



Core Competencies for Serving People in the Sex Trades

Adapted for Anti-Violence and Anti-Trafficking Service Providers

✦ This guide was developed by Reframe Health and Justice.

✦ We draw from the experiences we hold and have been witness to, as people accessing care, as people offering care, and as people connecting each other to care.

✦ We also draw on the wisdom of our community and community members,

✦ We intend for this information to be shared with colleagues and partners. When sharing, please attribute to Reframe Health and Justice. Not intended for commercial use.

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Recognize that everyone has a unique constellation of experiences.

02

Allow everyone to determine their own goals and desires for accessing care and justice after an experience of violence.
Center healing.

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Understand the role of criminalization and policing and how it impacts the experience of receiving services.

04

Address anti-sex trade stigma within your organization and interactions.

05

Develop agency-wide policies and practices which lower the barriers to engagement and share them with partners.

01

Recognize that everyone has a unique constellation of experiences.

There is no singular experience of trading sex. Instead, trading sex is a constellation of different experiences which can change over the course of a lifetime, year, or even day. These experiences will be further shaped by the identities and experiences of structural marginalization which people experience every day.

- Some individuals trade sex by **choice**, where there are many economic options.
- Some may have constrained resource and economic options, such as being unstably housed, and are trading sex under restrictive **circumstances**.
- Other individuals may be forced by a third party to engage in commercial sex and are involved by **coercion**. Some of these individuals meet the legal definition of “Trafficking.”

Everyone’s experiences are unique. Make room for all experiences.

In Action

- Allow people to define their own experience, including what they define as violent, empowering or traumatic. Let their understanding guide your work together. Approach with curiosity, use active listening and mirroring when connecting with folks.
- These different experiences also shape peoples’ feelings about their clients, managers and colleagues. Don’t problematize participation in the sex trade, or the people who support it, if that does not reflect their experience or feelings.
- Allow for change. As circumstances change, so can a person’s engagement with the sex trades. Someone may begin in a coercive situation and may identify as having experienced trafficking and later choose to continue trading sex and vice versa. These changes do not negate other experiences - it layers them.
- The way a person trades sex does not necessarily reflect their identity. A man who has sex with men for resources does not inherently indicate that he identifies as LGBTQ. Many trans and gender non-confirming people use a feminized persona for sex work because it is more lucrative for work. People take on the identity which will gain them access to resources, which may not align with who they are off the clock.

Self Reflection: What do I See

When we are more aware of our own narratives and ideas about sex work, we can more easily notice them when they arise. Below are some common terms. Read each term and think about:

- What is the story that comes to mind when you hear that term?
- Are there stereotypes that come to mind?
- Where were you taught these stories?

Term	What comes to mind?
Sex Worker	
Prostitute	
Escort	
Sex Worker who Uses Drugs	
Sex Working Mom	
Victim of Trafficking	



02

Allow everyone to determine their own goals and desires for accessing care and justice after an experience of violence. Center healing.

Allowing someone to define their own path forward is a key part of self-determination and healing from trauma. For victim service providers, this means that clients should have a range of options for how they wish to engage with healing, justice and accountability. Sex workers have valid reasons for not wanting to report to law enforcement, but may still wish to find avenues to feel seen and heard as a form of healing.

In Action

- Providing a range of options with varying proximity to law enforcement and offering support for safe access allows people in the sex trades many channels for dignity and healing.
- Prior to engaging law enforcement, have a full understanding of the legal risk sex workers take on when reporting violence. Be prepared to find legal intermediaries who can reduce the possibility of arrest when reporting violence, or the potential long-term ramifications of being known to law enforcement.
- After an experience of violence, some may wish to change how they trade sex. For those wishing to leave sex work, offer opportunities which take into account the barriers and needs that led many to trading sex in the first place. If a criminal record was a barrier to a “straight” job before, it’s probably a barrier now. For those who want to improve their situation in their current work, explore anti-violence harm reduction tactics that workers can incorporate, or potentially moving to a different area workplace, website, or other area of the industry.
- Sex working communities have created outside-the-system forms of safety, including Bad Date Lists, which may offer a space to report the assault without engaging law enforcement. Find out if your local harm reduction or sex worker group records “Bad Dates” for the community. This process can both provide a space to be seen and heard, and can help others make informed decisions about their work.

What is the impact of criminalization?

Below are resources which discuss how criminalization is impacting people in the sex trades on the global, national and city-level. We encourage you to review the materials, and

The Impact of Criminalisation on Sex Workers' Vulnerability to HIV and Violence is a policy brief which explores sex workers' experiences of criminalization around the world.

- **Global Network of Sex Worker Projects (NSWP), 2017:**
<https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-policy-briefs/the-impact-criminalisation-sex-workers-vulnerability-hiv-and-violence>

The movement to decriminalize sex work, explained talks to sex workers and advocates across the United States seeking decriminalization of the sex trades.

- **Anna North, Vox, 2019:**
<https://www.vox.com/2019/8/2/20692327/sex-work-decriminalization-prostitution-new-york-dc>

The State of the Hustle captures the experiences, motivations, hopes, and demands of sex workers across the state of Missouri. This report details the state of sex work in Missouri from the perspective of workers and sets the stage for meaningful reform.

- **Moho Justice, 2020:** *<https://www.mohojustice.com/report>*

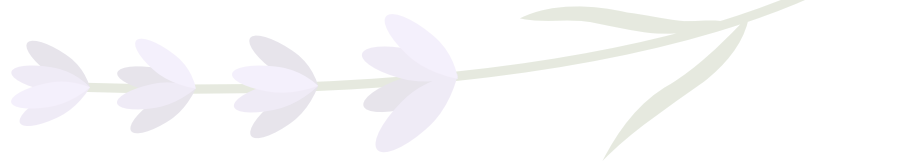
03 Understand the role of criminalization and policing on the experience of trading sex, and the way that these impact service provision.

Everyone involved in the sex trade faces potential criminalization – sex workers, clients, peers and managers. When making decisions such as where to advertise, or what to say to potential clients, sex workers often prioritize avoiding law enforcement, often increasing other risks. Additionally, reporting victimization to law enforcement can become an experience of criminalization.

Sex workers also face legal risks in the child and family welfare system, immigration system, and administrative law (housing, benefits.) Service providers must consider a client’s legal safety, and understand this as a factor of decision-making.

In Action

- Even sex workers who do not have a criminal record may have trauma associated with policing, especially if they have knowingly put themselves at risk of other forms of harm to avoid law enforcement.
- Limit the amount of information contained in notes and records held by your organization. Be clear and transparent about what information is being asked for and why, who has access to that information, and how to remove information from someone’s records.
- Service organizations who have close relationships to law enforcement may have a difficult time building trust with sex working communities. Building trust means being transparent and intentional about these relationships.
- Sex workers build peer community for physical and emotional safety. Engaging peers means considering the community’s safety as well. One person may qualify as a victim of trafficking while their closest friend may legally meet the definition of a trafficker - consider the danger of law enforcement for everyone in their life. Consider community safety when engaging law enforcement.





✦ Activity: Listen and Reflect

Follow the QR code to listen to Cecilia's story.



How would you describe Cecilia's relationship with the criminal-legal system?

How would her experience inform your approach and engagement, if she were asking for support?



04

Work through an anti-stigma lens.

Stigma and shame remains a significant barrier to accessing support for people who trade sex. Organizations should work on an individual and organizational level to identify and address the ways that people who trade sex may be facing barriers because of stigmatizing practices and policies.

Anti-stigma efforts are rooted in learning and deepening connection to marginalized communities and identities. *What are the ways that you and your organization can deepen your relationships with people in the sex trades?*



In Action

- Engage all staff in values alignments. Organizational change means everyone from the clinician to the front desk manager to the Board of Directors should understand the importance of effectively service people who trade sex.
- Educate through primary texts and a diversity of stories. Creating opportunities to see the full picture of transactional sex and hear the voices of those diverse experiences allows us to explore and expand our understanding.
- Talk openly about sex work in literature and offerings. Demonstrate your support through offerings such as including transactional sex in sexual health information.
- Reflect people's language in how they describe themselves and their experience.
- Practice talking about sex. A lot of conversations stop because people aren't comfortable talking about sex, let alone talking about sex work. Practice in the mirror, talk to your colleagues, and create space where clients feel comfortable talking about sex.



Self-Reflection: What I Bring

Addressing stigma and bias means we have to consider our own relationships and positionality. Spend time with the questions below to consider what assumptions, experiences, biases and feelings we may be bringing when working with people who trade sex.



What is my relationship and proximity to the sex industry? What parts of it?

I first became aware of the sex industry...



I am currently finding out most of my information about the sex trades through...

When we consume porn or other explicit material, visit a strip club, or see a sex worker we're participating in the sex industry as consumers or clients. My feelings on being a consumer of the sex trades is...

When the sex trade comes up in conversation, the people close to me respond...

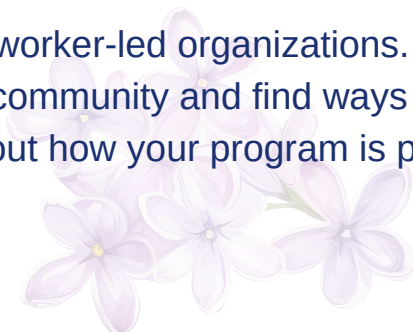
05

Develop agency-wide policies and practices, and share them with partners, to lower the barriers to engaging support.

Safer spaces require intentionality and care. Setting expectations which keep in mind the challenges that people who trade sex face can ward off many assumptions and let people who trade sex know that they are at an organization which has considered their experience. Additionally, the more spaces the better – share your expectations and goals with partners to help create a network of affirming, intentional support structures for sex working communities.

In Action

- Develop a confidentiality policy with intentionality for people who trade sex, including all service provider records and notes. Not everyone needs to know that someone is exchanging sex for resources, and inclusion of information in client files seen by multiple staff members may have unintended consequences. Consider scenarios which include family court, immigration court and other legal systems who may request records.
- Reflect on the ways that messaging and advocacy, especially around anti-trafficking efforts, have impacted people in the sex trades. Supporting things like increased policing of the sex trade may have created additional harm, and people may not feel comfortable reaching out, or assume they will not be supported.
- Find out from community-based organizations what the barriers are to accessing your space during operating hours and identify ways to overcome those barriers. Structural barriers, such as having to present a government ID at the front of the building, mean that some people cannot access your facility.
- Build relationships with sex worker-led organizations. Not only can you learn more about what is happening in community and find ways to better support sex workers, it may also offer insights about how your program is perceived and experienced.



Sex Workers Fight Back

Below are sex worker activists, collectives, and one unionized strip club that have contributed to a rich history of activism and resistance. After you find them in the search below, find more about their incredible work and legacy!

G U I F S Y N M A Y D V R M M X H J J X
Z V N P W W U I N Y D E C C B L G T V P
P O N Y O S L S P R C Y O D V H G L H K
F C V I P J G S P R H O W T D Q J U G H
G F L V R T H M A M I Y Y M Q D H S Z S
B K Y N N A S A I B E S L O B F Q T L N
L P X N S D S J R W Q Q C B T F B Y A Y
Z Q Y N R W Q O O U Z D T I N E J L S P
I L T E O Q P R L H M U Y S L G H A H P
D B T U U I L P G L P F X G Y L V D O D
E T F D H L W C L L N G L H F M A Y R V
J I K H R H C A X R X G G A K V Q P I N
L L Z G G D D V K O H H P B X S W O Z T
E J U Y O P D W O Y Z B U K L Y G O O O
S T S W V O O V B W Y A L J C R B Z N U
L R B Y N P W G F R G H Z E A B C Q T B
N H Y E L K Q J N O I S Q M P G A X A P
T B K I E V C R Q A P R Q P D C R P L M
Q Y D N Y X I C W S V A D R A Z O T E O
N F H A H G A A V O O M W H U P L W S P

1. Marsha
2. Sylvia
3. Carol
4. Margo
5. MissMajor
6. LasHorizontales
7. SWOP
8. PONY
9. COYOTE
10. LustyLady
11. NSWP
12. Priscilla
13. Gloria

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