



Resourcing Health & Education in the Sex Industry

RhED Community Needs Assessment on a career development program for Victorian sex workers

The Pathways Community Needs Assessment aimed to explore the career development needs of sex workers in Victoria in order to inform the ongoing development of the Pathways program. Because of the lack of research with sex workers in this area, the research was exploratory in nature and used in-depth interviews with a broad range of sex workers. The research set out to answer the following questions:

- what is the level of need for support and services?
- what types of support and services do sex workers need?
- what is the best way of providing this?
- how do sex workers view career development (both within and outside of sex work)?
- how do sex workers conceptualise their sex work (i.e. what does it mean to them)?

This paper provides summary results for the first three research questions. The main report will present the full results of the research.

Demographic information

Forty-two interviews were carried out with sex workers working in Victoria at the time of interview. Participants ranged from 20 to 60 years old with the average age being 32 years. 67.5% of respondents identified as cis-gender female, 20% as cis-gender male and 12.5% as trans and gender diverse. Participants came from Australia, including Indigenous Australians and first-generation migrants as well as Europe, Southeast Asia and Africa. 48.6% of participants were university educated (this figure includes several respondents who were currently studying at university or had deferred their studies). 27% had a Certificate III or IV and 10% had a diploma or advanced diploma. 8% had studied until high school and 5.4% to senior high school. 21.5% of participants reported working in erotic dance, 19% in brothels,

RhED is a program of



14% as private workers, 11.4% as escorts, 10% in erotic massage, 7.6% as street-based workers, 5% in BDSM or kink and 3.8% as topless waiters. However, the vast majority of participants reported working in different sectors of the industry so this should not be viewed as being indicative of sector-exclusive employment.

Is there a program need?

Although this question was not asked directly in interviews, participant responses showed broad agreement with the idea of a career development program, with many responding favourably to the idea. However, many workers connected this need directly connected to the stigma they faced as sex workers and not necessarily because of any need in relation to having a lack of skills. This framing would need to be kept in mind with the way the career development program is framed, and services are provided. Indeed, the vast majority of participants were highly educated and had extensive working experiences outside of the sex industry. However, not all participants agreed with the need for a career development program: I just don't relate to [the idea of career development] ... that is just utterly, utterly irrelevant to me **(Mark)**.¹

Participants also highlighted the need for services to be offered in a variety of forms (i.e. not just case management) and holistically (i.e. as part of the general services provided to all sex workers in Victoria and not as part of an 'exiting' type program):

I really don't like the previous focus. That could change in future but previously that their focus has been on reducing hours and exiting strategies. I really don't like that ... I would like to see that support networks weren't all about exiting strategies. I would like support networks to see my career as a valid career choice and that it can be an empowering career choice if somebody chooses it for themselves if they want to. **(Gertrude)**

I am very, quote unquote, highly educated or whatever, and I have no shortage of possible routes for how to survive capitalism, and this is my chosen one. And I think it can be hard to deal with services sometimes that have often... their program was very focused on transitioning out of the industry, and that if I had gone and said, "Hey, I'm having a hard time moderating my drinking habit, this is my idea for where I can transition that would fix that", my fear at the time would have been that I would have someone say to me, "Well, you should just get out of the industry entirely", which would have been really unhelpful and just sort of like an extra thing to deal with. **(Jinx)**

What would workers like to see in a career development program?

Participants were clear in stating that any career development program for sex workers needs to include peers in direct staffing roles and that this is essential for program success. During interviews, participants discussed their needs in terms of a career development program, and based on this, several specialised staffing profiles were identified. While a lived experience of sex work may not be necessary for all these roles, given the need for peer-to-peer sharing and peer involvement that most participants discussed, it would be ideal for these specialised staffing roles and profiles to be filled by people with a lived experience of sex work.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this summary.

Specialised staffing profiles and roles include:

Career development officer that specialises in sex work and non-sex work employment and education – this person can provide assistance to sex workers with writing a resume (to explain skills gained in sex work to people external to the industry and answer ‘gaps’), answering selection criteria etc. and preparing for interviews, assisting in finding the right courses to study at university or TAFE, upskilling in sex work or changing working sectors etc.

Ideally this career development officer is someone with sex work expertise (as a direct support role this is highly recommended and to have insider knowledge and understanding re: addressing gaps and explaining skills and having in-depth understanding for aspects of the position pertaining to career development in sex work). The position would also need a person with connections into industries, employment and the education sector as well as the sex work sector and a comprehensive broad-based experience in sex work. This is crucial for providing transitioning support for within sectors and upskilling in sex work. These skills and connections are possibly beyond the skills set of a social worker/case manager and it is recommended that someone with this career development skills set be hired in the position. This would be a crucial and key hire for any career development type program.

Legal officer – this person has an intimate knowledge of sex industry laws (Australia-wide given that many workers work interstate), independent contractor and sub-contractor status and related regulatory bodies as well as keeping abreast of changes and advice on how to interpret regulations to be operating within the parameters of relevant laws for each of the states and territories (in particular Victoria as many workers find the legislation very confusing to understand). The person working in this role would need to have a legal and dispute studies/law or criminology/criminal justice background or degree/training and expertise in working in the industry. The person would ideally have broad communication skills as participants suggested access be based on multiple formats (e.g. face-to-face advice and assistance, workshops, online/virtual spaces (including peer spaces), factsheets etc.) and could possibly be contained within the Justice portfolio.

Housing and financial officer – as per the recommendations made in the Evidence Review Report this person can provide assistance to sex workers who may need assistance with housing and/or finances and some participants did express a need for this type of support (housing support was particularly relevant for street-based sex workers while financial support cut across most sectors).

Peer support worker & engagement officer – this person would work alongside other staff (e.g. career development officer) in providing de-stigmatisation training and disseminate program information to collaborating service providers and other potential partners, sources for referrals or where sex workers may face discrimination. This person can also coordinate and facilitate peer-only workshops and services within peer spaces as there was significant levels of support among participants for the idea of work to be carried out in peer spaces. Given that the vast majority of participants saw stigma as being central to the need for this program, de-stigmatisation training and action needs to be a necessary component of engagement work and in bringing about change in this area, it is ideal to engage peers in this work. Ideally this would work as an excellent entry point for sex workers who wish to join the program but may not yet have the relevant skill, degree or training required for the other positions.

Additionally, several male participants expressed a desire for a male peer officer to be employed as well as the creation of male peer spaces.

What other program recommendations did workers make?

- Counselling/Advice phone line: a number of respondents said a 24-hour (or after hours) phone line that could be accessed for support, advice, information and/or counselling would be useful. That the phone line be 24 hours or after 9-5 working hours is important, as many sex workers work outside of business hours and may find access to support and information more valuable during their working hours.
- Workshops: participants mentioned a variety of workshops, including: STIs/health checks, information on transitioning to another sector, 'starting out' sex worker education, managing burn-out/slow seasons, FOSTA-SESTA and online advertising alternatives.
- Fact Sheets/Information: independent contractor rights (sector-specific), SWA numbers, ABNs, financial abuse and domestic violence.
- Accessible PEP Resources.
- Information on relevant services, and peer support groups be disseminated in sex work spaces (such as brothel lounge rooms and strip club change rooms). Participants mentioned posters, booklets and pamphlets.
- Industry-Centred Language Lessons for non-native English-speaking sex workers.
- More regional sex worker friendly services and support.
- Sex worker-friendly childcare referral options.
- A peer space with a virtual component to facilitate networking amongst sex workers, host workshops, and provide relevant industry information virtually. Consideration needs to be given to how peer spaces can be inclusive of all genders and sectors as some participants commented on being uncomfortable in certain peer spaces. For example, Andrew was concerned about encroaching on all-female sex worker spaces, and Jinx, who worked in brothels and as a private worker, commented that "[s]ometimes diversity is great, but for example, I've gone... I've wanted to go before to things ... and I find the workers that largely participate in that come from a really different place than I do. And there's mutual discomfort a lot of the times in discussing our lives, like what's going on for us, and that it doesn't become a space where I feel like I can ask the questions that I want to know based on my own working experiences".

Jessica Rabbit expressed concern about the recent brokerage funding, which suggests programs need to sufficiently explain and be transparent about brokerage funding and the impact this has on engagement with the service:

Alexa spoke of how the definition of 'sex worker' needed to include erotic dancers in order not to present as a form of exclusion and barrier to accessing services:

At the time that I was transitioning out of the adult industry ... They weren't considered sex workers. They weren't included in the program; they were not eligible at that stage.
(Alexa)

Most participants supported the inclusion of erotic dancers in definitions of sex work/adult entertainment.

Program Names

Participants highlighted the need have services with names that do not indicate “exiting”. A more simplified program name like ‘Career Development Program’ carries less baggage and connotations.