

**Project Case Study  
Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society  
Victoria, British Columbia**

**1. Introduction**

This case study of Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society (PEERS) is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

**2. Description of the Project**

Conditions prior to project implementation

PEERS, created in the mid 1990s, provides a number of services to former sex-trade workers who have chosen to change their personal situation, as well as support to current sex trade workers. Its mandate is empowerment, education and support for these women. Since its inception, the agency has developed the following services for its clients: RISE, a lifeskills service; 2nd Chance, a youth

internship service; Employment Drop-In; public education; research, counselling and advocacy; outreach services; and, training and volunteer services.

Prior to the NHI, the community did not have the resources to provide much needed shelter services to former sex-trade workers. In most cases, existing shelter and hotel facilities in the city were not seen as suitable for these young women, partly because the facilities usually did not have the resources or staff to provide adequate services to this population.

### What the project involves

Women living in poverty and at risk of homelessness had been identified as one of the priority populations needing assistance in the Victoria Homelessness community plan. PEERS hired two former sex-trade workers in 2000 to research the feasibility of providing a safe and secure shelter for young women. Their report developed the criteria and guidelines for the creation of PEERS Place.

A proposal to provide stable transitional housing and support services to young women who have chosen to leave the sex trade was submitted to HRDC in the Spring of 2001. SCPI funding was secured to pay for purchasing a building that could accommodate 14 clients.

Several funders cover the cost of operating the program (salaries of three employees, building maintenance, and other minor operating costs), including the provincial government through its agent BC Housing, the Vancouver Foundation, the Real Estate Foundation, Van City and in-kind donations. The shelter's budget is also sustained in part by the rental portion of the clients' social assistance benefits.

Many clients have addictions to alcohol and drugs as well as mental health issues. Often, the women's addictions and psychiatric or psychological problems are associated with childhood experiences and the dangers they experienced as sex-trade workers. Consequently, they often require considerable time and support to change and rebuild their lives. Clients are encouraged to access the agency's services as well as those of other agencies in the region. For example, during their stays at PEERS Place, clients can take advantage of the training and internship activities of the RISE and 2nd Chance programs. These programs are funded through agreements with the Labour division of HRDC to provide employment and training opportunities. PEERS Place staff also assist clients in their attempts to obtain social assistance from the BC Human Resources Department.

### Objectives of the Project

The PEERS Place project's main goal is to provide short-term support (up to one year) to former sex-trade workers wishing to maintain healthier lifestyles. The agency's broader objectives reflect those activities already identified earlier in this report.

### 3. Implementation to Date

Since the fall of 2001, PEERS Place has been providing shelter and support services to homeless women who were former sex-trade workers. The program is operating at full capacity. Currently, twelve women are living there rather than the full fourteen because one living space for two women is being renovated. There is a long waiting list.

PEERS works closely with other social services and shelter providers in the community. For example, the shelter maintains a close relationship with the Sandy Merriman Centre, a shelter for homeless women or those at risk of homelessness. Many of the Centre's clients have been referred to PEERS Place for shelter and support services. In addition, PEERS maintains partnerships with agencies such as the Cool Aid Society, Capital Health (BC's regional mental health services), the Mustard Seed Food Bank, AIDS Society of Vancouver Island, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. PEERS clients also benefit from the support services offered by practicum students in nursing from the University of Victoria.

### 4. Outcomes to Date

#### Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of PEERS Place on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- The agency's staff believes that the demand for the shelter's services will continue to increase. The funding to maintain the agency's facilities is secure for the time being, but funds for the program's operations could be in jeopardy in light of the province's recent budgetary announcements in mid-January 2002.
- The program's manager identified training as an urgent need for the shelter's staff and management is seeking funding from other sources in the community to provide this.
- The need for a shelter to temporarily house former sex-trade workers had been identified early on in the development of the PEERS program. The community recognized the need for a specific shelter to respond to the special needs of this population. The majority of these women are struggling with childhood traumas, mental health issues, addictions and self-esteem issues. The community's appreciation of the problem helped to increase support in the community for PEERS Place.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at PEERS Place having informal conversations with several clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

One young woman said, "I worked the streets not by choice, I did it in order to survive and to support my drug habit." Another client said, "I'd probably still be on the streets and getting involved in unhealthy relationships if a shelter like PEERS Place didn't exist."

A third woman reported that "Life on the streets was like a revolving door; I'd stay in shelters for a while but I couldn't get the help I needed, so I'd wind up on the streets again. I'm slowly making progress here."

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