

Program Spotlight: The Doorway Project

Ending stigma and building capacity through community empowerment

The Doorway is a community-centred project that recruits, trains, and transitions people with lived experience of substance use to become employed in the field of harm reduction. Group members take part in a two-year training program becoming educators, advancing their leadership skills and contributing their knowledge to the course curriculum. Their experiences are an integral part of this innovative project.



The Project fosters a collaborative, non-stigmatizing environment that is culturally safe as well as being sex, gender and trauma informed. By including the voices of those with lived experience, we are gaining awareness of how those who use substances can make valuable contributions in the workforce and as volunteers. We are also increasing capacity across the spectrum of support services to provide informed care to those who use drugs.

Lessons are organized and conducted each week by Harm Reduction Outreach Educators — Ben Ward, Leahanne Swan and Patty Quesnelle — with essential support provided by Monica Forrester, Mentor and Mary Kay MacVicar, Project Coordinator.

Topics explored in-depth include: communication, conflict resolution, triggers and boundaries, harm reduction history and philosophy, harm reduction practical skills, equipment, ethics, and HIV prevention. The program focuses on the application of theory, principles, and best practices of harm reduction. There is a strong emphasis on connecting the theoretical concepts to experiences in the field through guest speakers and case studies. The use of media and planned experiential learning opportunities also enhance the program.



The Project will also provide CPR and overdose response training to 70 community members. This CPR certification is essential to building the skills and confidence among people who are well placed to respond to drug overdoses.



Street Health has received funding to lead this initiative from the federal government's Substance Use and Addictions Program (SUAP) which prioritize the involvement of those with lived and living experience of substance use. The Doorway Project aligns well with this emphasis but the program's focus is not simply to check a box. It is a central tenet of the project that the knowledge and expertise is best found in those people with past experience. "People with lived experience will always add valuable and effective insight to how we work with the community," states Mary Kay. "By measuring and documenting this information, we are sharing strategies that help communities embrace a harm reduction approach, rather than labeling those with substance dependency with stigma and blame."

Stigma leads to discrimination which prevents people from accessing needed services and supports. The ever-present reality of stigma reinforces the need for people with lived experience to play a leading role in shaping harm reduction programming. "Working in harm reduction is one of the few fields you can get a job with a background in addiction. You can't go to college and get this kind of expertise," explains Leahanne Swan, Harm Reduction Facilitator for The Doorway Project. **"The bottom line is I don't believe anyone deserves to die because they are addicted to using drugs. We can build trust with clients because we have been in their shoes. We know where clients can go to get treatment, where to go for referrals, and shelter. If you call Central Intake, they will refer you to the first available bed, but they may not consider what your specific needs are."**



By placing a priority on involving those with lived experience in the development and implementation of projects, we reflect the diversity of who is affected by substance use. They are not simply participants, but become partners in the educational process and advancing public understanding.

Find out more about The Doorway Project and all of Street Health's services at www.streethealth.ca