

A Success Story

Stella, l'amie de Maimie Montreal, Quebec

Stella, a bright star for sex workers

Women, transvestite and transsexual sex workers have a hard time on the street and elsewhere and are among those at greatest risk of becoming homeless. For 10 years, Stella has been watching over them, listening to them, supporting them and providing them with helpful tools.

There are over 500 sex workers on the sidewalks of Montreal, and at least 10 times more working in the shadows, behind closed doors. Even though they are barely within the law, they are entitled to a roof over their heads and to live and work without endangering their lives. Stella is there for them. Its mission is not only to fight prejudice against sex workers, but also to inform them, support them and help them to improve their living and working conditions.

From HIV to social action

In 10 years, Stella has stirred up some serious thought about the environment in which it operates. The organization is well aware of the fact that these days, we no longer talk about "prostitutes," but about "sex workers." Stella was originally established to fight the spread of HIV/AIDS, and has become a tool for social action and a beacon in the night where people who are often ostracized and misunderstood can find a compassionate ear.

Through its street work, Stella helps hundreds of women, transvestites and transsexuals who work in the sex trade. "Thanks to the SCPI,* we have been able to increase our staff of field workers by 30%. This has been a real boon for us," explains Claire Thiboutot, General Manager and co-founder of the organization. The first \$285,000 contributed by the SCPI* enabled Stella to consolidate and develop activities for women at risk of becoming homeless. This contribution enabled Stella to forge ties with the Aboriginal community and reach out to First Nations women who work in the sex trade downtown and often have no resources. They are also given documentation in Inuktitut. A second contribution from the SCPI* for \$124,000 helped the organization implement its programs and keep them running. Stella gets the rest of its funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Quebec government's Programme de soutien aux organismes communautaires (SOC) and private donations.

On the streets

"Fieldwork is the most important part of our work," says Claire Thiboutot. "Our team visits neighbourhoods, massage parlours, bars and all locations where sex workers ply their trade. Its main objective is to create a bond of trust." Once this bond has been established, Stella's workers can provide information to those who need it and guide them to the appropriate services. Some of them need legal advice, while others need information about their rights or sexually transmitted diseases. Each client is given an information bulletin and a list of bad customers, which is updated once a month." Six support workers comb the streets of the city five nights a week, and over the years, have created a tight network. "Sex workers are often very lonely women. We help them break out of their isolation, either through our actions or by listening to them and giving them our information tools," says Claire Thiboutot.

Stella's drop-in

Stella holds an open house in its offices every Monday afternoon. People come for coffee and conversation and to solve their problems, but mostly, they come to be listened to in a prejudice-free atmosphere. On Monday nights, a community clinic is held in which they can undergo anonymous screening tests and talk about health issues, thanks to the co-operation of Médecins du Monde. A community supper is offered once a month on Thursday.

Stella is also expanding its prevention work by holding hepatitis vaccination clinics in bars with exotic dancers and by offering free self-defence workshops. The organization also looks after those who have just been released from prison and have no resources, and helps workers who cannot find lodgings because of their long criminal records.

For Stella, the SCPI* is a springboard that has enabled it to broaden its field of action in myriad ways. "I don't know if we've saved any lives, but we've prevented a good many tragedies. Without the SCPI*, we would never have been able to do all the things we do now. Knowing how important each and every contact is in this environment, the SCPI's* contribution is priceless," concludes Claire Thiboutot.

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*SCPI: Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative