

Value in Partnership - the outcomes

In our last magazine we mentioned an exciting project that RhED were conducting in partnership with Women's Health in the North (WHIN). The project has now concluded and we are pleased to provide some feedback about the experience of the project. Firstly lets tell you a bit about WHIN.

Women's Health In the North (WHIN) is the regional women's health service for the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne. WHIN undertakes a range of activities to support the health and wellbeing of women who live and/or work in the region. WHIN has over ten years experience in providing its services to women in the region, and has particular expertise in meeting the needs of women who are marginalised by the health system.

The RhED Brothel Outreach Program is well established, and the staff are experienced providing a service in relation to the health, welfare and occupational health and safety issues associated with working in the sex industry. RhED identified that women's needs for health information are often broader than those relating to its core work. So began the RhED/WHIN partnership project.

Brothels selected for the project reflected a mix of styles, services and suburbs in Melbourne's north. Brothels with women working who were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) were included. The goal of the program was to enhance the health, welfare, safety and wellbeing of women working in brothels.

The objectives of the program:

- To provide women with information and advice on safety, welfare and broader women's health and wellbeing;
- To respond effectively to information needs of sex workers through methods of 'action research' conducted at the time of the visits;
- To profile health services available to women in the region.
- To respond to any follow-up on information needs identified by sex workers at the time of the visits;
- To maximise the safety, welfare, health and wellbeing outcomes for sex workers by continuously refining the model of service delivery developed for the project.

Twenty-four brothels in the northern metropolitan region were visited during the RhED/WHIN partnership program, with around 70 women receiving information on safety, welfare, health and wellbeing. Around 30 managers/owners were also contacted as a result of the program.

WHIN's services were less known to the women, although women contacted during the visits were happy to receive information about a 'mainstream' organization such as WHIN. The partnership program had a positive impact in terms of WHIN's vision and capacity in the northern region.

The visits to brothels in which women from CALD backgrounds work also produced positive results. Workers reported that in CALD brothels the women were a cohesive group, with two women offering to translate the information to others. Translated material provided women included copies of Chinese 'Siren'. The Project Workers did report difficulty in providing appropriately translated and relevant information to sex workers due to the paucity of such information. This is a matter that is being addressed at many levels including government. Despite this CALD women asked many questions and interacted freely.

The Team were well resourced for visits. Information (including services available) and resources provided to women and managers or owners of brothels during the program covered across a number of topics:

- The industry in general and legal issues (looking after yourself);
- Occupational health and safety;

- Incidences and ugly mugs reports;
- Sexual assault;
- Sexually transmissible infections, HIV/AIDS, safe sex;
- Drug use;
- Hepatitis C;
- Incest;
- Domestic violence (especially the booklet, 'Is someone you know being abused in a relationship');
- Health service provision and health rights (reliable GPs, bulk billing);
- Mental health (including depression);
- Women's health (urinary infections, menopause, breast health, anorexia); and
- Services available through RhED and WHIN (RhED magazine, WHIN sticker, confidentiality).

The program's impact was reflected by the following experiences;

- The vast range of topics and linkages to appropriate services discussed amongst women during the visits;
- The willingness of women in engaging with the Project Workers to raise and talk about issues that were important to them;
- The willingness of managers or owners to pass on information to women who could not be accessed at the time of the visits;
- The willingness of women to take resources provided to them, so much so that there weren't enough to hand around at one particular visit;
- The vast range of resources that were taken by women, from menopause to domestic violence;
- An awareness amongst some women that generalist services such as WHIN are for all women, and not just some;
- A few women indicating that they would contact either RhED or WHIN for further information;
- Requests for follow-up workshop on STIs particularly for women who are wanting more in-depth and quality information; and
- An indication by women from CALD backgrounds that they would contact RhED or WHIN if they needed to through use of telephone interpreter service.

It was felt that the success of the partnership program was due to the planning and establishment phase. In this phase, the roles and responsibilities of the Project Team were clarified and understood, enabling the Team to fine-tune how they worked together as the program rolled out. The project was comprised of eight (9) consecutive weekly outreach sessions to brothels in the northern region.

RhED particularly valued the benefits that WHIN brought to its core brothel outreach work, like providing opportunities for women to raise issues about their broader health and wellbeing with this becoming a 'gateway' for those needing to talk about difficult issues (such as domestic violence). WHIN particularly valued the improvement in reaching women who would not ordinarily access a mainstream service like WHIN.

All in all, the partnership was considered an excellent way to enhance services to sex worker in the northern region and, to improve the safety, welfare, health and wellbeing outcomes of women in the industry. In addition there is potential for the model to be implemented in other metropolitan regions.

Finally, we at RhED had a fantastic time working with Wei Leng and Sue – thanks to you both, and thanks to all of the gorgeous women we met throughout the project - from the RhED team. 