

## Supportive housing offers sex workers safety: study

Keven Drews , *The Canadian Press*

Updated: Thu. May. 10 2012 11:59 AM ET

### **Female sex workers living in and operating from supportive-housing units have less adversarial relations with police, says a new study.**

The study was published Wednesday in the "American Journal of Public Health" and was authored by researchers from the University of B.C. and the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV-AIDS.

Based on interviews with 39 women living on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the study also found female sex workers living in the housing units were exposed to less violence and disease, such as HIV.

The study was released just a month after Ontario's top court struck down a ban on bawdy houses.

It also comes amid the inquiry into serial killer Robert Pickton, which has heard the poor relationship between sex workers and police makes them reluctant to report abuse.

"I think it's actually providing a really important opportunity for sex workers to actually feel safe to reach out to police for protection rather than feeling constantly criminalized," said Kate Shannon, senior author and assistant professor of medicine at UBC.

According to the study, the women lived in supportive-housing programs run by the Atira Women's Resource Society and RainCity Housing and Support Society on the Downtown Eastside.

The housing units operate on a harm-reduction model, meaning the women are given a place to live and pay rent, but what they do in their units is their business.

Security measure are in place and include women-only buildings, security cameras, front-desk sign-in procedures for guests and clients, and on-site staff who can call police in the event of violence.

One woman who was interviewed told researchers she used to feel "paranoid" about the police and was worried about being charged while servicing clients in cars.

The woman said she can now come and go as she pleases, and police actually greet her.

Another woman said she thought police were happier because the housing units kept sex workers off the streets.

Yet another said police help her be safe.

The study also found that women living in and working from the units felt they increased their control over negotiating sex-work transactions because they could refuse unwanted service, negotiate condom use and avoid violent predators.

Janice Abbott, chief executive officer of the Atira Women's Resource Society, explained why the relationship between women and the police has changed.

"When women are forced to work on the street in the public domain they are often harassed by the police who, perhaps, have an obligation to do their jobs," she said,

"When they're not in the public domain, when they are in their own homes, they are able to have a relationship with the police that's much different."

Leslie Remund, associated director of the RainCity Housing and Support Society, said many of the women mistrust the systems, like policing and health care, that have been set up to help them.

Under one program, though, a Vancouver police sex-liaison worker actually comes into the facilities and builds relationships with the women, she said.

Remund said there's also an on-site advocate to help women through the criminal justice system.

According to the study, the age of the women ranged from 22 to 58, and the number of years they were involved in the sex trade ranged from six to 45.

All reported a history of illegal drug abuse.

The interviews took place between July 2009 and March 2010.

Shannon said she thinks the study needs to lead to more discussions on what safer sex-worker spaces can look like and said talks have already included ideas like co-operative brothels.

She said many of the policies have already been expanded to other housing programs in the city.