

WISH Drop-In
Centre Society

WISH NEWS
WINTER 2023

PARTICIPANTS COUNT ON WISH.



CAN WE COUNT ON YOU?

Letter From our Board Co-Chairs

To our community of supporters,

As WISH approaches its 40th year in 2024, we have been reflecting on the monumental work the people behind this organization have accomplished, despite facing enormous adversity.

Most recently, we said goodbye to Mebrat Beyene, WISH's Executive Director, after 8 years of service. Mebrat has been a formidable leader, strategist, and advocate, and we remain forever grateful for her contributions and dedication to WISH.

During this period of change and transition, we recognize that our history informs our present, and this keeps us rooted in the vision and mission of WISH. The lessons learned over 40 years—the triumphs and successes, as well as the deep sorrow and suffering that has punctured our communities—are worthy of reflection.

We reflect on the struggles of our predecessors and the people who built the foundation for WISH at a time when sex workers were being pushed out of Vancouver's West End during a wave of gentrification that sent them further into the margins of our community.

We remember the heinous crimes and predation of sex workers, as well as those who remained complicit in violence committed against our sisters, aunties, and mothers, who were and are loved. We also reflect on the toxic drug crisis, which has needlessly taken the lives of too many of our community and kin. We will never become complacent in our commitment to street-based sex workers; nor will we stop the critical work WISH does.

After nearly 40 years of service, WISH remains. We are still here and will continue to be here—to push back and challenge systems of oppression, to provide a place of refuge, safety, and advocacy, and to affirm the inherent dignity and humanity of street-based sex workers.

One lesson we have learned is that we must not stop. And we won't.

Onward, to 40 more.

With respect, care, and gratitude,



Lauren Casey

Lauren Casey
WISH Board Co-Chair



N. Wayara

Nic Wayara
WISH Board Co-Chair



The new MAP Van is on the Road!

Please join us in celebrating the arrival of WISH's brand new, and long awaited, Mobile Access Project (MAP) Van!

Despite securing funding for a new vehicle more than a year ago, a variety of obstacles, including supply chain issues, stood in the way of replacing the van that has been the heart of the Mobile Access Project for the past eight years.

Although our talented and dedicated mechanic has done wonders to keep the old van operational, it simply wasn't reliable anymore. An interim van provided by the City of Vancouver allowed us keep the program running.

In addition to being mechanically sound, the new van is specially equipped to store and distribute harm-reduction supplies, first aid kits, food, and clothing donations.

"Having this new van on the road just in time for the colder weather is such a celebration! The interior is very welcoming and the new layout is such a great change by offering more of a participant focused space."

MAP Van Supervisor

As with all WISH services, the MAP Van also provides one-to-one support. There is room in the van for sex workers to come inside and sit, take a break from the cold, submit a bad date report (if needed), and feel cared for.

"Having a reliable vehicle will allow us to provide consistent, excellent service for our participants who we so deeply cherish!"

MAP Van Manager

Thank you to Premier David Eby, the Province of BC, and the City of Vancouver for helping to keep the MAP Van rolling, day and night.



You can count on WISH.
Can we count on you?
Donate today!

3 Years of Safe Shelter



The housing crisis is undeniably a critical issue. It will take years of cooperation across sectors to address, but WISH participants are in urgent need now.

This fall, WISH's Shelter reached its 3-year anniversary.

While we celebrate the incredible work this milestone represents, it is a somber reminder that there is no respite for the acute housing emergency that prompted the launch of this shelter.

Although more than 40% of residents on the Downtown Eastside are women, there is a severe lack of safe spaces for them. Women and gender diverse folks deserve to be safely, and appropriately, housed.

The WISH Shelter provides 23 beds along with hot showers, laundry, meals, and critical access to WISH's supporting programs and services. Shelter staff use a trauma-informed approach and give space for participants to engage with supports at their own pace.

“When you are struggling, it can make a huge difference to be able to connect with someone else who has faced, or is still facing, a similar situation.”

Shelter Manager

For participants working at night, it is incredibly important that the WISH Shelter does not have a curfew. This guideline is intentionally responsive to the needs of street-based sex workers.

Individualized support, provided by WISH's Housing Support Worker and other staff, can help participants navigate the complicated steps that lead to secure long-term housing.

In the first six months of 2023, 12 participants worked with WISH to secure housing, and the process took an average of 51 days. For Andrea* the process took 268 days.

Her immediate needs were a safe place to sleep, food, and clean clothes. Once these basic needs were met, Andrea* started building relationships with shelter staff. She was supported to continue sex work and provided with the harm reduction supplies she needed to be safer. She connected with WISH Inreach workers for support with health concerns, and also received a referral to counselling.

Andrea* was eager to move out of the shelter, but faced numerous barriers, including a lack of ID. In time, with support, she was able to replace her birth certificate, apply for income assistance, begin working as a Peer Support Worker at WISH, and secure housing!

By using her agency and being able to choose what is best for her through this process, Andrea* has built a strong network of support that will help her successfully maintain the housing she has secured.

Thank you to BC Housing, the City of Vancouver, and WISH supporters for helping to keep WISH's Shelter open.

**Pseudonym used to ensure anonymity*

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IN?



Do you believe in human rights?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe in women's right to choose?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe everyone deserves safety?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe in equal access to opportunities?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe everyone should have access to housing?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe that sex work is work?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe in harm reduction?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No



Do you believe in acceptance, caring, dignity, and respect?

a Yes **b** Somewhat **c** No

**What you believe in matters. The work we do matters.
Your support makes it happen.**

This holiday season, stand behind your values and choose to support an organization whose values align with your own.



PARTICIPANTS COUNT ON WISH. CAN WE COUNT ON YOU?

Help twice as many: All eligible donations of \$250 or more will be doubled, thanks to our amazing matching donors!



**DONATE
TODAY!**

BC BDAR Shares “What We Heard”

Bad date reporting systems exist in places like Vancouver, Victoria, and Prince George, and they are a vital warning system for sex workers.

The BC Bad Date & Aggressor Reporting Project (BC BDAR) is working to extend these existing services by creating a comprehensive province-wide system that will be accessible to all sex workers and people informally trading sex in BC.

After compiling hundreds of survey responses, as well as feedback and data from Sharing Circles and Kitchen Table Talk consultations, Project Coordinator Andrea Cupelli and Research Lead Courtney Demone have started sharing their early findings with everyone who participated in the consultation process so far.

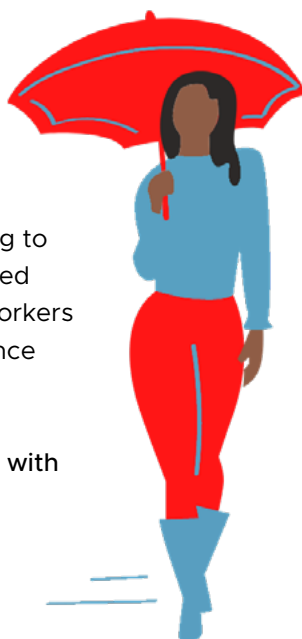
They have found there is a shared desire for results, alongside many concerns about risk – risk that is amplified for members of smaller communities, such as in rural areas, within ethnic groups, or for street-based sex workers.

The wide diversity of people who use bad date reporting means that this new system of sharing information must find the right balance between privacy and accessibility, and it needs to work in both low-tech and high-tech conditions.

This challenging work is supported by the thoughtful contributions of sex workers, sex work support organizations, and allies.

Thank you to everyone working to advance this community-inspired effort to help protect all sex workers from the risk of targeted violence they face.

To learn more, or get involved with BC BDAR, visit bcbdar.org



Moving From Response to Resilience



This October, WISH staff were excited to attend BC's second sex work conference, organized by Living in Community (LIC). Sex workers, community organizations, and government officials from across the province gathered to collaborate in the creation of a better BC for sex workers. **The goal was to strengthen our collective advocacy voice and increase the prevalence of culturally competent and person-centered services for sex workers.**

The first conference took place in 2019 and helped launch the BC BDAR project as a community response to combat violence in sex work. This year, the conference featured keynote speakers and panel presentations, as well as sex work organization tours.

WISH was honoured to participate in one of the panels to discuss best practices in sex worker shelter and housing. Our Shelter Manager joined other organizations and talked about WISH's approach to supporting the housing needs of sex workers, and described some of the gaps and barriers they face when trying to find permanent housing.

Living in Community is a provincial non-profit organization working to change the conversations we have about sex work. They focus on addressing the root causes of issues like stigma, poverty, and gender-based violence that create systemic vulnerability for sex workers.

Visit their website to learn more about the amazing work they do: livingincommunity.ca

Memorials at WISH

It is difficult to explain the scale of loss experienced within the WISH community, and extremely difficult to accept. Every time we lose someone, a passing announcement is shared with staff and volunteers. The amount of loss is overwhelming.

In the past, when we learned a member of the WISH community had passed, we would organize a memorial to honour them. Now, the scale of what we are collectively facing requires a different response.

This summer, WISH started hosting a memorial every month. Participants, staff members, and volunteers are all invited to the monthly memorial, which offers support to help process this immense grief.

WISH staff from the Inreach, Indigenous Health and Safety, and Music Therapy Programs worked together to develop an inclusive format for the memorial, ensuring that we honour every participant who passes, while including space to mourn the loved ones we have lost outside of WISH. Music Therapy staff lead the bereavement work and support everyone who attends.

The monthly memorial includes smudging, singing, music, poetry, and writing. Those in attendance are invited to speak if they would like to.

We gather to celebrate the lives of those who have passed, to share and listen, and to remember our loved ones. The monthly memorial helps us to move through this unprecedented difficulty together.



Exciting new Project at WISH to Improve Harm Reduction Services

Photo: Wendy D. Photography

WISH is proud to announce a new Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention Project.

Guided by Project Manager Eliza McCullough, this is a re-visioning of how we act to prevent overdose and reduce harm in our community, moving towards a more sustainable and holistic service model, one that is grounded in cultural safety.

Building on the strengths of WISH's past Peer Witnessing Program, and knowledge shared by current Harm Reduction Workers, this harm reduction and overdose prevention model of service will be developed and delivered in collaboration with a Community Advisory Board. The Board will be comprised of WISH participants and staff, Indigenous organizational partners, and other community experts in harm reduction, mental health, and substance use support.

Consultations with staff, participants, peers, and WISH's in-house Elder will also take place to better understand what training, support, and infrastructure is needed for frontline staff to maintain a trauma-informed and culturally safe approach when working with participants.

We must find a better way to increase safety within our community. We must find a new understanding of what harm reduction means. One that includes street-based sex workers' needs, voices, and expertise.

This one-year project would not be possible without funding provided by the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA). We are grateful, and honoured, to do this work together.

Let the Evidence Lead

A new docu-series, called *Sasha Reid and the Midnight Order*, is in production for Hulu and WISH has been asked to participate.

The series aims to raise awareness of systemic injustice and interconnected harms, as well as ways that “communities can band together to create safety.”

The Midnight Order is a group of women who use forensics and data-based science to find patterns in unsolved homicides. They say this work is done “with the larger hope of bringing justice and closure to these stories,” and they aim to keep “compassion first, but let the evidence lead.”

WISH was asked to participate to help provide perspective as Canada’s largest sex-worker support organization.

Members of marginalized communities are often ignored by traditional law enforcement investigations or considered to be “unreliable” witnesses. This creates gaps in investigative work that can allow criminal activities to continue.

We have seen firsthand what can happen when information provided by targets of gender-based violence is ignored, despite providing crucial insight.

We deeply appreciate the work being done by this group; using thoughtful investigative work to better protect vulnerable populations.



BC MBA Student Support



The annual BC MBA Games brings students from across the province together to compete in academic, athletic, and team spirit challenges.

This year the host school is Simon Fraser University (SFU). The theme is Decolonizing Business, and the charitable recipient of the students’ fundraising challenge will be WISH!

The organizing committee chose to support WISH because they want to “support decolonization in non-profit spaces,” and bring awareness to “the link between colonization and sex work stigma.”

Through this collaboration, we hope to help inspire the next generation of socially responsible business leaders. Thank you so much to the MBA students who have taken the time to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers facing women and gender-diverse street-based sex workers in our community, and to the donors who have stepped up to support these students by making a gift to WISH.



The BC MBA Games Fundraising Challenge wraps up on December 1, and WISH will be there when the winning team is announced at the BC MBA Games closing ceremonies.

Good luck to all the participating schools and thank you especially for your creative ideas on ways to raise funds for, and awareness of, WISH!

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WISH is located on the unceded, stolen lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and selilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.



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