



Helping Vulnerable Populations and Helping to Maintain Public Health, the many success stories of the Ally Centre of Cape Breton - an interview with Executive Director, Christine Porter.

The Ally Centre of Cape Breton, Formerly known as the Aids Coalition of Cape Breton, has been helping vulnerable populations for twenty-three years. It started off very small as a resource centre for HIV and aids because twenty-three years ago, “a lot of people were moving home from larger urban centres and when they moved home there was no support or resources and frankly most came home because they were very ill and didn’t have medication that they had today, so they were basically coming home to die and to be around the people they love -



their families,” says Christine Porter, Executive Director for The Ally Centre.

There was a group of women that saw the need and put the proposal together and it became a not for profit organization, known as The Aids Coalition of Cape Breton. Christine has been with the Centre for eighteen years and has witnessed the positive growth it has accomplished. She says, “a few years into the Aids Coalition’s start, there was more need rising in populations suffering from addictions, there was no break in the Hep B cases arising at the time, and concern regarding public health grew,” so they started a needle exchange, which now provides outreach services to anyone in need of clean equipment and safe sharps containers and information. “Things kind of took a leap and a bound from there, it went from a support program to support and prevention,” Christine offers.

The Sharp Advice Needle Exchange program (SANE) is an important part of preventing blood borne pathogens from spreading in the community of injection drug users. The members who run the needle exchange are Shaun Murray, Jayce Dylan and Francis Coles. Without the faithful work of these three individuals the concerns for public safety surrounding discarded dirty needles would be increased. Opioid Recovery Programs in Sydney, Glace Bay, and North Sydney dispense clean equipment on behalf of The Ally Centre. The funding for this needle exchange program comes from the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness and the Cape Breton District Health

Authority. This year they are waiting to hear about their funding from the newly amalgamated Nova Scotia Health Authority for the continuance of this much needed program. “The growth is what needs to be recognized,” says Christine; “the need is growing all the time.”

In the last five years, a series of research projects have shed light on the overwhelming need of expanding services at the Ally Centre. One research project completed by Dr. Margaret Dechman of Cape Breton University, focused on the stigmatization drug addicts, sex workers or homeless persons are dealing with when they seek out health care. “These feelings some have faced causes them to not seek out health care at all, we always knew this was happening, but through dissemination of that research, it was proven,” reports Christine.

The success of that research project is now evident because a doctor, a nurse, and a chiropractor have all



graciously offered their services free of charge to The Ally Centre.

Dr. Megan Keating is providing her services at The Ally Centre Health Clinic on a weekly basis, where these vulnerable populations feel safe and cared for. Since the medical clinic opened, a retired nurse, Ursula DuFour, is offering her services as a foot specialist and has opened a foot clinic for vulnerable populations. A news story

about this can be found here: <https://www.localxpress.ca/local-news/retired-von-nurse-helps-sydneys-homeless-hapless-keep-putting-one-foot-in-front-of-the-other-298210>

A chiropractor, Dr. Jennifer Maher, from Island Chiropractic, offers her services every second week to anyone among these vulnerable populations with back and neck issues.

The Ally Centre also staffs a large number of volunteers, called Natural Helpers, who are members of the community, “who really get it” says Christine. They have taken naloxone training and are prepared to hand out clean syringes to anyone who needs them. The natural helpers are also the ones who are usually called when someone is overdosing and in need of immediate help. Because of the stigma surrounding drug use and the legalities of calling an ambulance, users tend to shy away from calling for help because of that fear of legal trouble. There are currently 162 natural helpers in the CBRM community helping to save lives and providing prevention equipment.

The Overdose Prevention Program is a new program being piloted through The Ally Centre of Cape Breton, which provides any individual who is a past or present user of opioids to get trained on how to use naloxone and is given a \$70 kit of naloxone free of charge. This is a pilot project and the current number of people trained will not be made available to public until December 2016.

With all this growth and branching out to these vulnerable populations, including the homeless populations, a need soon developed to fix up parts of the centre and funding was received from The Homelessness Partnership Strategy to re-paint the interior, but there will also be another grant coming soon for new floors, structural damage, and more storage space.



They have an LGBTQ program, run by Madonna Doucette that has taken off with the assistance from the federal government and the Provincial Mental Health Strategy, to work specifically for building Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA) communities in schools. These GSA's create safer spaces in elementary schools right up into high schools for LGBTQ students and staff. "This is very important when you look at the rates of youth living under that umbrella who are dropping out and the rates of addiction among LGBTQ youth," says Christine. The GSA's are groups, led by a faculty member, consisting of students who recognize pride in their schools and help create a safer environment for LGBTQ youth.

The Ally Centre also has a food bank, which is supplied by Feed Nova Scotia. "There is always somebody hungry dropping by, and we never turn anyone away, if they are hungry they get food for the night, but we also have the monthly food bank too," reports Christine.

Another program offered through the Ally Center which started as the Safer Stroll Initiative for sex workers, and has now developed into a much larger initiative known as SWEEP, Sex Workers Encouraging and Empowering Peers. The program encourages the sharing of information between sex workers to make their work safer. This includes a bad date list, which could be lifesaving information, and also life-saving tips like, "if a john pulls over and

there is plastic on the seat, they know not to get in the car because it's going to get messy, and they need to be aware of where their john's hands are - at all times," Christine says. It's teaching due-diligence and providing them with basic necessities such as condoms and whistles. It focuses around the prevention of sexual violence and empowering the sex workers to come together and share information. The Ally Center is now opened on the weekend, after a series of meeting with sex-workers, who really expressed the need for a safe place to relax in the evenings for a few minutes. "They can have a cup of tea, and in the winter get warm," says Christine. Sex-workers have been able to access the centre every weekend since July 2016. There are two women that were hired to oversee the center during this time, Emily Donovan and Debbie Morrison, who oversee the information and programming offered. This population of sex workers can access this safe space, there is clothing they can get, once monthly a woman has offered to provide free haircuts, another has offered to do their nails. Shops have donated nail polishes and fake nails, and real connections are being made between these volunteers and the sex workers; "ya know, when somebody holds your hands to do your nails, in a gentle way, and they're just chatting and talking, it can mean the world to a person," Christine says. Soon, there will be someone coming in to provide makeup tips and tricks too.

Core funding from the federal government which covers the staff, Christine Porter, Madonna Doucette (LGBTQ Coordinator) and Joanne Rolls (Support Coordinator and Educator), rent, supplies, and equipment.

Provincial core funding covers the needle exchange and other direct to consumer services. The Aids Community Action Project is the federal initiative that also supplies funding and a couple of annual fundraisers like their Variety Shows and concerts are a big help to The Ally Centres funding.

The Ally Centre of Cape Breton has grown substantially and now Christine says, "We are looking forward to possibly offering better outreach services because The Ally Centre is so centrally located in Sydney, that we know there are people who can't always get here to access the services like this." Another wish item for the future is having the CBRM take over maintaining needle kiosks, since the Ally center has been maintaining them without additional funding. There are four large sized kiosks and the CBRM is maintaining one small pole mounted kiosk on the boardwalk. There are also four big kiosks located in Eskasoni.

There have been many small success stories that have contributed to the success of The Ally Centre of Cape Breton, and without this organization the CBRM would have a lot more issues to handle and people to help out. Thankfully Christine Porter and her team are doing a perfect job of acting as our community humanitarians, and we thank them for it!