



WISH

Drop-In Centre Society

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WISH Newsletter • Spring 2017

Community volunteers with
recording artist Bif Naked
and MP Jenny Kwan.
Photo: Wendy D



URGENT APPEAL FROM WISH

Spring is always a time of transformation at WISH. The shifting weather brings relief and cheer to all, from the women who access our services through to our staff.

Spring is also when our government funders share their plans for supporting our programs for street-based sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in the coming year. **Unfortunately, the news this year means WISH's spring transformation will be difficult. We face having to cut back critical front-line services at a time when they are most needed.**

As a committed supporter, you may remember the Pickton trial prompted a surge in political will to protect the women most at risk of violence. Five years ago, the Oppal inquiry recommended that WISH Drop-In move to a 24/7 model, and the B.C. government committed to support that expansion financially.

Even in 2013, that funding wasn't enough to properly support 24/7 service. But it was a start. We, at WISH, knew we were the only place sex-working women in our neighbourhood consistently felt safe. So, using the available funding, we increased our services to 18 hours a day.

In the intervening years, we have lobbied government partners to increase their commitment to our work. During that period, the need for our services has grown and grown:

- Homelessness numbers are at their highest in 10 years.
- In that time, social assistance payments haven't increased once.
- The devastating fentanyl crisis continues to escalate around us.

These are just three of the factors increasing the risks to women's safety. As insecurity rises, so do the numbers of women accessing our services, and the costs of meeting their needs.

Over the past five years, our government funding has remained essentially the same, at a level that was insufficient from the outset. Consequently, WISH has stretched beyond its limits to continue serving our community. That stretch means we're now faced with reducing our level of service to street-based sex-working women, some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

We face having to cut back critical front-line services at a time when they are most needed.

We face having to close the Drop-In one night per week. One night in seven, the women we serve will have nowhere they feel safe to take a break.

We face leaving the Mobile Access Project Van parked one night per week. One night in seven, the only harm-reduction service operating between 3 and 6 a.m. in the Downtown East Side won't be available to serve the community.

Program cuts are not our first choice, but they're our only option to ensure the survival of WISH. I'm working closely with senior staff, our board, and a group of committed experts to develop a plan for building WISH's capacity to support these strong, resilient women.

This plan includes working with government partners to secure additional funding. It also includes you, our committed supporters. Our team will be reaching out for your thoughts about how to move forward.

Today, we ask you to find a way to dig deep. If you usually contribute later in the year, consider donating today instead. If you can, consider increasing your contribution. Your donations go directly to providing safety, support, and community to sex-working women in our neighbourhood — women who have almost no access to safe space, let alone opportunities to connect meaningfully with themselves and one another.

WISH is heading into a difficult time of transition, but we remain fiercely committed to our mission: to improve the health, safety and well-being of women who are involved in Vancouver's street-based sex trade.

I am so grateful for your partnership on this journey. Only through community can we continue to ensure inclusion, safety, and belonging for all women.

Thank you, and please give today.

Mebrat Beyene
Executive Director, WISH Drop-In Society

OPIOID CRISIS RESPONSE

As you have certainly heard, Vancouver is reeling from an unprecedented opioid crisis, one which Mayor Gregor Robertson called “B.C.’s most tragic public health emergency in decades.” In April 2017 alone, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority reported 54 illicit overdose deaths, a 266% increase over April 2016. Those same statistics have hit hard at WISH. We have lost participants, friends, and members of the community to the epidemic.

WISH is responding by increasing safety checks throughout the Drop-In space, and ensuring all front-line staff are trained to administer first aid and Naloxone. We also participate in the Take Home Naloxone (THN) program through the WISH Drop-In and MAP Van programs. A project of the Provincial Harm Reduction Program, the THN program has trained WISH staff to administer life-saving Naloxone, and WISH staff can now train other women in the community to do the same.



Naloxone kits arriving at WISH.



TRANSITIONS

NEW: TRANSITIONS PROGRAM AT WISH

WISH Transitions has officially launched! Transitions is a **long-term supported program for sex workers who want to reduce their reliance on sex work in order to transition, retire, or exit from the sex industry.** The project will provide multi-tiered access for women at diverse points in their journeys. Some participants will be coming from a place of street entrenchment and addictions, while others will be seeking support to kick

start existing education and employment experience. Participants will get support from the service coordinator and attend regular workshops on a broad range of topics such as safety and harm reduction, housing, health and hygiene, addiction and mental health, financial and legal matters, social connections, and family reunification. WISH Transitions centers around a goal planning workbook project, which participants will develop individually and as a team to present as a community resource: **a peer-tested resource designed by sex workers for sex workers.** Program content will be grounded in arts and culture that encourage and enliven participants’ creative energies.

Transitions is funded by Public Safety Canada, with contributions from the City of Vancouver. It is delivered in partnership with the Metro Vancouver Consortium, consisting of WISH, Aboriginal Front Door Society, Battered Women Support Services, Hustle Program out of the Health Initiative for Men, and PACE Society.

For more information about Transitions, email wishtransitions@shaw.ca

Participants' answers to the question: “How will Transitions impact your life?”

“...baby steps towards a happier more fulfilling more helpful life”

“...new skills, new information, and new people. Will be a great opportunity. Getting tired of the current situation”

“...getting used to routine and responsibility”

Staff, donors, volunteers. We all make WISH Happen. Collecting items, hosting an event, writing a cheque, volunteering in the make-up room, chopping vegetables, sweeping floors, serving dinner, and answering the phones. However you do it ... you make WISH Happen. Join us in celebrating all the people and tasks that make WISH happen: Snap a pic! Post it on Facebook, share it on Instagram, tweet it on Twitter. **Don’t forget the hashtag #ImakeWISHhappen**



@imakewishhappen



@WISHdropin



@wishwellness

THE LEARNING CENTRE

The WISH Learning Centre, in partnership with Capilano University, provides a friendly space to learn, create, build leadership skills and explore new possibilities. We mirror women's strengths and offer opportunities to grow.

Our most important job is to put learning on the agenda for women at all stages: those who are ready for change, those who are content to stay where they are but love the learning, creativity and comradery that we provide, and those who use learning as a form of harm reduction (by being in the Learning Centre, they avoid harmful practices such as using or connecting with violence). It is a place where beautiful things are created by beautiful minds.

Focus areas:

Building Leadership skills: Women are encouraged to take leadership at WISH, and a lot of this starts in the Learning Centre. At the monthly Women's Advisory Group meetings, women chair meetings, make suggestions for improvements at WISH and learn about programs in the community. **They also act as consultants on different issues.**

Core Learners: Women who want to engage in formal learning are registered as Capilano Students and work with Capilano faculty to develop a learning plan and work to meet their educational goals. This year, we had women working on communications, math and computer skills and other upgrading skills.

We also work as educational navigators, making women aware of current educational and training pathways.

Creative Space: Based on research that we did with women in the development of the WISH/Capilano U partnership, the Learning Centre facilitates learning within 5 major themes: being, healing, creating, learning, and leading. Art and creativity are very important modes of expression for women at WISH. As participants have explained, creative expression is a form of relaxation, a way to unwind. It is also a way to reflect and gather thoughts. Creativity also allows women to express beauty and tap into the self that is often protected on the street.

To support the Learning Centre and other programs and services at WISH please contact
wishfundraising@shaw.ca



LUCY ALDERSON AND BETSY ALKENBRACK
Learning Centre Coordinators

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls will be coming to Vancouver. Women's Advisory Group participants offered ideas about how the Inquiry could better engage the voices of sex workers. Here are some of them:

Come to WISH, see what it's all about and also hold some meetings here or elsewhere.

Provide transportation.

Advertise the meetings really well, with lots of notice.

Small meetings over lunch.

No cameras.

Be able to speak privately.

Someone can read someone else's story to keep it anonymous.

Get proper signatures to release stories.

Don't put people at risk.

Meet at Carnegie's gym or theatre. But it's not private.

Meet at school, or a hall, like Japanese Hall or outside at Crab Park.

Make sure lawyers, outreach workers, and other people we trust are at the meetings or hearings.

Have lawyers like Pivot's lawyers to come to the meetings to help explain.

Different meeting times, including daytimes and evenings.

Private one-to-one ways to record thoughts and ideas (like the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's hearings.)

Compensate people for their time and stories (money and/or items). Everyone else is being paid to be there.



SOCIAL MEDIA, SEX WORK, AND STIGMA



WISH never publishes the photos or names of women who access our services, because doing so would out them as sex workers. Sex work is deeply stigmatized, and workers experience violence, prejudice, dangerous stereotypes, and criminalization if their status is discovered. Mainstream media and opinion often severely dehumanizes women who engage in sex work, resulting in the impression that violence towards sex workers can occur with impunity. If a sex worker is outed to someone in a position of power who believes there is something fundamentally wrong with what they do to survive, it can dramatically affect their access to justice, supports, and services. For example, if a health care provider holds a negative view of sex workers, a sex worker seeking treatment for a sprained ankle may also be subjected to STI or other intrusive (or redundant) testing. That's why WISH hosts service providers at our drop-in space. We believe that when outreach workers, health care and service providers meet sex working women in our safe, non-judgemental space, they will better understand the challenges and extreme marginalization sex workers face on a daily basis. We continue to work toward a time when prejudice against sex workers will be overcome, but until then, we are committed to the privacy, anonymity, and safety of our participants.

YOUR HELP IS URGENTLY REQUESTED

Thanks to Science World for stepping up to collect and store your donated items while we recovered from the great flood of December 2016! Repairs have been completed and we are so grateful for your contributions.

Due, in part, to the wonderful response we received from our request for flood assistance, we are currently flush with donated goods. If you want to support WISH, we are urgently in need of financial contributions. The cuts we are facing to frontline services are serious and will impact the lives and the safety of women.

The Drop-In Centre

The WISH Drop-In Centre is a haven for women (trans* inclusive) involved in the street-based sex trade. The Drop-In offers frontline support overnight in the form of hot meals, safe showers, nursing care & more. **We face having to close earlier in the morning, and to close entirely one night a week, a reduction of 27 service hours a week.**

The Mobile Access Project aka MAP Van

The MAP van is an overnight street outreach van that meets women working in the street-based sex trade all over Vancouver, providing harm reduction and support. From the hours of 3 am to 6 am, the MAP van is the only mobile harm reduction van on the streets of Vancouver. **We have reduced the coordinator's hours, and we face having to limit MAP van services to 6 nights a week.**

The Aboriginal Health and Safety Project

The Aboriginal Health & Safety Project (AHSP) is a culturally-relevant response to the many indigenous women who use WISH. Its purpose is to help Aboriginal women who are involved in the sex trade reclaim their culture. **We face having to reduce our coordinator's hours to part-time, which means no additional outreach can be done.**

The Supportive Employment Program

The Supportive Employment Program meets women where they are at and supports them as they develop the skills and confidence necessary to eventually enter mainstream employment. **We have reduced our coordinator's hours to part-time and we face a reduction in paid shift hours for participants.**

Program cuts are not our first choice, but they're our only option to ensure the survival of WISH. With your help we may be able to reverse the tide of cuts and keep the doors open for these strong, resilient women. **Please donate today.**

www.wish-vancouver.net