

Young Women's Empowerment Project 773-728-0127

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who do you work with?

Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) works with girls and young women from the ages of 12 to 23 who are currently or have been involved in trading sex or being sexual for money, gifts, drugs, or survival needs including exotic dancing, escorting, phone sex, adult internet sites, survival sex and all the other ways girls can be affected by the sex trade and street economy.

2. What do you offer?

Girls and young women with current or previous life experience in the sex trade learn in a **paid peer education and outreach training** how to educate and support other girls in the sex trade on how to take care of their body, emotions, relationships, money, rights, options and their whole selves. After the training, girls are paid, supported and mentored in their on-going harm reduction outreach work. Girls also participate in a **leadership development** are paid for their work here as well. Youth work here as paid part time staff. Our project offers **workshops and skill building trainings** for youth and adults who work with youth. We are developing our social justice message and plans for organizing as girls and young women in the sex trade and street economies.

3. What do you mean by **harm reduction**?

Harm reduction is a practice of **respectful, free of judgment engagement** with people to find ways to be healthier, safer, and more in control of their lives without having to make sudden and immediate changes. We don't ask that girls promise to stop using drugs, being sexually active or trading sex or being sexual for money or survival needs to participate in our project. We support youth who are seeking to exit too, but often exiting the sex trade is a long process. We **encourage and celebrate the small and slow changes** people make in their lives.

4. **How** do I know if someone is involved?

Sometimes girls are very open about dancing in clubs or men offering them money for sex. Other times it can be **hard to tell** and making assumptions doesn't help. So many girls from all over the city have been impacted by the sex trade - if you work in a school, youth program, shelter, counseling center or anywhere youth gather - **you know someone who is or has been involved**. Asking directly can be one way to find out. But youth can recognize from your words or body language or the negative consequences from a positive answer, (like losing level in a program, everyone finding out or being asked to leave a program) that it's not safe to answer truthfully.

5. How do I **bring the topic up**? (She doesn't call it prostitution)

You'll notice we don't use the word prostitution either. Use the words she uses and ask her if she wants to talk about it in private. Don't be surprised if it takes some time before she decides to talk. Also you can **post our information** where youth can see it, distribute our cards and information (we can deliver some to you) to everyone and talk about how they might know youth who are impacted without making assumptions about any one young person, or invite us in to speak.

6. How do I make a **referral** to YWEP?

Just have the young woman **call us**. We can also arrange a meeting between the parent or adult staff making the referral and the youth to talk about our program. Please note that we do not accept mandated or involuntary participation.

7. Is this really a problem for girls in **our neighborhood**?

Yes, this is a problem for girls everywhere, in every neighborhood, all over the world. We work with girls and young women from **all over the city and suburbs** and have no geographic limitations.

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8. How much does this cost?

All of our activities are **free**. We receive funding from private contributions and foundation sources like AIDS Foundation of Chicago, Chicago Foundation for Women, Girl's Best Friend Foundation, Michael Reese Heath Trust, and Third Wave Foundation who make our work possible.

9. What do you **require** before a youth can participate?

We need to be able to talk or meet with the young woman and **hear directly from her that she wants to participate**. We have no other requirements and do not need anyone's file, assessment, testing results or any documentation or identification. We don't even need to know the young person's real name.

10. Where do you **find the girls**?

Girls hear about us through **word of mouth**, or they see a sign about our project, or because they meet someone who **tells them about us**. We also do groups at various locations where girls are, and sometimes they choose to continue to work with us after being in a group. **You can help us reach girls** by posting our information where all youth can see it.

11. Are you in any other **locations** besides Lincoln Square?

Most of our groups/activities happen at our space at 2334 W. Lawrence Ave., Suite 209, but we are willing to work with youth and programs that work with youth to create a presence in locations all over the city as partners with community based organizations.

12. Can you come out and **speak to our program**, school or youth group?

Yes, we would love to talk with girls at your school, program or youth group on who we are and what we know about this issue. We also offer workshops for adults through our partnership in the Harm Reduction Training Collaborative.

13. Why don't you **emphasize** to these girls that they should stop?

Well, we don't really think that telling girls to stop is effective. We believe that people are involved in the sex trade and street economies for all different kinds of reasons, and that the best way to work with girls is to ask them how they want to improve their lives - they always have ideas, and **we'd rather work with girls to realize their dreams** than argue with them about what they are doing.

14. Why don't you offer **services** like case management, counseling or support groups?

We do what we know best - educating and supporting girls to be leaders. Girls and young women impacted by the sex trade have multiple, complex needs and it will take a community effort to address it all. As a small project, we are making decisions about what we can do best. We have many connections across the city to assist youth with resources they need.

15. What can I do with youth I work with about this issue?

We think it's most important to **listen** first, and talk only when asked. If you think that a young woman you know or work with may be involved in the sex trade, it's important to ask how trading sex for money impacts her life, and then to work to **respect and understand** her decisions. **Ask her what you can do** and respect her wishes. We also recommend that you take action to discourage youth and staff from using derogatory language and labels for youth believed to be involved in trading sex for money.