endeavors, then you have all the requirements to apply for this scholarship.

The next application dead-line is in June to be granted for the fall semester - or two months prior to the commencement of your classes. You will need to submit your application form (available at PEERS' main office) with proof of course acceptance, two letters of reference, and a letter of intent (this is a cover letter outlining your intention for the grant money, and your future educational goals)

It is recommended that you have some involvement in PEERS and it's programs. So you can volunteer, submit stuff for

the newsletter, or go through one of our programs. This will show us that you have some knowledge of how PEERS goes about things and what our beliefs are. If you have no previous experience or involvement with our organization, don't worry, you won't be ruled out. Apply anyway. (It's the first question on the application so you may want to be prepared to have an answer)

Now a little history.....



"The Contessa"
Elizabeth Spedding (1915 - 1995)

She lay dying in Mount Sinai hospital in Toronto, wearing a paper crown, attended by a family of whores. There were girls in tight skirts and heels, girls in sweaters with plunging necklines, a girl in a black sheath dress that winked out just a hint of tattoo. One of the whores brought her kids along. Another brought her hubby. It felt very family.

The dying woman's name was Elizabeth Spedding. The girls, though, addressed her as Contessa. They were celebrating her 80th birthday, and everyone knew it would be her last. She had cancer and not many weeks later, on Aug. 28, she died.

Elizabeth Spedding was probably Canada's oldest whore, and undoubtedly the country's most famous madam.

She achieved a certain notoriety in Toronto in the late seventies, when police busted her call-girl service and the story played the papers.

But Toronto was really just the last chapter in a story that began in Regina when she was 17, with modelling gigs that brought extra cash for doing, as she put it, "personal favours."

She didn't stay in Canada for long. She was very beautiful. She was poised, aristocratic and ambitious, and soon there was an apartment in New York's Fifth Avenue, the champagne

parties and trysts with the likes of Miguel Aleman, president of Mexico. She says American president Harry Truman wanted into her bed, and she says she turned him down. She received postcards from Elizabeth Taylor. Cherished an autographed photograph from Richard Burton. She made a lot of money. In 1951 she married a Romanian count, and though the marriage ended only a few years later, the "Contessa" she remained until the day she died.

She also spent time in American jails -- once for two years on what were then called "white slavery transportation" charges. After she was released, she returned to Canada, headed for Toronto ("it was a good choice," she wrote later, "it's a wealthy city") and started right back into the business.

She would eventually remarry (her husband died in 1984), and though she was busted, convicted and fined in 1979, she continued to work and madam well into her seventies.

For most people, it's the tales of presidents and movie stars that enthrall. The family of whores know all the glamorous stories, but there are others they cherish more.

They talk of the Elizabeth Spedding who always had room for a girl in trouble. Who helped out with money. Who kept a smaller percentage of the take than any other madam. Who was proud of her profession, and who taught her girls to take the same pride in their work as she did.

Some of them made it to that hospital room for her 80th birthday party. They brought champagne, and balloons, and streamers, and the hospital looked the other way. The girls teased her, and she teased right back. She took a particular shine to me that afternoon, and wouldn't let me leave until I'd signed her guest book and given her my phone number. Some people thought she was a little ga-ga by then, but I like to think she could still spot raw talent.

— by Gerald Hannon, writer, prostitute, university instructor Reprinted from the Focus section of *The Globe and Mail* entitled "Larger Lives: Canadians who made a difference" Saturday, December 23, 1995.

The fast pace of change and growth at PEERS seems to have become a part of the culture. In the spring of 2001, PEERS moved into a space within the Central Building that is large enough to house all sixteen of the present staff in one place.

A small grant from MWE resulted in *Project Steam—Sex Trade Education and Awareness Manuals*. The project employed two youth who produced four impressive manuals each designed for a specific target group—youth and parents, teachers, doctors and nurses and professionals.

Work on purchasing the apartment building was successful (see Section Four on Housing for details) and PEERS Place opened June 1, 2001. PEERS now has the resources and the skills to buy and manage an apartment building providing a home to fourteen women who were homeless. The local credit union was very supportive and with the help of grants PEERS hopes to have the full mortgage paid off within five years.

PEERS continues to experience tremendous growth and development. As this report is written, 16 staff provide a range of services from outreach to counselling to education. New funding was just received from Justice Canada, Crime Prevention to develop an Aboriginal component to PEERS. One of the staff is moving to Vancouver where she is going to begin to develop a PEERS sister agency. HRDC has already agreed to fund some training programs in Vancouver through Youth Internship Canada and Employment Assistance Services. As well HRDC is providing the funding for a new drop-in employment centre at PEERS for the women who are between programs or who haven't found work—yet.

PEERS is now sharing their experience and expertise with a group in Nanaimo, another small city about two hours north of Victoria. The group is called jane. When asked what jane stands for the founder replied,

jane isn't an acronym for anything if that's what you mean. When I first started working on this project I had initially thought about using the 'jane doe society.' I wanted something that really implied nameless faceless people! Plus for the logo I had designed for jane I chose the colours black and blue. Well I'm sure that one is pretty self explanatory.

It's wonderful to see the women I have gotten to know from the street who have been able to move into PEERS Place. The Capital Health Region definitely wants to be involved. The women want to move toward independence but they are still street entrenched. I like the focus of moving them toward independence. One of the women who moved into PEERS Place was one of the original participants of the DWP and is still struggling with her addictions issues. It's not simple and there's never a straight line from what I can see.

It's wonderful seeing the women at PEERS now—the growth, the changes. It feels really good to see them looking so healthy, doing so well, helping others. It is really exciting. Everything seems to be rolling. Staff moving on, seeing them have career options. I love it.

**Carolyn Showler,
PEERS Board chair**

UPDATES

PEERS as We Know it!

Yes folks we have made a lot of changes this year. Some of us have moved on, fulfilling their dreams, some new people have come to make their dreams come true and some of us have stayed, continuing the vision we all dream of.

Three of our loyal, committed and passionate staff members have ventured on to the great wide open. They carry a torch for the cause, teaching by example to never underestimate what we can, and will do. Everyone at PEERS will cherish and admire all their hard work to support the sex trade community and continue in diligence and passion in their absence. Good luck.

And now we welcome some fresh blood into the brood. Hello Newbies, we know you'll do a great job! PEERS looks forward to your expertise and pro-active outlook on catering to the lives of sex trade workers.

We've had a make

over! Come and see the new digs! Fresh paint, reorganized and ready to serve the public. Our interoffice engineer Ally, is available for all types of opportunities. Resume writing, Internet surfing, directions, form filling, applications, message board, News tracking, community resources, counseling resources, program information, letter writing, and many more than I can list here. So come on in, have a look around and find out how we can be of service.

Support Group

is now a **Drop-In**. Look forward to all new format for the usual Tuesday night! Active and exited sex trade workers of any gender can enjoy Speakers, workshops, pottery, and more! Make a point of dropping in at the Central Building, #414-620 View st. Give us a call at 388-5325 and lets us know your coming or be at the front doors at 7 p.m.

Outreach has some new faces, coming to a street near you! Whether they are teaming up together or with the street nurses, they are always proud and practical.

Not to mention well prepared with many of the necessary needs for today's working men and women.

We now have a

Counselor!

If you need to talk to someone that will understand where you're coming from, you can bend our counselors ear. Available to all sex trade workers between 9:30 am and 4:30 p.m. Tuesday to Friday. Call us at 388-5325 or drop by at our office #414-620 View st. Don't be shy, she wont bite!

The RIDE program is a first step employment assistance service provided for all sex trade workers regardless of age, gender or current working situation. This means You can be working and access *any* of our services including this program. We are *not* here to make you quit! And we won't get you in here and then try to talk you into leaving the trade either. **We like Whores!!!!** Intake and assessment are taken on an ongoing basis, 9:30 am to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday. Providing everything from life skills to computer skills with a drop in and on-line upgrading with counseling and lunches provided. Here you

will find a safe environment with people who've had similar experiences and where you can receive the support want! Call Jane or Tara at 388-5327 or come down to the office at the Central Building, #414-620 View st.

The 2nd Chance

Program IS the second of our programs to employment in the "square" world. Held once a year *as long as we get funded* for 22 weeks with salary, this program is conducted in three stages. The first Module is classes at Camosun Colleges BEST program exclusively for sex trade workers, active and exited. The second module is in-house training for certificates in the tourism industry. This includes Food Safe, both the Super Host-Fundamental and Cross-Cultural, Serving it Right, Squirrel and First Aid. The third module is paid work placement for 6 weeks. If you would like more information, even get your name on the list for the next time around please call Shannon and Hermione at 388-5388 between 9 am and 3:30 p.m., Monday to Friday.

Our **Research Project** is on a roll! Now conducting interviews with active indoor sex trade workers. So if you are working out of an escort agency, massage parlor, your home, strip club or any Non-Street venue then come and get your name on the list! Personal interviews done one on one are facilitated by ex-pro's in a comfortable environment, confidentially and without judgment in any way! We need your story to keep up to date with your needs! We are here to serve you while you work and if your not. Your time is valuable and deserves acknowledgment and respect. An honorarium is paid for each interview and bus tickets are available. Here is your chance to tell us something we don't know! Don't pass it up! Give a call to Judy at 388-6506 and leave a message with your Alias and a contact phone number, let us know when we can call you back and if we can leave a message. All our messages are destroyed after being listened to.

section four

what peers is and what it does

This section describes in some detail what PEERS is and what it has accomplished over the last six years. The first part is a description of current programs and services taken directly from PEERS Information Package. New projects and programs are constantly emerging so this description was true for the spring of 2001 but may have changed since. Then follows a description of all of the research projects PEERS has sponsored or conducted. Following that are the details of an international project in 1998 that PEERS co-hosted entitled *Out from the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth*. Next is the successful story of PEERS' long search for funding to purchase a building in order to provide housing for women who want to access PEERS programs but cannot do so while struggling on a daily basis just to find somewhere to spend each night. The section concludes with the detailed descriptions of PEERS' community partners.

current programs and services

Outreach

Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays our outreach workers connect with sex trade workers in Victoria. They distribute condoms, lube, bad date information, and provide support in a respectful, non-invasive manner. They also provide needle exchange services for those who need it. We offer our services to anyone, whether on the street or at an indoor establishment. Our outreach workers also connect with the Capital Region Public Health Nurses, and provide home visits to sex trade workers, and accompaniment to hospitals and clinics. We encourage empowerment in sex trade work and respect the choices of those involved in the trade. We work to improve their safety and working conditions. We monitor police harassment and support sex trade workers who are being harassed.

Public Education

PEERS has developed interactive workshops for all audiences including youth, students,

in this section you will find:

Programs and Services

A description of PEERS current programs and services with a chronological chart of events showing what year each program or activity began, p 51-53

Research

A description of six research reports produced by or with PEERS, p 54-62

Out from the Shadows: International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth

Information on the conference held in March 1998 in Victoria, p 62-65

Housing

PEERS' development of housing for homeless sex trade workers, p 65-68

Community Partnerships

Detailed descriptions of PEERS partners in 13 categories, p 68-74

service providers, other community organizations, parents, school boards and teachers, police departments. Workshops focus on youth and adult prostitution, myths and stigmas associated with the sex trade, the risks and dangers of prostitution, recognizing common recruitment methods used by pimps, avoiding exploitation, long term effects of prostitution, where to go for support, and how to support a loved one in the trade. Sex Trade Awareness Manuals are available designed for specific target groups.

Advocacy

Sadly, in our society, many sex trade workers face various forms of discrimination based on their choice of work. No one knows this better than us, so we offer advocacy services to all sex trade workers. This includes court support, legal, welfare, tenancy and custody concerns. Our advocate knows her way around legal issues, and is here to make sure your basic human rights are not infringed upon because of your choice of work. Call our main office to get connected with our advocate.

Counselling Services

PEERS is proud to have an in-house counsellor available for sex trade workers to talk with. She is here Tuesday to Friday, 9:30am to 4:30pm. You are welcome to drop in, though we encourage you to call first to make an appointment to be sure that she is not with someone else.

RISE @ PEERS

Are you an active or exited sex trade worker? Come discover your options with RISE. Here you will find a safe, non-judgmental environment where you can receive support around any goals you want to reach. RISE offers in-depth life skills, self-esteem and self awareness workshops, as well as basic computer orientation (some advanced computer skills offered also), and resume and cover letter writing. RISE assists people in recognizing the skills that they have acquired while in the trade, and the fact that those skills are transferable to other fields of work and life choices. RISE is a great program to take before moving on to the 2nd Chance, where participants actually use those skills in job placements in the community. In the interest of culture, every Friday afternoon is an 'outing day' at RISE. Outings have included visits to museums, IMAX films, canoeing and nature walks. RISE also offers access to further education with A.B.E. online (upgrading) from Camosun College. Anyone interested in the program does not have to make any major life changes in order to be eligible! You are supported wherever you are at in your life through RISE. RISE has a drug & alcohol counsellor, as well as a clinical counsellor. Intake and assessment are on an ongoing basis.

2nd Chance Program

2nd Chance is a unique employment program for youth under 30 years old who have exited or are currently exiting the sex trade. This program is designed to help youth make a transition to the work world. It combines life skills, education, job readiness skills and work experience. Participants are given skill development specific to the work place and to suit the local employment market. This program currently runs approximately twice a year. If you are interested in the 2nd Chance Program, be sure to call our main office to ensure inclusion in the orientation and interview process. There is a selection criteria. You are welcome to stop by or call the main office for more information.

Research

PEERS staff provides information to former and current sex trade workers on employment programs, other government programs, and appropriate community resources. We investigate and document the needs of sex trade workers, young and adult, in relation to education, training, employment, support, housing and health. PEERS helps to

identify barriers to existing programs that sex workers encounter and attempts to assist in overcoming these barriers. PEERS strives to develop new services to meet identified needs. We encourage feedback from sex trade workers as our programs and our organization as a whole is completely accountable to them.

We are currently doing research sponsored by the British Columbia Health Research Foundation, with a focus on indoor workers. The need for accurate and all inclusive information is one we feel strongly about. Unfortunately, most information on sex trade workers focuses on the outdoor or street workers, which only make up 5-10 % of all sex trade workers.

Through the support of Status of Women Canada, PEERS has done a gender analysis of the sex trade. We held a series of focus groups to find out the differences and/or similarities for men and women in the trade. The final report is now complete. You can pick up a copy at our main office.

PEERS Place

Second Stage Housing for homeless women in the sex trade. The building provides supportive housing and on-site counselling for up to one year to help women stabilize their lives.

Drop In Program

An opportunity to re-connect with past and present participants as well as those interested in accessing PEERS services, the centre is designed to assist in finding employment by helping with resumes, goal setting, career exploration. It has a library of resources which can aid in eliminating the barriers to achieving meaningful employment. The drop in also offers volunteer opportunities to those in the sex trade to learn new skills and to connect with their peers.

Chronological Chart of Events

Event	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Prostitutes Anonymous Group	█						
Incorporation of PEERS	█						
Outreach begins with volunteers		█					
Receive MWE grant for research		█					
Development funding received			█				
Office opens			█				
RISE employment program begins				█			
Summit takes place				█			
BCHRF research grant approved				█			
Advocacy begins				█			
Public education begins				█			
Counselling program begins					█		
Second Chance employment begins					█		
Gender Analysis report						█	
Complete BCHRF research							█
Employment drop-in opens							█
PEERS Place housing opens							█

research

It was never really the intention of the women who started PEERS to engage in research. As far as they were concerned, they knew far more than they wanted to about the sex trade and about the needs of ex-sex trade workers. However, one of the first responses to the idea that sex trade workers needed specialized services was, “Show me the evidence.” Many policy makers and government funders had to be convinced that there was something unique about the experience of being in the sex trade and they wanted more than personal anecdotal information.

As a result, PEERS has generated six separate research projects. They are listed in the order in which they were completed. The date in parenthesis represents the date of publication of the final report.

1. Report on the health needs of multi-disadvantaged street women. (April 1996)

This project was funded by a grant from the Community Health Promotion Centre at the University of Victoria in the amount of \$5,000. The research was conducted by Barb Smith, one of the women who began PEERS, and was completed before PEERS had even been incorporated. It focussed on identifying the health services currently being used by street women, the barriers these women encounter in seeking access to community health services, and the needs that are not addressed by existing resources. The central issue of the study became their quality of life and the circumstances that lead women to choose the street. The major conclusion was that there must be a greater understanding on the part of the general public of who “street women” are, where they come from and where they are going. As long as they continue to feel that they are viewed as “losers,” they will never be able to change or move on. In the words of the author, “These women are desperate.”

The report includes eleven recommendations that all suggest the creation of new supports and services. These range from small things like access to a phone, nutritional snacks, and laundry facilities to more complex needs like access to dental care, drop-in counselling, detox for women, and long-term housing.

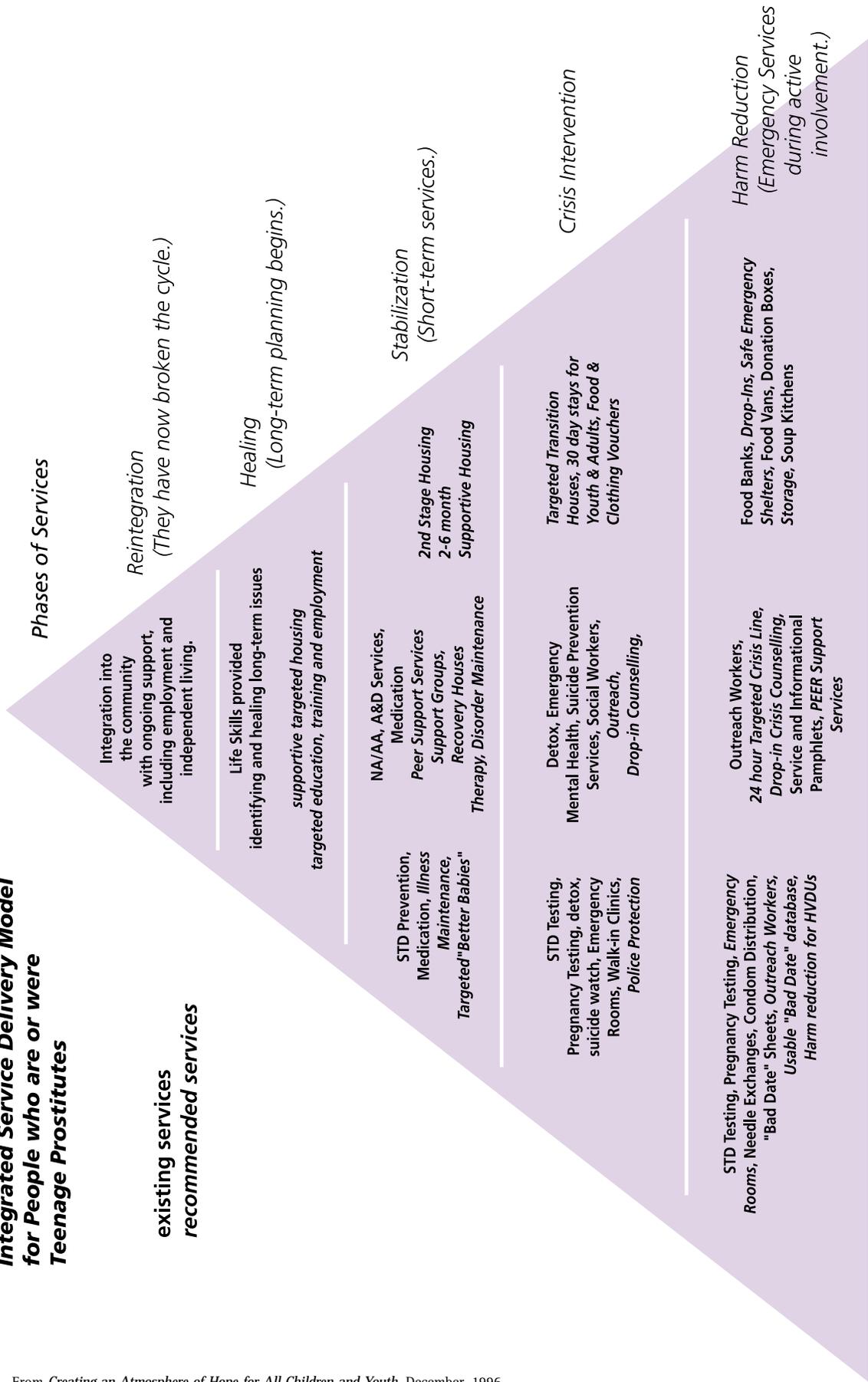
2. Creating an atmosphere of hope for all children and youth: Teen prostitutes speak up & speak out³ (December 1996)

This project was designed to solicit information directly from people who had been in the sex trade during their teens, youth currently working in the sex trade, and from youth at-risk of entering the sex trade. It was funded by the Ministry of Women’s Equality for \$10,000. It was undertaken to help inform the ongoing process of developing new programs and services, rethinking existing programs and services, and in the words of the new Minister of Children and Families at the time, create, “a climate of hope that includes all children in BC.” It was also used to support the need for core funding for PEERS.

The project began by collecting stories from 24 former and current sexually exploited youth. Their stories included information on services they had used, services they might have used, had they existed, and a depressingly consistent picture of the isolation of children living in a world that sees them as “hopeless” and disposable. Their average age of entry was 13. Project staff also attended local high schools, alternative schools and the youth detention centre to gain insight and comments from youth at-risk. They found that youth at-risk want accessible services that are specifically

³It is embarrassing to read the title of this research project now. An increased awareness of language and its implications has resulted in our decision not to refer to sexually exploited youth as prostitutes, teen or otherwise.

**Integrated Service Delivery Model
for People who are or were
Teenage Prostitutes**



it was me

by Ally R.

It is not very often I sit and actually let myself recognize and acknowledge certain memories. Of a time that is almost mysterious to me, although I was there and it was me and I'm still me. It was me. Or some shape of me. When I think of people and times from then my first feeling is never a good one.

I can't believe most times when I look back. I see faces and fragments of scenes float through my mind.

Andrew. I think about him, my first time meeting him. Doug. Man, if I knew Doug now. But I wouldn't know him now, that's the thing. I'm no longer traveling in that circle. I don't seem to be traveling in any proverbial circles right now. Just this small one that is my daily life. But I am about to embark on expansion!

designed to meet their needs rather than designed to meet someone else's expectations. Most of those interviewed didn't use any services or programs until they decided to exit prostitution. Frequently their friends on the street or in the trade provided the only stability or regular contact in their lives. In one discussion, a few described going for several years without talking to anybody who wasn't directly involved in the sex trade. What stood out was the isolation of the youth who told their stories. They described their isolation, lack of connectedness and feelings of separation as the single most significant factor in making them vulnerable to prostitution to begin with. The major recommendation from everyone was for a full spectrum of supports when exiting prostitution.

Bearing in mind the particular needs of this population, some of the project participants came together to develop a service delivery model that outlines the continuum of care required to meet the needs of sexually exploited youth in particular. It addresses a full spectrum of needs for youth including physical health, mental health, addictions issues, education, training, employment, shelter and food. The five levels of care are:

1) Harm Reduction—reduce harm while youth are still actively involved in the trade;

2) Crises Intervention—deal with the crises and emergencies that result from being actively involved in the sex trade and that often act as a catalyst for the decision to exit the sex trade;

3) Stabilization—provide support once someone has decided to begin the process of exiting prostitution;

4) Healing—create a supportive environment that can provide an opportunity for long term healing and retraining; and

5) Reintegration—provide ongoing support once youth are living independently.

3. Report of the Sexually Exploited Youth of Victoria (1997)

This project was carried out by a committee of the Capital Regional District and jointly managed by the City of Victoria and the BC Ministry of the Attorney General. PEERS staff were hired to do the interviewing and provide some input into the content of the final report and the report recommendations.

The recommendations are:

- safe homes for youth wishing to leave the sex trade or otherwise in need of protection;
- an inter-municipal police unit to deal specifically with the problems of sexually exploited youth;
- witness protection programs to ensure the safety of sexually exploited youth involved in court proceedings;
- more, improved programs focussing on the prevention of child abuse and timely intervention in abuse cases;
- a system of integrated case management offering a continuum of services to at-risk youth;
- education plans to help at risk youth get “hooked” back into school or employment programs that meet their needs;
- changes in policies and procedures to provide more effective prosecutions in cases of youth sexual exploitation;
- a change in the law to raise the age of consent for adult-child consensual sex to 16 years from 14 years;
- public education programs to change attitudes about child and youth sexual exploitation; and

- changes in the law to allow for more successful prosecutions against those who exploit children and youth.

4. Access to healing: An inquiry into equitable health care for sex trade workers (1999)

This report was the thesis submitted by Rosalyn Rechsteiner for her Masters in Leadership and Training at Royal Roads University in Victoria. The report's abstract follows:

This research explored the experience of health care delivery for sex trade workers from the dual perspectives of the medical community and the sex trade community. Working within the Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS), the study examines the experience of health care providers and sex trade workers regarding health care services for sex trade workers in the Greater Victoria area. Comparative data was gathered from both groups on the range and delivery of health care services provided; perceived barriers to equitable health care for sex trade workers; and recommendations for improved health care services.

The results of the study suggest that there is a need for more awareness and understanding between the sex trade worker and health care provider communities concerning health care for sex trade workers. Study findings indicate that generally, health care providers require more information concerning the sex trade community and community resources for referral; training in the psychological factors that affect sex trade worker health and awareness of the psychological impact of the sex trade on sex trade workers. Sex trade workers need current information on health care services available and how and when to access them.

The study also identified factors such as inadequate resources, lack of confidence in the health care provider and absence of health insurance coverage as barriers to effective health care for sex trade workers. While discrimination is recognized as a major barrier to those in the sex trade, there is encouragement from these study results that such issues may be jointly addressed between these two communities where they concern health care. Gaps in appropriate and accessible health care services for sex trade workers and strategies for improving these services are also discussed. Finally, this study found that there are shared views between health care providers and sex trade workers, particularly regarding the commitment to address better access to health care for sex trade workers."

5. Is anyone listening? A gender analysis of sex trade work. (2000)

This project was funded by Status of Women Canada for \$15,000 and was conducted by Connie Carter, Principal Researcher and Analyst, and Michelle Walton. The executive summary, quoted below, highlights the reports' conclusions which are consistent with the previous reports.

This report contains the findings of a research project conducted by PEERS (Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society) of Victoria, BC and funded by Status of Women Canada. The focus of this project was an analysis of the sex trade using gender as a primary lens. The central methodology used in this project was focus group interviews with adult women and men who had worked or were currently working in the sex trade.

With the exception of eight of the 41 participants, all had begun working in the sex trade under the age of eighteen. Participants thus shared their unique and important perspectives and experiences of the sex trade and were asked to reflect, in particular, on their experiences as youth. They were also asked to give feedback on programs and services that would make sex trade work less dangerous and would assist those who want to exit the trade.

The prosecutor. The cops. I remember their faces. I wish I had known more words then. Accurate ones.

The tie man.

Ian from D. Street and how scared I became.

Howard from long ago and all the cars that drove by that day.

I don't think I'll ever remember anything I ever said.

The drummer.

The one from down the street.

The first, second and third ones. After that they're a blur.

The ones with guns when I imagined pain might be so much and so quick that I'd likely not feel it at all.

Irwin. And the snapping that took place there.

The one who liked to scream with ecstasy and madness in parking lots when he finally came. He's the one I saw other ways after we talked about how impossible it would be to ever see each other other ways.

What was that one's name I'm thinking of now? Donny. That was it.

The special place in my heart I still have for Craig.

And why do some from years apart get mixed up in my mind? Why do I see them in a space of time they don't belong to?

How incredibly easy going and friendly I felt and I was. Happy. And how angry I became. The feelings I knew could belong in no other category than homicidal. Yes I could have done it. Just about did.

The total helplessness over certain things.

Findings of the project concentrated on the similarities and differences in the ways in which women and men experienced the sex trade. Both similarities and differences are important because they reflect the need for gender-specific prevention and exiting strategies for women and men. The focus of this project was not personal differences between women and men but instead the structural and social processes that shape women and men's experience of entry and exit from the sex trade. The findings from this study can be summarized as follows:

On average, women were somewhat younger than men when they entered the sex trade. Most narrators entered the sex trade before the age of 18.

Findings of this study echo others conducted in the Victoria area and in other smaller communities in BC. Reasons for entering the trade were complex. Both women and men cited the need for food and shelter. Women, however, were more likely to enter the trade through the coercive manipulation of boyfriends or family members, suggesting that the line between boyfriend and pimp is more permeable than it is usually considered to be. Many narrators had histories of school problems and family disruption that severed their links with supportive adults. Others were already in foster or group homes that had increased their distrust of adults.

Both women and men narrators reported experiencing isolation and loss of self-esteem before entering the sex trade. For girls this loss of self-esteem must be seen as connected to the devaluation of girls in Canadian society.

Most narrators reported that their living and schooling situations changed after entering the trade. Men were more likely, however, to continue to live at home or work at other jobs for at least two years after entering the trade. Women were more likely to live with friends or with boyfriends after entering the trade. This finding echoes other studies that suggest girls' lives are more regulated in terms of family relations, thus making sex trade work entirely incompatible with living at home.

Narrators described the working conditions of the sex trade as dangerous and isolating. Many narrators did not have anyone to talk to about their feelings or experiences. All narrators described experiences of violence. Women's experiences of violence reflected dominant sexist social patterns of violence against women in Canadian society. Women in particular experienced violence at the hands of clients, pimps, boyfriends and family members. A few male narrators admitted to committing violence. Many women narrators had not defined these experiences as violence until the focus group and many reported having their experiences diminished by authorities because they were sex trade workers.

The boundaries between different aspects of the sex trade were permeable (i.e., street, escort agencies, bars, parties). Most narrators had worked in various aspects of the trade including on the street, and in escort agencies, bars, parties and parks. Women were more likely than men to work in escort agencies, but many women also worked on the street.

Both women and men narrators reported difficulties with alcohol and/or drugs. At the same time, they noted that one of the persistent stereotypes of the trade is that all workers use alcohol or drugs. Some narrators felt it was very difficult to make life choices while suffering from addiction problems and thus, these addiction issues hindered decisions to exit the trade. Many female and male narrators suggested that drug and alcohol services needed to be sensitive to the needs of youth in the sex trade.

Narrators in the focus groups were concerned that stereotypes about sex trade workers were extremely damaging. Stereotypes often led to judgments that discouraged narrators from making use of available services which, in turn, led to more isolation and loneliness. Stereotypes typically blamed sex trade

workers for the conditions of the trade while excusing the behaviour of clients.

Overwhelmingly, narrators indicated that their clients were men between the ages of 30 and 60, and mostly middle-class in origin, although clients represented all walks of life. Narrators described clients of escort agencies as older and more middle-class than clients on the street. Findings of this study, while qualitative in nature, tend to differ from other studies of clients. Narrators offered several explanations for why clients were mainly men. Several female and male narrators questioned the social constructs of masculinity that encourage men's irresponsible sexual expression and control of women by men. Many felt that men held more economic and social power, which allowed them to purchase women's sexual services.

Narrators recommended that intervention services use a harm reduction approach. They emphasized the importance of street outreach programs and their potential for ameliorating isolation. Narrators also felt that the criminalization of some aspects of the sex trade made it more isolated and dangerous and furthered the control of sex trade workers by pimps.

Narrators suggested a number of programs and services that would assist sex trade workers to exit the trade. These included advocacy and mentorship opportunities, increased alcohol and drug services, transition and second-stage housing, counselling, and increased access to life skills training, employment bridging programs, job training and to post-secondary education.

Women's experiences of exiting the trade were complicated by inequities in the labour market faced by all women, such as concentration in low wage sectors. Many women narrators had not had the opportunity to complete high school and found themselves forced to take low wage and exploitative service-based employment. For women with children, exiting the sex trade was particularly challenging due to lack of recognizable jobs skills, lack of available job training and lack of housing suitable for families.

6. Assessing the health impact of sex trade work on prostitutes in greater Victoria. (2001)

PEERS submitted a letter of intent and three complete proposals to the BC Health Research Foundation, Community Research Grants over a period of two years. The community grants program allowed for projects of up to 24 months in duration up to a cost of \$150,000 in total. The requirements of the complete application package were extensive and relied on research expertise not available within PEERS. By the third try, it had become clear that having an academic on the team was an essential component of a successful application and Dr. Cecilia Benoit of the University of Victoria joined the project. The research project was managed by Judy Lightwater.

Approval was received in January of 1998 and this comprehensive research project finally began later that spring. The focus was on women who had worked off street, primarily in escort agencies. Women were interviewed for approximately two hours each. One of the most significant features of the research was that all of the interviewees were former or current sex trade workers themselves. This made it possible for them to access a portion of the sex trade community that is virtually invisible and for them to experience a high degree of disclosure from a normally reticent population. The executive summary (September 14, 2001) follows:

Background

Much of the research to date on the sex industry and its workforce has adopted a social problem orientation. Individual sex workers, almost always depicted as street walkers (those who are observable to the public and invariably the source of complaints by residents in neighbourhoods where the street trade is active) have been the main focus of analyses, with much attention given to

The Englishman.

The surprise I'd feel when one would divulge that drug or another.

When exactly was it that I lost the fear?

The cab driver.

The cab drivers.

The Turk.

Ken. Now there's a word packed with some ghastly feeling.

The day I felt my mind go in half like a snapping. Too bad I have yet to figure out how to put it back to its exact positioning.

All the times I slammed the door on life. And dead bolted it shut. Was it really this that I eventually wanted, or had I already been there/here?

The lying.

The doctors.

The Sister.

The Apartments.

The houses and the streets.

The actors and the directors.

The large bellied men. The small men.

The stitches in my hand.

The pink bra.

The black teddy.

The long red skirt with paisleys on it.

The pink jacket I loved so much.

The sequin bras and costumes.

The ones who always called when it was party time.

The German.

background factors that lead them into the sex trade, risk behaviours while working in the trade, and the short and long-term physical, sexual and mental health outcomes of sex trade involvement.

A small body of literature, however, has taken the view that the sex trade/industry is far more complex than most believe, involving a number of sex occupations/venue locations other than street prostitution where it is estimated less than 20 percent of activity takes place. The sex trade is not unlike other types of service work that are found in high income countries such as Canada, involving a bundle of tasks done directly to please the recipient of the service (customer/client), or indirectly to fulfill the expectations of a boss or manager overseeing the delivery of services. What these 'square jobs' have in common with the sex trade is that an exchange of services makes it possible for the worker to make a living. The research reported here also looks at the sex trade from a work perspective, arguing that there is an urgent need to give voice to sex workers located in indoor as well as outdoor venues as a first step in understanding the challenges they face.

Methodology

Following the methodology used in an earlier study investigating the sexually exploitation of children and youth in the CHR (Sexually Exploited Youth Committee, 1997), this current study trained ex-sex workers as research assistants who became involved in activities ranging from recruiting respondents, interviewing them, imputing questionnaire data into the computer program, and transcribing the tape-recorded interviews. This strategy and others reported below helped to make the project a genuine community-academic collaboration. A non-random sample of currently active and exited* adult** female (n=160), male (n=36) and transgendered (n=5) sex workers residing in Victoria, BC and the surrounding 13 municipalities that make up the Capital Regional District (CRD) were asked about whether they experienced their sex trade activity as a job or not, the degree of control they experienced in their current venue, their health status, and their access to health and related services in the metropolitan area.

Summary of Key Findings

- For the vast majority of our respondents, the sex trade is their main means of making a living, that is, it is their job or occupation. The majority of them have worked in more than one venue during their sex trade career, sometimes moving from outdoor to indoor work and other times the reverse. The relative permanency of sex work as a job and the fluidity of movement across venues reported by our respondents suggest that the distinction between indoor and outdoor sex work is not as clear-cut as previous research suggests.
- In terms of experiences within the trade, the data show that across certain dimensions, such as control over job safety and freedom from harassment, those working on the street experience comparatively less occupational control and more harassment than counterparts located in indoor venues. However, as noted by the respondents, third party control extends beyond that of the traditional pimp. In regard to other key dimensions of work control— earnings, pace of work, and clientele and activities performed—those working as private contractors through agencies are often at a considerable disadvantage, even compared to counterparts working independently on the street. In the absence of even minimum work standards, workers in escort

*Exited or ex-sex worker, for the purposes of this report, is defined as someone who has retired from the sex trade for a minimum of two years at the time of interview. It is believed that those who had been out of the trade for two years would have been able to leave behind most aspects of the identity of and activities involved in being a sex worker.

**The study focused on the situation of respondents involved in selling sex services who were 18 years of age or older at the time they were contacted by our research assistants. One of the authors (Benoit) is currently investigating the situation of those under age 18 who are involved in the sex trade in the CRD. (See Benoit and Jansson, 2001-2005).

agencies massage parlours and other indoor employment venues have no legal avenue to protect themselves against exploitative conditions of employment.

- The findings further indicate that, compared to the other venues examined, sex workers operating independently out of their own homes are in the best relative position to determine their own cost of labour, net earnings, pace of work, clientele and the sex activities performed while working.
- Despite these findings regarding the relative permanency of the sex trade as an occupation and of the variability within the trade in regard to work location and worker control, at a more general level the criminal nature of the sex trade in Canada has a dramatic impact on workers' rights and safety and leaves all respondents at serious risk.
- Along physical, psychological, emotional and social dimensions the majority of our respondents report that their health is not what they would like it to be. While most research on the sex trade has focused mainly on sexual health matters, the findings indicate that the health issues affecting sex workers range far beyond these traditional concerns. Mental health and level of self-esteem is related not only to being marginalized and rendered invisible as workers but are also to childhood experiences of frequent household change, abuse and neglect.
- A minority of respondents find an escape from their situations through the use of illicit addictive substances. Similar to the impact of low self-esteem, our data also indicate that addiction is a factor in determining entry (and reentry) into the sex trade and is co-related with poor health for respondents.
- Even those respondents who have permanently exited the trade continue to struggle post-retirement with mental health and related problems that do not end simply by their leaving the sex trade life behind.
- Our respondents said that they are in need of a variety of frontline and preventive health services. Unfortunately, some of the needed services are either inaccessible, unavailable or ineffective in addressing their needs.
- All of our respondents struggle to resist the popular depiction that portrays them as mere victims. Despite past and present hardship, they describe themselves as active agents with varying degrees of control over their work and health. More than anything else, this report aims to confirm respondents' agency, to give them a voice and an opportunity to be heard.

Summary of Recommendations

As demonstrated in this report, all respondents experienced marginalization in the sense that they are unable to avail of many of the rights and protections other Canadian citizens take for granted. Because of this situation, we suggest some general recommendations, followed by more specific recommendations depending on the sub-group of sex workers.

1. General Recommendations:

- Educate the public about the reality of sex workers' lives
- Campaign for changes in policy and legislation to make sex work safe
- Make available better education and training for police and other criminal justice personnel to be more sensitive and supportive of sex workers across all work venues
- Provide ready access to safe, stable, and affordable housing
- Provide ready access to appropriate and sensitive health and social service providers who are knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of sex workers
- Make available a continuum of services so that sex workers receive the care they need when they need it

The Greek restaurant owner.

The other restaurant owners.

The Iranian restaurant owner and running through the endless park at night full of trees.

Then the car and the wife.

The one from the Indy.

Thousands like them whose faces float in suspended animation somewhere in my existence. I'll see a face from then and I wonder why I am seeing it now, or ever.

The ones I started to believe because no one else was telling me anything.

The brander.

The wrestler.

The ball player.

The soccer player.

The wheelchair man.

The amputee.

The egg shaped child-like man.

The deaf man where we talked through the machine.

The dwarf.

The ones from Pennsylvania.

The one with the antique kit.

The one who had been in the Olympics, portfolio in hand, who reminded me of someone I once knew and loved.

The basements.

The waiting.

The drivers.

The murderers.

The one with all those snakes.

- Provide economic and political support for experience-based advocacy organizations

2. Recommendations for Those Currently Working in the Sex Trade

- Educate sex workers about what is legal and illegal about the sex trade
- Institute formal job contracts for sex workers when employed by others (such as in strip bars or clubs)

- Institute formal work agreements for sex workers when working with third-parties (such as in escort agencies or massage parlours)

- Provide services that are specific to the needs and schedules of sex workers, including child care for dependent children and outreach services around-the-clock, seven days a week.

3. Recommendations for Survivors Wanting to Leave the Sex Trade and Those Who Have Exited

- Make available more outreach workers offering assistance to sex workers wanting to exit the trade

- Provide ready access to second-stage supportive housing

- Provide access to appropriate mental health services for exited sex workers dealing with low self-esteem and other psychological problems stemming from the stigma attached to their former work life

- Provide access to academic education, including the means to complete high school

- Provide access to vocational training that is affordable and meaningful

- Provide access to employment opportunities that match their skills and interests

- Provide access to exiting programs specifically targeting adults

Out from the Shadows:

International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth

Cherry Kingsley attended her first PEERS Board meeting in the fall of 1996. A young woman who had been in the sex trade from ages fourteen to twenty-two, Cherry had moved to Victoria to work on a contract with the BC Ministry of Children and Families to facilitate the Youth Involvement Project and the writing of the project's report, *Finding Our Way*. She had also been part of the Canadian government delegation to the World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children held in August 1995 in Stockholm, Sweden.

Cherry told the group that her plan was to organize an international congress much like the one she had attended although this time instead of having delegations made up of government representatives they would be made up of sexually exploited youth. She said she had the support of two of the other members of the Canadian delegation, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, and Senator Landon Pearson.

Immediately Foreign Affairs committed \$10,000 to help fund the development of the conference and the planning process began. Cherry remained the primary person paid to organize this enormous international event but she needed help from many quarters. At the time the Summit was being organized, PEERS was housed in a very small space and adding the Summit organizing to the office was a bit insane.

It was in the cramped space at PEERS that *Out from the Shadows* was truly conceived. A few staff, along with Cherry and Jannit, met with a professional photographer to brainstorm the creation of an image for the conference. Out of that dialogue emerged the name and the design for the poster to be used to advertise the event.

Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society

L'Association pour la prise en charge, l'éducation et des ressources destinées aux prostituées

La Sociedad para la Capacitación, la Educación y de Recursos destinados a Prostitutas



School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria

Office of the Ombudsman, Province of British Columbia

present/présentent/presentan

Out from the Shadows

Sortir de l'ombre

Salir de las Sombras

Sommet international de la jeunesse contre l'exploitation sexuelle des enfants

International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth

Jornadas Internacionales sobre la Explotación Sexual de los Jóvenes

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

march 7-12/mars 7-12/marzo 7-12

1998



The one early morning sitting on
a swing in his yard as dawn
broke, ducks at my feet.

The farmer.

The photographer of objects.

The 2 virgins.

The ones who made me work,
and the one who bought me a
rose.

The travels.

The journeys.

The planes.

The boats.

The toys in my purse.

The truck ride from North Van.

The immortality or else.

The games.

The lessons.

The boat painter.

The banker with the green
pendant.

Declaration and Agenda for Action of Sexually Exploited Children and Youth

Ratified by the Youth Delegates of:

**Out From The Shadows:
International Summit of Sexually Exploited Youth**

March 12, 1998 Victoria, BC, Canada

DECLARATION

We the sexually exploited child and youth delegates gathered in Victoria Canada, for Out From the Shadows: International Summit for the Sexually Exploited Youth, declare the following:

We declare that the term child or youth prostitute can no longer be used. These children and youth are sexually exploited and any language or reference to them must reflect this belief

We declare that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth is a form of child abuse and slavery

We declare that all children and youth have the right to be protected from all forms of abuse, exploitation and the threat of abuse, harm or exploitation

We declare that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth must no longer be financially profitable

We declare that all children and youth have the right to know their rights.

We declare that the issue of child and youth sexual exploitation must be global priority and nations must not only hold their neighbors accountable but also themselves.

We declare that governments are obligated to create laws which reflect the principle of zero tolerance of all forms of abuse and exploitation of children and youth

AGENDA FOR ACTION

Our agenda contains actions that are based on our beliefs. Our beliefs have come from what we have lived. To understand why these actions will work, you must understand our beliefs and the life experience that have led to these belief

We believe that education is vital in our struggle against the sexual exploitation of children and youth.

We believe that the voices and experiences of sexually exploited children and youth must be heard and are central to the development and implementations of action. We must be empowered to help ourselves.

We believe that we have the right to resources that are directed towards sexually exploited children and youth and our very diverse needs.

We believe that as children and youth, we are all vulnerable to sexual exploitation whether male, female, or transgendered.

We believe that our laws must protect us as sexually exploited children and youth and no longer punish us as criminals

We believe that we are all responsible for our children and youth, yet the issue is not ours alone. Governments, communities and society as a whole must be held accountable for the sexual exploitation of children and youth.

As the Summit itself approached (by then it had been reduced to a Summit of the Americas rather than the whole world), youth representatives had to be chosen. Megan joined Cherry in a cross-Canada consultation meeting with kids in the sex trade in eight cities, helping them identify participants who would come to Victoria and become part of the event to be held in March 1998. PEERS became involved in training the volunteers especially in helping sensitize them to the importance of confidentiality and being respectful.

A few PEERS staff became very involved during the final days coming up to the Summit and local media sought out local sources to help them understand just what was about to befall the community. The Summit itself was a huge success and attracted media from around the world. It was covered in Germany, Australia and all across Canada as well as in the local media. People from the UN offices in Geneva and New York attended along with international representatives of UNICEF and ECPAT (an international agency dedicated to ending sexual exploitation). As well, very senior government officials from Brazil, Canada and the Province of BC attended.

For PEERS, it's hard to evaluate the impact. The Summit helped raise awareness on the issue of sexual exploitation within Victoria in a way that PEERS couldn't have accomplished on its own. It did turn out to be a lot of work to administer, since PEERS ended up taking on a significant chunk of the administrative responsibility for Cherry's involvement. The paperwork clean-up went on for months and months afterward.

Lasting legacies of the Summit included a Declaration and Agenda for Action that has since been presented by Cherry to the United Nations General Assembly and has been incorporated into frameworks, strategies and policy directions to address the issue locally and around the world.

Housing

Early in the life of PEERS, people talked about the need for housing for some of the women who were coming to PEERS for support. Many were living at Sandy Merriman House, an emergency shelter that provided a roof over their heads but not a home. Women who wanted to take part in employment programs found that they couldn't while they were living in unstable situations. At first, the idea of developing housing was too overwhelming to contemplate but in time the discussions began to be more serious. While the need for housing was identified, so was the need for training and employment, and the idea of combining all of these activities into one project emerged. The project was called PEERS Place.

PEERS Place I

PEERS Place was a grand concept from the outset. It was described in the local newspaper as "an innovative Victoria project aiming to redirect the people-skills of prostitutes into the tourist trade." The project objective was to integrate former sex trade workers into the mainstream economy of the community by operating successful, economically sustainable, hospitality industry ventures and an industry employment centre. The programs were to include counselling, related skill development and supported work experience and employment.

The intention was to purchase a small motel and use it both for housing and an employment centre for former sex trade workers. It would provide a safe place for training in hospitality related skills and an opportunity for employment for some graduates of the program. The rationale for buying and operating a motel had five points:

- Victoria's fastest growing industry is tourism;
- Sex trade work is part of the hospitality industry already, requiring many of the same skills, i.e., adaptability, ability to work under pressure, good interpersonal skills,

The students.

The veteran who got me in the end.

The senior citizens.

The deathbeds.

The gloves.

The children.

The drunks.

The poets.

Garth. That was his name. I was going to call him near the end but couldn't find his number so I called the cops instead.

The pharmacist.

The widows.

The clubhouse.

The hotels and motels. The trailers.

The security men.

The names.

The rush.

The timing.

The broken glass after I shattered it all.

The pillow on fire.

The fireman.

The women haters and the women.

The watch and the bracelet.

The ones I don't remember.

The snow.

The rain.

The wind.

The dogs.

The songs that take me to times from then.

"Sentimental Journey" and play it again and again and he did and

experience with the public, basic understanding of business transactions, negotiation skills, practice in handling demanding customers, and the ability to work long hours under difficult circumstances;

- Many of the small motels are housing people on income assistance and so are already indirectly government funded;
- The motel residents, many of whom are women with children, are not adequately served and would benefit by PEERS management as they would then have access to a community kitchen, a lounge and outside play area; and,
- Supportive training and employment would provide a route out of the sex trade for people wanting to leave.

The biggest obstacle encountered upon introducing the project was societal attitudes and stereotypes about prostitution and prostitutes. To that end, PEERS made an effort to address the assumptions, myths and stereotypes directly.

Prostitutes and a Motel—The Optics

(taken from the PEERS Place proposal, July 1997 written by Jannit Rabinovitch and Gwen Smith)

Assumption #1: A motel run by ex-prostitutes will quickly turn into a brothel.

Myth: No one really wants to leave prostitution.

Reality: PEERS members report that in the course of their outreach work on the streets from midnight to 3:00 AM the vast majority of the women they talk to (an estimated 95%) say they would choose to leave prostitution "if only they could." This is consistent with other findings. 88% of 130 San Francisco prostitutes stated that they wanted to get out of prostitution (Farling & Hotaling, 1996) and the Edmonton Social Planning Council Street Prostitution Project, 1993, reported that 60 out of 67 respondents said they would like to quit working the streets. Nobody is more motivated to provide support to prostitutes wanting to leave the sex trade than someone who has personally experienced the abuse of prostitution.

Assumption #2: A motel run by ex-prostitutes will encourage street activities like drug dealing and drug use.

Myth: All prostitutes work the street and are drug addicts.

Reality: The community of prostitutes best documented is street prostitutes, who constitute an estimated 10% of the total population of all prostitutes (Pheterson, 1993). Other research estimates of the percentage of people who work the street range from 5% to 20%. Although on the street drug use is common, for most prostitutes addiction tends to be secondary to exiting prostitution. An informal survey of PEERS clients showed that 40% did not use drugs or alcohol. This appears to be confirmed by the BCHRF research data.

Assumption #3: A motel run by ex-prostitutes will draw pimps.

Myth: Anywhere there are prostitutes or ex-prostitutes there are pimps.

Reality: Many prostitutes work independently although large numbers do work for pimps. Unfortunately there is a relatively unlimited pool to draw from and pimps do not seem concerned with organizations like PEERS or our programs. We do not threaten their livelihood in any way—yet. Pimps prefer to pursue prostitutes when they are vulnerable, not when they are surrounded by support.

Assumption #4: No one would want to stay in a motel run by ex-prostitutes unless they were looking for sex.

Myth: The community is unable to understand or support women and men who are ready and able to make a positive change for themselves.

Reality: Many people will choose to stay at the PEERS motel because they support its aims and objectives and because it will provide a safe and supportive shelter environment at a reasonable cost.

Assumption #5: No one would want to work for minimum wage when they're used to making lots of money.

Myth: Prostitutes make lots of money and everyone in tourism makes minimum wage.

Reality: There is a huge range of income among prostitutes and lots of it goes to pimps, escort agencies and licensing fees. In fact, it's possible on a bad night to end up owing money. In tourism, many jobs pay much more than minimum wage and while many people start at lower wages, there are opportunities for increased earnings. Earning less is considered a small price for many to escape the abuses of prostitution.

Unfortunately, PEERS was not able to raise the funds necessary to purchase the motel. HRDC, however, provided funding for Employment Assistance Services (EAS). The EAS has been funded for two consecutive years with negotiations underway to fund a third. In fact, the employment programs offered by PEERS have become some of the most important and life-changing programs PEERS offers to its clients.

peers place

Despite being unable to raise the capital to purchase the motel, the need for housing never left PEERS' agenda. Then in 2000, the federal government was willing to fund a housing development process and to put money into projects designed to house the homeless. The local credit union, Pacific Coast Savings, had maintained a relationship with PEERS since the first talk of buying a building and had encouraged PEERS to hold onto the vision of purchasing property (with a mortgage through them, of course).

In its application for housing development dollars, PEERS described its goal as providing medium term self-contained housing units (up to one year occupancy) for female youth at risk of entering or staying in the sex trade and who have been or are at risk of physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

In the spring of 2001, PEERS bought a small apartment building called PEERS Place. PEERS Place will focus on providing supportive housing and counselling for up to one year to help women make the transition from the sex trade into the mainstream of society. The project will have an on-site live-in staff person as well as a counsellor. The building provides 14 women with shared accommodation. A group of women who were formerly homeless and sex trade workers were hired on a community development grant to develop guidelines for living in the housing project in consultation with residents of Sandy Merriman and with staff of PEERS and Sandy Merriman. One of the women who moved into PEERS Place has been homeless for eight years.

Women from PEERS' Service League helped to clean up and decorate the apartments and a new phase of PEERS' programs and services is underway. One of those women, Adibi Hahn, has been involved with PEERS since the two groups of women first started working together. Adibi is well connected to the development industry and helped with materials and finishes for the apartments. She talks about her involvement with PEERS and with the housing project.

Sandy Evans got me involved. She said we were going to be doing some fund raising for them and gave me a little bit of literature to read on PEERS. A friend of mine's daughter had ended up on the street at 13. These were people who had everything. It gets close to your heart. It could happen to anybody.

Then when I met the women (at PEERS) I thought, "These are intelligent women." Before I thought they were there because they want to be but I realized it's a lot deeper than that. Bad circumstances.

he did.

"The road to hell

"Paint it black

"One of these days

The money.

The credit cards.

The travelers cheques.

The rolls of quarters, loonies, dimes and nickels.

The pennies.

The bank machines.

The pleas.

The excuses.

The threats.

Helping that one write a letter to his son.

The one I told was right, that indeed he should kill himself.

The movies and the magazines.

The photographs.

The one who got a ride with me in the white van.

The blue Malibu and the car

accident.

The codes.

The questions.

The cliches.

The chance encounters that were never supposed to happen. On the street. In the drug store. In 7-11. The cab ride.

That time in the liquor store. My heart ending up in my shoes.

Paul and all the loss that happened there. How it feels just to write his name down.

The exclamation.

The hardware store that was down the street.

The Flinstone skirt.

The one with the tripod.

The crates where they kept my shoe.

The million or so times I prayed

Now it's part of me. I just have to be there to see everything. I love talking to the women. Seeing their excitement in their new apartments. The other day, one was telling me that never in her wildest dreams did she think she would have her own place. A month ago she was living in a crack house. She takes such pride in everything. The blinds. She's fixed her place up so nice. I am so thrilled when I see that.

Now I'm reading everything. I guess I had believed those stereotypes about prostitutes. I've opened a lot of eyes in my own circle, too.—Adibi Hahn

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Since it was created, PEERS has slowly developed relationships with a great many agencies in the region. Some of these relationships are ongoing; others have emerged while working together on a joint project. Although every community has different specific agencies and organizations, the kinds of groups PEERS has allied itself with exist in many communities.

FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

Status of Women Action Group (SWAG)

Take Back the Night—PEERS staff have been invited to speak at several Take Back the Night marches and have done so eloquently and with passion. They have used the opportunity to tell their personal stories and to talk about the sexual exploitation of children and youth as well as the pervasiveness of the sex trade in our culture and around the world.

International Women's Day—PEERS has participated in International Women's Day events by joining the marches, speaking at rallies and having an information table when that has been appropriate.

SWAG volunteers—PEERS staff and participants have volunteered at the SWAG office. This has helped the women at PEERS become familiar with some of the other activities that are taking place for women in the region.

ANTI-POVERTY GROUPS

Together Against Poverty (TAPS)

TAPS has always been a supportive neighbour in the building where PEERS' office is located, providing access to photocopying before PEERS had a reliable copier and to information about a range of programs and services available to people living in poverty. PEERS staff regularly refer participants to TAPS for help with disputes or problems with their landlord, with welfare appeals, or to get their disability status.

Welfare advocacy training—TAPS has provided PEERS staff with training on the system of social services available, who is eligible for what, what decisions can be appealed and how, and policies of the welfare system.

YOUTH SERVICES

YM-YWCA Outreach Services

Lay counselling training—The staff at the Y provided the first group of PEERS staff with their initial peer counselling training and then provided ongoing clinical supervision for the first year.

AIDS AGENCIES

AIDS Vancouver Island's Street Outreach Services (SOS)

SOS donated space and assisted in finding participants for the Capital Regional District Sexually Exploited Youth research project (1996). They provided coffee, food, and an

area for both the interviewers and the participants to wait and to talk with clients and staff about the project. SOS has, on several occasions, hired PEERS volunteers or staff. SOS staff have been very supportive. They have and continue to act as mentors for new PEERS staff, inviting them to spend time in the drop-in and talk with mutual SOS/PEERS clients and sharing information on harm reduction and philosophies of care. SOS has, from the beginning, been PEERS' sole provider of condoms and other harm reduction equipment for PEERS Outreach program. SOS is also the creator and distributor of the 'Bad Date Sheet', the pamphlet that details violent clients of sex workers to help in keeping them safer from violence. SOS has written many letters of support and assisted PEERS in various programs including doing workshops for participants and staff, using their drop-in to advertise employment positions, education opportunities, and PEERS events.

SERVICES FOR HOMELESS WOMEN

Sandy Merriman House

Sandy Merriman House donated space for PEERS' PA meetings and support group before PEERS had space of their own. Sandy Merriman House staff write many letters of support for various projects and funding proposals. Further, Sandy Merriman staff have partnered with PEERS in information dissemination to the street level sex workers. They invite PEERS to do weekly workshops with sex trade women in the Sandy Merriman Drop-in, allowing the women to create relationships with PEERS staff, and familiarize themselves with PEERS programs and services. They also partner with PEERS to do advocacy and support for mutual clients.

SERVICES FOR MARGINALIZED MEN

John Howard Society

John Howard Society has supported PEERS from the beginning, providing free labour for painting the office as well as referring women sent to them through the Courts Diversion programs as clients.

POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Camosun College

Tourism Training—The Program Manager of the Travel and Tourism Department of the School of Business at the local community college called PEERS to offer her assistance after she read an article in the local paper describing a training project PEERS was hoping to develop. PEERS continues to work with the Travel and Tourism Department incorporating retail and hospitality certifications into the training programs for participants who are interested.

BEST—a four week pre-employment course entitled the BEST Program has been attended by PEERS participants for three years, the courses offered once or twice a year. Participants have sometimes all been from PEERS and at other times the class has been mixed. This has been a valuable bridging program for PEERS' participants who are sometimes years away from any formal schooling.

University of Victoria

Classes—On a number of occasions, PEERS staff have been invited to present their story and to talk about PEERS to classes in the School of Nursing and the School of Social Work.

Practicum and Co-op Students—On several occasions, students from UVic have come to work at PEERS. For three years, PEERS has had students from the School of Social Work's BSW program do a one semester practicum placement in one of the programs. Many of the students have had personal experience in the sex trade themselves.

please God just let him come
now so I can go home. Don't
these people understand I have
cats that need me at home?
Please and I'll never ask again.

And Lee. And Linda. And Terry.
And Cheryl. I still think of Cheryl.

And Speedy.

And Steve.

And the loves of my life.

The words that I remember being
spoken to me.

"Move your hand.

"At least my parents loved me.

"Can I put you on my leash and
walk you downtown tomorrow?

"I'll cut you up and keep you in
my cupboard, or was it "I'll
chain you up and keep you in my
cupboard ?

"It sounds like things are pretty
out of control where you are.

"You have to have hope, Al.

"Please just tell me where you
are. Don't worry about anything.

Your cats will be fine.

And the words I know and can
hear in my head but still can't
write them down, let alone think
about them.

That December of the Christmas
lights and everything after.

For one summer, PEERS also hired a student from the Creative Writing Department, Journalism program. Part of her wage was subsidized by the provincial government's student summer employment program. Her job was to help support the campaign to build PEERS Place, a training, employment and housing project that PEERS pursued for a year or so.

BC Health Research Foundation Project, Dr. Cecilia Benoit, Department of Sociology—Dr. Benoit joined the team at PEERS as part of the BCHRF research project. She has worked very closely with PEERS, reviewing the research questions and interview format with staff in detail. As part of this project, some of the interviewers (all of whom had personal experience in the trade) took part in a workshop on Participatory Action Research with a primarily academic group in attendance. This event provided a significant learning experience for everyone involved.

MEDIA

Monday Magazine—*Monday Magazine* is a free local weekly paper that has a double page of escort ads every week. These ads are one of its major revenue sources. During PEERS' first year of operation, PEERS staff decided that advertising the existence of PEERS on the escort page would be a good way to reach a large number of potential clients. For a month or so, PEERS paid for the ads and then two Board members arranged to meet with the editor and proposed that the paper donate space to PEERS. After some negotiations, the paper agreed to put in an ad for PEERS at no charge when they had the space available. They put together three potential ads in varying sizes. For several years, the ads appeared some weeks and not others, often quite small but not always. Then a stretch of months went by without any ads appearing, so the new Director of Education at PEERS asked the new editor of *Monday Magazine* if they had changed their policy and reminded him of their commitment. They are now putting a very large ad in almost every issue. We know from the women's stories that this has been a very effective way to reach people and that women have contacted PEERS directly as a result of seeing the ad in *Monday*.

The Times Colonist—From PEERS' earliest days, there has been editorial support from the local daily paper. *TC* staff has always included PEERS' voice in articles relating to prostitution and have been willing to work very hard to understand the issue. In the June 11, 2001 edition there was a large colour picture on the front page which showed a photo of a PEERS staff member giving a presentation at a local high school.

Focus on Women Magazine—A local monthly magazine for women, *Focus on Women* has taken a particularly strong stance of supporting PEERS. The magazine has carried two major articles about PEERS, numerous smaller ones, and has both hosted and covered PEERS fund raising events.

MUNICIPALITIES—CITY OF VICTORIA

Social Planning Department—Initially the City of Victoria, through its Social Planning Department, sponsored the Downtown Women's Project which culminated in the construction of Sandy Merriman House. Since PEERS was also an outgrowth of that initial process, in a way, the City has always felt a certain sense of kinship with PEERS. As a result, PEERS is consistently invited to participate in activities sponsored by the City and is recognized by the City as having significant expertise in the area of sexual exploitation and prostitution. In 1997, the City sponsored a research project of its own and came to PEERS for assistance in the project design, potential interviewers, project advertising and dissemination of the report to the participants of PEERS. The resulting report, "Wanted, Vulnerable Youth and Children," sparked the formation of CRAT (Capital Regional Action Team, formerly Sexually Exploited Youth in the Capital Regional District).

from the sex trade to the tourist trade

PEERS GIVES PROSTITUTES A CHANCE & A CHOICE



by Andrew MacLeod

Megan Lewis & Jannit Rabinovitch

By appearances, there is little special about the Pacific Isle Motel. A box-like, unadorned structure on a particularly bleak stretch of Gorge Road East, it is currently run as a "welfare motel," with rooms rented cheaply to the nearly-broke. A few months ago, the sign out front read "Best rats in town," and one couldn't help but suspect it might be the truth.

That doesn't dull the excitement of Megan Lewis, executive director of the Prostitutes Empowerment Education

and Resource Society. Whenever she and other PEERS members have a few free minutes, she says, they zip over to the motel from their View Street office. They discuss where to plant flowers, how to design the deck and what the renovations might be like.

PEERS has been attempting to raise up to \$850,000 to cover the purchase price plus upgrading by October 31. As the deadline looms they are considering asking for an extension; though many in the community have been support-

ive of PEERS' dreams, and many proposals have been sent out to funding bodies, little money has been forthcoming. "We've been getting a lot of rejection letters," says Jannit Rabinovitch, a founder of and fundraiser for PEERS.

PEERS hopes to run the hotel pretty much as it is now, except the staff will be people who are leaving the sex trade and learning tourism skills in cooperation with Camosun College. PEERS is doing it, says Lewis, "because there is

CRAT is made up of representation from municipal councils, area police departments, Ministries of Attorney General and Children and Families, School Districts, parent groups and a variety of local agencies and services. PEERS was asked to join CRAT at its inception and has participated on a variety of sub-committees. PEERS has always seen its primary function as that of bringing the voice of experience to the table. At times, professionals have resisted the inclusion of that voice or done little to facilitate such inclusion. This has led to a somewhat strained relationship with CRAT at times, although recently it has been improving. CRAT works with not-for-profit and government bodies addressing the subject of sexually exploited youth and creating solutions for some of the basic issues these youth face (housing, drug use, etc.).

POLICE DEPARTMENTS

Victoria Police Department

Vice Section—During the first years of PEERS' existence, relations with the Victoria Police Department were strained. Some officers saw PEERS as an obstruction to their enforcement activities and others were uncomfortable with PEERS' policy of supporting women wherever they are, in the trade or out. Over time, the police have begun to see that PEERS is able to provide substantial support to women and men wanting to leave the trade and that the agency's non-judgmental approach works well with the community of sex trade workers. Regular meetings now take place between members of the Vice Squad and PEERS Outreach staff to discuss specific incidents between police and sex trade workers, enforcement plans, and the development of a shared enforcement strategy. Both organizations have agreed that the enforcement focus should be on safety for the women, targeting violent tricks and pimps.

REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Capital Health Region

The CHR Street Nurses, part of the public health program, were instrumental in helping PEERS create its outreach program. PEERS outreach volunteers would walk with the nurses along the track and hand out bad date sheets, condoms, do needle exchange and be introduced to the sex trade workers. They provided medical support, shared their perspective, and gave PEERS condoms and needles to distribute.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS

District 61 (Greater Victoria)

During the first years of PEERS' existence, a few individual teachers invited PEERS to come and speak to their classes about the sex trade, recruitment strategies, and the real experience of The Life as opposed to Hollywood's *Pretty Woman* version. As well, Public Health nurses began to identify schools with girls who were being recruited into the trade or they felt were at risk. When PEERS approached staff in some of these schools and asked if they could come and speak to students, they were greeted with a negative response and a complete denial that the school had "girls like that."

Eventually PEERS staff and Board members made a presentation to the School Board asking that the organization be endorsed and that support for presentations be articulated by the School Board. This appeal was successful and many requests for school presentations began to come in. Some schools have required PEERS staff to make their presentation to the Parent Advisory Council first in order to reassure parents that the presentation would not glamourize the sex trade.

POLITICIANS

PEERS has always maintained a relationship with both our provincial Member of the Legislative assembly, from 1991-2001, Gretchen Brewin, and our federal Member of Parliament, David Anderson. They seemed pleased to be kept informed as to how

PEERS was doing whether it directly related to them or not. When PEERS was successful in receiving funding from either level of government, our local politicians have been proud to present the cheque. They have both taken a fair amount of interest in PEERS and seem genuinely pleased with how well the organization is doing. Government staff have told PEERS that maintaining an ongoing relationship with the MLA and MP has made a difference.

section five

peers as a model project or a project model

This section describes a number of alternative perspectives of PEERS and is intended to help make the story of PEERS useful as a model for others. This section will speak to the importance of the active participation of grassroots members both on a theoretical and practical level.

There are as many theories of social change and organizational development as there are communities that want to facilitate change. Some of these theories seem to be of more use to the theorists than they are to anyone working at a community level but others do seem to help put the work we are doing in a useful context. In this section, some of the background work that has helped explain PEERS and move it forward is outlined.

PEERS is viewed as an organization in transition and as an empowerment model. It is looked at as an example of a population health approach; through a health promotion lens; as an example of effective grass roots community development and as a best practice.

the uniqueness of peers as an organization

Like any organization, PEERS has gone through a variety of stages and changes. In many ways, PEERS has a lot in common with any direct service agency. But PEERS is special. PEERS was developed by ex-sex trade workers and continues to be managed and staffed by many ex-sex trade workers. Although on occasion PEERS has brought in others from the community with specific skills, the priority in hiring always goes to someone who has personal experience in the trade.

PEERS will never be able to move step-by-step through the traditional stages of a maturing organization. These stages imply a linear process of growth that is shared by all the members of the organization. However, built into the very existence of PEERS is the ongoing commitment to recruiting and training women newly exited from the sex trade. This means that PEERS will always have staff who have learned a set of survival skills more suited to the sex trade or the street than to the efficient and smooth operation of a service-providing agency. Inevitably there will be staff conflict, power

in this section you will find:

The Uniqueness of PEERS as an Organization

including PEERS values and beliefs and a chart of the changes in decision making, p 75-78

PEERS as an Empowerment Model p 78

PEERS as a Population Health/Health Promotion Approach in Action, p 79-80

PEERS as an Example of Effective Grass Roots Community Development, p 81

PEERS as a Best Practice, p 81-82

The Importance of Participation

An overview of why it is so important to include experiential people in the design, development and delivery of their own programs and services, p 82-83

Impossible! A group of prostitutes can't start a social service agency much less run one.

Man at Building Bridges: A Conference on Women's Health, Victoria, May 2000.

conflicts, and communication problems. This reality must be anticipated and accepted as part of the environment. This is not to suggest that a climate of constant conflict is inevitable; however, an expectation that PEERS, in time, will become stable and like any other organization is unrealistic and undesirable. Learning to work with a full range of exited sex trade workers means learning to work with strong personalities, many of whom will spend their lives healing from the exploitation and abuse they have experienced.

Some members of the organization may not have difficulty in communication. However their history may manifest in other ways that can be equally frustrating - losing important documents, forgetting appointments, showing up late, and, in general, being less responsible than their position may seem to require. Others may have a strong preference for working alone and will become super responsible, forging ahead with tasks and decisions without any input from their co-workers because they are so excited that they are finally making a difference and having something meaningful to do.

Creating and maintaining an organization of ex-sex trade workers can be both incredibly challenging and incredibly satisfying. Knowing that it won't be easy and that the same struggles will have to be repeated over and over can help ease the frustration. Becoming part of an organization like PEERS is a life-changing experience for everyone involved.

PEERS has chosen to bring in outside help on several occasions to work with the staff and Board on the development of the organization. Sometimes this has meant bringing in a mediator to help resolve a conflict, a facilitator to help develop a shared vision of the future, or an organizational development consultant to help develop a workable structure. The decision making structure of PEERS has changed many times during the years PEERS has existed. It has gone from primarily a Board responsibility to primarily staff managed with an advisory Board. Currently PEERS describes itself as a collective but this structure can be slow and cumbersome, occasionally impossible, and once again staff are looking at how to make the organization operate more easily. Constant change is integral to PEERS and there is nothing to indicate that that is going to change.

peers' values and beliefs

Although the following principles have never been written out explicitly, they have been implicit in the work and direction of PEERS. The principles significantly affect the organization and its structure.

1. PEERS' mandate is to provide support for people coming out of the sex trade and for people in the sex trade.
2. Decision-making at PEERS will at all times rest primarily with people who have been or are in the sex trade. This applies to both the Board and the staff.
3. One of the ways PEERS supports people coming out of the trade is by hiring them as staff as well as by offering programs and services.
4. The staff of PEERS should always include people who are exiting the trade themselves, many of whom will have come to PEERS as clients. This means that at all times some staff will have recent experience in the trade. It is healthy to have a mix of staff who have recently exited and staff who have some distance from their time in the trade.
5. PEERS will never be and should never be like more traditional employers in that the expectations of employees must reflect the reality that they are exiting the trade and allow room for that process to take place.

Decision-Making at PEERS

Date	Event	Details
Oct 1995	Incorporation	Everyone was a volunteer. The same people were the Board members & worked on projects.
Feb 1997	Office Opened	Board acted as overseers. It included paid staff. Jannit Rabinovitch was named Executive Director. All major decisions were made with input from Board and staff.
Feb 1998	New director	Jannit began work on PEERS Place. Megan Lewis, one of the original five staff, became Director.
Aug 1998	Acting Director	Megan went on stress leave and Gabrielle, also one of the original five, became the Acting Director.
Jan 1999	Staff off Board	Core group of original five staff took over decision making in place of having a Director and all staff came off the Board. Board became advisory only.
May 1999	First Board/staff retreat	All staff, including core staff and project staff, are included in decision making which is described as collaborative, acknowledging that some have more wisdom on a topic.
Sept 1999	Staff statement	"In the spirit of community, PEERS makes decisions collectively, while trusting the expertise of each individual. Each staff member is equally valuable to the operation of the organization. Decisions are reported to the Board of Directors, which acts as an advisory body."
Jan 2000	Board/staff retreat	Need for program review & evaluation established. Confirmation of the statement established by staff after last retreat describing the decision making process as collective.
May 2000	Board/staff Retreat	That there is no distinction between core and contract staff is explicitly stated.
Jan 2001	Co-coordinators	Two co-coordinators established; decisions continue to be made collaboratively at weekly staff meetings primarily by consensus though sometimes by two thirds majority of staff present.

In the beginning, any time I mentioned any ideas to you, you would say 'do it' and I did it, rather than you doing it for me. This was empowering. You stayed in the background as a support and were there when we needed you but you trusted us to do it ourselves. This was key. Often supporters take on a paternal role and end up taking over, losing the essence.

Barb Smith in a note to Jannit

If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up.

Adrienne Rich

6. Part of the mandate of PEERS is to support people exiting the trade whether they are staff or clients. PEERS recognizes that the skills needed to survive in the trade may differ significantly from the skills needed to develop programs and services in a social service agency and that the process of transition will be different for everyone and will take some time.
7. There will be times that PEERS will have to hire non-experiential people for their expertise and experience but these people should not and cannot take on significant decision making or leadership roles.
9. For many staff, working at PEERS is a training opportunity and they should be encouraged to try out different jobs to establish which is the best fit for them. To this end, they should not be expected to excel at whatever task they happened to be hired for when they began working at PEERS.
10. PEERS' goal is to create an organization that recognizes and celebrates diversity and an environment that is safe, supportive and caring for everyone involved.

peers djs dn empowerment model

The concept of organizational empowerment comes from democratic management theory. In an empowering organization, individuals assume genuine decision making roles and hence become empowered through their work. Empowered organizations are those which develop and exert influence in the larger community to promote system level change. (Wallerstein, 1992) PEERS acts both as a platform for personal empowerment and as a catalyst for change within the context of the larger community.

Within the literature of health and social science, powerlessness has been defined as a subjective or perceived phenomenon: the expectancy or belief that an individual cannot determine the occurrence of outcomes (Seeman, 1959). This definition speaks directly to the experience of the women who started PEERS. As Kathy stated in describing the experience of herself and her friends in the sex trade, "You know there has got to be something better out there, but you can't get out to find it."

Empowerment is a multi-level construct that involves people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment. (Rappaport, 1987) PEERS provides a daily opportunity for ex-sex trade workers to assume a degree of control over their lives that many have never had an opportunity to experience before. Staff are consistently hired from within the community of current and former sex trade workers and given significant decision making power over the day to day operations of the agency and over the creation and development of new initiatives. The Board, which includes both experiential and non-experiential members, acts in a support and advisory capacity.

The very existence of PEERS has introduced a new perspective on the sex trade within the Capital Region, becoming a part of shifting community standards and ultimately, community behaviour. The discourse that has emerged from PEERS has reinforced some obvious but unspoken knowledge – there is a large market of men with money buying sex from women (and girls and boys) in every city and town in Canada. Public acknowledgment of this fact is an important step in the process of change.

peers as a population health/ health promotion approach IN ACTION

From the perspective of the women whose lives have been dramatically altered by PEERS, PEERS is clearly an organization that promotes health. Historically, health care and health care services have tended to be more narrowly defined. Within the field of health recently, however, policy makers have started looking at what makes the population healthy or, as it is starting to be known, population health.

One of the ways to increase the health of the population is to focus on activities that promote health. In 1986, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion identified the major factors that influence health. These factors or “prerequisites for health” extend beyond the traditional concepts of health care services. In 1994, the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health (ACPH) released a document entitled *Strategies for Population Health: Investing in the Health of Canadians* which identified the following “determinants of health” or factors that determine the health of individuals:

1. income and social status
2. social support networks
3. education
4. employment and working conditions
5. physical environments
6. biology and genetic endowment
7. personal health practices and coping skills
8. healthy child development
9. health services

According to *Strategies for Population Health*, “Strategies to influence population health status must address the broad range of health determinants in a comprehensive and interrelated way.” In BC, the Office of Health Promotion within the Ministry of Health produced a strategic plan that outlined a set of Health Promotion Principles. These principles build on the understanding that in order to promote health a number of basic principles must be applied. They recommend that “individuals and groups wanting to adopt a more health promoting approach can integrate these principles into their policies and programs” (BC Ministry of Health, 1993).

Health promotion:

1. Builds the capacity of individuals and communities
2. Enables people to take control of their own health
3. Respects a “bottom-up” agenda
4. Encourages multisectoral participation and solutions
5. Develops solutions WITH the people experiencing the issue
6. Shares decision making and power to “even the playing field”
7. Challenges the status quo
8. Respects the opinions of and values all participants
9. Focuses on the underlying factors affecting health
10. Builds on existing strengths
11. Uses a problem-solving rather than service-based approach

12. Develops policies which are supportive of health
13. Shifts resources to the local level
14. Works within a long term vision

Toward a Healthy Future: Second Report on the Health of Canadians (1999), also prepared by ACPH, describes how a population health approach focuses on the interrelated conditions that underlie health and then uses what is learned to suggest actions that will improve the well-being of all Canadians. A population health approach uses both short- and long-term strategies to improve the underlying and interrelated conditions in the environment that enable all Canadians to be healthy, and reduce inequities in the underlying conditions that put some Canadians at a disadvantage for attaining and maintaining optimal health.

Population health concerns itself with the living and working environments that affect people's health, the conditions that enable and support people in making healthy choices, and the services that promote and maintain health. Population health strategies address the entire range of individual and collective factors that determine health. Population health strategies are designed to affect whole groups or populations of people.

PEERS embodies the very essence of health promotion. PEERS is based on an intuitive understanding of the determinants of health applied in a practical, functional, everyday way. PEERS incorporates the abstract principles of health promotion outlined above and provides an excellent example of their application. Below, the principles of health promotion appear in italics in a description of how they are incorporated into the activities of PEERS.

For example, as an organization, PEERS *enables people to take control of their own health, respects a "bottom-up" agenda, develops solutions WITH the people experiencing the issue and shares decision making and power to "even the playing field"* by ensuring that over half of the Board of Directors have personal experience in the sex trade, by having a commitment to hiring ex-sex trade workers and by encouraging clients to play a major role in deciding which programs and services most meet their needs.

PEERS recognizes the importance of *building the capacity of individuals and communities* and has made individual and organizational capacity building a priority by providing access to personal support and training programs for staff and volunteers, by holding regular facilitated joint Board and staff strategic planning sessions and by encouraging all members of PEERS to learn new skills and to do what they need to facilitate their personal healing process. It is precisely because PEERS respects the opinions of and values all participants including one of the most marginalized groups in our society—prostitutes—that it *challenges the status quo*.

By working directly with women who have experienced life in the sex trade first hand, PEERS is able to understand and focus on the underlying factors affecting health for prostitutes, a population with extremely wide ranging health issues. PEERS provides a wonderful opportunity to see the effectiveness of what happens when we shift resources to the local level. Individual lives are changed and little by little a community can come to see that all of its members share in the life of the community and have a responsibility to each other. PEERS has developed strong ties and unlikely partnerships with many members of the business community and works closely to encourage multisectoral participation and solutions, to build on existing strengths within the region and to help in the development of a long term vision, not just for the organization but for the whole community.

peers as an example of effective grass roots community development

Community development is an approach to working with communities that begins from the bottom-up. This approach is based on the following assumptions.

- People most affected by an issue or experience are the best judges of what they need and how to begin to address the issue;
- Part of the purpose of the process is to build capacity for the participants;
- Partnerships with different sectors of the community will increase effectiveness;
- The community development process challenges the status quo and creates change;
- The focus is on underlying factors not merely surface symptoms; and
- Change to deeply rooted conditions can be slow, so a long-term vision is essential.

When beginning a community development process, there are several key steps:

- create an environment of participation;
- clearly identify the issue and agree on a goal to begin to address it;
- have enough time to learn how the community works and to acquire the skills to have a significant impact;
- establish objectives, a clear strategy and a way of evaluating the effectiveness of the process as it proceeds; and
- make people aware of what is happening in order to change attitudes, change behaviour and create new responses.

PEERS is based on a community development approach because such an approach represents the best chance of creating both sustained and deeply rooted change in attitudes and behaviours present within the larger community and programs and services designed to meet the identified needs of sex trade workers.

peers as a best practice

“Best Practices’ is a term used in a wide variety of contexts to refer to actions, initiatives or projects from which others can learn, adapting them to their own situations” (Serge, 1999). Using the term “best practice” usually implies that a rigorous evaluation has been completed combining quality assurance, a review of evidence-based practice, cost analyses and the identification of benchmarks. In the area of supports and services to sex trade workers, no such evaluation has taken place.

When identifying a best practice model, it is important to answer the question “Best practice from whose perspective?” For example, it is possible that programs and services could be created to address the issue of the sex trade that serve the needs of others in the community. In some communities moving the trade out of sight has been seen as a goal. Consequences, such as an increase in danger due to working in dark and isolated settings and the loss of connection due to being out of reach of outreach workers, were not considerations. Strategies designed from the perspective of the police or emergency room personnel, professionals who far too frequently view sex trade workers as hopeless or, at best, unable to make appropriate decisions for themselves, are likely to miss the most important factors from the perspective of the sex trade workers. They would develop strategies that differ greatly from those designed by those with personal experience in the sex trade.

PEERS ran into this difference of perspective in its early days when the local police believed that PEERS was enabling women by providing supports and services to them even if they chose to continue working in the trade. Current government funding policies often support harm reduction over support programs, presumably based on the premise that no significant change will take place in their lives any way so there is no point to allocating funds towards such a remote possibility.

“Determining and implementing ‘best practices’ clearly occurs within a complex and wide ranging network of policy and funding issues.” (Ministry of Health, 1999) Policy relevant to improving the lives of sex trade workers range from access to basic harm reduction, eg. condoms and clean needles, through funding for personal supports such as counselling and training, to larger social policy and systemic change in attitudes, community standards and behaviour.

PEERS’ commitment is and always has been to the perspective of those who are or were in the sex trade. Using the perspective of current and former sex trade workers, as well as, increasingly, policy makers, PEERS can be considered a best practice. PEERS’ experience demonstrates that the organization has created a model that works and that can provide significant lessons for others who wish to create programs and services to support sex trade workers within communities beyond Victoria. For example, HRDC has recently asked PEERS to begin establishing a sister organization in Vancouver.

the importance of participation¹

Participation is a crucial component when advocating for and implementing positive social change. The benefits of participation in addressing complex social issues such as commercial sexual exploitation must be understood to ensure any long-term success.

The benefits and unique perspective that experiential people bring with their participation must be recognized and acknowledged in order to create meaningful programs, policies, services and strategies to address an issue. The benefits of participation in community development must be taken seriously to ensure any long-term success.

Simply put, participation is the ability to define one’s own issues and to participate in addressing them. Fostering participation means creating a supportive environment in which experiential people—those who have had personal experience with the identified issue being addressed—can realize their own potential and be instrumental in the development and implementation of public policy and programs that affect them and those who share their experience. Experiential people are important experts in developing tools for and with their peers. Putting a human face on an issue makes it possible to personalize the often-denied or misunderstood reality of the experience and helps people feel less isolated and alienated.

Programs and services developed and delivered by experiential people have a higher success rate than other programs and services because they are built on:

Trust: When experiential people play an active role in programming, trust is easier to establish with the alienated and disconnected, many of whom do not and will not access more professionalized services.

Commitment: Active participation creates a feeling of ownership in the process and long term commitment to addressing the issue.

Involvement: People need and want to play a meaningful role in addressing their issues as part of their own healing process. Creating a mechanism for their participation allows this to happen.

¹An earlier version of this statement was written by Jannit Rabinovitch, Cherry Kingsley and Fadi Fadel for Save the Children Canada. A set of principles of participation from the earlier version are attached as Appendix B.

Connection: Projects based on participation create a feeling of camaraderie that is very attractive. People line up to be part of such projects.

Safety: Creating spaces where experiential people can trust that their voices will be heard and respected is of fundamental importance. Many marginalized people have developed a sense of isolation based on mistrust and it is vital that they begin to feel safe.

The benefits of participation are experienced both by the individuals involved, who have the opportunity to participate, and the system that encompasses the delivery of strategies to address their issue. Involving the experiential provides access to a wealth of diversity, energy, information and experience to communities who are fighting to create a viable and healthy future for everyone.

The participation of those with personal experience:

- provides new and innovative solutions and strategies to address identified issues in situations where traditional approaches have not been effective;
- provides skills training and capacity building which increase the employability of participants;
- has a long lasting positive change on the lives of everyone involved;
- ensures that the voices and experiences of the marginalized are heard and considered by the individuals and organizations who are committed to addressing their issues; and
- is a part of a growing worldwide trend to involve people in decisions which affect them.

Participation cannot be defined consistently from project to project. It must be true to the individuals and the circumstances of each project. This means incorporating experiential participation during the planning stage, during development and implementation, and in an ongoing way into every outcome. The experiential must be included in developing the vision, be hired as staff, have a significant decision making role in all Boards, advisory committees or review panels as well as having the opportunity to become role models and mentors for others.

PEERS is an excellent example of an organization built with an understanding of the importance of participation of those directly affected by an issue. PEERS continues to be an organization which is led, managed and operated by ex-sex trade workers where programs and services are envisioned, created and delivered by ex-sex trade workers.

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APPENDIX A

SCHEDULE "A"

NON-RESIDENTIAL CONTRACTS

1. NAME OF PROGRAM/SERVICE

Prostitutes' Empowerment, Education and Recovery Society (PEERS) Outreach and Education Program

2. CLIENTS TO BE SERVED

- a. Description: women, men and children with a history of work in the sex trade including street prostitutes, call girls, escorts, massage & body workers, phone sex operators, and people engaged in the production of pornography as subjects. PEER operates within the geographic boundaries of the Capital Region but is available as a resource for all of Vancouver Island. The Project will work with all ages from children to adults.
- b. Numbers to be Served per Month:
Primary participants: 10-12 ex-prostitutes will work on a half-time basis
Part-time participants: 20 volunteers (all former or current prostitutes) will receive training, meet as a group, attend support groups, participate in the outreach program, work in the PEERS office and participate in other PEERS programs
Service recipients: 40 active prostitutes will be accessed on the street, through escort agencies, through the 24 hour phone line
Attending sessions: 50 members of the larger community will attend educational sessions in schools and other institutional and community settings
Each month a total of 120 different individuals will be served by this project. Many of these individuals will be involved for more than one month.
- c. Hours of Service: PEERS office will be open 8 hours a day, from 11:30 AM -7:30 PM 5 days a week, Monday-Friday. PEERS also operates a 24 hour phone line. The Street Outreach Program will operate in the evening, from midnight until 3:30 AM 5 days a week including on weekends.
- d. Referral Process: PEERS operates as a self-referral agency although educational material and in-service sessions will be developed and made available to appropriate service providers.

3. STAFF

- a. The contractor will employ 7 full-time staff or the equivalent in part-time employees in the provision of this service as follows:
 - three staff employed in the direct service delivery
 - two staff employed in the supervisory or support capacity
 - two staff employed in the admin support capacity
- b. Overall project coordinator: Jannit Rabinovitch, MES
Extensive background in project coordination, community development, experience with marginalized populations and with project development and supervision.
Counsellor: Certified trained counsellor to act as individual and team support and to provide clinical supervision to peer counsellors
Bookkeeper: Experienced professional bookkeeper to set-up and maintain books as well as train participant to assist her
Program Manager: Former prostitute with experience in PEERS program development
Street Outreach, Volunteer Coordinator, Admin Support Staff: All former prostitutes

4. DESCRIPTION OF SERVICE/PROGRAM

PEERS will:

- a) open an office out of which its outreach and education programs will operate
- b) provide training and support to former prostitutes employed by PEERS on an individualized basis in areas that are transferable
- c) provide a street outreach program 5 nights a week from midnight until 3:30 AM for street prostitutes
- d) provide advocacy and referral information to former and current prostitutes and others in the sex trade including information on existing training programs, other government programs

- and appropriate community services
- e) provide peer counselling and support to former and current prostitutes and others in the sex trade
 - f) develop and deliver educational material, both written and oral, on both youth and adult prostitution for various audiences including youth, at-risk populations, professionals such as those in the criminal justice system, health workers and social workers as well as students in those programs, service providers currently working with at-risk populations and the larger community
 - g) research and report on the needs of prostitutes, both youth and adults, in relation to education, training, employment, support, housing, etc. incorporating a review of the barriers to existing programs and services incorporation data on numbers, ages, barriers to choice, etc.
 - h) provide services to children and youth where the needs of that population may differ from adults
 - i) work as part of a team on an international conference of prostitutes to be held in BC and to be co-hosted by PEERS, the Province of BC, the Government of Canada and UNICEF
 - j) develop one or more ongoing projects to meet an identified need possibly including a Community Economic Development Project, a Prostitutes' Long-Term Stay Transition House or others with the understanding that this projects, itself, is funded on a one-time only basis

This program will begin Jan 1, 1997 and complete Jan 31, 1998.

5. GOALS/OBJECTIVES OF SERVICE

Short term Goals:

- a) Ten to twelve former prostitutes will be trained and employed on this project.
- b) Street Outreach and other support services will be provided to prostitutes, a population currently without specific targeted services.
- c) Educational materials will be developed and service providers will be educated to respond more appropriately to this population.
- d) Surveys will be conducted in order to provide detailed information about the needs of this population.

Long-Term Goals:

- a) A strategy for providing appropriate support to prostitutes will be developed that meets their self described needs.
- b) One or more ongoing projects will be developed, including funding commitments, to meet some of the identified needs.
- c) An increased understanding of prostitutes and the requirements of exiting prostitution will be created within the community and among policy makers.

6. METHOD OF DELIVERING PROGRAM/SERVICE

This project uses a community development approach starting with the real experts on prostitution and the consequences of that lifestyle, prostitutes themselves. By employing members of that community who have made the decision to exit prostitution and to deal with connected issues, PEERS is able to access a community that has remained isolated and invisible.

It is critical to the success of the PEERS Program that the primary participants are all former prostitutes. However, the group recognizes the need to incorporate some professional expertise into the program in order to ensure its success. This project will include a professional community development facilitator and a trained counsellor to provide leadership and support.

7. PROGRAM LOCATION

The project is renting an office in downtown Victoria and will operate within the Capital Regional District under the joint supervision of the regional offices of the Ministries of Education, Skills and Training and Children and Families.

8. SERVICE MONITORING

The Ministry of Children and Families, jointly with the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, will appoint liaison persons to this project. The primary method of monitoring the project will be through the liaison people.

a. The liaison people will be:

- i. a representative from the Ministry of Children and Families, currently Hank VanderPol, Acting Area Manager
- ii. a representative of the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, Deborah Rhymer Area Manager

Their duties will include:

- provide information and support
 - ensure contractor meets statutory obligations
 - communicate feedback to and from the contractor
 - ensure services are provided as required by the contractor
- b. The Ministries agree to work in cooperation with the contractor via the liaison persons, who will:
- monitor the contract
 - handle day-to-day communication between the Ministries and the agency
 - communicate agency concerns to the Ministries
 - promote a spirit of partnership
- c. The contractor agrees to work in cooperation with the Ministry of Children and Families and the Ministry of Education, Skill and Training to:
- maintain open communication between the Ministries, the Contractor, the program staff and the community
 - provide such information as may be required to determine that the services being provided under the terms of this Schedule are within the terms of the contract
 - allow access to locations where the services are being provided
- d. Ministry liaison person and project personnel, primarily the project coordinators, will maintain regular communication through:
- quarterly meetings from the commencement of the project the first of which to take place in April 1997
 - periodic reviews of expectations, overall work plans, budget forecasts and expenditures
 - assessing contract compliance
 - interviewing project participants and reviewing documentation
 - reviewing programs, project goals and objective and project deliverables]
- e. The Contractor will develop and maintain a feedback/evaluation method designed to collect comments from clients/consumers concerning the quality of service being provided by the Contractor. The information provided will be incorporated into the program and services wherever possible.

9. SERVICE REPORTS

A. Program Reports:

- The contractor will maintain monthly reports indicating the number of new requests for service, ongoing use of services, a breakdown of age of service users and some background information on service users such as number of years in the sex trade, education level, etc.
- The contractor will provide an Annual Program Report on the services provided, the demographics of the service users, a description of their service needs, their experience of using services, recommendations of the participants as to how to meet the needs of the target population, a summary of consumer feedback and the Contractor's own evaluation of the program.
- The contractor will participate with the Ministries in evaluating the outcomes of the services provided.

B. Financial Reports:

- The contractor will provide the Ministries with detailed program expenditures and incomes at the end of the project.
- The contractor will provide the Ministries with the minutes of the societies' Annual General Meeting and its annual financial report.
- The contractor will provide proof of incorporation.

C. Special Requirements:

This project is intended to provide programs and services to both youth and adults. The contractor is acutely aware of the issue of safety when working with youth, especially youth with a history of being sexually exploited and abused. The contractor understands that the safety of any children involved in the project must be ensured. To that end all programming will be organized so that no one will ever provide support or services to children or youth while being alone with them. At all times there will be at least two staff or a staff and a trained volunteer present.

It is understood that requiring a criminal record check on staff and volunteers for this population would act as a substantial deterrent to participation and would make it impossible to carry out the goals and objectives of the project. The contractor will take steps to assure that all staff and volunteers are aware of the seriousness of this issue and of the projects' policies. As well, a session on the importance of safety for children and youth presented by a professional counsellor will be a requirement for all project staff and volunteers.

10. CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND REVIEW PROTOCOL

In the event of a conflict arising between the contractor and the Ministries or among the contractor's employees, consumers and volunteers a meeting will be held with the express purpose of developing a strategy to resolve the conflict as soon as possible. Present at that meeting will be the project coordinator and the project liaison persons.

11. SUPPORTS FOR CLIENTS

The contractor has the right to support a client in their efforts to obtain services from the Ministries involved in this contract, or any other Ministry, or in the community. The Ministries understand that advocacy is a desirable component of service delivery.

12. BUDGET

Wages and Staff Expenses:

Staff	\$15/hr x 25 hrs/wk x 48 wks x 6 FTE's	\$108,000
Coordinator	\$30/hr x 20 hrs/wk x 50 wks	30,000
	Benefits (12%)	16,560
Counsellor	\$40/hr x 4 hrs/wk x 48 wks	7,680
Bookkeeper	\$25/hr x 5 hrs/wk x 52 wks	6,500
	GST	993
Staff Development	\$1000/FTE	6,000
	Staff Subtotal	\$175,733

Operating Expenses:

Rent	\$565/mo x 12 months	6,780
Office Supplies	\$100/mo x 12 months	1,200
Phone	\$100/mo x 12 months	1,200
Transportation	\$20/wk x 48 wks	960
Outreach Expenses	\$150/mo x 11 months	1,650
Honorariums	\$20/person x 5 people/wk x 48 wks	4,800
Food	\$25/wk x 48 wks	1,200
Administration		2,477
	Expenses Subtotal	\$20,467

Start-up Fee 4,000

TOTAL \$200,000

APPENDIX B

Principles of Meaningful Participation

1. The principle of meaningful and visible decision making of the experiential.

Experiential people must play a meaningful and visible decision making role in the development of any and all efforts. Wherever possible they should play a role in the development of the participation process itself.

2. The principle of realistic participation.

Opportunities, support and resources for participation must be realistic and address the circumstances under which experiential people live. Some ways to facilitate participation include; paying for expertise, using non-intimidating processes, interpreting the culture of government and law in plain language, genuine willingness to listen and learn from the experiences of those involved, open dialogue, room to speak openly and to trust that support will translate into meaningful and appropriate outcomes as well as pragmatic things like covering the costs of transportation and day-care.

3. The principle of capacity building.

Commitment to a capacity building approach in addressing an issue means that those who have personally experienced the issue will be supported to become a central part in the creation and delivery of services. They must have access to whatever training and support they need to facilitate their participation.

4. The principle of recognition of expertise.

The only real experts on an issue are those who have personal experience in it. They must be considered an integral part of all local, regional, national and international dialogues and be respected and supported by community and culture. They should be paid for their expertise and be seriously considered for any employment opportunities created in the development of strategies designed to address commercial sexual exploitation of children, youth and adults.

5. The principle of meaningful exchange.

All efforts to address an issue must include the capacity or opportunity for meaningful exchange among the partners. Systems professionals can learn from those with direct experience and the experiential can acquire marketable skills during the process of participation so that they can move beyond the sex trade if they choose. Both communities can play a meaningful role in creating change. Processes that use the experiences and expertise of the marginalized must create a better life opportunity for them or they become part of perpetuating exploitation.

6. The principle of safe, voluntary and confidential participation.

The safety of those who participate in the development and implementation of solutions and strategies must be a primary concern. Their anonymity must be respected, confidentiality must be explicitly acknowledged, and all involvement must be voluntary.

7. The principle of self-help.

The process must acknowledge the value and importance of experiential participants helping themselves and each other. It must recognize that considerable time, effort and resources may be required to help heal from the traumatic effects of many experiences and that opportunities must be created for experiential people to gather together, and to talk to each other without expectations.

8. The principle of accountability.

Experiential people must be able to play a role in monitoring and evaluating the actions taken by government and the community in addressing their issues.

9. The principle of flexibility.

Meeting times, styles and locations must reflect the needs of those involved, not the needs of the facilitators or of other community organizations. For example, it may not always be necessary that the same person participate at each step of the process. It must be recognized that the need for continuity can have more to do with institutional culture than the needs of the project. As well, everyone must be willing and able to change the approach when appropriate.

10. The principle of commitment to outcomes.

Remember that experiential people are engaging in this process because they believe it will make a difference. Everyone involved in the process must be committed to change. It is important to recognize that everyone involved is challenging the status quo by engaging in the process.

11. The principle of a long-term vision.

It is important to recognize that this process takes time and that deeply rooted change can be slow. It requires focusing on underlying factors and not merely addressing surface symptoms.

12. The principle of meeting people where they are.

This can mean literally going to locations where the marginalized feel safe and comfortable, as well as figuratively, by finding ways to accommodate the needs of the experiential so that the process belongs to them.