

Sex workers question police DNA collection

Is a national databank in the works?

SEX LAWS

Jeremy Hainsworth

a POLICE CAMPAIGN to quietly collect sex workers' DNA across Canada is raising red flags.

Sex workers say it's a violation of their rights. They don't trust the police or government's intentions.

And, they say, this collection opens the door for authorities to collect DNA from other groups too.

"If the government said everyone must submit their DNA, they'd be up in arms," says Sue Davis of Vancouver's Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education Society. "It's a very hot-button issue."

Prof Michael Goodyear of Halifax's Dalhousie University studies prostitution issues. He agrees with Davis.

"Imagine if we wanted to collect nurses' DNA in case they were murdered," he says. "Most murdered people are pretty easy to identify."

'THIS IS A HUGE VIOLATION OF OUR RIGHTS.' Amy Leibovitch of Sex Professionals of Canada wants to know what police are planning to do with her colleagues' DNA, and why they won't protect sex workers while they're still alive.



BRITNEY KWASNEY PHOTO

Davis says an Edmonton Police Service officer recently told her the DNA profiles would be used by Project KARE (Edmonton's missing persons task force) to identify dead sex workers.

"How about protecting me so I don't die?" she says.

Davis says changing the prostitution laws would remove the need for such data collection.

Though prostitution is not itself a crime in Canada, "communicating for the purposes of prostitution" and "living off its avails" are both illegal.

That's the crux of this problem, say all the sex workers and advocates Xtra interviewed for this story: the laws around prostitution force workers out of the public eye and into violent or possibly fatal

conditions. Change the laws and there will be no need for any DNA collection, they say.

But collecting DNA? "This is a huge violation of our rights," says Amy Leibovitch of Sex Professionals of Canada.

RCMP K Division spokesperson Cpl Wayne Oakes says the DNA samples are taken voluntarily from those "involved in high-risk lifestyles."

Oakes says information gathered can only be used if a person becomes the subject of a missing persons or homicide investigation.

He says Project KARE "has not and will not share any of the information collected."

Davis says the officer she spoke to told her more than 700 workers have given samples in the Edmonton region.

But, she says, when she asked the officer how many prostitutes were currently working in the city, she was told 30 to 40. She wants to know what happened to the rest of the samples.

Edmonton isn't the only area collecting sex workers' DNA.

Corine Arthur, of the Surrey Women's Centre Society, says sex workers there were told by police their DNA was needed so police could rule out still-living women whose DNA may have been found at the Port Coquitlam farm of convicted serial killer Robert William Pickton.

"We couldn't get anybody to confirm or deny that was the truth at the time," she says.

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BC gov't introduces new Legacy funding program

Arts critics fear grant process will be politicized and commercialized

BC BUDGET

Nathaniel Christopher

IN LAST WEEK'S PROVINCIAL BUDGET, the government introduced a new arts and sports funding program that some critics say could politicize and commercialize the grant process.

During his Mar 2 budget presentation to the BC legislature, finance minister Colin Hansen introduced a 2010 Sports and Arts Legacy to provide \$60 million for arts and sport activities over the next three years. Half of this funding will be allocated to youth sports and improved athlete and coach development, while the remainder will be spent on the arts.

Hansen said his government plans to capitalize on the momentum of hosting the Olympics.

But Out on Screen executive director Drew Dennis is concerned about how the allocation of these funds will affect queer arts organizations. Dennis is especially concerned with the program's proposal to develop new art and cultural ideas that could become commercialized.

"When you see words like 'commercializing art,' that raises a red flag," says Dennis, adding, "it raises concerns about artistic integrity."

"Hopefully this doesn't mean the government only places value on certain types of art other than what our groundbreaking, edgy artists across the province produce," Dennis continues.

Vancouver-West End MLA Spencer Herbert

shares Dennis' concern about the potential commercialization of art and its impact on queer arts organizations.

"[Profit] has never been the purpose of the BC Arts Council or groups who receive gaming money," he says.

Moreover, he adds, work in the queer community challenges people to address their assumptions, grow together and learn together. "Once in a while you have a Brokeback Mountain that turns into a huge commercial success, but that's not the primary purpose," Herbert notes.

There is no word yet about how the Legacy monies will be disbursed. A background on the fund says the programs are still under development and eligibility criteria will be finalized in the coming weeks.

Herbert worries that the administration and distribution of the Legacy Fund may become a politicized process.

He says he's uncertain whether the Legacy Fund will be subject to a peer review process like the one that governs BC Arts Council grants and is concerned that disbursements from the new government fund will not be made impartially.

"The province is committed to supporting the creative economy," says a spokesperson for the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, "including the development of professional

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BRIEFS

BEAT COPS FOR GAMES

The Vancouver Police Department (VPD) says no gaybashing were reported during the Olympic Games, thanks in part to a beefed up police presence in the Davie Village.

"I don't recall any [reports] crossing my desk," says Insp John de Haas, who dispatched two extra officers on bicycles to the gay village during the Games.

At the request of the city's gay advisory committee, the VPD met with committee members and Qmunity to discuss its plans to protect the queer community during the Games.

De Haas says concerns were raised about people coming from parts of the world where there is "a lot more homophobia, and what would be the impact when they were in an environment where we're very respectful and have more rights."

Ron Stipp, a member of the gay advisory committee and co-founder of West Enders Against Violence Everywhere, says he was impressed with the VPD's measures to protect the queer community.

Stipp has been pushing for permanent beat cops in the gay village for the last five or six years. "The sense that police are part of the community — that they're walking in our Village, talking to people, making sure that everybody feels safe — it's all part of positive policing. I hope they would consider doing this all the time," he says.

De Haas says having more officers walking the streets would be a "smart thing to do" especially as a security measure during large events. "I'm going to continue to ask the people that control [the resources] whether that's a possibility."

—Tamara Letkeman

PROGRESS ON NEW QUEER CENTRE

The group established to create a new queer community centre in Vancouver is making steady progress, says member Tony Correia.

The Out Under the Rainbow (OUR) Spaces Society was established by a working group on Nov 30 and registered as a society in December. Its goal is to plan, build and maintain a queer, multi-purpose community centre.

Correia is optimistic that this attempt to build a new centre will yield positive results. "I think we got the right group of people together and I think we're going to get the right people together to pull this off," he says.

OUR Spaces will be seeking new board members at its first annual general meeting, Apr 19. The meeting was originally scheduled for Mar 15 but was postponed due to the Olympics.

"We're hoping to have an equal representation of people from the arts, fundraising, people with political connections and philanthropic connections," Correia says.

All members are eligible to vote and to run for the board. Memberships can be purchased for \$5 at the meeting.

—Nathaniel Christopher

OUR SPACES AGM.

Apr 19, 8:15pm.
Roundhouse Community Centre.