

THE NATURAL HELPER MODEL A RURAL REMEDY



A Guide to Reaching Rural Injection Drug Users

Sharp Advice Needle Exchange (SANE)
A project of The AIDS Coalition of Cape Breton
Funding From the Nova Scotia Department of Health

Introduction

ABOUT THIS MANUAL

The information in this booklet is a compilation of the experiences of the present staff of Sharp Advice Needle Exchange in reaching the rural regions of Cape Breton, as well as the expertise of the exchange's service users.

It is our hope that the information in this booklet will generate a move throughout Canada to fulfill the needs of injection drug users in rural communities.

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WHAT IS A NATURAL HELPER?

If you're not employed in an exchange, but do the work of an exchange from your home or elsewhere, we identify you as a Natural Helper. Natural Helpers are people with a deep understanding and a keen sense of the social networks of those who choose to use injection drugs. They are sometimes users themselves, or they might be someone who knows and loves an injection drug user and they just want to be able to help.

WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST

Barriers to access

Although we do our best to avoid it, there are many barriers to accessing services.

- Lack of transportation
- Illness
- Distrust
- Location of service users

These barriers are seen in every region, but are particularly felt in more rural areas. Sharp Advice Needle Exchange is mandated to service all of Cape Breton Island. We cover 10,311 square kilometres. Much of this is rural. Just to give you an idea of exactly how rural parts of our island are, the cover of this manual is a picture of one of the routes we have to take to service a Natural Helper. Knowing this, we had to use innovative ways to break down these barriers. A network of Natural Helpers has helped us tremendously in overcoming some of these barriers. Accessibility to service is a priority among service users and those who fund our projects.

Although this model has been adopted in regions such as BC, Alberta, New Brunswick and soon PEI, this model has yet to be perfected. Everything we do is trial and error. Each day has been a learning experience for staff, service users, and natural helpers alike. This model has been in place for the past eight years or more and there are still a lot of wrinkles to be ironed out. After reading this manual, we encourage you to drop us a line or phone with any suggestions that you think may help us in this effort.

MAKING CONTACT:

- Keep in mind that, for the most part, each person who enters that exchange knows somebody who uses, or they use themselves. You have already gained the trust and confidence of that person or he/she wouldn't be there. You probably engage in conversation, carry on, inquire about their health, etc. Chances are that this person knows someone who is using, but does not access the services of the exchange. But how do you go about asking him/her without sounding too intrusive? You can't. But you can plant the seed. Ask him/her if they are sure they have enough equipment. Let them know that they can take equipment for friends and distribute on your behalf - no questions asked of course. All you ask is that they return the used equipment. If they are from out of town, remind them that you deliver and will meet them at a location of their choice. Soon the friends that they service will inquire about where the equipment came from. This will often lead to people accessing on their own behalf. These friends most likely have other friends who use. Eventually a network of service users will begin to emerge.
- Partnership Building. We all heard it. It is a necessity with the Public Health Agency of Canada, the provincial public health services, most funding bodies and to community based organizations themselves. The building of partnerships with other community-based organizations can be very beneficial in reaching the people. Because our work in the exchange is powered by the philosophy of Harm Reduction, we have an obligation to build partnerships with various organizations such as AIDS Service Organizations, Hep C Community-Based Organizations, Planned Parenthood, etc. Not too many people are interested in education around Harm Reduction, but they are interested in learning about blood borne pathogens and sexually transmitted diseases. Partnerships are a give and take relationship. Educate yourself around HIV/AIDS, HCV, HBV, and sexually transmitted diseases. Offer your services to these organizations by assisting in the education aspect of their work. The staff of Sharp Advice delivers an AIDS 101 weekly on behalf of the AIDS Coalition of Cape Breton to the detox unit of the regional hospital. This has proven to be a great asset to us. As an introductory piece, we talk about our positions within the needle exchange, the work carried out by the exchange, how and why we do our work, and our relationship to the education session we are facilitating. It's quick and dirty, but it works. The AIDS Coalition of Cape Breton and HepC~CB allowed us the opportunity on numerous occasions, to do this work in rural regions and small towns as well. We have made some initial contacts with injection drug users through this process.



MAKING CONTACT CONTINUED:

- The two previous examples of making contact not only helped us in developing a network of injection drug users, but have also allowed us to make contact with the friends and loved ones of injection drug users who just want to be able to help them manage their health during their use. Injection drug use in rural communities is often a big family secret, and they like to handle it in a very discreet manor. They welcome the fact that they don't have to enter a public building to access equipment and information for their loved ones. They welcome friendly, understanding and non-judgemental faces. Most often than not, we are asked to join them in a cup of tea and a chat.
- As we all know, staff selection is extremely important in the success of a needle exchange. Having staff that are knowledgeable around harm reduction and injection drug use is a definite asset. Having staff that are in recovery and are known in the injection drug using community is an added benefit. In most cases, those who are known are already trusted. This makes the process so much easier. However, it is not the only way. You can also be affiliated with an injection drug user, or come from some other solid community and still be accepted. Sharp Advice has the best of both worlds. We are able to relate easily to all aspects of the community. This allows us the trust of the IDU community as well as that of the friends and families of those who use.
- Pamphlets, brochures, business cards, posters, newspaper articles, radio talk shows - these have all proven to be of assistance in making contact with the community. Taking part in other organizations' media events, such as the annual AIDS Walk, World AIDS Day, AIDS Awareness Week, etc. have provided us with free publicity. Fundraising efforts and food drives. These also make people aware of our services and our commitment to the community. Health Awareness Fairs take place all over the island on a frequent basis. Community health boards, or large corporations such as hotel chains that want to promote health among their workers, generally sponsor Health Awareness Fairs. We get in on the action by setting up information booths during these fairs.
- Staff in the past have frequented pool halls, bars, gyms, and tattoo parlours and socialized with the patrons and handed out business cards and supplied condoms. When socializing, the nature of their work often came up in conversation. Because of the uniqueness of the work, interest is immediately piqued. Word of mouth is certainly the best source of advertisement in rural areas. Quite a few contacts were made this way. This can be such a quick process that exchanges were done in the parking lot of some of these establishments.



THE COMMUNICATION BARRIER

Knowing that there is more to our work than simply supplying safe injection equipment, we also had to find a way to include the other components of our work into our outreach service to Natural Helpers. This is often quite easy when you are servicing a Natural Helper who doesn't use injection drugs themselves, but can be tricky when you are dealing with a person who is presently using on a regular basis. Always keeping in line with the Harm Reduction philosophy of the "User is the Expert" and remaining non-judgemental, you have to approach the subject of referrals and the health of the person in a very tactful manner. Sometimes just the mention of the fact that you are able to make referrals to a detox or a physician can put the person off. It may sound to them as if you are saying, "You got to clean up". Even leaving a list of services in the outreach kits can put a person off. We also have to keep in mind that literacy levels among people differ greatly; written material is not the best way to communicate. We find that the only way we can approach this is a simple, "How ya doing and how's all your buddies?" Sometimes, but not always, the person will let us in on their state of health and that of their friends. Then we have the opportunity to offer our other services.

CONTACTING US

Most regions in our area that are considered rural are so far out of the way that a phone call is a long distance call. Upon initial contact, we inform all our Natural Helpers and service users that we accept collect calls. If it is after hours and nobody is there to accept, leave a message and we will get back to you as soon as possible. We check messages frequently. We will also reimburse for the call so they do not have to take on any added expense. We make all our services free. We do this because we know that lack of money can be a major barrier to a person's health and we don't want to have to add to it.

WEATHER RESTRICTIONS

The winters in Cape Breton can be cruel. We get a lot of snow and ice. It is certainly not ideal weather for traveling, especially over rural roads and mountainous terrain. The worse months are generally December through to March. We stock the more rural sites with hopefully enough equipment to get them and their friends through the winter months. We always ask that they phone regularly so that we don't lose contact with them and we tell them not to hesitate to call if they need us to re-supply them. This usually works well and sometimes has an added benefit. If these people have to come in for groceries, doctor's appointments, etc. they stop in just to visit us for a brief few moments. Some folks even hang around for a cup of coffee. Our fixed site is a very informal and comfortable environment. When you walk through the doors, you're almost sure to run into an old friend. People are sitting around talking about their use, their health, or the troubles they have encountered through their use. It becomes a great learning experience for some.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

Although Cape Breton is small, we still have a number of homeless people, not a significant number, but a number none the less. Some of these folks will drop into the exchange to get warm and grab a coffee, a bite to eat or some Ensure™. Because the number of homeless people is so low in our area, we are able to familiarize ourselves with some of them and advocate and assist in finding them shelter and food. If we don't see one of them for awhile, we'll take to the streets and look for them to make sure they are all right. We'll bring to them warm clothes, blankets and some food. We will offer to drive them to the emergency room if they are ill. These people become Natural Helpers in their own right and a great asset to both the exchange and the community as a whole. They are right on the front line and are always informing others in the same situation about the help and service they received from the exchange. This is one of the aspects of our work that we find most rewarding.

WHAT THE COMMUNITY TOLD US THEY NEED

We recently did a small needs assessment with our Natural Helpers and service users. The major finding of this needs assessment was that Sharp Advice is able to meet the needs of the injection drug user in every category but one: a methadone program. It is a need that has to be fulfilled, and hopefully will be in the near future. We worry, however, that if this hope of ours ever comes to light, how accessible will it be to our rural users? Knowing the restrictions to methadone programs, it probably won't be accessible for all. We'll have to cross this bridge when we come to it and start the wheels of innovation turning once again.

WHO'S WATCHING?



So what do you do when you have to deliver injection equipment in such small communities that everybody knows everybody and their dog? Here are some basic suggestions:

- Avoid doing television interviews or having your picture taken for newspaper stories. Publicity is great, but get one of your partners to do it for you. A neighbour of a Natural Helper may recognize you from a TV news show or an article they read in the paper while you are entering the home or desired location of that helper. All they have to do is put two and two together and you have just inadvertently disclosed.
- Use dark bags when transporting the equipment. Don't allow the equipment to be visible to anybody.
- Travel in an unmarked vehicle with no logos or identification of the organization you are representing in your work.

THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Every person is different, as is every community. We try to address the needs of the people in our rural communities by having the following tools on hand:

- **Safe injection equipment:** This includes rigs, filters, swabs, containers, spoons, and tie offs.
- **Safer sex equipment:** This includes condoms, lubricant and tips on how to use a condom properly. It is especially important to have great quantities of these on hand when delivering to sex trade workers.
- **Educational pamphlets:** Some suggestions are vein care pamphlets, safe injection tips, how to deal with an over dose, and home detoxing.
- **Your address book:** If you come across someone who wants a referral, you don't want to have to drive all the way back to town to get the names and phone numbers of your contacts. This way you can enable the service user to get immediate help as they want it and you have the ways and means of transporting them to their desired location.
- **Cellular Phone:** If you have to make a referral, you may come across someone who doesn't own a phone. This is also great to have when travelling any distance in case you break down on the road.
- **Nutrition:** Try to keep a couple of ¹Ensure™ or Boost™ in your vehicle with you. If a person has been on a run for a long period of time, he/she may not have been eating properly. Offer them the drinks.
- **Natural Helper Card:** This card is given to our Natural Helpers and is used to present to the police or the RCMP if they are found to be in possession of our equipment. The card simply states that this person is working on behalf of Sharp Advice Needle Exchange as a Natural Helper and may have in their possession new or used equipment which is the property of the exchange. The card has our names and phone number on it.

¹ These nutritional drinks are very expensive, however, the companies which make them have been extremely generous to the AIDS Coalition of Cape Breton by making an in kind donation of their drink each month. The AIDS Coalition generously shares this with us as well as access to their food bank when needed. We, in turn, work on any fund raising activities or food drives they have.



HUMAN RESOURCES

Doing this type of rural outreach work demands that the staff be away from the fixed site. Volunteers are a resource that we must have in this type of work. They are usually people who are in recovery and trusted among the community and already possess a knowledge of the social stigma surrounding injection drug use. They are trained in office procedures and safety protocol. They are made aware of the principles of Harm Reduction. They have proven to be a valuable asset to our organization. They are truly appreciated for their efforts within the community and their concern for the community.

WHERE DO WE GET THE TIME TO DO ALL THIS?

We are fortunate enough to have two staff members, a project coordinator and an outreach coordinator. It is the job of the project coordinator to handle all the internal stuff such as administration, preparing proposals, ordering supplies, handling walkins, referrals, keeping stats, delivering educational sessions, training volunteers, etc. The outreach coordinator's main focus is to make contact and continue the process of support with the Natural Helper sites. She schedules meetings with them and keeps track of the stats for outreach. She responds to situations that occur outside of the scheduled visits. Scheduling outreach is a major way to manage your time, although this schedule can be easily disrupted when an unscheduled need for service arises. This is why we make our service users known to both staff members. Except in rare occasions, where trust is a major issue, the project coordinator accompanies the outreach coordinator to the Natural Helper site. This way they are familiar with both staff members. This comes in handy too when one staff member is away from the job.

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

We all know that very few things in life come free. Support is usually free, but even that carries a price tag when you have to travel to give it. Depending on the amount of ground you have to cover in your work, constant travel can become very expensive. Program and service accessibility is usually a major requirement to obtain funding for needle exchange programs. The topic of reaching rural communities is increasingly becoming a priority. We include these two components in every proposal we write. If your funder does not request explanations on how you address the issues of accessibility and rural outreach, then you should include them in your objectives. Also include them in your budget request. Outreach fits nicely within the travel category of your budget. Estimate the number of kilometres you expect to use and multiply this by the going rate for mileage in your area. Don't forget to include any other travel money you expect to use throughout the year.



THE BOTTOM LINE

It is without a doubt in any of our minds that it is the Natural Helpers themselves that are our most valuable resource. They bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience and are quick to share it with us. If there is a drug out there that is harming people, they let us know. If there is a home remedy that is cheap, yet effective for an illness, they let us know. If there is ignorance and stigma to be combated in a community, they let us know and jump right aboard to assist in alleviating it. They exhibit a real desire to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their small networks of peers. These people, these Natural Helpers, have made our work so much easier. We owe them a great deal of gratitude.

THE JAMES STREET CREDO

ALL PEOPLE ARE EQUAL

RESPECT ONE ANOTHER'S FEELINGS

***PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO THEIR OWN OPINIONS AND FEELINGS
WITHOUT THE NEED TO DEFEND THEM***

WE STRIVE TO HAVE DIGNITY FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS

***WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS TO
PROMOTE A SENSE OF SECURITY***

RESPECT PEOPLE FOR WHO THEY ARE

***WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY NOT TO TOLERATE ABUSE OF ANY
KIND***

***WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY NOT TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST
GENDER, SEXUAL PREFERENCE, NATIONALITY, AGE, RELIGIOUS
BELIEFS, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STANDING, AND THE PHYSICALLY
AND/OR MENTALLY CHALLENGED***

***WE MUST ENDEAVOR TO UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS SOMETHING
TO BE GAINED FROM EVERYONE'S SPECIAL QUALITIES, AND THAT
ONLY GOD (AS WE UNDERSTAND GOD) HAS ALL WISDOM***

***IN FULFILLING MY RESPONSIBILITIES, I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE
HERE.***

THE EXPERTS SPEAK

“They found my brother dead at the kitchen table with a needle in his arm. He was alone and hiding his addiction. That’s why I do this. I want people to know that the exchange is there for them, that they’re not alone.”

“They’re coming to my door 12:30 at night. I don’t care. I’ll get up and give them what they need. As long as they’re using clean, that’s all that matters.”

“The boys are all paranoid down there. I told them that I’d take them up to meet you guys so they’d find out that you don’t bite, but they won’t come, so I’ll bring it to them.”

“One of the girls is a real mess. Holes everywhere. I gave her some of that stuff you gave me for infection. She doesn’t want to go to her doctor cause he’ll know she’s pokin’ her script. I gave her the vein care book too.”

“I got to move off the island to get meth, but I’ll set you up with a buddy of mine who’ll take the gear.”

“I’ve been using the exchange since I started using about 4 years ago. I’m taking 300 fits a week, for myself and some other people. I just got tested and I’m still clean, thanks to the exchange.”

“I’m both HIV and HepC positive, and I don’t mind telling people how I got it. That kinda reinforces the fact that you shouldn’t share your gear. If there’s a bunch of people using, I tell them to make sure to keep their shit separate and throw a bunch of new fits on the table.”

“My buddy never ate in two days. I gave him a couple of cans of the Ensure stuff you gave me. It’s all I could get into him, but it’s better than nothing.”

“I got that many pokes in my body I look like a pin cushion. It’s a good thing that fits are so easy to get, or else I’m sure I would have shared by now considering how much I use.”

“Thank God you guys deliver, or else all us junkies would never get a clean rig, and you know what that means. We can’t afford a car man, and the buses around here suck.”

“My buddy told me about you guys, but I didn’t believe you guys delivered the shit that you do. I thought it was only for drug users, not steroids. I got a lot of friends doing a cycle right now.”

“Holy shit man, I couldn’t believe it when you said you would deliver way the fuck out here. And there you were, at my door. Can’t believe it.”

“I was in detox sittin’ in on your thing about AIDS and you mentioned that you have a needle exchange there and that you deliver. I’m back at er, but now I’m using clean every time.”

“I thought you guys only gave out condoms there. They sent me up from the half way house to get some condoms for the boys and I nearly fainted when I saw the rig room. The boys got more than condoms when I got back. Man, they were some happy. I’ve been helpin’ them out ever since.”

“I knew that when I got straight I wanted to help out at the exchange.”

“Geeze, it’s hard enough to buy the dope, let alone buying the syringes too. They grab as many as they need when they come and I tell them they got to bring back the dirty ones.”