



Sex Workers & COVID 19

June 2020

Background

Nurses are well positioned to help ensure that sex workers, who may continue to see clients in person, have access to the information required in order to help keep them safe during this time of pandemic. Easily available information, access to and an understanding of how to seek out COVID testing as well as the ability to tap into mental health supports is critical in ensuring that this population is protected. As nurses it is our responsibility to ensure that traditional barriers related to stigma that may keep sex workers from accessing health services are broken down in general and most particularly during this time of global pandemic.

In Canada, it's important to note that while sex work itself is not illegal, the purchasing of sexual services and the advertisement of these services is. Additionally, it is illegal to live off the material benefits of sex work. This puts sex workers in what is often regarded as a quasi-legal status thereby making them unable to benefit from traditional labour protections such as unemployment insurance or paid sick leave.¹ During this time, it is important to note that sex workers are in general experiencing a loss of income as a result of cancelled appointments, sickness, workplace closures and decreased demand. Moreover, anecdotal stories indicate that many sex workers are either ineligible to apply for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and/or feel unsafe in doing so as a result of the aforementioned quasi-legal status. While some sex workers have been able to move their business to online formats in order to comply with physical distancing, others such as contact sex workers may be unable to do so which means that by virtue of their work, they are at greater risk for contracting COVID-19.

Sex workers are advised to take well-established precautions against the spread of COVID-19 such as frequent hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, not working when ill, increased use of hand sanitizer when unable to wash hands, not sharing food or drink, not touching the face etc. Additional precautions for sex workers include screening clients for illness, asking them to wash hands prior to the meeting, disinfecting surfaces, the use of condoms (it's unclear if COVID-19 can be sexually transmitted), avoiding the exchange of saliva and other bodily fluids through the use of dental dams or other protective measures. This noted, even with increased precautions the nature of sex work makes them vulnerable to COVID-19.

Key Messages

- Nurses understand that those who work in the commercial sex industry during the pandemic may need to continue working as they have been and that doing so puts them at risk of economic hardship and may contribute to an increased potential for violence, as well as puts them at risk for contracting COVID-19.
- While NNPBC understands that many sex workers have moved to online or webcam activities, that this, for a variety of reasons, is not an option for many.
- Nurses must also recognize that clients, e.g. those who pay for sexual services also need to be supported in understanding their risks in both transmitting and contracting COVID-19.
- NNPBC recognizes that there are a number of organizations (noted below in the Resources section) who have access to emergency funds that will support sex workers in accessing income support in order to cover the cost of living.

¹ *Journal of Sex Research. Prostitution Stigma and Its Effect on the Working Conditions, Personal Lives, and Health of Sex Workers.* Benoit, Janssen, Smith & Flag. <https://www.understandingsexwork.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/2017%20Benoit%20et%20al%20Prostitution%20stigma.pdf>



- NNPBC supports ensuring that sex workers are provided with evidence-based information about COVID-19, from transmission, to protection, to testing services.

Further Reading/Resources

- [Sex Work COVID 19: Guidelines for Sex Workers, Clients, Third Parties and Allies](#)
- [BCCDC- Sex Workers Guidance](#)
- [Pace Society](#)
- [SWAN](#)
- [PEERS Victoria](#)
- [Hustle](#)
- [American Journal of Public Health- Strategies and Challenges in Preventing Violence Against Canadian Indoor Sex Workers](#)

NNPBC wishes to thank Vicky Bungay, PhD, RN, Professor and Associate Director, Strategic Initiatives, UBC School of Nursing for her contributions to this brief.

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.