

Centering Sex Workers in Harm Reduction Programming

Use these core competencies when working with and serving people engaged in sex work

People in the sex trade have been organizing and practicing underground harm reduction to prevent violence, infection, and overdose for decades. Many currently access healthcare and social services but desire resources that prioritize their occupational health and safety. Sex worker-centered harm reduction is much more than handing out condoms and bad date lists.¹ This document provides standards for service providers operating harm reduction programs that serve people engaged in sex work. This document can also be utilized by state health departments and other agencies supporting programs through funding or governance.

A holistic, effective approach to sex worker-centered harm reduction requires the consideration of five key core competencies:

1. Be informed of the local sex trade and surrounding anti-trafficking, prostitution, and third-party laws;
2. Prioritize non-carceral violence prevention and response;²
3. Develop organizational policies to protect participants and staff;
4. Distribute a variety of resources and supplies (along with condoms); and
5. Work through an anti-stigma lens.

1. Know Your Local Context

There are many federal, state, and local laws that pertain to different types of sex work. Sex worker-centered harm reduction programs must develop knowledge of the role sex workers and the sex trades play in your local environment and among the populations you serve. Know the liability and risk involved with supporting people in criminalized economies, where people are working, and how needs related to sex work and drug use might differ from other participant groups. **Consider the following:**

- ▶ How does policing of outdoor sex and drug markets impact the operation of a syringe services program?
- ▶ How can a LGBTQ+ health program connect with people on and off of common online hookup sites?
- ▶ How do federal, state, and local third-party laws impact the work that service providers do?
- ▶ The sex worker label doesn't fit for everyone. Find the best ways to talk about sex work in your context.

2. Prevent Violence

A strong sex worker-centered harm reduction program blends violence prevention, overdose prevention, and infectious disease prevention. Develop your organization's prevention and response mechanisms, and tailor them to the sex trade. Know the extent to which community partners can be sensitive to the needs of sex workers and network with staff who can help build bridges between resources and those who need them. **Know:**

- ▶ What shelter and housing services are available for someone who needs to work at night? What about for individuals who have children?
- ▶ What spaces exist for people of different gender identities (transgender, non-binary, cis men, and others) who are seeking safety?
- ▶ How can your program support a sex worker who has experienced police harassment or abuse?

1 A bad date list is a community-based intervention that includes circulating warnings about violent, fraudulent, or disrespectful clients.

2 Non-carceral refers to approaches that recognize the racism and exploitation inherent in policing and prisons, therefore do not rely on punishment, policing, or incarceration.



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3. Create Intentional Policies

Establish policies and procedures that address the perceived safety of your staff and participants. This includes staff and client review and discussion of policies to ensure the overall health and sustainability of your organization.

Programs can:

- ▶ Provide robust comprehensive sexual health education to all staff at orientation for consistency.
- ▶ Create sexual harassment policies for staff and participants that uplift accountability and restoration. Safety is complicated but liability is only one of many factors to consider.

- ▶ Communicate mandatory reporting policies to participants with a focus on how it might affect them and how your program can maintain trusting relationships.
- ▶ Develop disclosure policies that include protocols for discussion of sex work, violence, or exploitation. What happens when a participant says they are trading sex? What about a staff member?
- ▶ Identify and remove barriers to hiring staff with current or former experience of sex work.

4. Offer Free & Accessible Supplies

Sexual health and physical safety supplies, infectious disease testing, materials, and education need to be free and accessible to all sex workers. Resources can be provided in a variety of settings, including street and club outreach, support groups, drop-in centers, or online. Supplies and materials include: a variety of sexual barriers (external and insertive condoms, dental dams, finger

cots, non-latex gloves), water and oil-based lube, wet wipes, gum, mouthwash, bad date lists, and other sex work-specific materials. This is not an exhaustive list — find out what supplies and strategies are valuable to the communities you serve and prioritize those. For example, sex workers on street outreach may be using different drugs or routes of administration than drop-in participants.

5. Focus on De-Stigmatization

Destigmatizing sex work means creating an environment where people in the sex trade feel seen and welcome. **Try:**

- ▶ Displaying sex worker-sensitive materials and posters.³
- ▶ Using affirming, sex work-neutral or sex-positive language.

- ▶ Asking questions and including information about sex work on intakes and core program documents.
- ▶ Reviewing how sex work is discussed within your organization, among participants, and within coalition. How does this align with your harm reduction values and where you would like the organization to be?

Additional Capacity-Building Resources

This document outlines the core competencies of sex worker-centered harm reduction programming. Organizations that fail to meet these standards fail to meet the needs of participants who trade sex, and could be unintentionally causing harm. The following resources are available to help build the capacity of sex worker-centered harm reduction programming:

- ▶ [Reframe Health and Justice](#) provides training on sex worker-centered harm reduction, provides policy development and review, and custom harm reduction consultation services.

- ▶ [St. James Infirmary Occupational Safety Handbook](#) is available as a PDF or for purchase as a donation to the sex worker-led clinic in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- ▶ [Sex Work, COVID-19, and Harm Reduction](#) fact sheet contains pandemic-specific harm reduction information and is available for download.
- ▶ [NASTAD's National Harm Reduction Technical Assistance Center](#) provides technical assistance to new and established community-led harm reduction efforts, including syringe services programs, across the U.S. and can provide or connect programs to additional training and resources around sex worker-centered harm reduction.

3 Check out HIPS, Sex Workers Outreach Project, St. James Infirmary, and other sex worker rights programs for great swag!