

2014 Report: Year One

Below the Belt is a drop in safety center for male identified persons involved in the sex trade. At Below the Belt we provide 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 three times a week for several hours each time. 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	Edmonton Police Service – Vice Section	AHS STI Clinic
E4C Crossroads Outreach	Catholic Social Services	RCMP KARE Pro-Active Team
BMHC Kindred House	Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services	Streetworks
Metis Child & Family Services Society	HIV Edmonton	REACH Edmonton

History

Below the Belt (BTB) is a drop-in program for male-identified and two-spirited persons working in or have prior experience in the sex trade. BTB is based in Edmonton and is unique in Alberta. A multi-stakeholder group came together to launch this initiative, which has operated since 2013. 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 a huge 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

- In 2014 Below the Belt Men's Project saw 56 unique persons.
- On average, BTB saw 2-3 new people per month
- On average, BTB saw 14 people per month at the drop-in (ranging from 8-21 persons per month)

About Our Clients

- Age range: 17-48
- Almost all identify as male
- 75% identify as gay, 20% bisexual, 5% straight
- 60% Caucasian, 30% Aboriginal, 10% Asian
- 85% use Meth, Cocaine, GHB, or Crack
- Over 50% are transient or homeless
- 45% had experienced some form of abuse, violence, or assault within 3 months
- At least 3 are involved in the sex trade to put themselves through school

About the Buyers

- Typically men in their mid-40's
- Many are married
- 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 2014, support was given 146 times.

Basic Needs

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

In 2014, BTB helped 111 times with basic needs.

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 2014, BTB set up 32 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 2014, clients used BTB solely to take a break 56 times.** The time spent in the drop-in is time spent away from risky situations.

Referrals

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

In 2014, BTB provided 30 referrals.

STI/HIV Testing

In 2014, BTB's on-site STI/HIV testing program provided by AHS STI team tested 210 people. Of this, approximately 20 were BTB's clients working in the sex trade. The others were individuals who heard about this via word-of-mouth and felt more comfortable coming to the BTB site than the General Hospital.

In February 2014, of those tested, 60% were HIV negative, 15% were HIV positive, and 25% were unknown.

Over 75% use a condom, but will refrain if requested by a buyer.

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.

Personal Stories

"...BTB is the reason I felt I could get some help with my using...sometimes courage takes two people and C was there during the beginning and continues to be there...I have been clean for two months and keeping it together..."

"...coming into the office every once and awhile feels like coming home and having a family..."

"...C bribed me with Subway if I got tested...I am glad I did cause I tested positive for an STI. I would have never known...he gets a lot of guys to get tested at his office; they probably won't have gone in on their own..."

"...I tested positive(HIV) a month ago C was there when I did it made a difference...he helped me make my Doc appointment and get on meds.....I am usually a mess but he has kept me on track with taking then as best as we can...prob saved my life..."

"...the drop in rocks!!! I can get socks undies and clothes...and I get fed ... some days that's like gold..."

*"...C helped me keep my apartment and feed my cat when I was in Remand...he helped my get connected into Alberta Works so I can get some extra support...life can get rough for us but it is nice to have someone on our side and get us cause we are a f***ed up but fabulous bunch..."*

"...a few weeks ago I wanted to kill myself...there has never been anyone there for me...no one that understands my lifestyle or sexuality...C was there when I was lost...I think his text saved me from just ending it...he keeps me laughing and gotta give him credit he keeps me in line and on track...it's cool having someone who gives a st and not just trying to take advantage of you ..."**

"... ok we did gay boy stuff like farmers market and cool coffee shop....I gotta admit I kinda liked it...don't tell anyone lol..."

Trends

STI/HIV Rates and Drug Use

- HIV rates are on the rise, especially in Edmonton (source: AHS)
- The current drug of choice is Methamphetamine; efforts are being made to encourage clients to take GHB as a safer alternative
- Methamphetamine use tends to lead to riskier behavior; putting themselves at risk of immediate danger and heightened likelihood of HIV/STI contraction

Modes of Communication

- Craigslist
- Cellphone apps such as grindr and tinder

A fake advertisement put up by staff asking to "party and play" garnered 12 responses within 6 minutes of being posted.

Transactions

- Reports indicate that male sex workers make, on average, more than female sex workers – up to \$700 for two hours
- There are only two men currently in contact with BTB that service women – female buyers tend to seek services online from craigslist and backpage
- Transactions frequently happen over the lunch hour

- Most activity is happening within bathhouses and bars
– there is very little to no activity on the street

Violence in this industry is extremely high, but due to stigmatization and lack of understanding from emergency and hospital staff many of BTB's clients are reluctant to use emergency services.

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.

MEN'S PROJECT

Reflection from Staff

Below the Belt Men's Project started from a serendipity meeting and a whole lot of amazing community support. The need has been there as there are no direct services designed for the needs of men in the sex trade. It has grown into one of the most amazing projects I have ever worked on. It has been a wonderful journey seeing how mentoring and support had impacted these people. I look forward to another year of making a difference. ---- C

Our chance encounter has led to numerous successes, Below the Belt being one of them. The first year of BTB has brought about many learning opportunities that have demonstrated my coworker's ability to relate and build rapport with a largely invisible population. His dedication and passion for the work we do at BTB is truly inspiring. I cannot wait to see where this project goes and what can be achieved -----S

Thank-you to Steam Works for their generous donation of the rooms for the safety centre!

We are proud to have developed a brand, an information card, and a website in 2014.

Below the Belt Men's Project Edmonton

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