

Gaps in Service and Unmet Needs

In Victoria's Street Community

“Marginalization does not cease to be oppressive when one has shelter and food.” *

April 15, 2002

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In partnership with The Open Door and the research participants

With support from VIPIRG's Research Internship Program

*Young, I. (1990). Five Faces Of Oppression. In Justice And The Politics Of Difference. New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Introduction

This research report was completed as part of a school of social work research class at the University of Victoria. We (students/researchers) wanted to do a research project that would empower marginalized people and lead to positive change.

We had the opportunity to work through V.I.P.I.R.G. (Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group) to complete this research project with the Open Door resource. Reverend Al, from the Open Door, had contacted V.I.P.I.R.G., as he was interested in evaluating gaps in services accessed by the street community in order to improve the services provided by the Open Door when the resource moves this summer. This report is the product of these partnerships.

The Researchers

Joey Worthington

The experiences of homeless and marginalized people have been of interest to me for a long time. As a youth I went through a difficult time after my parents divorce. During this time I was involved in criminal activities, substance misuse and varying degrees of homelessness. I managed to stay in school and after completing a diploma in Social Service Work at Langara College I worked at a Safe House for street kids. I have found my experiences as an 'at risk' youth to be helpful in working with youth and homeless people in general. I have worked with youth in different settings for over 5 years and I have worked and volunteered with homeless adults and with people suffering from mental illness. I believe my personal and professional experiences help me to understand many of the issues that homeless people face. While this experience will be

helpful it does not change the fact that I am presently very much an outsider to street life. I came to this project from a very privileged position in relation to the participants and this was a barrier to the goal of conducting anti-oppressive research. In my experience there are gaps in service for all marginalized people and I assumed that we would find gaps in service for Victoria's street community as well. I am passionate about issues of homelessness and it is this project's possibility for positive change that was of most interest to me.

Jeremy Pearce

I respect the fact that this project is potentially going to lead to positive change for service users. Through volunteering and conducting this research project at the Open Door I see it providing a beneficial service to many people. Through volunteering at a street youth drop-in and at Victoria's Need Crisis Line I learned about gaps in services for people in need. I feel I have some knowledge of the experience of the street community, though as I am an outsider to this community, and have never faced the issues of street people, I feel that my knowledge of street life is intellectual rather than emotional. Coming in as outsiders from places of privilege, I wonder what service users thought of Joey's and my presence during the research project. I like the fact that this project has potential outside of being an academic paper.

Purpose

Our intention in completing this research was to give the street community a forum to voice their opinion and provide information about the services they access. This information will serve two purposes: it will be used by Open Door staff to evaluate the organization's hours and services in order to provide improved service in the new location and it will be presented at a meeting of service providers with the goal of improving overall service for the adult street community in Victoria. The intention of this meeting will be to address gaps in service, to identify over-lapping services and to provide more user-friendly services to the street community. This project also fulfills a requirement of our school of social work research class.

Research Plan

This project consists of five parts: 1) research into services for the street community currently available, 2) volunteering at the Open Door in order to become less of outsiders to this community, 3) facilitation of a focus group and an information gathering poster at the Open Door with service users, 4) analysis of this information and the writing of a report and 5)) presentation of this report to service providers in the hopes of creating positive change.

We asked people at the Open Door to tell us what services are available to the adult street community in Victoria. Using this information we decided to go to the Upper Room, 9-10 Club, Streetlink, Salvation Army, Sandy Merriman House, Mustard Seed and Saint Vincent De Paul to find out more about these resources. When visiting these

resources we inquired about the services that they provide to people aged nineteen and over with a focus on the times and days of the week these services are available.

We created a large poster that was broken down by days of the week and hours of the day; information we gathered on services was included on this poster.

We planned a focus group, for adult members of the street community, at the Open Door and put up notices advertising this meeting at the resources mentioned above.

The focus group was held at the Open Door in a room separate from the main drop-in area. On the day of the focus group the information poster mentioned above was taped to a wall in the room that the focus group was held in. Participants were given markers and asked to add information about the resources they use on a daily basis (i.e. Where do they go? What services do they use and at what time of the day?). During this process we asked specific questions about services and gaps in service. Some examples of these questions included: What are services like on weekends? Can you get a place to stay every night? What do you think of the hours that the Open Door is open? Is there somewhere for you to eat everyday? Participants were also encouraged to make general comments on the services available, gaps in service and whether service could be improved. This information was recorded with a small tape recorder that sat on the table. One of the researchers also wrote participants comments on a flip chart.

All this data was transcribed and broken down into categories: shelter, food, activities, problems with services for people not on social assistance, Streetlink, Open Door, cleaning facilities, weekends and evenings, finding out about services, families and general comments. This data was returned to the Open Door so participants could review it, make changes and provide new information. This information was added to the

previous data, the data was analysed and a draft report was written. This draft report was once again presented to the participants for comment before the final report was written.

During the focus group participants were asked to volunteer to help present the final report to service providers. This meeting will be the final step to this research project.

Participants

The focus group consisted of sixteen adults, over the age of nineteen, who are involved in Victoria's street community. Participants included two women and fourteen men.

Prior to the focus group, while volunteering at the Open Door, we attempted to involve the participants in the research process as much as possible. The idea of a focus group and the questions to be asked during this research project were discussed with service users. In addition, participants were involved in a review of the data before the final report was written and volunteers will be involved in the presentation of this report to service providers.

Ethical Considerations

In this project we have been honest about our motives and goals with the service users and we have been clear as to our position as research students from the University of Victoria. There is no physical risk to the participants although participants may have taken a psychological risk by divulging details of their day-to-day lives.

In order to gather informed consent from participants we created a consent form (see appendix A). This form was read out to participants at the beginning of the focus group and was available for participants to read. A sheet was passed around and participants wrote their name and signed it on consent of us using their information. When new participants joined the group we repeated this process with them.

The focus group was held in a room separate from the main drop-in area, participants were told that they could leave at anytime, they could still have the free lunch if they decided not to participate and they could review, change and/or withdraw their information at any time. They were also told that they would have a chance to review and edit information before and after the final report is written. No names or identifying details of the participants were used in the report and the tapes and written information from the focus group will be destroyed once the final project is completed.

The focus group was done in a very informal way with participants coming and going during the whole process. This contributed positively to having a voluntary process because participants could comfortably leave at anytime. Participants came, contributed what they wanted and then left.

Doing this research for a University class project, having two researchers and working in partnership with V.I.P.I.R.G. and the Open Door all had an impact on power relations within this project.

Writing the final report as a requirement of a class constrained our freedom to do this project in our own way. We had to meet the requirements of the assignment and as a result we have written this report in a prescribed way. This resulted in a conflict between

our desire to write a final report that was easily understandable for the participants and writing a report that was academic enough to get a good grade.

Working through V.I.P.I.R.G. to do this research for the Open Door resulted in power relations that also have to be considered. V.I.P.I.R.G. provided us with information on previous reports about the street community, they provided support and direction and they paid for the free lunch that was provided to participants. As researchers we had to be sure that we were choosing data and writing a report that reflected what the participants said rather than what we thought Reverend Al wanted to hear. This power relation was minimized as none of the staff from the Open Door were involved in this project in any way.

Finally, having two researchers on this project meant that we had to agree on the best way to conduct the research and analyse the data. We come from different standpoints in regard to the issues we were studying and we had to work to include both of our perspectives in this report. We shared the common goal of completing a project for a class and similar goals and reasons for wanting to do this specific report. Our similar goals seemed to reduce power relations between us and contribute to us working well together on this report.

Research Question

What are the formal and informal services that people at the Open Door resource use and what are the gaps in these services?

Data

The following data comes from three sources: 1) information transcribed from the tape recorder, 2) information written on the poster and 3) information from a recorded conversation between the researchers. This conversation included a summary of information gathered and information from participants that was not captured on the tape recorder or the poster. The summaries at the beginning of these data categories come from 2) and 3) while the direct quotes come from 1). Participants have been given a number from 1- 16.

Weekends and Evenings

Weekends and evenings were identified as times when there are gaps in service, especially around activities and drop-in space. Free meals are harder to find on the weekends and participants commented that it would be nice to have coffee and snacks somewhere in the evenings. The main concerns focused on the lack of activities and warm places to hangout and socialize. Basically on the weekends and evenings there are less places to eat and nothing to do.

What are services like on weekends?

10. "Saturday and Sunday there is nothing to do. There are places to eat but that's all there is."

9. "The library is open on Saturday."

1. "Streetlink's day program is in danger of being cut because they are losing their grants. If that happens that takes out about 75% of places people hang out during the daytime. On weekends there is almost nothing to do."

3. "A lot of people are just killing time until dinner. Hanging out. Spending a lot of time doing nothing."

Sunday was identified as being especially lacking in service.

13. "Sunday is a very bad day."

9. "A lot of people don't know what to do on Sunday. We are stuck at home doing nuttin."

3. "Sunday is pretty lame."

2. "Sunday there is no breakfast."

9. "There's nothing on Sundays. The only thing that's guaranteed is the Streetlink dinner at four. There is nothing going on until four on Sundays."

Many participants felt that Streetlink should have an evening drop-in that includes non-residents in order to fill this gap in service.

1. "They should be open at night. They should have coffee at night."

9. "At Streetlink they have snacks at night but they are only for residents."

10. "Unless you're a resident your not allowed to hang around."

14. "Most of their services are reserved for residents."

10. "That should be a place where there should be a TV or something and people should be allowed to hang around."

The Open Door was also identified as a resource that could offer evening and weekend service.

15. "Open Door closes too early"

7. "In the winter, Open Door could be open 7 to 9 [pm], there's nothing at night, and no public washrooms"

5. "There needs to be more things at night run by volunteers. Movie night is run by volunteers. They could be open here [Open Door] from 7 to 9[pm]."

5. "I think they [Open Door] should be open just a couple hours on weekends and if having the staff here is a problem it should be run by volunteers"

9. "On weekends [Open Door] could be open 10-2. People sleep in anyway."

10. "Movie at Open Door on Sunday."

Finding out about services was also identified as a gap in service that was especially lacking on evenings and weekends. People indicated that it is hard to find out about services, especially if you are new to Victoria. There is no comprehensive resource material and outreach is unavailable during evenings and weekends. Often the only way to find out information is through other people who use the services.

7. "They used to have a map of downtown Victoria. Sort of a map of adult facilities but things changed since they printed it. The information isn't up to date anymore. Its hard to find information if you're new to the city. I didn't even find out about the map until a friend told me about it."

7. "You have to find out about services from other people."

2. "There is no book or list of services."

1. "The Open Door does a walk around outreach and they help the people that are downtown but the other agencies don't have anyone out on the street that's doing an actual outreach. They are sitting in their building trying to do outreach from there."

1. "Open Door does [outreach] 5 days a week rain or shine. There's someone out there from 10 o'clock in the morning until 4 o'clock in the afternoon."

Activities

Concern around lack of activities and feeling trapped with-in street life were mentioned a lot in the focus group. The daily routine of going from resource to resource can become a cycle that is hard to change. Most resources provide basic physical necessities but clients' emotional, social, and recreational needs are not generally considered. Also opportunities to escape street life and re-integrate into mainstream society were identified as major gaps in service.

2. "We need more ways to reintegrate people."

7. "We need volunteer opportunities or things to do that aren't related to street."

2. "You get struck in the donut cycle"

2. "It [services for the street community] seems to me to be geared to keeping people in the box."

3. "There is definitely a cycle."
5. "There should be more places to volunteer."
7. "More importantly we need contacts."
4. "I would love to be able to have a private tutoring when it comes to the Internet. I was meaning to talk to Al about this because there was supposed to be computers coming to this place and I have a friend that likes to teach people how to use the internet, but for some reason that never got off the ground. In this day and age you got to know how to use computers, you got to know how to use the Internet."
7. "We need more ways to reintegrate people back into the system right. Like they were part of it once but now they have fallen between the cracks."

Participants also thought more activities should be organized at existing services. Some suggestions included having bingo or crib games, having movie nights and having a volunteer to organize daily activities.

8. "We need someone to be in charge of activities."
5. "Games could be good, cards, Monopoly."

Shelter

Shelter was not identified as one of the major gaps in service but one issue that did come up was Streetlink's and the Salvation Army's policy of only allowing people shelter for one week of each month. This leaves around 16 days of each month where there is no free shelter. People said that it would be better if Streetlink and the Salvation Army allowed people to stay longer.

Can you find a place to stay every night?

9. [comment by an older man]"If you're a woman it's easy to get shelter, but if you're a man sometimes you get left out in the cold because you go and they only have a certain amount of beds. If you can't get into Streetlink then there really isn't anywhere else."
2. "There are a lot of slum landlords in Victoria. I'll tell ya' that."
1. "Streetlink only has 50 beds."
11. "Salvation Army is the best example of a working shelter unit."
11. "Salvation Army, don't even try it. They are always full."

1. “The limit should be 2 weeks at Streetlink and 2 weeks at Salvation Army, there are empty beds now!”

Food

Lack of food was not identified as a major gap in service. There seems to be enough places to go for food to generally avoid being hungry but service varies from day-to-day. Evenings, weekends and during the day on Tuesday and Thursday were identified as days when there is less food service. Some other ideas for improvements included not having to line up for so long at Streetlink, changing the way food is served, the need for vegetarian food, and a general improvement in the quality of food everywhere. Most participants felt that food service was adequate but that it could be fine-tuned to make it more user -friendly.

3. “It’s rushed, it’s like in and out so quick. It’s like you don’t even digest the meal properly. It’s not comfortable.

4. “Those of us who are poverty stricken vegetarians really have a tough time finding free food to eat!!!”

6. “They [Streetlink] line em’ in and as soon as the line-ups empty they close er' down. If you’re not there at 4:15 you’re not going to get a dinner. You pick up your ticket and usually you just hang around, which I think it is ridiculous! Because all it does is crowd the place for an unnecessary 45 minutes between 3:15 and 4 o’clock. They should issue much closer to 4 o’clock.”

6. “The biggest problem with the Upper Room is that they don’t have the facilities so what they will do is serve up 60 plates of food on a cold steel table and then invite everyone in and then have a little prayer and by that time you have cold food.”

Is there somewhere for you to eat everyday?

7. “Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday there is no free lunch so many people either won’t get together their money or don’t have it.”

2. “Sunday there is no breakfast.”

Other Comments

People talked about many different issues that didn’t fit into the above categories. Some of these concerns included: lack of places to shower and clean clothes, no access to public washrooms at night, building one large complex for all services (i.e. shelter, food, recreation, etc.) and the specific issues that people with children and people who do not receive income assistance face. In addition, many participants suggested practical ways that current services could be improved.

1. "Saint Vincent de Paul will help you but only every 30 days. This means that if I go on the 7th of say January I wouldn't be able to go again until the 7th of February. It would be better if it was once a month cuz then it would be less complicating and I wouldn't have to remember when I last went."

2. "Legal advice at the Open Door would be good, once a week, and maybe not by lawyers."

7. "Mostly from what I've seen it's not a lot of things that are a problem. It is just a matter of fine tuning."

Services for the street community are not very accessible for people with children. In some shelters children are not allowed and most resources are not very child friendly. Some suggestions include having a family table at resources with free meals and having a play area for children at places like the Open Door.

4. "Those of us living in poverty that have kids find that the children don't feel comfortable and sometimes aren't even welcome at some of these facilities. I can't understand why the needs of our kids aren't being factored into these services."

4. "This is [the Open Door] sort of friendly. He [her son] comes upstairs and plays pool. It's a little bit more friendly. There's something to do."

4. "People on social assistance with kids, they never come into these places because they just don't fit in, with the kids, somehow."

Two weeks after welfare there are fewer services. For people who aren't on welfare this is a big problem. They may be very poor and/or have no income and when the services they receive are cut they often do not have the money to make up for it.

1. "You can get Upper Room tickets. Except for the two weeks after welfare day. You can't get a ticket anywhere!"

10. "Or if you have no sources of income during that two weeks that they don't give out Upper Room tickets. What do you do?"

1. "Those of us living in poverty who aren't on social assistance have to find ways to get by, especially for the two weeks after welfare. I save up tickets to the Upper Room because it's hard to get em' then."

There is a lack of free places to take a shower and clean your clothes in Victoria. Streetlink is one of the only resources and as a result is often over used, dirty and/or out of order. People suggested that the washer/dryer area be supervised or put in an open space as people often take other people's clothes out before they are dry.

9. "Streetlink has laundry everyday but there is only 2. There are too many people."

10. "There is only one shower at Streetlink."

7. "There is a big line for washers."

Open Door

People mentioned really liking Reverend Al and the rest of the staff's attitude. People liked that the Open Door does not push religion although Reverend Al is open to discussing religion with anyone who is interested. Many people commented on the Open Door's hours. Ideas ranged from being open from nine to five, staying open later and opening on weekends (even just for a couple hours). Some people thought that the early morning hours are very important and a few people liked the hours the way they are. A washer and dryer, lockers and bike locks were mentioned as some things that would be useful at the Open Door.

5. "Maybe have some spare locks for people who don't have locks. People have to stand outside with their bikes. Just a chain and a padlock you know, as long as it's locked."

11. "If you look around people are smiling. This is their place."

11. "In the next place they should have shelter, especially in emergency situations."

11. "The Open Door is the best thing that could be a legitimate adult shelter."

What do you think about the hours that the Open Door is open?

5. "If the staff took rotating lunches there would always be someone at Open Door."

3. "9-5 would be better hours at Open Door with a no sleeping rule to avoid people taking advantage of these hours, otherwise people could take drugs all night knowing that they could sleep all day at Open Door."

12. "Early hours at Open Door are important."

11. "They are open 5:30 to 8am. That's really good because everybody else is shut down."

8. "Open Door should be open 9-5 every day."

Data Analysis

Contrary to the expectations of the researchers, issues such as shelter and food were not major themes in this report. Although there were concerns in these areas, these concerns were mostly around fine tuning of services rather than gaps in service. The areas of most concern focused on a general lack of services on weekends and evenings and the absence of activities and ways to re-integrate back into mainstream society. In addition many suggestions were made for simple ways to improve existing services.

When people coming from places of privilege consider the issues that street people face we often focus on issues of food, shelter and clothing. Issues related to social, emotional and recreational needs are not often considered when services for the street community are designed. It is as if people from the street community do not have the same social needs as people from mainstream society. The information collected in this research project identifies the importance of drop-in space and empowering activities in order to break the monotony of the daily routine, raise self-esteem and create opportunities for re-integration into mainstream society. These services are especially lacking on evenings and weekends.

Results from this study show that participants need more drop-in space on evenings and weekends. There is a general lack of places to eat and things to do during this time and as a result people are forced to hang out on the street. Lack of information and outreach services were also identified as gaps in service during this time. Streetlink and the Open Door were suggested as possible places that could offer evening and weekend drop-in.

In addition to providing more drop-in space participants indicated that these services should address the need for activities and opportunities to re-integrate back into mainstream society. Many resources focus on the street communities day-to-day needs and not much emphasize is put into helping people break out of ‘the donut cycle.’ Volunteer opportunities, non-street activities and opportunities to learn skills were all identified as important ways to break this cycle.

In addition to these themes many specific needs were identified in this project. Many of these needs were more about ‘fine-tuning’ existing service rather than gaps in service. This problem might be resolved if the agencies that provide service to the street community were to meet and brainstorm ways to meet these needs. We plan to organize a meeting, with the help of Reverend AI, and some of the participants, in order to address these issues.

The Open Door is often referred to as the living room of the street community and this resource was well liked by most participants in this study. This perception was undoubtedly influenced by the location of the study (i.e. at the Open Door) but the Open Door does seem to provide an empowering service that creates a sense of ownership and belonging. Participants indicated that this type of service needs to be expanded. Some specific ideas for improvement in the new location were identified: extended hours in the evening and on weekends to fill the gap in drop-in space during this time, organizing more activities especially ones that increase skills and facilitate re-integration into mainstream society, installing a shower and a washer and dryer in the new location and providing lockers and bike locks.

Participants have reviewed and edited the raw data in this study and they will have the opportunity to review and edit this final report before it is presented to the service providers. This is done to ensure the reliability and validity of this report.

Process Analysis

It was our goal in this project to give a voice to the people most affected by gaps in service and to create positive change. We wanted to do participatory action research and involve the participants as much as possible. This proved to be difficult for a number of reasons.

Many service users struggle with issues of poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental illness, discrimination and day-to-day survival. As a result most of the participants were not able or did not wish to be involved to the extent of a participatory study.

Also the fact that we are outsiders to this community and our relative positions of privilege were barriers to conducting this type of research. We volunteered at the Open Door to try to lessen these barriers but due to time restrictions we were only able to do this for a couple of weeks and we spent all this volunteer time at the Open Door. In retrospect this time would have been more effectively used by also going to other resources that this community use day-to-day. In other words, spending a day on the 'donut cycle.'

Lack of time also affected the amount of preparation we could do for the focus group. We had hoped to involve the participants in the creation of the research question and the questions to be asked in the focus group but this proved to be difficult to do over

a limited number of visits. Much more relationship building time was needed to create an atmosphere where participants would be willing to spend time and energy on this project.

We had hoped to involve Sandy, a long time and well liked Open Door staff member, in the focus group. We thought her knowledge of, and level of comfort with, the participants would create a smoother process. On the day of the focus group Sandy was absent due to sickness so we had to proceed without her. The informal nature of the focus group was likely related to Sandy's absence. Sandy's involvement may have resulted in a more formal process and her role as a staff member may have resulted in participants being less willing to criticize the Open Door and/or speak honestly.

Having the focus group in this informal way meant that no one had to speak in front of the whole group. This may have elicited information from participants that they would not have otherwise put forward. A more formal focus group would have likely elicited more discussion and questioning of points of view may have occurred. In a more formal focus group more information could have been shared among participants and this may have resulted in more group solidarity and increased awareness of resources available.

As the Open Door caters only to adults, we decided to focus on people nineteen years and older. By focusing only on adults, issues specific to youth in the street community were left out of this study.

The location of the focus group (at the Open Door) influenced the study. Most comments about the Open Door were positive while other agencies were often commented on in a negative way. Having the focus group at a different resource may have influenced who came and what they had to say.

It would have helped to have two recorders, as much of the discussion was hard to hear because people talked over one another. Also individual interviews may have created clearer information.

Before this study we assumed that the issues of food and shelter would be very prevalent among people within the street community and that there would be major gaps in service. Having these preconceived ideas caused us to create questions around them. These ideas may have also influenced our focus in our conversations with the participants.

Relevance and Utility

Our goal in this research project was to give voice to the experiences that the adult street community have with the service providers they access. This report will be used by Reverend AI to improve the Open Door's services. Through the service providers meeting other service providers may improve their service as well. Our hope is that over all service will improve for the participants and for the street community as a whole. The report is very relevant as it speaks to the lived experiences of sixteen members of the street community.

Appendix A

Consent Form

I am Jeremy Pearce and this is Joey Worthington, we are third year social work students at the University of Victoria, required to complete a research project for a class. The Open Door has asked us to do this research project on gaps in services that the street community experiences. We hope to discuss what's working with community services, what's not, how services could improve, especially around times of the day and days of the week when there are gaps in services. As the Open Door is moving soon this is a good time to look at ways things could improve. Participation is voluntary and you can leave at any time. No names will be used in the report and you can ask us not to use any information you provide at any time. We will bring the draft report back to the Open Door for you to preview and make changes before we write the final report. Volunteers from this focus group will present the report in a second meeting that will be held for service providers in the hopes that this will lead to positive changes in services offered. The report will not be published and will only be used by the Open Door, at the service providers meeting and a copy will be kept on file for two years at the University of Victoria. To record information gathered at this meeting we would like to use a tape recorder. In order to use this information we need each of you to sign your name in consent of this on the sheet we will pass around. Please write your name and sign it. This meeting will continue until around noon. We will be giving out barbequed hotdogs after the meeting. You do not need to answer questions or stay for this meeting in order to get a hotdog. Thank you for participating in this project.