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Therapy for Sex Workers? Friendly Providers Call for More Understanding



(http://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/serena-dai)

By Serena Dai (/chicago/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/serena-dai) on April 25, 2013 9:05am @ssdai (http://twitter.com/ssdai)

CHICAGO — What's a therapy session like for an erotic dancer?

A lot of times it's disheartening, according to the volunteer activist group Sex Worker Outreach Project Chicago (http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/).

Many service providers including doctors, therapists and social workers automatically assume sex work is the problem and make their first goal to get the client out of the industry, said SWOP members, many who have been involved in sex work or are currently in sex work.

That's not always the issue and many sex workers do not see leaving as an option, said Katherine Margaret, a SWOP-Chicago board member.

As a potential solution, SWOP created a network of 36 service providers in the city who are friendly to sex workers (http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/about-swop/), such as strippers, prostitutes, professional dominants and sex educators.

Organizations or individuals in the PROS Network (http://www.prosnetworkchicago.org) — or Providers and Resources Offering Services to sex workers — have signed contracts saying they understand the needs of sex workers, said Serpent Libertine, a SWOP-Chicago board member.

"It's about meeting people where they're at," she said. "It's about giving people the resources necessary to engage in what they're doing in a safe way."

Members of the network range from individual social workers or therapists to organizations such as the Howard Brown Health Center (http://www.howardbrown.org) and Chicago Recovery Alliance (http://www.anypositivechange.org/menu.html). The network is focused heavily on Lakeview and Uptown, partly because of the friendliness of both neighborhoods to the LGBT and social service communities.

Providers in the network (http://www.prosnetworkchicago.org/large-map/) ideally help clients who are sex workers with an approach that does not automatically start with trying to get the clients out of the industry.

Sex workers, for example, tend to feel isolated because of the stigma of sex work, and often they do not tell family and friends, Margaret said. A sex-worker-friendly service provider might suggest battling loneliness by taking up a hobby outside of work or making a more conscious effort to find friends who are also in sex work.

"A lot of the issues people encounter can be addressed without an exit," Margaret said.

D. Michael Coy (https://www.dmcoy.com), a social work professional in Lakeview, decided to join the network because he thinks it's important for groups with an institutional bias against them to have places to go, he said.

He's worked with clients who have traded sex for money or goods — but he's also worked with clients that had sex for companionship and love, and trying to persuade a sex worker to quit his job would be like trying to get a computer programmer to quit his job, he said.

"Every clinician walks into the door with biases," Coy said. "But it's not the client's job to deal with the biases. It's our job to deal with our own and not bring them into the room."

The PROS Network and SWOP-Chicago will be hosting a free debut party at DePaul University's Cortelyou Commons (http://www.depaul.edu/campus-maps/buildings/Pages/cortelyou-commons.aspx), 2324 N. Fremont St., at 7:30 p.m. May 8. Printed booklets of organizations and individuals in the network will be available.

SWOP also offers training to organizations looking to be more sex worker-friendly.



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