

LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: SEX WORKERS IN TRANSITION

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using background research, interviews with key local and national informants, and two focus groups with sex workers in transition, the project focused on documenting models for linking sex workers to the mainstream workforce. This initial research can be used to understand how best to raise awareness with employers around these issues.

Sex work in BC's Capital Region

Local estimates show about 10 to 20 percent of sex workers are outdoor workers (or working on the streets) and the rest are indoor workers. Many indoors workers are well-established, earn good money and are planning for their future.

Transitioning from sex work

Some factors that would motivate a sex worker to seek transition into the mainstream workforce include: an addiction that is difficult to manage; a violent or life-threatening experience; pregnancy or children who are getting older; or, getting older - most sex workers want to leave the trade before reaching 40.

The transition process can take between one to five years, depending on the severity of the barriers involved. It takes an average of six attempts before a sex worker leaves the industry for good, in part because for many sex workers the industry has been their family and exiting usually requires them to walk away from all that they have known for years.

Access to peer support during the transition period can be critical. Mentoring has been successful, especially in mainstream industries that can provide flexible scheduling and a certain level of independence.

With the decrease in income that often comes with exiting, sex workers find it hard to maintain themselves financially, especially if they are dealing with an addiction. For a sex worker, the idea of working nine-to-five for minimum wage and under poor working conditions is totally out of the question.

Interestingly, sex workers are much more willing to volunteer to demonstrate their skills and gain a sense of the work environment.

Having basic needs covered before entering a transition process is essential, particularly housing, as some more vulnerable sex workers are living on the streets, in "crack houses" or with pimps. Housing becomes especially relevant if people are also dealing with an addiction. Not all sex workers are dealing with addictions, though it is estimated that about 80 percent are.

Opportunities to upgrade their education or attend college are important to improve chances for a successful transition.

Employers may be concerned about morale and reputation, due to the stigma of sex work in society. Sex workers have concerns that employers who knowingly hire a former sex worker may have sexual interests, or power and oppression issues.

Transferable skills

Sex workers develop work skills that can be transferable to a mainstream job. These include: entrepreneurship, ability to work long hours, self-promoting, marketing, people skills, accounting and finances, among others.

Some more traditional work skills may initially pose a challenge to sex workers accustomed to a more independent work style, such as punctuality, respect for authority, workplace relations, language and communication and personal appearance.

Programs such as PEERS' Steps Program help to address the low self-esteem resulting from society's stigmas and discrimination against sex workers.

Mainstream work

Sex workers said that the following are some of the working conditions that would help them transition to a mainstream job:

- Affordable and accessible daycare
- Flexible schedules that accommodate transition needs or family commitments
- Hiring based on practical skills and not on work history
- Orientation and training to facilitate learning the job
- Access to counselling services to manage stress and maintain productivity and self-esteem.

The following industries are some good initial options for sex workers in transition:

- Construction work
- Gardening & landscaping
- Dress design
- Arts & crafts
- Health care or nursing
- Social work
- Addictions counselling
- Homecare and seniors care
- Children with special needs
- Veterinary & animal care
- Wilderness & environmental work
- Hair dressing and make up artist.

Recommendations

Employers can attend an orientation workshop at PEERS to provide an opportunity for interaction with potential employees and a space to start removing stigmas and

stereotypes. Sex workers then also address their own preconceptions and stereotypes about mainstream or “square” employers.

Self-employment may be an alternative to sex work and programs exist to support this. One possibility is having PEERS Step Program graduates qualify for the Service Canada Self-employment Program as an incentive to complete the Step Program.

Governments can examine policies and regulations around activities that could be related to sex work (massage parlours, escort services), and develop supports from the judicial and police system. These institutions can play an important role in providing services and incentives to both sex workers in transition and to potential employers.

While some services are available to assist sex workers in their exiting process, more supports are needed to ensure a successful exit.

Public education is an important complement for a strategy to support sex workers in transition. Public sensitivity and understanding of what drives women and men to sex work or clients of sex work must be promoted.

More research needs to be done addressing the transition of sex workers to the mainstream labour market.

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