

Health Changemakers 1993

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Women Helping Women

Pam Fichtner
Downtown Eastside Women's Centre
Vancouver



Pam Fichtner knows how much the women living in the downtown area need a safe haven. But as volunteer coordinator for the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre in Vancouver, she is also concerned about empowering the women rather than making them more dependent on professional services.

The centre provides a safe "living room" where women can socialize and support one another. Most of the women are single, and a majority are native women who live in hotel rooms and rooming houses. They have no place else to go to talk freely about the violence in their lives and the hardships of being on welfare.

"It's a place to open up and have fun and share our resources. We are here to accept and support one another—not to judge," Pam says.

The centre is looking at operating as a collective and has monthly board meetings. Throughout the week, "Women's Voice" sessions give the women input into the centre's activities.

"We have a self-help approach. The staff and volunteers are not here to do things for the women. We are here to facilitate what they need to do for themselves," Pam explains.

With the women helping each other, the centre provides two meals a week, coffee, showers, and free clothing. It also has information, legal and mental health counselling, and support groups. The women have access to typewriters, a phone, a computer, and a photocopier.

"Most of the women do not have access to those types of resources," says Pam. "A major focus is on providing opportunities and empowering them so they can eventually function more effectively."

Barbara Coggins, is a volunteer who has been visiting the Centre for two years.

"It's a good place to come to relax, kick off your shoes, and be yourself," she says. "I've seen a lot of women come in desolate. Two months later they are out working. Here it's cooperation time. If women need advice, we sit down and talk."