

Sex Workers as Health Workers: the experience of POW!

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The Prostitute Outreach Workers (POW!) was launched in 1990, as a research project in which local prostitute women volunteered to train as interviewers to assess health and social care needs of prostitute women in a disadvantaged area of Nottingham, UK. Working in partnership with University colleagues, this data was used to design a community outreach project distributing condoms with advice and referral to appropriate services, and also to generate funding for premises providing a safe space for people involved in prostitution to access information, counselling and advice.

POW! currently employs five full-time members of staff and trained volunteers who assist with outreach sessions and activity sessions. In addition, the project staff receive support from the Management Committee - ten people from various professional backgrounds, all of whom have a commitment to the philosophy and principles of POW! Such support is intended to empower (not take control), and thereby assist individuals in taking full responsibility for their lifestyle, with the aim of maximising quality of life.

The project aims to provide a free and comprehensive, confidential, full-time drop-in and outreach services to those involved, wishing to exit or at risk of becoming involved in prostitution and substance misuse. Services include provision of information, support, advocacy, referral, counselling and advice on all matters relating to sexual health and HIV/AIDS, drug dependency, education, training and employment opportunities. POW! also aims to promote understanding and awareness in the wider community, amongst statutory and non-statutory organisations on all matters related to prostitution and drug misuse. Monitoring and evaluation techniques have been implemented from the start of the project, and are perceived by the project staff and management committee as crucial for credibility and sustainability in terms of funding, and financial accountability.

The average number of contacts made by POW! through outreach and drop-in each year is approximately 2,700. Outreach usually occurs 2-3 evenings a week and some afternoons in a range of local settings, with a daily drop-in service at POW! Satellite services are also provided by other local agencies for drug and alcohol related problems, advice related to substance misuse and Hepatitis B vaccination. Practical support includes matters related to homelessness, issues around safe working practices, health care appointments, court appearances, welfare rights, referral to health and social services, safe accommodation, domestic violence and crisis intervention.

The success of POW! to date has been based on a community development approach linked to institutional flexibility in patterns of working, shared control and evaluation. This holistic approach has made a significant contribution to health promotion among people involved in, or associated with prostitution who share common difficulties arising from social disadvantage.