

Annual Report: 2015

Below the Belt is a drop in safety center for male identified persons involved in the sex trade. *Below the Belt* provides a safe, welcoming environment with authentic, peer-to-peer dialogue, seeking to meet men at various stages of change in their lives. Men can access resources, referrals, hygiene products, snacks and clothing. Our program has three main components: creating a safe space, providing HIV and STI testing, and developing safety plans to mitigate harm and violence. *BTB* is open four times a week: one drop-in only, two STI testing only, and one time for drop-in and STI testing. Peer support is also available outside of these hours.

Vision

A community that provides the necessary supports to males involved in the sex trade.

Mission

To be a safe respite for males involved in the sex trade and increase access to referrals and resources to build a peer community.

Our Community

CEASE: Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation

Catholic Social Services

RCMP KARE Pro-Active Team

E4C Crossroads Outreach

Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services

Streetworks

BMHC Kindred House

HIV Edmonton

REACH Edmonton

Metis Child & Family Services Society
 Edmonton Police Service – Vice Section

AHS STI Clinic

Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton

History

Below the Belt (BTB) is a support program for male-identified and two-spirited persons with current or prior experience in the sex trade. *BTB* is an Edmonton-based initiative and is unique in Alberta. A multi-stakeholder group was drawn together in 2013 by two concerned individuals to listen, respond and mobilize resources. CEASE: Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation is pleased to provide the organizational structure and obtain resources to support *BTB*. The goal is to create a safe place for respite, offer appropriate resources, build a peer community, provide peer mentoring and increase the ability to access broader community and government resources.

There is an immense stigma associated with men who experience sexual exploitation, making it challenging to access services. These men have complex needs, and *BTB* seeks to offer support through a harm reduction and violence reduction philosophy.

Demographics

By the Numbers

- To date, *BTB* has provided support to 94 people
- On average, *BTB* saw 3 new people each month
- On average, 14 people accessed services from *BTB* per month at the drop-in (ranging from 8-24 persons per month)

About Our Clients

Please note that these statistics are an approximation based on anecdotal evidence. It is meant to provide an overview, not a detailed account.

- Age range: 17-48
- Almost all identify as male
- 85% identify as gay, 10% bisexual, 5% straight
- 70% Caucasian, 25% Aboriginal, 3% ABC, 2% Asian
- 90% use Meth, Cocaine, or GHB
- 50-60% are injecting drugs
- At least 65% are transient or homeless
- 50% had experienced some form of abuse, violence, or assault within 3 months

About the Buyers

- Typically men in their mid-40's
- Use internet and phone apps to contact
- Many buyers ask our clients to come to their houses/apartments/condos

Program Services

Support

Some of the supports offered at *BTB* include immediate crisis intervention and problem solving.

In 2015, support was given 121 times.

Basic Needs and Harm Reduction Supplies

Some of the basic needs offered at *BTB* include food, clothing, and bus tickets.

In 2015, *BTB* helped 142 times with basic needs.

Harm reduction supplies offered at *BTB* include condoms, and clean needles and alcohol wipes, courtesy . **In 2015, *BTB* distributed harm reduction supplies 88 times.**

Safety Plans

Safety plans are an excellent process to engage the client in reflecting and naming where they may face dangerous situations. Safety plans empower the person to be on alert and make the best protective decisions possible in the moment. This reduces risk of victimization and violence. Since survival needs or addiction needs related to trauma are the primary factors wherein a client could be in a risky situation, it's critical to equip them with appropriate options. When designing a safety plan, clients agree to call or text a safe person within a certain amount of time, and if they fail to, the safe person can contact Edmonton Police Service or RCMP with their exact address and time of last contact.

In 2015, *BTB* set up 13 safety plans.

Breaks

The goal of the drop-in safety centre is to provide clients with a place to rest, relax and connect with peers and community resources. **In 2015, clients used *BTB* solely to take a break 168 times.**

The time spent in the drop-in is time spent away from risky situations.

Personal Stories

Referrals

Referrals include to other community agencies, treatment centres, and Edmonton Police Service.

In 2015, BTB provided 31 referrals.

STI/HIV Testing

In 2015, BTB's on-site STI/HIV testing program provided by the AHS STI team tested 236 people. Not all persons tested at this site are clients of BTB.

One-on-one Support

One-on-one support is a very important component of BTB. Staff provides outreach support on an as needed basis. Some of these supports include lunch, coffee, and simply someone to talk to in confidence about their struggles and successes in life.

Peer Support

Peer support at BTB happens both at the drop in and out in public. Group activities such as going to a movie or grocery shopping help to provide a sense of normalcy to people's lives and aid in breaking damaging drug and party cycles.

"...BTB is there, plain and simple....I think I would have been in deep shit without it..."

"....C was there to pick me up. I was in a dark place struggling with meth, sex addiction and was really fucked up. He never judged just kept hanging in there; hugs when I needed them, a kick in the ass when I needed it and a way out when it got so dark I had nothing to lose"

"BTB feeds me, keeps me looking styling with cloths and helps out - kinda like a dad"

"C helped my son through a really bad time - unfortunately drugs took my boy away. C was there for me through this, in fact the whole reason I got back to having a relationship with him was because of C. I cannot express how grateful I am for having that time ... and for the caring and compassion."

"...cleans socks, a chocolate bar, and deodorant - life is good."

Challenges

In 2015, the greatest difficulty within this population was struggles with addiction. Most of the projects participants were users of crystal meth or fentanyl. The current trend for using is to "slam it" (intravenous use). The use of these drugs has increased criminal activity and mental health issues. Over the past year the community has lost six young men to overdose and five to suicide. *BTB* has tried to provide better resources for the men through increased STI testing in evenings, free one to one counselling and offering harm reduction supplies. In 2016 there will be an increase in staff hours to help with service provision.

Successes

In 2015, *BTB* helped over eleven men get into treatment and in the future will continue to support their efforts. We have helped provide support and resources for five young men getting out of the correction services. There have been twenty six successful suicide interventions. We will continue to provide mentoring to many men accessing the project and our ability to mentor one-on-one has been one of our greatest strengths. We have also played an important role in getting the men STI and HIV testing as well as providing ongoing support to seven men living with HIV.

Program

Sustainability

Below the Belt staffing resources consists of one contractor providing peer support and one casual staff providing project support for approximately 20 hours per week combined. A small drop-in centre is necessary to create a safe and confidential place for clients to rest and be tested for STI's and HIV. *Below the Belt* fills a much needed gap in services for male sex workers in Edmonton, and has been brought together by various community organizations willing to fill this gap. As identified by clients, *Below the Belt* provides services and support for these men that ultimately leads to a better quality of life.

Staff Reflection

2015 continued to see *BTB* have a great impact on these remarkable men. I have seen many of the guys gain resilience and become empowered. I have also had to say goodbye to many young men who lost their lives to suicide and to substance use. More than ever I am dedicated to providing hope and support to an often hidden and over looked group of men. *BTB* has a great team of people behind it and I know the upcoming months will continue to make a difference.---- C

2015 brought lots of learning to the *Below the Belt* team! Throughout the year we had numerous opportunities to present educational material and build rapport with community stakeholders. From these connections we have been able to strengthen our network and continue to best support the individuals involved in *Below the Belt* Men's Project. It has been an honour to be a part of the project and I am looking forward to seeing what the next year brings.-----S

Thank-you to Steam Works for their generous donation our drop in space for the safety centre!

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