



Baylor College of Medicine

An Innovative Approach to Improve Street-Level Prostitutes' Health: The Development of a Prostitution Recovery Program

Andrea Link, MD, David Buck, MD, MPH, Susan Nash, PhD

Department of Family and Community Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA



Statement of the Problem

Street-level prostitutes are a common, distinct and underserved group of homeless women. They have high rates of interpersonal violence, substance abuse and mental illness. The majority of women want to leave prostitution but exit is difficult. Only a handful of prostitution exit programs exist and there is little research on outcomes. To address these unique issues, we are proposing a collaborative program between an urban FQHC homeless clinic (Healthcare for the Homeless Houston - HHH) and an existing residential substance abuse treatment program for female ex-offenders (Angela House).

Background

Women follow a predictable and consistent path:

- Early childhood sexual abuse
- Chronic runaway history
- Introduction to sex trade and illicit drugs by pimps and/or dealers targeting runaways – within 48 hours of leaving home, one third of runaways are successfully lured into sex trade
- Once in, women and girls are in a vicious cycle: continuation of prostitution to pay for drug use, which is done to numb the pain of prostitution

Prostitutes experience . . .

- Daily hassles: evading arrest, uncertainty about food and shelter, hyper-vigilance to possible violence
- Acute trauma: rape, robbery, assault
- Chronic conditions: depression, substance abuse, physical and mental illness, decreased self esteem
- Result: learned helplessness where only goal is to get high, work, and get high again to alleviate pain

Existing programming at Angela House

- Individual therapy
- Group therapy including shame and processing groups
- 12 step program
- Reconnection with functional society – plays, sporting events, outings
- Primary care with embedded behavioral health as well as integrated intensive case management provided by HHH clinic

Wellness Program

PROBLEM: Recovering prostitutes and trafficked women have neglected their health for many years and know little about healthy habits. High calorie jail diet and no opportunity for exercise frequently lead to obesity and obesity-related health problems.

SOLUTION:

- Weekly wellness class focusing on nutrition, exercise, safety and self-care
- Weekly cooking class focusing on healthy meals on a budget
- Herb garden with instruction on incorporating fresh herbs into cooking
- “Couch to 5K” walking/running program

Writing Program

PROBLEM: Recovering prostitutes and trafficked women have lost their voice, resulting in low self-esteem and low feelings of self-worth.

SOLUTION:

- Writing group focusing on self-expression
- Magazine of women’s poetry, essays and artwork distributed at agencies that serve the homeless

Health Education

PROBLEM: Ex-prostitutes have multiple health problems and low levels of health literacy. They also often avoid the healthcare system due to concern of being judged, which can reinforce trauma.

SOLUTION:

- Weekly classes taught by medical students on common health issues faced by this population. The aim is to educate the women and decrease their fear of interacting with healthcare providers.
- Medical students are given curriculum of reading and videos so that they are educated about issues faced by the women.

Methods

For all women entering the program, we plan to assess the following outcome variables:

- Quality of life indices (WHOQOL) and self-efficacy indices (GSE) pre- and post-intervention.
- Recidivism by tracking re-arrest rates using the HHH Jail Inreach database and JIMS – the county criminal justice database.
- Abstinence from prostitution as assessed by follow up interviews at 6 months and 1 year.

New Interventions

Peer Support

PROBLEM: Substance abusing women in sobriety often feel lonely and isolated. Women also have little interaction with peers who have successfully left life on the streets.

SOLUTION:

- Community building activities such as group 5K race, communal herb garden, group classes (cooking, wellness, writing)
- Monthly “Dinner with a Graduate”

Trauma-Specific Care

PROBLEM: Prostitutes have early childhood trauma followed by intense physical and emotional trauma from their time on the streets, resulting in rates of PTSD similar to those of combat veterans.

SOLUTION:

- Trauma-informed care
- Psycho-educational program “Seeking Safety” which integrates treatment for trauma/PTSD and substance abuse. Program teaches cognitive, behavioral and interpersonal skills to enhance client's feeling of safety.

Employment Counseling

PROBLEM: Prostitution, while highly dangerous and traumatic, is also lucrative. Ex-offenders often have few marketable skills and are difficult to place, given employer reluctance to hire felons.

SOLUTION:

- One day a week employment counselor who assists women with job readiness, life skills and employment search
- Partnerships with multiple area agencies which offer low cost or free job training and education
- Financial literacy classes

Anticipated Results

- We expect significant improvement in quality of life and self efficacy indices.
- We also expect a reduction in recidivism and an increase in successful abstinence from prostitution.

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