

UPHNS HUB Video Call Minutes August 17, 2021

Topic:

Prisoners Justice with Unlocking the Gates

Attendance: 34

Presenters:

- Mo Korchinski, Executive Director, Unlocking the Gates Service Society
- Pam Young, Program Manager, Unlocking the Gates Service Society

Presentation:

Mo and Pam provided an overview of the [Unlocking the Gates Services Society](#)

Program Overview:

- The organization has been around for 13 years, offering support and outreach to assist people transition from correctional facilities in accessing health and social services upon release
- The program started off with women in provincial facilities across BC
- Participated in a research project, interviewed women: what would benefit them from not reoffending?
- Women had no idea what bus to get on, often very vulnerable, cab drivers were extorting women for sex and drugs. Cab drivers no longer pick up women from our women's prison in BC, the correctional facility will take them to bus loop
- The corrections system becomes a revolving door, people coming in 10, 12, 14 times
- Each time you enter the system, you lose your housing and all your belongings
- People were being released from prison and dying, this started before the overdose crisis
- The Unlocking the Gates program ensures that folks being released have a safe place to go, are connected to OAT the community, all the resources they need to help keep them alive.
- In this past year, the program has expanded and our now doing outreach, connecting with folks who have falling through the cracks
- A high priority is getting folks on some sort of safe supply and ensuring their safety
- Anyone who works for the organization has prison experience. Everyone knows what it's like being released.
- Mo and Pam are permanent fixtures in the prison. Biggest thing we do is give people hope.
- We aim to start connecting with people and build those relationships before people get out. Our phone number is free, 7 days a week 8 am to 10 pm a day. As long as there is a phone, there will be someone who answers.

The Ward Program

- If you have a warrant, we can help you. People don't want to go to shelters because there is a high police presence. In BC, people hide in the shadows and avoid services. Probation sends over a consent form, tells us if they have a warrant, and whether they need to phone in or go to a court house. Never had one person be arrested, they are released to us. We get their warrants waived. We send support letters for pretty much everyone who reaches out to us.

- This has been hard for us to get this program running 12 years ago. Weren't supported by corrections. We wrote hundreds of letters for the women, did that for 5 years to get our program up and running.
- When COVID hit, our program was still running when public transit was not. This strengthened our relationship with corrections, tripled our numbers since last year and housed just under 300 people

Funding

- We are currently funded through the First Nations Health Authority and are seeking more funding. Contact us if you have suggestions or want to donate: unlockingthegates@gmail.com

Backpack Program:

- People were being released at 8:45 in the morning with their belongings in plastic bags. We started this backpack program so people couldn't be recognized as being released.

Program Expansion

- Started working with federal and provincial men and women a year and a half ago. There are so many more men's programs than women's.
- When COVID hit, started mass releasing people, the count at the women's correction facility was down as low as 40 people. There were no services available, places where you could get free clothing, recovery homes weren't accepting people. The one consistent thing was that our staff was showing up – our services to people, with expanding to the men and with COVID it has been a busy couple of years.
- Unlocking the Gates became a nonprofit in 2020, most of our battle is for funding, great to see the program grow and staff grow, it has been a great experience.

Digital Divide

- The cell phone era has made people leaving prison a lot harder
- Need internet and a phone to access services (income assistance, detox, probation)
- We have developed a cell phone project for people who have HEPC. Advocating to look at all chronic diseases as a need for cell phones.

Transportation

- Received a grant to help people get to their remote communities. Our staff drive up to 10-11 hours to get people to their communities.
- The reason we started this, people were getting stuck in Prince George. They would reoffend and end up back in BC Corrections. The next time they would get out, they wouldn't even have that bus ticket.
- Been a great opportunity to make sure we are meeting people where they are at and connect people to resources in their region.
- Every community in every region is different.
- In the mainland, its easy – not so hard to find somewhere because the next community is super close.
- Not as simple in more remote communities.

Zoom

- We are now able to have zoom calls with clients who are still incarcerated
- Visits are now done by zoom, where people before did not have access to in person visits because families were so far away, they can now have visits.
- Start seeing a lot more healing because of being able to build those relationships

Unlocking the Gates Videos

[Animation](#)

- Mo decided to be public about who I am in my past life, want to humanize who people are who are in prison, who are stuck in addiction. Show who we are, that was me 16 years ago on the street. Same with most of my team. That's where animation comes from. All our stories are pretty well the same so that people will understand it.
- *Q: I hear this medical model of approaching substance use and I wonder where harm reduction fits in knowing risk of fatal overdoses increase upon release?*
 - We do provide naloxone kits. Noticed overtime, people were getting released – they were supposed to be getting training and a kit. But there was a glitch, with court hearings and other activities. We make sure people get one. Some people say I'm not going to use. We encourage them to take it, could be to save someone else's life.

[Documentary](#) (to help fund peer program)

- It is more powerful to hear from the participants. This is the first one we did. Every time I do a grant, I include a short film about the findings.
- Such a beautiful way of translating knowledge, glad you write these in your grants. We need more creative ways of sharing stories. Giving people to share their stories is so powerful and healing for the individuals. Being able to write and share their stories. People want their stories told. They just want their voices heard and validated for what happened.
- I love participatory action research – have academics look at us as the experts, gives us the opportunity.
- Would love to see more support to families to support healing
- For me, my addiction saved my life. I probably would have killed myself if I didn't use substances. Drugs was my solution, not my problem until I dealt with the trauma in my life.

Meeting Close:

- Thank you for sharing your stories, so inspired by the work that you do.
- *What makes you very hopeful in this work, and what keeps you going*
- Seeing peoples' success – if people are trying to make changes. Could be a small goal – just being able to see the change
- So much potential in anyone that we pick up and work with. Life is amazing, so short. Lost 20 years in my addiction and try to make it up for it all. Most of these people don't have someone who believe in them and care. We have over 400 people who aren't with us anymore. Those people have children and family members left behind. 6-7 people die a day from the overdose crisis. That is a bigger crisis than COVID.
- Held a moment of silence for those lives that have been lost