

## SHOP & RNC Partnership Breakdown



♀ ST. JOHN'S WOMEN'S CENTRE  
♀ MARGUERITE'S PLACE  
♀ SAFE HARBOUR OUTREACH PROJECT

November 23, 2020

The Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP) and the St. John's Status of Women Council have made the decision to end our official SHOP Liaison Officer partnership with the RNC.

In 2014, SHOP approached the RNC in hopes of establishing better communication, reducing sex work stigma through education to the RNC, and creating better access for sex workers when interacting with police. None of this has transpired and so we are releasing this public statement to our broader community, and the sex workers and survivors we serve. Without accountability, we do not feel as though we will genuinely see the change in policing culture at the RNC.

SHOP is committed to upholding the human rights of sex workers, and our values of sex workers' self-determination, the power of harm reduction and social justice. We have heard the concerns of the people we support and serve, and we stand with them.

### **Background**

When we approached the RNC to create a partnership, our goal was to mediate the harm sex workers were experiencing in their interactions with police, including judgement, victim blaming, and invasive questions when reporting violence. The resulting Liaison Officer partnership was intended to provide sex workers and SHOP direct points of contact when reporting to the police. This partnership was rooted in the RNC recognizing a need for change.

### **Outcomes**

The need for change persists. Since 2014, we have consistently heard sex workers and survivors in our community tell us that they continue to experience judgement, stigma and a lack of safety in their interactions with the RNC and that they need things to change. In the last six years, SHOP and our community have initiated the majority of our partnership connections with the RNC, from requesting meetings, offering training sessions, creating opportunities for more collaboration, sharing recommendations, and presenting evidence-based research and testimony directly from sex workers in St. John's. We have provided local and international reports, documents and direction on what meaningful engagement with sex workers looks like and asked for increased accountability and transparency.

Despite all this time and effort, we have not seen useful outcomes or adequate engagement from the RNC in this partnership. Our relationship is not reciprocal, we continue to have some phone calls and emails to liaison officers go unreturned, and members of our community continue to feel stigmatized and devalued by the police. Simply put, the RNC has not done the work to rebuild trust with our community and this is not a partnership.

## **Ending our Partnership**

The RNC has repeatedly indicated that it wants to build trust with vulnerable communities, however, over our six-year history of trying to engage the RNC our requests have been sidelined or ignored, demonstrating that this commitment does not include our community. After years of expending immense time, limited resources, and energy towards trying to repair harm, we believe we have exhausted our options, and this is not an effective or safe partnership.

The fractured trust between much of the sex working community in St. John's and police has actually worsened, and we are concerned that continuing with this partnership misrepresents that reality. Regrettably, this partnership has been a failed experiment.

While we have made the decision to end our official RNC partnership with dedicated Liaison Officers, we are not gatekeepers to the police, nor will we stop working with members of our community to seek police assistance when desired. We acknowledge that many current and former sex workers access police without us. Indeed, this failed partnership has demonstrated we cannot always get sex workers better access or more compassionate treatment, despite our best efforts.

As long as sex work is criminalized and the police mandate is to uphold the criminal justice system as it is – a system that leads to the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of sex workers, Indigenous, Black and people of colour, migrants, 2SLGBTQI people, people with untreated mental health needs, people living in poverty, and survivors of gender-based violence – SHOP and the RNC are fundamentally at odds on how to support people in the sex trade.

## **Moving Forward**

We have sent a direct letter to the RNC explaining the end to this relationship. We remain open to working collaboratively with the RNC in the future, provided that the RNC proposes concrete plans with clear commitments towards rebuilding trust and moving in a direction that supports members of our most vulnerable communities.

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The St. John's Status of Women Council/Women's Centre is a feminist organization that since 1972 is continually working to achieve equality and justice through political activism, community collaboration and the creation of a safe and inclusive space for all women in the St. John's area.

SHOP is the only sex worker advocacy program in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a mandate to advocate for the human rights of sex workers. SHOP believes in the value of sex workers and their self-determination, the power of harm reduction and the pursuit of social justice.