



**I never thought
it would happen
to me.**

**OPIOID DIALOGUES
WITH WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN SURREY**

April 2018

About the Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls Working Group

The Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls (SVWG) Working Group formed in 2012 to collaboratively understand the challenges and needs of vulnerable females in Surrey and find workable solutions. In 2014/2015 the Working Group undertook “In Their Own Words” a research project about the challenges and barriers vulnerable women and youth experience and the services and housing they need. For more information about the SVWG Working Group, visit surrey.ca/socialplanning.

The following organizations are represented on the SVWG Working Group:

- Atira Women’s Resource Society
- BC Housing
- City of Surrey – Public Safety & Social Planning
- DIVERSEcity
- Elizabeth Fry Society
- Fraser Health Authority – Surrey Mental Health and Substance Use Services
- Lookout Housing and Health Society
- BC Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Nightshift Ministries
- Options Community Services
- Pacific Community Resources Society
- Public Safety Canada
- Surrey RCMP
- Surrey Women’s Centre
- YWCA

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People ask what is wrong
with me that I got addicted.

But I was stuck
and it was so hard to stop.

**I did not wake up
one day and say “Hey,
I want to be an addict.”**
This was never my life plan.

Dialogue participant

The Opioid Dialogues

In Winter 2017/2018 the Surrey Vulnerable Women and Girls (SVWG) Working Group hosted a series of four dialogue sessions with women and girls, which focused on substance use and the current opioid crisis.

During each of the facilitated sessions the participants responded to questions about substance use and discussed their experiences. The women and girls were contacted to participate through established service providers in Surrey. The participants varied in age and circumstance. Most of the women and girls had experience using opioids, while a few had regularly used alcohol, cocaine and crystal methamphetamine. Some of the participants were youth under 19 and some were pregnant or new mothers. One group of women was still actively using while the rest were going through recovery and treatment.

What follows is a synopsis of the four dialogue sessions written using the women and girl's words and ideas.



The Start of Substance Use

I started using when I was fresh out of high school; I was young and dumb – got a prescription from my doctor, which made me think the drugs are “safe”.

Dialogue participant

Several of the women described the onset of their substance use. One common experience was becoming addicted to prescription painkillers, initially prescribed by their doctors. When the prescriptions ended or their doctor cut them off they would turn to street drugs, usually heroin. It was often not clear at first what was happening – but they said it didn't take long to become addicted. Some said that if they had been gradually weaned off of the prescription opioids rather than abruptly cut off they might not have turned to street drugs. Other participants talked about how common substance use is in their social circles and how this had led to their own problems with addiction.

**Men sell drugs,
women sell themselves.**

This affects women's
mental well-being and is
emotionally damaging.
Men do bad things but they
are not selling themselves.

Dialogue participant

The Experience of Substance Use

I couldn't feel worse about myself. I sold myself and hurt people. I thought - who cares?

Dialogue participant

The women and girls talked openly about their experiences of substance use and the opioid crisis. These experiences included drug overdoses, watching friends die, homelessness, being cut off from family, sex work to support their substance use, and desperation. All of the women talked about how substance use is/was having a negative impact on their lives. They mentioned overdoses and how they supported their friends who overdosed. For some, the overdoses have become normalized. They also talked of losing friends and dealing with that loss – sometimes by increasing their own drug use.

The dialogue participants talked about how the substance use experience is often different for women than for men, in part because of the social expectations placed on women. This is especially the case when speaking with women who are marginalized and have few options available. They spoke about how women are judged more for their addictions, partly because of their roles as mothers. People think that they are bringing their children into bad situations. They may lose their children to child protection services because they are using drugs and alcohol.

Sex Work

To afford their substance use habit, women are often forced into sex work if they have no other financial options. Men with limited options, they say, often resort to crime, sell drugs, and panhandle. Women do not often sell drugs, although there were two women in the dialogue series who had chosen to deal drugs rather than get involved in sex work. Most of the dialogue participants felt that men would not sell themselves, at least not as often as women do.

Violence

Many of the participants talked about how women are more at risk for violence.

Both the women who participated in the dialogues and the service providers talked about the increased violence that women are experiencing on the streets. Some attributed this to the strength of the drugs that are currently available. They say that the addiction is so strong that the women will tolerate more risky situations in their sex work to pay for drugs. They say a bad date is better than no date. These risky situations are leading to more violent assaults on women.

Homelessness

When women stay outside due to homelessness they risk rape. Women will try not to sleep outside on the street because of the fear of being assaulted or kidnapped. Women will take street drugs such as crystal meth to help them stay awake for as long as possible.

“I would rather die than live like that again.”

Dialogue participant

Participants also described how women get preyed upon. When they are homeless they will go with a guy, so they finally have a place to sleep. They will sleep really deeply because they have not really slept in days, or because they have been drugged. When they finally wake it is to the reality that they have been sexually assaulted while they were sleeping. Staying indoors in such precarious situations is often not any safer than the street.

Fentanyl

The women talked about how drugs they are using can be very unpredictable now because of fentanyl. Contamination can occur when the dealer does not clean the tools used for measuring and dispensing the drugs. As a result fentanyl is showing up in a range of street drugs. They cautioned that you cannot experiment with drugs without risking your life. They also talked about purposeful contamination and that they have heard about this happening occasionally in Surrey.

Addiction

The women talked about the physical and mental dependence that comes with an addiction, and how it will drive a person to do things that they would have never done before their substance use started. Addiction can also have an emotional component where the guilt and shame spiral. They also talked about how hard it is to stop using.





This crisis
is so frickin big
we need everybody
on board.

Dialogue participant

The End of Substance Use

Guys think they are invincible – they are big and nothing can really hurt them. They isolate themselves when they OD. Women are caretakers – we need to stay alive.

Dialogue participant

Community

A number of the women credited their families and friends for not giving up hope. It was their family's hope and support that eventually got them into treatment or in some cases back into treatment. They talked about their whole family suffering when they were sick and addicted.

Preparing for Recovery

Preparing for recovery and treatment can be daunting. The women talked about how they had to plan ahead when they were going through treatment, to think about all of the steps, not just getting clean. They were aware of having to change their entire life. They couldn't go back to their old lives, they needed a housing plan, new friends, connections to recreation centres, gyms, child minding, churches, and community resources.

Support for Women

The women feel that there are more resources and support available for men who are using substances or who want to quit. They say there are fewer options available for women with substance use issues, especially for those who have kids.

They talked about having more to lose than men because they are caretakers, they are responsible for their kids, and they have attachments. Women fear their children will be taken away by the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) so they keep their drug use a secret.

Women who are pregnant for the first time may not know about getting support and they will remain isolated.

Participants feel that there is not a good understanding of substance use for women because the statistics and data are not available. This reality keeps women on the street.



What is Needed?

I had to sell my ass for drugs. Men don't have to do that. I put myself in dangerous situations for drugs – sacrificed my self-worth and self-esteem.

Dialogue participant

During the dialogues the women talked about what they felt was needed to deal more effectively with the opioid crisis and substance use for women in particular.

Harm Reduction

For those who are still using, the women said that drug testing strips should be more widely available. Naloxone should continue to be widely available. They thought Safe Point, a safe consumption site in Surrey, was a very good facility and they felt there should be more safe consumption sites.

During the dialogue sessions there was often debate between the women who found opioid agonists such as methadone and suboxone helpful in dealing with their substance use and those who did not and felt that it was simply replacing one drug with another. For those who supported the use of opioid agonists they wanted to see methadone and suboxone more easily and widely available. Others were proponents of detox and abstinence, and wanted more easily available detox services.

Prevention & Education

Prevention was a topic that the women discussed enthusiastically, especially in regards to youth.

They feel it is important to prevent opioid use through more education in schools as early as possible. They emphasized that the education in high school needs to be real, suggesting that even showing people going through detox might be a deterrent for students. Having substance use counselling

in school would also be helpful. Youth also need other options so they don't try drugs simply because they are bored.

They also supported awareness raising throughout the community and trying to address the stigma associated with drug use.

For the women who are parents who participated in the dialogues, they are keenly aware that their kids may mirror their habits. They are fearful for their kids and they are hoping for better resources for youth.

Women-only Services

Many of the women who participated in the dialogues were emphatic that women-only services are essential for making substance use treatment and recovery accessible for many females. They said that there are not enough women-only recovery houses.

“I can't talk with a guy about the fact that I was on the verge of selling my body to get drugs – that is how desperate I was - especially if he is living in the same facility as me.”

Dialogue participant

Women-only services also provide women-only support groups and counselling. The dialogue participants discussed the value of talking with other women in their circumstances -there is an understanding that they share. Some women said that could not have gotten well without a women- only recovery facility.

Support for Women with Children

For women with substance use issues who are pregnant or who have young children, specific services are very important.

Maxxine Wright Health Care Centre and Ellendale Cradle program provide valuable services for this population in Surrey. The women talked of several cases where they were able to work on their substance use issues and also keep their children.

Treatment & Recovery

The participants talked about the importance of being able to access treatment when they were ready and not having to wait. Treatment should follow detox immediately with no gap. Also treatment should come with fewer stipulations, such as “no smoking.”

The women talked about the value of the recovery experience and the importance of not rushing that phase. They identified the need for a longer recovery process (beyond the usual 30 – 60 days) and were thankful for the facilities where this was possible.

They also mentioned the need for a maintenance phase after recovery. Second stage recovery was identified as valuable and some participants talked about the need for family second stage, once both partners have gone through their individual recovery.

“I need connection with others who have had the same experience as me. I used to be anti-meeting. Now I like them. I pick up helpful messages.”

Dialogue participant

They mentioned that there are recovery houses which are unstructured and seem to enable peoples’ addictions rather than help them. Some provide better service than others and they should all be reviewed, especially those receiving government funding.

Counselling & Support

The women identified the value of counselling and therapeutic support, including grief support, in their recovery process. They feel that more counselling supports for women are needed. Counselling supports provide an opportunity to rediscover oneself after being lost in addiction, deal with the issues that may have led to the addiction and change thinking processes. Unfortunately, existing services are often full.

“We need to raise awareness. I was hanging out with my 15 year old nephew at the skate park and his friends were joking about taking heroin. I told them about my experience and what it is really like. They were shocked – they apologized.”

Dialogue participant

Housing

Housing is an important part of the equation. The women talked about the need for low barrier housing and day jobs so they can avoid some of the risks associated with substance use such as survival sex work and couch surfing because of homelessness. Unfortunately, finding housing as a substance user is very difficult.

People who are going through treatment need to have their housing lined up so they can have somewhere to go when they are finished. If women end up back on the street, it can be difficult to maintain sobriety.

Friendship

A few of the women talked about how sobriety provided a path for developing new friendships with women. They talked about when they were using, they viewed women as competition – for drugs and “boyfriends.” Once sober, they found women friends who were supportive and who could understand what they had been through.



LANDED

DVK

TRUG NO NOTS

ARTS

MAY

NASS

You are the first person
to come here and ask us
about our situation instead
of telling us what we need
– thank you.

Dialogue participant

Their Words

The women and girls were pleased to be asked about their thoughts and opinions about substance use and their own experiences. They expressed enthusiasm for getting involved in public education and helping people maintain their new found sobriety. They also wanted to speak with high school students about their experiences. They were pretty keen to help out in any way that could support women who are dealing with substance use. Some said they felt “useless” while they were using so now they are embracing the opportunity to do something valuable and help others.

The girls and women in the study were asked what messages they would like to share with the community. These are their words:

Please Don't Judge

- “Don't be rude or judgemental to street people; it could be your kid out there one day.”
- “We need less judgement and more compassion.”
- “Judgement is for the uneducated.”
- “Stigma equals judgement without real knowledge.”

It Can Happen to Anyone

- “Addiction can happen to anyone – it is not based on your socio-economic status.”
- “It could be your son or daughter using harm reduction supplies instead of a dirty rig– so don't tell us we should not be distributing harm reduction supplies.”

Be Informed

- “Getting clean is not easy.”
- “Everyone should learn about drugs.”

The Power of Kindness

- “We are not bad people – we are just struggling. Do not push us away.”
- “As kids we were rejected, beat up, and bullied in school.”
- “We should help lift each other up.”
- “Remember we are all human beings.”
- “Be kind to us. We feel lonely.”

