



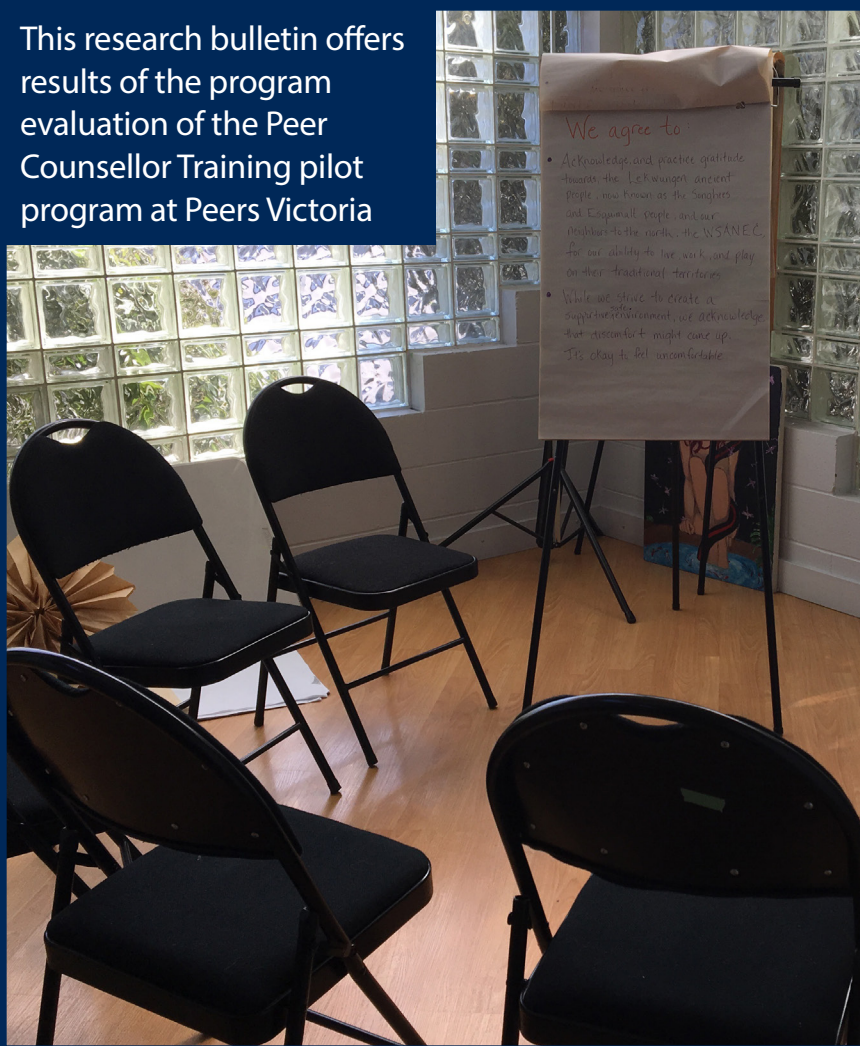
# Trauma-Informed Peer Counselling Training for Sex Workers in Victoria

Peers Victoria Resources Society has been providing support services for people in the sex work industry for over 22 years. This peer counselling training program was requested by Peers' program participants and staff in order for community members to learn concrete skills to provide peer-to-peer mental health supports.

This 10-week counselling training program was funded through an *Island Health Community Wellness* grant and carried out in partnership with researchers at the University of Victoria.



This research bulletin offers results of the program evaluation of the Peer Counsellor Training pilot program at Peers Victoria



# THE PROGRAM

## BACKGROUND

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This course taught foundational counselling skills to folks in the Peers community in order to address gaps in mental health service and supports. These skills included:

- Establishing healthy relationships
- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Reflective listening and empathy
- Self-regulation
- Principles of trauma-informed care for vulnerable populations

Graduates of the program have the opportunity to transition into more in-depth counselling training at other agencies, such as Esquimalt Neighbourhood House.

## WHY HAVE A COUNSELLING SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM FOR SEX WORKERS?

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### Mental wellness & stigma are important and related issues facing sex workers

- Oftentimes, sex workers report experiencing trauma and violence both in childhood and at work—yet these community members struggle with high rates of *untreated* mental and physical health challenges.<sup>1</sup>
- The stigma of sex work heightens mental health-related challenges.

### Accessing mental health services has not been easy for sex workers

- Sex workers' mental health needs are often not adequately addressed by mainstream healthcare services due to stigma. Past experiences of discrimination in counselling have led to personal shame and mistrust of therapists. In fact, sex workers are more likely to access emergency rooms when life become challenging.<sup>2</sup>
- Peer support services can help to decolonize mental health services by encouraging community-based care models that acknowledge oppression and discrimination faced by sex workers.

### Peer-to-peer approaches have been successful

- Peer support models for sex workers have been shown to be effective in the areas of health promotion and harm reduction. Peer support has also been useful for supporting folks living with depression and other mental health issues across vulnerable populations.<sup>3,4,5</sup>



# What did the course look like?

The Peer Counselling Training Program ran for 10 weeks in the fall of 2018.

Nine participants attended a three hour session each week.

The course content was taught by facilitators, discussed in a circle and then practiced by the participants in groups of two or three.

## Participants practiced:

### Self-regulation and coping skills

*Grounding, Containment, and Body Awareness*

### Understanding the therapeutic relationship

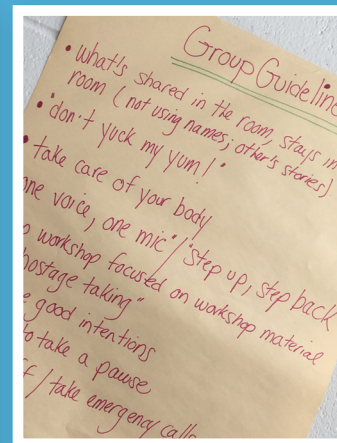
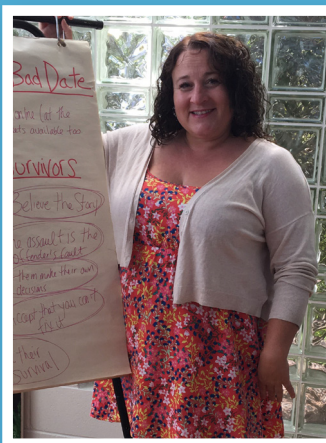
*Recognizing their own boundaries and setting boundaries with others*

### Therapy skills

*Empathic reflections, asking appropriate questions*

*"I noticed that there's a bit more strength there. Instead of just putting up with whatever I will make myself aware of what I'm feeling, more so now at the end of the course than I was before."*

BRANDI – Participant



The course was held in the group space at Peers (see cover) and co-led by Shannon Raison (left) and Michele Powell (middle). Group guidelines (right) were established to facilitate supportive group discussions.





*"I've definitely...made way more of an effort myself to be more present in conversations with my friends"*

ALEX – Participant

*"...I was totally like activated like emotionally and it got pretty intense which isn't like entirely a bad thing in my opinion because I started looking at some of those things which I was not looking at before."*

TIGER LILY – Participant

*"I'm definitely more aware...of myself and how I'm acting towards other people and picking up on certain things and body language"*

ROSIE – Participant

# EVALUATION RESEARCH

## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS WANT TO KNOW?

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1. Can participants learn to use these foundational counselling skills in their lives?
2. How does this training program impact their confidence and empowerment, as well as their community solidarity and support?

## FINDINGS

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### 1. Skills assessment

As part of the program, the course instructors completed a mini 'report card' of how well participants were learning the counselling skills. These were the areas they evaluated:

#### Nonverbal skills

*Appropriate body position, eye contact, posture, distance, voice tone, etc.*

#### Minimal encouragers

*Door openers like "Tell me more about...", "Uh huh..."*

#### Questions

*Appropriate and non-leading open and closed questions*

#### Empathy

*Empathic responses verbally and non-verbally*

#### Deep listening

*Appropriate listening*

#### Basic reflections

*Reflection of content (paraphrasing)*

#### Client-centered framework

*Non-judgemental, client-centered counselling approach*

*"I noticed myself kind of doing the reflective listening... it seemed like it helped when people were talking to me about, you know, something difficult that they're going through"*

TIGER LILY – Participant

Results show that each participant had different strengths and weaknesses in using these skills; however, overall everyone improved their skills from the mid-point report card to the final evaluation.



## 2. Qualitative interviews

Interviews provided information about participants' thoughts and feelings regarding the course. Here is a summary of the feedback:

### Course instruction

- Participants reported that the instructors were very supportive and helped them understand the materials.

### Course content

- Participants shared that exploring shame and substance use issues were helpful.
- Folks indicated that they would like further training on: shame, grief, depression, sex work and self-worth, and internalized stigma.

### Challenges

- There was some confusion as to whether this was counsellor training or if it was counselling itself
- Participants indicated that active substance use and its effects on the group needed to be addressed in class
- Some said the counsellor practice was stressful—they worried they may say the wrong thing and feared harming others
- Some had challenges with emotional topics in class and a few reported that interpersonal conflicts arose in a few cases.

*"This course gave me more confidence... and an actual physical space, whereby I felt safe to be able to set some really strong and hard boundaries."*

JAIME – Participant

### Skills development

- Participants indicated that practicing the skills in class was useful, and many felt their skills improved throughout the course, as did their confidence
- Participants indicated they were able to apply skills in their daily lives in a few ways:
  - Increased self-advocacy
  - Improved boundaries with others
  - Use of reflective listening skills with friends and family

### Experience of community in class at Peers

- Participants indicated there was a sense of community in the class. They found it safe to open up in class.
- Participants indicated they experienced peer support from others during the course.

### Recommendations from participants

- Additional focus on sex work in general and outdoor sex work in particular.
- Shorter classes twice per week rather than one longer class.
- Offer individual therapy supports throughout the course, which participants can pursue outside of class.

## BENEFITS OF THE COURSE

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### Benefits to individuals

- Acquired counselling and interpersonal skills
- Increased self-confidence and self-awareness
- Increased understanding of one's own health and wellness

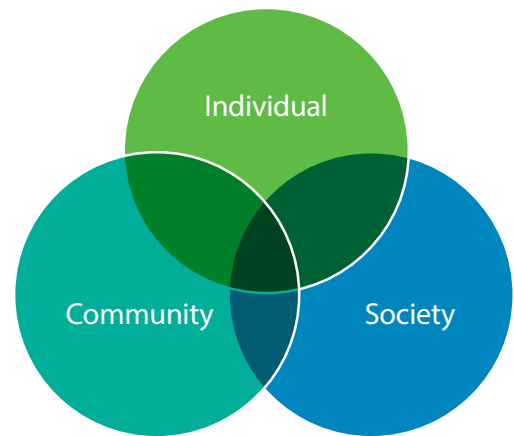
### Benefits for the community (potential)

- Decreased reliance on primary crisis centres
- Increased capacity for leadership and community solidarity
- Increased opportunities for support

### Benefits for society (potential)

- Mental health supports through community-based services for vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations
- Reduced strain on the medical system

Future studies could measure these larger potential benefits.



**Wholistic Benefits of  
Peer Counselling Training**

## CONCLUSION

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While all participants gained counselling skills in this course, the **skills assessment** data suggest these gains were modest. This is not surprising—although these counselling skills were foundational, they are very challenging to learn in a short period of time. The participants should be congratulated on their achievements, given that the course was only 10 weeks long and skills practice formed only a part of the curriculum.

Importantly, these results portray a realistic picture of what can be expected at this level and within this time frame for future peer counselling training courses.

The data from the **interviews** shows that participants felt positive about their counselling skill acquisition and several noted a significant boost in confidence, particularly in the areas of **self-awareness** and **boundary setting**.

Future programs should carefully consider the crossover between counsellor **skills training**, **mental health education** and **group therapy** that arose in this program. Future iterations could look at purposefully combining these streams or intentionally having different streams for skills training, mental health education and group therapy. It is our hope that offering this course regularly with refined content and complementary support will continue to improve access to mental health supports within this community.

*"I found it was really nice to have a space where I felt comfortable and safe enough to talk about the things that were going on in my life."*

ALEX – Participant



## Acknowledgments

This training program and evaluation research study were completed through a partnership between Dr. Rachel Philips (Peers Victoria) and Dr. Allison Reeves (Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria). The course was designed by Allison Reeves and community research associate, Julie Higginson (Peers Victoria, Citizens Counselling Centre). The research study was carried out by Allison Reeves and supporting research assistants, Kathryn Saunders and Isaac Rosenberg.

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