



“Well, if you can't smile you should go home!” Experiences and reflective insights on providing outreach to young sex trade workers

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ABSTRACT

This case study relates experiences and candid reflections of front-line staff in the STAND program (Street Trade Alternatives and New Directions) providing outreach to young sex trade workers in downtown Toronto. The authors describe how this project came to be and the lessons learned in setting it up and providing services to this vulnerable, very hard to reach but resilient population. Through a sharing of tales and narratives of outreach, the authors corroborate some of the reasons why there is much written on outreach but little specifically about reaching out to sex trade workers. The traditional responses and approaches in working with children and youth are also questioned in light of negotiating power, building relationships, and actively waiting for the client to lead the change process.

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1. Introduction

As those involved in social work know, outreach is exciting, challenging, rewarding, awkward, innovative, and slow moving, all at the same time. It is also known to be stressful, underfunded, and low-status social work, with a high rate of turnover and attrition. Outreach programs are experiential and relational, and they need to be both consistent and constantly adapting. This article focuses on stories of outreach workers and their engagement with street youth. These powerful and multidimensional accounts, along with our candid reflections on these experiences, go beyond the professional literature and training manuals that exist on outreach to street youth. Too often, outreach is treated in these sources as a term so obvious it requires no definition, and thus, too many assumptions remain hidden and are not critically considered. Our aim is to rethink and expand the boundaries of social work scholarship and practice with this vulnerable group.

The stories shared here are based almost entirely on the personal experiences of the authors and the staff of the STAND (Street Trade Alternatives and New Directions) program in Toronto, which focuses on supporting those involved in the “street trade” (prostitution, pimping, drug dealing, hustling, and gang life). STAND, developed by a young couple in 2004 as a grassroots initiative, is an exit program supporting young sex trade workers and pimps. Its goal is to support young people engaged in illicit street work beginning when they are still engaged in the street trade and continuing through their transition from the streets to stable housing, meaningful employment,

and healthy living. In 2009, STAND merged with Yonge Street Mission, a non-profit organization providing social services since 1896. One of the authors of this article (Parenteau) served as a front line youth worker at a drop-in center for street youth offered through Yonge Street Mission. After listening and evaluating the needs of street youth, he and a few like-minded individuals saw the need to do something more for youth involved in the sex trade. At the time the project was being conceived, the other author (Saldanha) served as an intern at the drop-in and stayed on for a number of years as a volunteer. Both have collaborated on other practice, teaching, and research initiatives. Because of the nature of the STAND program, most of the examples selected refer to outreach to young people involved in the sex trade, mostly females. Some of them are also gang-involved individuals.

1.1. Setting up the program and the selection of stories

The STAND program began with street outreach to sex trade workers aged 16–30 in downtown Toronto. A team of staff and volunteers (initially two part-time staff, later a few more) conducted outreach on Thursday evenings from 9:00 p.m. until 3:00 a.m. in the downtown core of the city. The outreach workers contacted about 25 young people each night – though the number of contacts could range from 12 to 50 on a single evening. During these nights, workers went in teams of two, offering outreach kits (with essentials such as condoms, hand sanitizer, etc.) and on-the-spot support in areas such as housing, detox referrals, and crisis intervention. It was in the context of this work that the stories shared in this article were gathered. The stories were selected based on their impact on the authors, their generality in terms of representing a large number of

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similar interactions, and usefulness in teaching. The stories emerged from case notes and debriefings that became material for training sessions with student interns, volunteers, new staff, and peer mentors. Although this was not initially conceived as a research project, the stories became a powerful resource in preparing outreach workers to effectively engage with this population and convinced us that these accounts have potential to provide insights to a larger audience.

1.2. Context of sex trade work

Sexual exploitation in Toronto, as in other urban centers, is more pervasive than is commonly thought. The demand is driven by the buyers or “johns” from all cultural and socio-economic groups. The high demand for sex trade workers tends in turn to place demands on individuals (pimps or human traffickers) who will groom, control, and market those sex workers who appeal most to the johns. Within the sex trade there tends to be a variety of different “sub-trades” that come with their own sub-cultures and distinctions. The STAND program actively assisted young people involved in “high track” street prostitution (earning several hundred dollars per hour), “low track” street prostitution (less than \$50 per hour), escorting, exotic dancing, massage parlors, child prostitution, male prostitution, transgendered prostitution, and several other sub-trades.

The geographic bounds of the sex trade in Toronto are in constant flux. Factors such as gang conflict, police response, gentrification, and political climate contribute to a quickly changing environment. There are a few major areas where street prostitution occurs, referred to as “strolls” or “tracks.” “High track” refers to a geographical area where sex trade workers solicit on the actual streets and have a cost ranging between \$150 and \$1000 per service. In terms of those who work outside, those on “high track” make the most money and are also the most likely to be controlled by organized crime. In Toronto, at that time, there was only one “high track,” the city block in the downtown core bounded by Gerrard, Jarvis, College, and Church Streets. A “low track” is an area where the sex trade workers are engaging in prostitution for a very low cost, mostly in response to an addiction and/or homelessness. There are a large number of “low tracks” all over the city, the most busy being Sherbourne St, River St, Kingston Road, and Queen Street West. Massage parlors exist in all areas of the city and tend to be concentrated most densely in areas of known wealth, such as the financial district or major tourist areas. Male prostitution which until a few years ago was mainly in the area of Women’s College Hospital has now shifted to the bathhouses.

Given the underground nature of the sex trade it is very difficult to obtain accurate statistics because those who are being actively exploited and controlled are not usually accessible to researchers. Anecdotally, the STAND program found that only 5–10% of sex trade workers solicit on a physical street, whereas the majority use the internet or massage parlors to solicit. However, almost all of the participants in the program had worked on the street at some point. This speaks to the transient nature of the sex trade and the tendency for pimps to move their workers around to maximize profits and minimize police attention. Although the most visible population is small, an outreach worker with strong relational ties to street sex workers can eventually make contact with the rest of the population.

The population, relevant to this article, are those who are under age, have the highest prices and are the most controlled because of the large demand by johns (buyers) for what is perceived as taboo – ethnicities considered exotic, (under)age, role playing, etc. In Toronto, the average sex trade worker entered the trade after being procured by a pimp in their early teens. After years of exploitation and few opportunities for change, even if they are no longer being exploited by a pimp, many of these young people feel as though they have no option but to go on to work independently in the sex trade.

2. Outreach in the literature

Outreach to street-involved youth in the social science literature is typically defined as a program or methodology with the following components: meeting with youth in their environment, forming a relationship with them, providing services and information on the spot, and connecting them to other services outside their environment (Connolly & Joly, 2012; Gibson, 2011; Webber, 1991). In a systematic review of 42 studies in the literature, themes that were commonly highlighted emphasized relationship, a youth-centric focus, and connecting youth to services (Connolly & Joly, 2012).

Most of the literature on outreach focuses on descriptions of a service methodology with minimal systematic examination of what it entails (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Webber, 1991). Outreach is described in terms of duration, such as “event” versus “regular” basis; or whether it is conducted by agency personnel or volunteers (Gibson, 2011). Outreach is also described relative to specific interventions or target populations served through “mobile” or “fixed” outreach, referring to services either brought to community members or located in the specific community itself (Connolly & Joly, 2012). Some programs target outreach to help youth disengage from violence and gang-related activities (Pollack, Frattaroli, Whitehill, & Strother, 2011) or to prevent diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Woods et al., 1998).

The access to technology has resulted in a shift in outreach styles. The traditional way of going out with a backpack with toothpaste, condoms, and socks now also includes outreach on social networking sites such as MySpace frequented by members (Fratt, 2007). With the advent of sites such as Craigslist and the availability of cell phones, certain target populations no longer congregate in specific sites where traditional outreach workers found opportunities to engage directly in varied forms of group outreach (Able-Peterson & Bucy, 1993; Fratt, 2007; Gibson, 2011). Hence new forms of outreach are also being explored.

What is lacking in the literature is a critical examination of the problems, limitations, and power differentials that exist between workers and the community members they seek to serve. This aspect of critically evaluating outreach as a social performance to negotiate power remains minimally explored in the literature (Gibson, 2011). Furthermore, outreach work can be understood as a site in which the notions of childhood, youth, and social work are being critically challenged and negotiated. A critical examination of outreach work with sex trade workers provides a basis for re-examining and reimagining social work practice with children and youth that takes into account the very difficult life circumstances of these young people and the challenges of engaging them with social services (Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009). To do this we need to go beyond typical program evaluations that attempt to track the outcomes of outreach programs by focusing solely on numbers served through programs (Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007).

Furthermore there is a seeming gap between the work done by front-line staff and what is written in academic literature. While some attention has been paid to particular populations served, there is a lack of research addressing the grounded experiences and practice wisdom of front line workers. For example, in Canada, there is much research examining juvenile prostitution (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Volpe, Talwar, & Hunter, 2006; Webber, 1991), but there is no documentation of interventions that offer comprehensive prevention and support services to sexually exploited youth in Toronto (Volpe et al., 2006). Scholarship that centers on the voices of clients and workers has the potential to bridge this disconnect between academic approaches to outreach and the lived experiences of the participants. It may also reduce a need to “reinvent the wheel” in programming (Kidd et al., 2007).

The larger eco-political context is also unexamined in outreach programs and work with marginalized groups. The ideology and

practices of neoliberal reform that have affected services to children and youth, and social work practice with them in the U.S. (Nybell et al., 2009), have similarly emerged in Canada. Since the 1990s Ontario has experienced cuts to social programs, lack of affordable housing, stricter rules for those receiving welfare, demonization of groups such as single welfare moms, zero-tolerance disciplinary policies in schools, and criminalization of activities such as “panhandling” and “squeegeeing” for the homeless in cities such as Toronto (Gaetz, 2004). All of these shifts have had adverse effects on young sex trade workers. However, there has been little attention paid to the impacts of these policies.

This article builds on promising new directions of research that address street outreach as a power-laden social performance. For example, Gibson (2011) conducted an ethnographic study on street outreach. It contains rich descriptions of public spaces as the sites for street youth to benefit from outreach services through workers that not only forge relationships but create bridges from the streets to a more stable lifestyle. However, while sex workers are constantly referred to in the study, there are few specific details on who they are, how and where one can find them, or in what ways outreach is negotiated with this group. Other literature similarly highlights profiles of sex workers, offering rich details of their lives, with few details of how outreach to this population is conducted and how power is negotiated between outreach workers (or researchers) and community members (Webber, 1991).

This article specifically attends to the experiences of outreach to sex workers, with all its nuances, challenges, and insights. First we describe the beginnings and purpose of STAND, emphasizing the importance of active waiting and good attitude. We then focus on the development of the program highlighting the importance of respecting alternate realities, following through, and keeping promises. Finally, we highlight the relational aspects of outreach, the need to respect where community members are, and the promotion of core programs beyond the streets. The italicized passages provide a detailed scenario from the frontlines of street outreach. These vignettes are followed by critical reflections on the story.

3. Beginnings and the purpose of outreach

It was the middle of the winter, in the middle of the night, right in one of the city's most infamous neighborhoods. We were just getting the outreach program started and we were very excited about it. As we walked down the street we noticed a girl wearing thigh high boots and little else standing in front of a strip club. After a quick impromptu consultation with my outreach partner, we decided that she was indeed a sex worker and that we were going to approach her to talk. As we walked closer I took a deep breath, tried to repress the nervous and anxious feeling in my stomach and said a quick prayer...

“Hello, we are just out doing outreach tonight; can we help you with anything?”

“Do you have needles?”

“Sorry, no we don't.”

“Crack kits?”

“No, sorry.”

“Are you one of those Christian groups?”

“Well, ah, not really...”

“Well, have a good night.” (She turns her back)

While we continued walking down the street, my outreach partner and I didn't say a word to each other. We were both wondering the same two things: How did that go so poorly and why are we putting ourselves through this in the middle of a freezing cold night?

Beginnings can be difficult, both for individual workers and outreach programs. However, thanks to the ability of outreach staff to see beyond themselves, many projects such as STAND weather a

challenging start and carry on rather successfully. Faith-based groups historically have started many outreach efforts as small ventures that have later blossomed into well-developed institutions. Examples include Chez Pops in Montreal for street youth, Santa Maria in Detroit for female juvenile delinquents, Ruth Ellis Centre in Detroit for lesbian teens, Bruce Ritter's Covenant House, and international projects as well (Karabanow, 2003). While all of them began small, some grew into larger institutions. However, it is always these first beginnings that are never forgotten: the first night, the first client, the first failure. These awkward beginnings can provide opportunities to reflect on and clarify a sense of purpose both at the level of the individual outreach worker and of the organization.

3.1. Active waiting and being consistent

Roxy didn't need us. “It's those other girls, the ones over by Sherbourne and Dundas that really need the help,” she reminded us weekly. She was always friendly, but in a bit of a condescending kind of a way. She felt strong and in control when she was working “high track.” Over time we learned, through the 30 seconds of her time that we had every Thursday night, that she was new to “high track” and considered it a promotion from working in the back of a strip club. She was very proud of her promotion and was enchanted by the big money potential of “high track.” Eventually we stopped our, “can we do anything to help?” routine, because we were, without fail, corrected each time and reminded with attitude that she did not need us. One Thursday, several months later, as we were walking along “high track,” Roxy waved to us from a distance and called us over. She almost seemed excited to see us.

“Where were you guys last week? I've been waiting for you tonight.”
“We were out last week; we must have missed you, though. How are you doing?”

“I'm good. I have court in 2 weeks and I need to do 40 hours of community service before then, can you guys help me do that?”

It was hard to believe that she even remembered who we were, let alone that we were out every Thursday night. We jumped into action and set up what she needed. During the time Roxy spent volunteering, we developed a strong relationship, getting to hear the real story behind her “I don't need you” front. She became one of our biggest promoters on high track and started helping us to coordinate getting supplies to the other women who worked with her.

There are often disconnects in the perception of “help” between the perspectives of a worker and a youth. Many people involved in the streets want to know that there is a worker waiting for them who is ready, willing, and able. In many ways, outreach can be viewed as an *active form of waiting*. It is simply being available in a more “in-your-face” and consistent way than is often possible in more traditional programming.

Waiting communicates respect towards the individual. It acknowledges that street youth are on their own stage of the journey and will not be ready or able to make changes in their life just because we want them to or because we happen to have room in our program for them at that time. Waiting shows people that outreach workers care about them, not just about helping them; while we wait we spend time with people just as they are. When doing outreach workers get really good at talking about the weather, about their pets, about everything other than what the young person's struggles might be. When workers combine waiting with a consistent presence in the community, they establish a basis for trust and engagement for when the time finally comes to “do your job.”

Some people will take a long time to be ready and others may never be ready to change. Even then, actively waiting is not a waste of time. A consistent presence in their lives helps keep the desire to change alive and gives them hope. Relationship and connection honor dignity in the here and now. Outreach workers who remember

the names and stories of those they meet demonstrate a genuine desire to connect and to respect dignity.

3.2. The attitude of the outreach worker

I wasn't feeling well that night. I hadn't worn proper shoes, so my feet were starting to blister. I'd been very busy all day and had an important meeting on the far end of town, first thing the next morning, which I scheduled despite knowing that I wouldn't be home until 4 a.m. I just wanted the night to be done so I could go home. We started walking around "high track" for the third time that night and were approaching a group of women whom we had come to know fairly well. I hung back slightly and let my outreach partner get there first. I figured I was doing the women a favor because I wasn't in the best of moods. But, before my partner had a chance to say hello, one of the women looked right at me and spoke up...

"What's the matter with you?"

"Me? Ah... just a bit tired I guess..."

"Well, if you can't smile you should go home!"

OUCH! Just like that, just that fast, I'd been told, and she was completely right.

When it comes to outreach, first impressions always matter. Sex trade workers often have a heightened level of awareness because of abuse suffered in their past. Their ability to read people is quick and becomes an essential skill in order to maintain safety and maximize profits in the sex trade. Consequently, whether it is the first time meeting a person or the first time seeing her that particular night, the first impression shapes the entire interaction. Given the nature of outreach work, making a good first impression is not easy. First, the worker's very presence may be a reminder to street-involved youth that they "need help" and "have problems." Second, people who are street-involved tend to be very paranoid when they are in public spaces such as street corners, especially if they are breaking a law, and the presence of an outreach worker only draws more attention to them. Third, most street-involved people have had bad experiences with multiple organizations and institutions. Finally, these youth are most often only "approached" by police officers, enemies, and "customers," so an outreach worker's very presence will be suspect.

Although physical appearance will make a difference, the most important part of making a good first impression is having a proper attitude. Having a good attitude for outreach means being present and being content. Without these two things, outreach efforts will not go anywhere. From the perspective of the person on the street, if an outreach worker approaches him or her with an I'm-in-a-bad-mood-and-would-rather-be-somewhere-else attitude, the only logical conclusion is that the worker is just there because it is a job. If the person is going to make a life and death decision to leave a gang or the sex trade, he or she probably is not going to trust a person who is "just there to collect a pay check." Good outreach workers strive to be actively present and content. They should also be genuine when other factors may impede their ability to be focused in the moment.

Having a good attitude is more difficult than it sounds. For example, an outreach worker has traveled for two hours on public transit to visit a young person in her home and in hopes of meeting some of her peers. The worker finds herself sitting in a housing project, eating suspect food on a suspect plate, and waiting to see if anyone stops by. She may have a hard time being present as she contemplates her return bus trip and the hundred things left to do in the day. Likewise, an outreach worker walking down Sherbourne Street in the middle of the night trying to step around needles, vomit, feces, and urine is not likely in a happy place. Maintaining a good outreach attitude requires continual and conscious renewal of commitment to the purpose of outreach. It

also calls for access to peer consultation, effective supervision, and supportive strategies such as delegating another staff to cover a shift when a worker is not able to be present in the moment.

4. In the middle of the program: respecting alternate realities

The night was going great. We had talked to almost 40 people, and most of them were new to us. We decided to head back to "high track" one more time before finishing the night. While we were walking along Jarvis St., we noticed two girls who hadn't been there before. They looked very young and they seemed out of place. We started speaking to them and they seemed scared and desperate. We had a great conversation with them and could see their eyes lighting up with hope. Then, just when we thought they were about to walk away with us, perhaps to talk about leaving the sex trade, they looked down at their feet and went completely quiet. I offered them my card which they quickly accepted, but continued to be quiet. Then, the younger looking of the two turned to me and said something which broke my heart.

"I will take your card, but I'll never be allowed to phone you. I'm taking it so that if I die tonight, when they find my body and see your card they will know that I wanted to change."

I wanted to explain that the police could protect her. I wanted to tell her that we had helped many people in her position before. But no matter what I was going to say, I knew from the way she kept looking around that in any minute now a car was going to come by to pick her up, and that I would likely never see her again. And that is exactly what happened.

When doing outreach, workers will encounter people whose lives are so drastically different from their own that what they do or say might not make logical sense. Although we may live in the same world, their lives are often governed by very different rules because of the extreme oppression they are experiencing. From an outsider perspective, one may make a seemingly reasonable evaluation of the person's problem and a proposed solution. The dilemma is that pain and suffering can only be properly understood by the persons experiencing them. Their realities become subject to the extreme pain that they experience, and as outreach workers, we must respect that reality. As workers, we may be experts at helping people "take down walls" in their lives, which is a good thing, but we usually understand very little about why they were built up in the first place. We perceive how the wall is holding the person back from going to where they want to be in life, but we miss what the wall is holding back on the other side. Great damage can be caused to the individual by merely taking down walls without awareness of the larger context of why they came to be.

Outreach workers are positioned as "outsiders" in a sub-culture that they will never fully belong to, so it becomes particularly important to have a proper respect for people's broken realities. This is not to say that there is no room for intervention, but it must be done carefully and with a deep understanding of the person's situation. Most importantly, encouraging change must be done only when the community member is ready. Understanding the reality of another's life, means accepting, among other things, that some people on the street "work to use" drugs and others "use to work." It also means knowing that while the police in general are responsible for protecting "good citizens," these community members do not get the same treatment from the police as the outreach worker or the rest of society does.

4.1. Perceived needs... actual needs

That particular outreach night I had a student intern with me as my outreach partner, and it was her very first night out. She was very excited and talked at length about all the research she had done on the sex trade and about all her thoughts on it. Although people mean

well, I always find it awkward taking people out to do outreach for their first time because I find that I spend the whole night apologizing for how things play out. It's rare that "outreach" ends up satisfying the person's expectations.

Like most nights we spent a significant part of our night handing out outreach bags and condoms and running small errands for people. The student's questions were common ones... "Why does that girl need you to give her condoms if she is making \$500 an hour?"... "Why wouldn't that woman take the Trojan condoms even though she said she needed condoms?"... "If the person is hungry, why would they only want granola bars with chocolate on them?"... "Why did we take the time to drive them to the shelter when we have transit tokens to give out?"

A little later we ran into a young lady that I've known for several years. We chatted for some time and when I asked her if she "needed" anything she responded with, "SUGAR!" I smiled and offered to get her a donut and an iced cappuccino from the 24 hour Tim Hortons. As we walked, the student didn't say a word and seemed to have another question that she was sort of holding back. After we finished our donuts and headed for the door, the young lady turned to me and said she needed help with finding housing and wanted to know if we could help with that. I smiled and said that we would be happy to help.

We all have "wants" and we all have "needs" and we all have a hard time distinguishing between the two. When looking at someone who is in great need, it often seems easy for us as helpers to determine what the person actually needs, even though the person may not see things the same way. When someone from our circle of friends says she "needs" a cigarette, we accept it as a figure of speech. But when a street-involved person says they "need" money for cigarettes, when we know they don't have money for rent, we often get frustrated. In this example, both people are struggling to determine what they really need, but the difference is that the street-involved person's struggle is highlighted because of their poverty and marginalized status.

When it comes to outreach, it is important to acknowledge a person's perceived needs and to understand that, to them, in that moment, the perceived need is as real as what we may perceive as an "actual need." Because core programs and ministries are built around providing support in areas of "actual need," such as employment, housing, counseling, and nutrition, the people that we encounter when doing outreach will quickly discern that we intend to help them with what they "need," but may simply have a difference of opinion about what those needs are. Also, because outreach focuses its efforts on people who have a hard time trusting organizations, it should not be surprising that people would first offer workers their "small needs" before trusting them with their "big needs." If done well and with the right attitude, meeting "perceived" needs usually leads to meeting "actual" needs.

4.2. Following through and keeping promises

I had known Sean for many years. He was heavily gang-involved and often made his income by pimping young girls. I kept running into him... on the streets, in the drop-in, in the courts. I had at least half a dozen people introduce him to me, each person from a different circle. For a long time all I was ever able to do was to make eye contact. Then I moved to saying hello and stuck with that for another long period of time. One day, when we made eye contact, he smiled back at me and so I told him what my job was and offered to help him with whatever he needed. He thanked me and walked away. We repeated that same interaction likely about a hundred times over the course of several years and never said anything more.

One day, I ran into him while walking with another young gang-involved man to court. He was with a large group of guys who looked

somewhat intimidating. When he saw me, he said hello and then turned to his friends and said, "If any of you are ever ready to leave 'the life' this worker can make sure that it happens! You can trust him, he's a good guy, and we go way back..." I walked away from that interaction feeling encouraged, but also very heavy. That was a big statement he made to a group of guys I knew nothing about except that they were probably into the same sorts of things that he was. I realized, though, that my actions over the years had communicated a promise so bold that I would never have felt comfortable actually saying it... but the promise was made none the less.

The better we get at doing outreach and the longer we commit to it, the higher the chances that eventually someone will tell us that they are ready to leave the life. It is as though we are giving "change vouchers" to people every time we interact with them through outreach. Over time, when they have accumulated enough and when they are ready to "cash out," we need to make sure that we are prepared to follow through on our commitment. Even if we have not made any verbal promises, it is logical from the perspective of the street-involved person that if we have gone to great lengths to gain their trust so that they will accept our help, that we are committed to and capable of actually helping them. In fact, the harder we work for their trust, the bigger the promise that is made.

There are many well-intentioned groups who never move past outreach. It is even more common to have a worker who gets so specialized at outreach that they do not have the necessary skills or experience to do the follow through. This can be a significant problem because the people that workers connect with through outreach, due to their trust issues, will at first only want to work with the person who has earned their trust. It is very important that the people they are working with move past trusting them as a worker and begin to trust the whole organization and accept the multiple supports available. But if it was that easy, then one would not need to do outreach in the first place. Most people will need to develop enough trust in a worker to ask for help and then have that trust validated by the worker following through to some extent before they will make the decision to trust the organization the worker represents. Consequently, a good outreach program and a good outreach worker will be prepared to do the necessary follow through fairly independently until a referral can be made successfully.

5. The streets are alive: street dynamics

After several years of doing street outreach, I ended up taking a break for about a year, due to shifting job descriptions, before returning under a fresh outreach initiative with the STAND program. Excited to get started again, I directed the team to all the best spots. "Parkdale is where most of the 'low track' prostitution is happening... 'High track' is busy, but there are a lot of turf conflicts and the women don't like being bothered... 'Boys stroll' is by Women's College Hospital..."

We started at about 9:30 p.m. in Parkdale and kept at it for several hours, but didn't see anyone. We moved on to "boys stroll" by Women's College Hospital, again no one. We then tried "high track" and found there were only three women and that they were all working together. We finished the night by returning to Parkdale, which again yielded nothing.

Frustrated and confused, I was trying to figure out where we went wrong as I was driving home. On the drive, I passed by "high track" at about 2 a.m. and close to 20 women were working... clearly things had changed.

The streets are always changing and need to be interpreted and reinterpreted constantly. There are many factors that impact street dynamics and outreach efforts: police "sweeps;" new businesses;

gentrification of neighborhoods; who's in and out of jail; changes in drug culture, gang activity and turf wars; technology used to contact sex workers; bars opening/closing; media trends; changes in policy/programs... the list goes on.

All of these factors and many more interact to an extent that the streets almost seem like a living organism. One needs to get to know the streets first hand, because learning about them from a book or another worker will never give one the same depth of knowledge and will leave workers outdated and out of touch. It is important to maintain a high level of awareness, so that workers don't find themselves walking the same route, at the same time, for years, even though the streets have already moved on. There is no formula for reading the streets; it simply requires an attention to detail, common sense and the help of "street friends." It is helpful to assume that the streets are constantly changing because one can then be constantly collecting new information, trying new approaches and asking questions of the community to make sure that they are staying relevant.

5.1. Guests in someone else's space

BEFORE: "Hi Sara, how are you tonight?"

"I'm good; I hope things get busy soon, though."

"Slow night, eh?"

"Ya, but I'm trying to save up money to take my son to the US so I hope it picks up."

"I didn't know you have a son, how old is he?..." (The conversation continues and goes really well for 20 minutes).

Her phone beeps, her face goes white and she looks around. "Oh, I've got to go."

"What's wrong?"

She shows me her phone, the text says, "Get back to work!"

AFTER: "Hi, Jessica, how are you tonight?"

"Ok" (Looking distracted).

"Do you have time to talk for a bit?"

"I can't, I'm really behind and it's almost the end of the week. I need to make a lot of money tonight."

"Alright, I'm sorry to bother you."

"Oh, you're no bother, hopefully I have time next week and we can talk on one of my breaks!"

"Sounds great!"

Despite our hopes and agendas of what we want to accomplish during outreach, it is important to always remember that we are only guests in someone else's "space." The people we will meet, even if they are housed, live their lives on the street, but we do not. Like any home, it has its own unique and peculiar rules, dynamics and culture. We need to show them respect, similar to any home we visit, if we want to be accepted and invited in.

The struggle with respecting street rules is that a vast majority of them are designed to control and oppress. As workers, we need to challenge that oppression; we certainly do not want to encourage it. Where does that leave us when we are doing street outreach? First, it is important to remember that there is a vast difference between outreach and core programs. We need to remember the purpose of outreach and be realistic about expected outcomes given the context of the work. Challenging systematic oppression is a very good thing, but standing on a street corner in the middle of the night, in a team of two, is not the right time to challenge it. Other programs are designed to confront that issue. Also, because of the nature of street outreach, the reality is that we cannot be in control the same way we would be in a drop-in or at another agency. The goal is to build trust and facilitate the person coming into an environment where the bigger issues can be addressed. Confronting "street rules" while on the streets will push people away, put our safety at risk, and possibly won't accomplish anything.

Some examples of street rules or street culture are, "men rule," "don't be bait" and attract attention and scare away customers, and "don't talk to the police" or you will be labeled a "rat." "Street rules" need to be learned and respected while doing outreach, but then confronted once the goal of outreach is accomplished and we have a trusting relationship with a well-supported individual who is no longer at the mercy of the streets to such an extreme degree.

6. From the streets to the community: leading someone to the point of change

For several years, we gave Crystal only the most basic of supports. We would run into her and find that she hadn't eaten in days and so would buy her food. She would often be without proper clothes or shoes and so we would dress her. Despite being involved in prostitution for almost 10 years, she would regularly do her dates without condoms and so we would get her condoms.

One day, she called, with great excitement in her voice, and said, "You'll be so proud of me! I used condoms with all of my dates last night, even with the ones who didn't want to!" I was proud of her, but at the same time my deeper hopes were for her not to be involved in sex work at all, so it was a sort of a bitter sweet victory.

Another year passed, and to my great surprise, Crystal phoned me and told me that she had enrolled in college and was going for addictions counseling and moving back in with her family. Even more surprising, is that she credited her new found success to the work we had done with her, even though we weren't directly involved in any of those decisions. Somehow, while trying desperately to keep her alive, we had helped to instill hope.

Harm reduction is a rather controversial and confusing term, but taken in its broadest sense it refers simply to any intervention that reduces the harm experienced by an individual involved in high risk behaviors. Although there is much disagreement over different harm reduction strategies, most people would agree that it is positive to reduce harm in general. Activities such as giving a homeless person a sleeping bag, giving a street youth a meal, giving a sex worker a condom, and giving someone with an addiction a clean needle are all forms of harm reduction, because they reduce the potential of harm. It is important to consider going beyond past simply reducing harm towards addressing the core issues which also need attention.

A big part of outreach is actively waiting for high-risk individuals to be ready to receive help and make change. Hence, a big part of outreach is making sure that people survive to be around for the moment when they are ready to ask for help. When harm reduction is delivered in such a way as to communicate value, hope, and care, it can move beyond keeping people from dying and end up being that which brings a person to the point of changing.

6.1. Crisis intervention and challenging the motivation to change

Children's Aid Society (CAS) had apprehended her child about a month ago and she was now on a drug binge, consuming whatever she could find... crack, heroin, alcohol... anything! Her binge brought her right back to the prostitution strolls that she had worked so hard to leave before her first child was born. Her emotional pain was intense, and her mental functioning was severely limited by her drug consumption, resulting in a very unstable and confused person. When we saw her working, she looked away, hoping that we hadn't seen her. She was in tears when we walked up to her.

"We've been worried about you!"

"I can't believe that you are seeing me like this. I am so ashamed."

"We're so happy to see you! What can we do?"

“Give me some crack! Get my child back!”

We remained quiet, just being present and holding back our own tears.

“I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do this another night, it needs to end.” She looks at her scarred arms as she speaks.

“With all you’ve been through, it isn’t any wonder that you are hurting. You need to clear your head, so you can start making the decisions necessary to get your child back.”

“You’ll help me?”

“Of course! First we need to get you to detox. Then in the morning when you are feeling a bit better we’ll come by and get to work!”

“Thank you so much! I have a few things to do first, then I’ll give you a call.”

Smiling, “Nice try, get in the car!”

It is most often a time of crisis that causes someone to “cash in” and accept the outreach worker’s offers to help. All of the trust building, waiting, harm reduction, and small talk have built the relationship between the outreach worker and the community member to the point that the worker is the obvious (and sometimes the only) person to turn to during a crisis. There is a need for someone to believe that change is possible for them, because often these individuals themselves are unable to do that. Self-sabotage, having no hope and confidence in oneself, low self-esteem, are all characteristics that these persons share. Because of this, successfully responding to the crisis is often what motivates people to “cross the bridge” to core programming.

6.2. Promoting core programs

“Hi Sara, how are you tonight?”

“I’m good. This is my girl ‘Goldie,’ she just started working with me.”

“Hi Goldie, we are outreach workers. If you ever need help with anything just let us know.”

“Ya, they are a great help Goldie, if you ever need condoms they have the best kinds.”

“Did you tell her about the other types of help we can give at the Center?”

“Like what?”

“You know..., like help with housing, employment, back to school... all kinds of stuff.”

“Really? I’ve known you guys forever and I never knew that!”

One of the major goals of outreach is to educate the people we will meet about all the types of support and resources that are available. Unfortunately, because interaction times are so small, and because it takes so long to build trust, program promotion can often be overlooked. Many people on the street don’t feel like outreach workers are worth taking the time to talk to, because their past experiences have proven that outreach workers are mostly around to say hello and offer “free stuff.” Although it seems awkward at first, openly promoting available programs often opens up extended conversations and positive interactions, because the worker is now “worth their time.” Healthy trusting relationships develop quicker when the people we meet realize that we are competent and understand their situation well enough to offer the right types of help.

6.3. Relational networking between the individual and the community

I had been working with Ashton for a long time. His friend whom I had helped to find a job some years ago had originally introduced him to me. Over the years that I had worked with Ashton, he received support in areas such as anger management, employment, housing, and crisis intervention. At first, he was only interested in receiving help to meet the requirements of his probation officer. But over time, as trust grew, he was increasingly open to making significant changes

to his life. Despite his genuine efforts, at one point he was arrested and over a phone call requested that I come to his bail hearing.

When I arrived out front of the court room, I found his lawyer, who was talking to three young women, each of whom had children with them. It became apparent that each woman had been in a relationship with Ashton at some point and were attempting to bail him out. After introducing myself and speaking with the lawyer, I was left to spend the rest of the day waiting around for Ashton’s turn before the judge, in the company of his ex-girlfriends and their children.

Although awkward at first, my presence at the court for Ashton prompted some questions from the women, about who I was and what I did, which I was happy to answer, mostly because it filled the silence. Knowing Ashton well, and picking up on some of the conversation from the women, it was clear that they were all involved in the street trade on some level, so I offered some information about the STAND program. By the end of the day, I had arranged to do anger management, meet with a CAS worker, and fill out a subsidized housing application. Because of my hard earned connection with Ashton, what would have taken years and countless hours of walking around in the middle of the night was accomplished in just one day.

Simply put, each person we meet through outreach is connected with a variety of people, who are in turn connected with others. Because of this, each relationship we develop through outreach has the potential for many other relationships to grow out of it. In addition, people tend to have relationships with other people who have similarities and common experiences. Hence each person we meet through outreach will be connected with other people who will also fit our target group. Marginalized and oppressed people, in particular, tend to be forced into small tight knit communities composed of people who have VERY similar needs.

Doing a really good job of relationship building and supporting one person is, simultaneously, doing a good job of outreach to many more. Following relationships from person to person is a highly effective way of connecting with people and is the only real way to intentionally connect with someone who is at the utmost extreme end of society (i.e. gang-involved youth, human trafficking victims). Also, in comparison to street outreach, relational networking allows workers to focus on people who are prepared to change and ready to trust them.

6.4. Home visits

Amy was too paranoid to come downtown to our office. She feared that a pimp would find her and force her to start working again.

So we traveled far into the east end to meet with her every week in her apartment in a rather notorious housing project. Walking into this housing project, we stuck out as outsiders, and could feel many eyes watching us. Between an intense gang presence, a bed bug infestation, and a high population of drug users, it was an uncomfortable place to be.

During our home visits, we would end up doing anger management with Amy, while helping her cook breakfast for her daughter as she yelled over the blaring rap music. Every time we went to her house, we met new people; people from the neighborhood; boyfriends, family members, johns and dealers. Much to our surprise, her visitors would carry on with business as usual: smoking marijuana, making crude sexual comments, and openly discussing their current hustle. More than once we had to pause our session because a john came to the door. So, we waited in the living room watching cartoons with her daughter until she was finished with the date in the bedroom and the session could continue. Didn’t they know we were outreach workers?

They did know that we were workers, but they didn't care. Having been invited into Amy's home made us a part of the community and ensured that we were "cool." Before long people started showing up during our sessions on purpose as they sought out ways we could help them as well. Instead of combing the streets doing outreach, the streets were coming to us while we did outreach from a bed bug infested couch!

Home visits as an outreach strategy incorporate all aspects of street outreach and community outreach. They are at the same time the best of relational networking, peer referral, crisis intervention, harm reduction, and program promotion. They may be time consuming, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous, but they work extremely well.

Being invited into the home of someone from a closed and oppressed community is like being given a VIP pass into that community. People's homes are where they are most themselves. People don't tend to "behave" or apologize for their behavior when we are in their home. To be invited into that space is a clear sign that a solid trusting relationship has developed... it is a sign not only to the worker, but to the rest of the family and community.

Providing support in the home environment requires flexibility and adaptability. A worker may be there to do anger management and find that the person's abusive partner has been "invited" to join in or the worker may be intending to fill out a housing application, but end up talking about employment opportunities because the person has little bags full of "product" spread out over the kitchen table, as they scramble to make rent. When we are in someone's home, we are completely in their world and they will call the shots... they decide the rules, and they set the agenda for the meeting. If we are able to work with what we are given, we will be rewarded because any support given may be received with genuine motivation to change and a desire to work towards that change.

Although not everyone we meet or work with will be ready, it is good to make it a habit of offering to provide support beyond the street, either in one's program space or the person's home. Simply offering the option communicates that we trust the person and that we are committed to being helpful. Entering program spaces can be a major barrier to services for some people; discussing life changing issues on a street corner is often not much better. It makes sense then for change to begin in the comfort of "a home," especially because change is always a difficult and uncomfortable process.

7. In closing...

In this article we have shared how outreach starts, develops, and moves dynamically as highlighted in relation to the work with sex workers through the philosophy and early experiences of the STAND program in Toronto. We have included experiences, stories, and reflections in which respect, trust, and positive attitude were established with individuals, not over single visits, but over a fairly lengthy period of time, even when things did not necessarily proceed as hoped for. Even so, being consistent, following through, and keeping promises were extremely important.

Through examples, we have underscored the need for outreach workers to be attentive to the power and dynamics that operate on the street in subtle and not-so-subtle ways influencing these youth. The path of change in the lives of community members is not linear, and the moment of change cannot be predicted. Even so, the outreach worker must deliver on the promises made to help community members change or exit street life, following through when they are ready. At these and other times it becomes necessary to provide outreach not just on the streets, but in other places, such as, program space, an individual's home, court, jail or wherever a community member or others connected to them request.

Although professional social work's response when it comes to adolescents and maybe even youth of this age group is typically to rescue, remove, restrain, protect, and place such persons (Nybell et al., 2009), the approach outlined in this article is different. Here power has to be negotiated, relationships have to be built up and earned over time. Typical social work interventions such as case management, counseling, and brokering may be relevant in outreach to sex trade workers. But it is active waiting, accompanying youth, harm reduction, respecting their reality and choices, and allowing them to determine what services they need that are much more relevant. Hopefully, the practice wisdom put forward in this article contributes to the critical awareness of both social work educators and practitioners. Outreach to sex trade workers poses a number of challenges to questions such as boundaries that the Social Work Code of Ethics continues to grapple with. However, reaching out genuinely to support these community members unconditionally, accompanying them until such time as they determine when they are ready to change, and then beginning to assist them transition to a more stable lifestyle is undoubtedly a model of core social work values in practice.

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