

SUNSHINE HOUSE SOLVENT USERS' RECREATION PROJECT



The Solvent Users' Recreation Project (SURP) provided an oasis of support and acceptance for some of the most marginalized individuals in Winnipeg. The primary goal of the program was to involve solvent users in engaging and fun recreation activities. The active involvement of participants in all facets of the program, from ongoing program design to evaluation, and the demand for participant engagement sets this program apart from many others, where a more passive presence is expected.

The SURP program was coordinated by Sunshine House staff and delivered in partnership with Mount Carmel Clinic (MCC). Mount Carmel provided in-kind resources such as staff time and financial resources for the program. Mount Carmel Clinic also offers a weekly solvent users support group, Survivors of Sniff (SOS), one of the only programs specifically for solvent users currently being offered in Winnipeg. The SOS group was used to inform clients of the pilot project, solicit suggestions for program delivery and share information about upcoming modules.

To support communication, decision making and ensure the project was well managed and meeting client needs, an advisory committee was established. Members of the Advisory Committee (8) were recruited and selected on the basis of their knowledge and interest in the adult solvent using population in Winnipeg, including a representative from the solvent using group. The advisory group met every two months to receive updates on the project and to provide input and support on planned modules.

Project delivery was led by the Project Coordinator, an individual who “has a unique ability to access ... huge networks of skilled artists and artisans who became involved in many aspects of the program willingly and enthusiastically” (advisory committee member statement). For example, he secured contributions and partnerships to support the auto mechanics module including a suitable workspace, donation of a vehicle, a certified mechanic who volunteered to train participants and partnership with Freight House to share vehicle use in return for insuring and storing the vehicle.

The project launched with a drop-in art group held Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. In addition to painting a mural, creating a Sunshine House sign, beading and other crafts, participants discussed the recreation program and gave input into the activities they would like to see offered. From that point, the program evolved into a series of modules that each lasted between 5 and 8 weeks, including bike repair, basic small building repair, boxing, auto mechanics, photography, drum making and music. Interspersed amongst these core modules were smaller activities, such as sewing, photography, spray painting, demolition and renovation, painting, and plant potting.

These smaller activities would happen concurrently, to provide secondary activities for people to take part in. Due to high levels of interest, the number of program modules offered was increased and the pilot extended to nine months.

Modules involved volunteer facilitators providing training, assisting program staff and leading sessions. Participants registered for modules ahead of time and were assisted with bus tickets and transportation. Each module was concluded with a community celebration honouring and acknowledging the accomplishments of those involved.

Art - We began our project with an art module, because of its inviting, open and expressive nature and it's foil as a social elixir. Local artist James Culleton was brought in during one of the Sunday brunches to sketch the room.

Home Repair - For the carpentry module, under the tutelage of Brad Hignell, the group built many practical things for Sunshine House - desks, shelves, tables, a wheelchair ramp, and a bench for the front. Most of the building was done from recycled wood reclaimed from other fixtures around Sunshine house.

Boxing - The boxing module was no walk in the park. This was a very intense anaerobic and strength building module, and the trainers cut us no slack.

Drum Making - For the drum making module, we stretched an elk hide to create a drum, used willow branches and recycled leather for drumsticks, a drum bag was made as well as a painted drum base. After the drum was blessed, the Red Sun singers were invited to break it in with traditional songs.

Mechanics - We spent this module working to repair and restore a donated van. When we unveiled it after 6

weeks of working on it, it was revelatory for everyone. We had brought back to life.

Bike Repair - This module took place at the Bike Dump in Winnipeg. Participants received a thorough hands-on experience in bicycle building, repair and maintenance.

Music - For the final module, a couple of established local musicians, Vince Andrushko and Adrian Spence, were brought in to teach the group the basics of the guitar. The two took the group through the basics of stringing and chord structures and eventually lead the group through old classics.

Photography - The photography module was spearheaded by Chris Friesen of the film crew. Each person was given a disposable camera. They would go out, take shots, return with them, and receive critique and guidance, and head back out with another camera.

The Solvent Users' Recreation Project was tremendously successful. Through rich partnerships, and drawing from a pool of talented, creative, and enthusiastic staff, trainers, and volunteers, Sunshine House was able to provide the structure and the energy to implement a unique program for an under-served population.

In general, volunteers and facilitators observed that participants were most engaged with hands-on activities such as mechanics, bike repair, drum building and boxing. Women were observed to be more likely to enjoy sewing and arts and crafts.

