“A DANDELION THAT CAN GROW ANYWHERE”

REFLECTIONS ON PACE SOCIETY’S CLOSURE

Written by PACE Members, Sarah Graham & Jennie Pearson

2026

“A DANDELION THAT CAN GROW ANYWHERE”

REFLECTIONS ON PACE SOCIETY’S CLOSURE

Report written by:
PACE Members, Sarah Graham, and Jennie Pearson

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to PACE, WISH and Ribbon Community for sharing space with us to conduct consultations and focus groups.

Thank you to Coastal Justice and Ribbon Community for providing funding support.

We are especially grateful to Gina Bombay for supporting members through a challenging transition time and keeping us all connected.

Cover art:
“Dandelion” by Brianna Bear (with permission)

References:

PACE Society. (2025). "Statement from PACE Society's Board of Directors". instagram.com/p/DGiySI6J7bT/?hl=en&img_index=1

Meenakshi Mannoe. (2023). "We are all we’ve got: Confronting street sweeps in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside". Spring Magazine. springmag.ca/we-are-all-weve-got-confronting-street-sweeps-in-vancouvers-downtown-eastside

Michelle Gamage. (2025). "DTES Sex Workers Left in the Cold as Support Services Close". The Tyee. thetyee.ca/News/2025/03/20/DTES-Sex-Worker-Support-Services-Close/

Sarah Grochowski. (2025). "Vancouver's DTES faces 'devastating' crisis as women's drop-in spaces close". Vancouver Sun. vancouversun.com/news/vancouver-dtes-devastating-crisis-womens-drop-in-close

P.O.W.E.R. (2025). "Nowhere to seek safety as gender-based violence worsens under drug supply & displacement crises". The Mainlander. https://themainlander.com/2025/04/29/gbv/

Rayen Bowen and Tamara O'Doherty. (2014). "Participant-Driven Action Research (PDAR) with Sex Workers in Vancouver". Negotiating Sex Work: Unintended Consequences of Policy and Activism. University of Minnesota Press. https://academic.oup.com/minnesota-scholarship-online/book/21305/

“PACE kept me strong and brave to face the world that we are living in and the harsh realities.”

- Effie, PACE Member

2025 was a year marked by closures and service reductions at long-standing sex worker organizations based in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.

In February 2025, PACE (Providing Advocacy, Counselling and Education) Society, a trusted and long-standing community space for sex workers in Vancouver, announced it was temporarily suspending services and laying off most staff. Since 1994, PACE has provided support, counselling and advocacy using a “by, for and with” sex workers approach.

Overnight, PACE members lost access to their counsellors, peer support groups and social networks. By March, services were reduced to a front desk providing harm reduction supplies and two long standing programs, Trans Lunch Club and Indigenous Sharing Circle.

Like PACE, community organizations face chronic funding shortages that severely limit the ability to bounce back from hardship. PACE’s closure is not a sign of individual organizational failure. Rather, it is the consequence of a system that prioritizes investments in policing as a main approach to “community safety” over sustained investment in community well-being for our most marginalized neighbours.

PACE's announcement came at a particularly troubling time, when the community was already navigating the closure and reductions of other services such as WISH's drop-in space and Sister Square.

In the context of the ongoing drug toxicity crisis, street sweeps and police displacement, community has warned against the rise in routine violence experienced by women, gender diverse people, and sex workers, and how service closures threaten to make the situation much worse.

"When there’s an overall loss of services, we’re exposed to more violence, stigma spreads and is uninterrupted, we are disheartened and scared."
- London

In the summer of 2025, PACE members were invited to take part in paid consultations, either in a one-on-one setting or group discussions, to share their thoughts and feedback in the context of PACE's imminent closure. This report is based on the experiences of 13 individual PACE members, and members of the Trans Lunch and Indigenous Sharing Circle weekly groups, including the immediate impact of service closures, and their recommendations for improving sex workers' access to safe, community-led supports.

"I'VE BEEN WITH PACE SINCE THE BEGINNING"

PACE'S IMPACT WITHIN THE SEX WORK COMMUNITY

PACE was started informally in a one bedroom apartment in Vancouver in 1994 by sex workers and allies. Early supporters helped raise money for an outreach and support service for street-based sex workers that would soon become a registered charity known as PACE Society.

Over the years, PACE has navigated many internal and external challenges, location changes and loss of beloved staff and members. Over the past five years, PACE has experienced several instances of severe water damage in the drop-in space. The damage, coupled with the need to distance due to COVID-19, resulted in a change to service delivery and limited capacity at the drop-in space, which would sometimes be closed for months at a time.

Still, PACE would bounce back to offer weekly group programs, counseling, and offer a safe space for folks to gather and access harm reduction supplies, clothing, a spare cigarette, and hot meals.

Several current PACE members have been with the organization from the very beginning, recalling the original drop-in space on Cordova Street, and the beloved cats who spent their days napping in the office.

"[I've] been with PACE since the beginning, I love PACE, it's given me inner strength, and given me a lot of good support and love, the support and love makes me stronger." - Brenda

Many members learned about PACE through word of mouth, dropping by after hearing about the drop-in space or programs from a trusted friend or co-worker. Members described joining PACE at a difficult time in their life, having recently lost a loved one, or experiencing violence. As Mama Rosa explained:

"I asked Creator, where can I go? Then I ran into a friend who told me to go to PACE. I walked in with my dog and felt welcomed right away."

Members that had been with PACE for many years became mentors in the space, inviting others to join and offering occupational knowledge and peer support.

Members emphasized the comfort they felt inside the walls of PACE, and the lack of judgement regarding gender or sex work, not always present in other spaces. For Indigenous sex workers, the availability of sex work friendly and culturally safe spaces was a unique and impactful experience. Members also described PACE as a place to come as you are, and to participate how you want to. As Effie explained:

"The sharing circle is very important, it took me 3 years to start talking, I kept to myself. Once I got to know everyone I started talking. I'm not very social to begin with, but being out with the group helps me to get stronger at being social. I just did karaoke, and I think that's because the [sharing] circle made me stronger.

I don't think I would have survived my cancer without Pace. From the bottom of my heart I thank PACE for being around, and Mama Rosa for bringing me."

Effie's quote illustrates that community building was often led by members and deeply intergenerational; this is powerful given that trans and Indigenous loved ones are often targeted for violence and disappearance before becoming community elders.

In addition to offering a safe space for emotional support, as expressed by Louise, "I really rely on PACE for mental health and emotional support, especially Indigenous sharing circle", members also appreciated the tangible support that PACE offered, in terms of harm reduction supplies, employment opportunities and stipends, clothing and shared meals:

"I love the cooking from Gina and Debbie - food insecurity is overwhelming, it's so expensive." - Louise

THE IMPACT OF PACE'S CLOSURE FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

"Where will we go for safety, for community?' - London

Following PACE's announcement of major service reductions, the drop in space was closed, a majority of staff were laid off, and only two programs would continue: Trans Lunch Club and Indigenous Sharing Circle. As news was shared that PACE would be fully ending services in July, members expressed a desire to have their voices and experiences heard, which led to the creation of this report.

When discussing PACE's closure, members expressed distress, frustration, and fear for the future. Nearly all the members who took part in the consultation expressed feeling deeply sad about the news, and most shared that they had cried when they heard about PACE's closure.

Mama Rosa described the experience as a "*shock, like losing a good friend*". Members shared that coming to PACE was part of a weekly routine that was essential to their wellness. Another member shared that PACE is the *"only thing that gets me up on Thursday mornings,"* and others shared that the change would be very negative for their mental health and substance use goals.

Two members of Trans Lunch Club shared that PACE closing would be a major disruption in the routine that they developed to keep themselves safe. London asked, *"literally where will we go for safety, for community?"*

For Brenda, not only would the in-person *"support and love"* be very hard to replace, she shared that *"even when I'm not at PACE, knowing that PACE is here gives me a lot of inner strength".*

Debbie shared that PACE offered *"a chance to go and talk, enjoy some laughs, do activities".* She continued to explain that *"the people are the biggest part, sitting there laughing, talking about what's happening in the community, we need that".*

"I'm not giving up - like a dandelion that can grow anywhere, even in the concrete. We still have a chance to fight to keep this open."
-Mama Rosa

An elder in Indigenous Sharing Circle shared her belief in the importance of everyone having a safe space where they can let off steam, and that she "*was always looking forward to seeing everyone's faces,"* and that she would *"miss seeing everyone's faces and the community because we helped each other".*

Further, members expressed that the fast timeline of the closure made it hard for the community to have time to process the changes and to self organize alternatives. Members also expressed that the stakes of the closure are high. The thought of PACE's closure brought up concerns of safety and survival, as Deanna expressed:

"I don't want to become a missing and murdered woman, that's my biggest fear".

Throughout the lead up to PACE's closure, members also expressed a desire to fight for the organization to stay open, to continue in a different form or to self-organize new spaces. As Mama Rosa explains:

"I'm not giving up - like a dandelion that can grow anywhere, even in the concrete. We still have a chance to fight to keep this open".

WITHOUT PACE, "I HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO GO"

Throughout consultations with members, there was frequent discussion about how unique PACE was as an organization. A number of members expressed that PACE is the only service that they come to.

London pointed out that PACE *"is one of the only places we have left as trans people to be safe".*

Members of Indigenous Sharing Circle highlighted that they had co-created the space to meet the needs of members, and that other organizations were just "not the same", either due to being too loud and hectic for older community members or having different policies around substance use.

Members of both Indigenous Sharing Circle and Trans Lunch Club shared that they wouldn't feel safe or comfortable at other sex worker serving organizations.

These concerns were especially relevant for trans women in the community who were experiencing new levels of transphobia at housing and social service organizations alongside a longstanding normalization of physical and sexual violence.

Both London and Sydney explained the pressure that they felt to *"dress like a boy in order to be okay"* because of dominant beliefs that *"it's okay to be gay but not to be trans".*

One member reported that she initially contacted PACE because she had been assaulted at her SRO and did not receive any meaningful support or accountability. These experiences highlight the uniquely supportive environment that PACE offered trans community members.

Members of Indigenous Sharing Circle shared how longstanding members of PACE had tirelessly worked to ensure that they felt comfortable accessing the group, and for members who had recently joined, there was a deep sense of shock that they would be losing a space they had just come to rely upon .

Overwhelmingly, members shared how upset they were that the space would be closing and that they were afraid there would be nowhere for them to access support and community.

RUPTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS

"The women are a strong support to not feel alone about being on the street"

During consultations, PACE members emphasized the importance of relationships they had formed at PACE which would be ruptured by the closure — many members were concerned about how the closure would impact their wellness. For some members, peer support was particularly important while others reported that getting together for lunch each week supported members to build strong social networks with each other.

As one member explained, *"the women are a strong support to not feel alone about being on the street"*.

Members shared that they had built a culture which made space for differences of opinion and conflict, which Debbie explained: "*we're like family, sometimes people don't get along and that's part of it"*.

Members also reported high levels of trust and appreciation for PACE staff; which is particularly notable as members are part of communities (i.e. sex working, trans and Indigenous people) which often experience high levels of stigma in health and social services.

Louise said that she loved how PACE staff treated members, and Mama Rosa further explained that this is the only space she had felt comfortable sharing her experiences, *"I've never felt more comfortable with any organization other than this one because I know it will stay confidential".*

Further, Effie shared that *"if I didn't have PACE I would not have survived my cancer...it made me want to fight for my life, just having that [support from staff who visited me and brought food]".*

PACE's closure creates a rupture in these longstanding relationships which took many years to build. For PACE members (and sex workers more broadly), it can take a long time to *"build up enough trust to open up,"* as Debbie explained.

Receiving this type of peer support is essential for safety — especially if someone has experienced a bad date. Although members had a wide range of circumstances and needs, PACE had succeeded at ensuring that members felt safe in asking for help, as Debbie explained, there's "*always somebody that knows, because we all tried to help each other".*

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR SEX WORKER SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Offer arts-based programming** and opportunities to explore creative expression. PACE members expressed high levels of appreciation for opportunities at PACE to explore beading, and enjoyed participation in an arts-based research project and access art supplies.

- **Increased and sustained counselling services** that are low-barrier. There was appreciation for counselling but also a need for this service to be ongoing and long term, without interruption to the relationships that members built with counsellors

- **Make space for connection around shared identity.** While many members expressed ongoing desire for identity specific spaces (ex. trans people, Indigenous people), there was also a desire for spaces where "everyone can be together". London highlighted that *"we meet at the intersections of many issues, such as being trans, sex workers or BIPOC and I would love a space where we can all feel safe because all have the same will to fight"*.
    - Mama Rosa shared a desire for increased connection between Indigenous Sharing Circle and Trans Lunch Club: *"Some of the first community I connected with was trans women and they watched over me. It was so sad to watch them get hurt and made fun of. When I see how much they've grown and flourished, I want to join with their group"*.

- **Hire experiential staff.** Members valued the perspective that experiential staff bring and desired increased opportunities for peer job opportunities.

- **Explore alternative models.** PACE members were concerned about the lack of sustainability for non-profit organizations and wanted to explore models such as co-operatives, unions, or social enterprises. Some members also saw benefit to a non-profit structure, especially if the organization was truly sex worker and Indigenous-led

- **Offer practical support for sex work**. Members expressed desire for support that is directly relevant to their work, such as occupational health and safety training, makeup supplies, backdrops to take photos, and support for finding safe spaces to work out of.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

"I'm sad to hear they're going to close the doors. They're closing the doors on our heart, it's gonna hurt for a while."
- Anonymous PACE member

- **Divest public funds from policing budgets.** Members reported that police presence in the Downtown Eastside perpetuates violence and the displacement of marginalized communities, including sex workers, through street sweeps.

- **Implement a safe supply program** to reduce the impact of the toxic drug supply crisis within the sex work community and sex worker organizations.

- **Prioritize core, long-term and sufficient funding** for community-led services. This will help ensure that organizations such as PACE can operate in a sustainable and dignified way. In addition to stressing the need to keep PACE open, members also noted the need for increased funding to improve the conditions of the drop-in space. PACE members deserve a space that is clean and safe.

FOR SEX WORKER ALLIES

- **Support community run mutual aid** efforts where every dollar goes directly to sex workers. This will help support sex workers' direct material needs in the context of reduced services and disproportionate poverty among sex workers in the DTES.
  - Intimate Access is a great example of community-led mutual aid initiative based in Victoria, BC

- **Help organize public actions or fundraisers** that help bring visibility to the issues facing sex workers. International Sex Workers' Day (June 2) and International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers (Dec 17) are examples of key dates to leverage for public actions.

- **Write to your city councillor, MPP, or MP**, urging for immediate government funding for sex worker specific and rights-based services, such as PACE.

- **Support the full decriminalization of sex work**, to help reduce sex workers' experiences of violence, islolation and stigma, and ultimately, improve sex workers' ability to access services and connect with community.