

NEWS RELEASE

Converted ambulance provides mobile services for Vancouver sex-trade workers

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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VANCOUVER - A converted ambulance that has been equipped as a safe, mobile drop-in centre for sex-trade workers will soon start circulating in Vancouver during the night – the most dangerous time for these women - representatives of the Vancouver Agreement and two prostitute's-rights groups announced today.

The Mobile Access Project (MAP) is designed to be a place of respite and safety from violence for survival sex workers during the night-time hours when there are virtually no services available to them, said Kate Gibson of the Women's Information Safe House Drop-in Society (WISH), Raven Bowen of Prostitution Alternatives Counselling Education (PACE), and Fay Weller of the Vancouver Agreement.

MAP is a project developed and supported by the two groups and the Vancouver Agreement, an urban development initiative of the federal and provincial governments and the City of Vancouver that works in partnership with community and business groups.

MAP services including emergency medical advice and assistance, provision of condoms and clean needles, and resource and referral information, including how to access addiction treatment services, will be available from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. seven days a week. The van will be staffed by a driver and support workers, including a peer-support worker who is a current or former sex-trade worker.

"The struggle to increase services to women working on Vancouver streets in the sex trade has been on-going for over 20 years," said Bowen. "We are so pleased that we have been able to work with the Vancouver Agreement to bring these incredibly vital services to our community."

The three organizations believe it is important that the community know about this critical service, but equally important is assuring sex-trade workers that their privacy will be maintained, they said.

"It's going to be very important that women working on the street late at night feel safe using MAP services so we are asking the public and the media to respect these needs and not make the van itself a focus of attention,," Gibson said.

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MAP is a key funding priority of the Vancouver Agreement, whose initial focus is the city's Downtown Eastside to address economic, social and public safety challenges in the area while promoting and supporting positive solutions through innovative community development projects.

The project was developed because of the acute need for immediate and coordinated action to reduce violence against women sex-trade workers in the Downtown Eastside, and to improve their access to peer counseling and basic and preventative health services, said Weller

“The MAP concept emerged a year ago from a Call to Action Forum on commercial sexual exploitation and reflects the Vancouver Agreement’s strategy to make the community safer and healthier for the most vulnerable, including a priority to develop safe places for women and children,” she explained.

A primary goal of MAP is to provide training and employment for women who are currently working or have worked as sex workers. Ten women who will provide peer support received training in areas such as peer counseling techniques, conflict resolution skills, basic first aid and sterility precautions, emergency procedures for drug overdose, and legal issues regarding prostitution like sexual assault and battering.

“As a former sex worker, I understand what a woman working the street is dealing with,” said a MAP peer support worker. “She knows that I can relate to her life and that means it will be easier to address any issues she might want to talk about.”

While the health, safety and information services provided by this mobile centre are vital, the project partners recognized that training and employment are as important for women who work in the survival sex trade, said Bowen.

“Many women who work as survival sex trade workers do so because they feel they have no other options. They face a range of barriers to other employment such as a history of past abuses, limited opportunity for training and education, and poverty,” she explained.

“MAP will also operate as a skills-training pilot project to recruit, train and employ sex-trade workers, providing them with pre-employment and on-the-job training.”

Besides WISH, PACE and the Vancouver Agreement partners, several other organizations have contributed to establishment of MAP, including Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (ACCESS), Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre, BC Centre for Excellence for HIV/AIDS, and the provincial government's Victim Services Branch.

- 30 -

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