INCLUSIVE SERVICES UPDATE

Meet the Inclusive Services Team and learn about their work in 2020: The Inclusive Services Team at VSAC is made up of two co-coordinators, Jaq and Lane. Lane was born on Tongva territories, born on Lekwungen territory and grew up on Seminole and Tequesta territory (Commonly known as Broward and Dade county Florida). Jaq started out as a Sexual Assault Response Team volunteer at VSAC in 2015 and has been in the role of Inclusion for a little over 2 years.

This year, Lane has taken the lead on a project funded by the Vancouver Foundation called “Transforming Justice, Healing Communities: Creating Alternative Responses to Sexualized Violence.” In Victoria many survivors of sexualized violence, especially those that are marginalized, are not receiving the justice they need from the criminal justice system & are experiencing re-traumatization. Transformative justice (TJ) offers community-informed alternatives for healing & accountability, centering relationship building, safety, & skill development to effectively prevent & respond to sexualized violence. For this project, Lane is building relationships and interviewing local stakeholders, learning about the gaps, trends, current supports, and hopes for alternative forms of justice for survivors on Lekwungen territories.

Jaq is currently working on a project funded by Victoria Foundation called “We Belong.” This is an inclusion tool being developed with the help of Peers Victoria and Men’s Trauma Centre around creating an agency self-assessment tool to help determine how inclusive and accessible organizations are when offering services to Trans, 2 Spirit, BIPOC, disabled, and sex worker communities. Inclusion is about more than creating a welcoming atmosphere – it is about actively centering the voices and experiences of folks who have been previously excluded based on systems of violence such as racism, ableism, colonization, and transantagonism.

Inclusion at VSAC is about meaningful change and collaboration with the communities that are most impacted by systemic violence. To this end, early this year the Inclusion team developed and delivered Inclusion Training Workshops for VSAC staff on anti-oppressive practice, intersectionality, the importance of decolonization, anti-violence work, intervening in microaggressions, trauma-informed practice, & supporting marginalized survivors. This training is currently being offered to volunteers and Board members. The Inclusion team also facilitates an intra-agency Inclusive Services Working group that gathers monthly to discuss policy, needs, concerns, and any other issues pertaining to equity and inclusion.

Thank you to our supporters

We are deeply grateful to each person who has responded to our mailings, phone calls, to third party fundraisers and events with incredible generosity this year. Thank you for your confidence and support as we continue our work in healing, education, and prevention.

Happy Holidays from all of us at VSAC!

*Staff photo taken last winter

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During this uncertain and changing time, we continue to provide exceptional care, support, and resources for our community while also doing the necessary work of adapting how we engage clients, students, partners, and those who are most at risk for sexualized violence.

We’re moving as an organization towards understanding and honoring Coast Salish laws and governance as we work here on the territories of the Lekwungen speaking people and the WSANEC. Importantly, relationships are the foundation of this process. We see here at VSAC that indeed, the relationships we cultivate with one another are what sustain and shape us to do our collective work with respect and care.

Through our committed donor base and the ongoing recognition that supporting social services during the pandemic is a public health priority, we’re confidently building on our strengths and establishing a strategic vision that sustains us during this time and beyond. We’re doing the remarkable work of surviving and imagining how we can thrive together in a world free from sexualized violence.

The commitment and heart demonstrated by everyone involved in VSAC and, in particular, by the courage of survivors to choose their path towards healing, reminds us of the incredible power of realizing strength together. The pandemic highlights the unknown, and as we sit in presence with one another, whether that’s by video or at a social distance, we’re listening for what’s most needed and then taking action to meet these needs. Step by step, we’re increasing our resilience and hope in healing.

In gratitude,

Elijah Zimmerman, Executive Director

OUR MISSION

The Victoria Sexual Assault Centre is a feminist organization committed to ending sexualized violence through healing, education, and prevention. We are dedicated to supporting women and Trans survivors of sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse, through advocacy, counselling, & empowerment.

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VIRTUAL COUNSELLING GROUPS

Metta VanderVliet, VSAC Counselor, discusses the launch of our new virtual counselling groups. I’m about to stop the Violence Counsellor and my role is to support survivors through our long term one-to-one counselling programs (we offer up to a year of support, or longer), group work (as well as virtual groups) to share valuable skills & info for coping, healing & growth.

Can you tell us a bit about VSAC’s new virtual groups?

In our groups, survivors don’t talk about the trauma that happened to them (that kind of sharing and processing is better suited to the individual counselling process). This helps everyone in the group keep their feet on the ground so they can focus on learning. In our early groups, that means learning about how trauma affects our brains and bodies, how we can ground and calm our nervous system, cultivating safety and shifting coping strategies to emphasize self-care and well-being. In later groups, how to recognize our own boundaries and communicate them effectively, and move on to explore our concepts of relationships and sexuality.

How has the offering of virtual groups shifted the experience for survivors and for you?

We’ve had feedback that participants can feel safer in virtual counselling groups. There have been some reports of feeling less connected to the online platform and missing the experience of actually being in the same physical space together. There is also a substantial number of survivors (as well as the broader community) who find online meeting platforms inherently anxiety invoking. While we do offer one-to-one phone delivery of the material for these folks, there can be a sense of loss in not getting to participate the way they would have when in-person groups were running.

Do you have anything else you’d like to share?

Overall, we are grateful that we have been able to resume running our Skills for Healing group. It’s a great experience for participants to be with other survivors - there’s solidarity in that - it breaks the isolation people can feel. It’s also a great way to share valuable information efficiently with a bunch of people at once. That helps us serve more people within the all the real constraints of our resources as an organization. With Victoria growing, our wall-times were already ballooning to unprecedented levels before COVID-19. Thankfully we’ve had some great interim funding and I believe it’s partly thanks to that and of course the tremendous resilience and passion of our staff that we’ve been able to respond and keep services running as well as we have.

THE ROLE OF GRIEF

Kathryn Saunders, VSAC Counsellor, discusses the role grief can play in healing from sexualized violence.

Grief is a universally recognized expression of loss and is a normal response to sexual assault. The losses experienced by sexual assault survivors are complex: there is a loss of safety and a loss of relationships with both people and activities folks previously enjoyed. Survivors may experience a loss in their ability to work, interruptions in their studies and life plans. Survivors also experience hidden losses following sexual assault including the loss of physical and emotional well-being as their bodies heal from their experience of violence. This may involve new embodied experiences such as anxiety, nightmares and hyper-vigilance.

Grief is vital to healing because feeling sadness and anger acknowledges the impact of sexual assault and the ensuing losses survivors may experience. The ability to mourn these losses validates both these feelings and the person experiencing them. Supporting survivors as they grieve can be helpful for healing — feelings don’t need fixing, they just need space to be expressed and warmly received and witnessed.

Unlike when someone has died, there is a lack of collective processes, rituals and ceremonies to support survivors in their grieving processes. Due to stigma surrounding sexualized violence and a lack of systemic justice, survivors often grieve alone without the comfort that are offered within communities of care when there has been a death. Isolation from others when grieving means there is a lack of validation of survivors’ feelings which may contribute to those feelings sticking around.

Survivors need what everyone else does when there has been loss: acknowledgment of their pain, comfort, support, rest, friendship and care — on their terms.

Services we offer:

- The Access Line, our first contact with survivors, provides support and intake to our services.
- The Sexual Assault Crisis Services provides immediate emotional support, medical care, & options for reporting to police in one safe, survivor-focused location.
- Crisis Counselling helps to build safety & stabilization.
- Counselling groups provide education, skills, & connection.
- Trauma Counselling supports survivors to work through the impact of trauma.
- Victim Services provides help to navigate the criminal justice system.
- Prevention Education to end sexualized violence & create inclusive communities.

Want to access our services?

Call our Service Access Line at 250-383-3232 or email access@vsac.ca for intake and info.

PROJECT RESPECT

Project Respect is VSAC’s multiple award-winning gender-based violence prevention program. Founded in 1999, Project Respect supports youth to develop knowledge and skills to practice respectful relationships and strengthen consent (only yes means yes) and to engage in social action to end sexualized violence and create inclusive communities.

Program update by Amara MacFarlane, Project Respect Community Coordinator

I’m Amara and I’m the community coordinator with Project Respect. I’m a white settler with West Coast Euro-Ancestry. I was born in Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish territories, and have lived uninvited in Lekwungen territories since 2001. I’m really happy to be working with such a wonderful group of folks at VSAC.

As part of Project Respect’s SHIFTING culture school-based project, we offer social action training to middle and high school students. In February, I had the privilege to facilitate this training with my co-worker Chaw-win-is with the grade 10/11 class at WLSS. On the first day facilitating this training, Chaw-win-is grounded the session through a Nuu’chah’nulth story about leadership and consent. When we asked what issues these young people would like to focus on over the course of our sessions and take leadership on in their communities, many of them brought up racism they had experienced in their everyday lives. In response, Chaw-win-is, Tahia, and I developed a workshop to offer tools of bystander intervention and community care, where students would be able to talk through their experiences. At the end of our sessions, many students expressed that this was their favourite part of our time together.

These youth taught me to expand my view of what sexualized violence-prevention work looks like. As a youth-led program, it’s essential for Project Respect to incorporate this feedback and expand our scope in response to what youth are looking for so we can address the multiple forms of violence they may be experiencing.