Submitted by Denise Duncan

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We are a team!

You are NOT ALONE, and support is available in our communities.  This was the message that I heard from three women working within the scope of harm reduction.  Their work with community based organizations such as the Play it Safer Network, the Hope North Committee, along with ongoing support from the Northern Health Region all support sustainable community development.  Sometimes it is hard to understand where in our communities you can go if you are in need of harm reduction supplies or information; supports for mental health, suicide, substance use and other public health inquiries.  Our communities have the supports that you may be seeking.  If you are thinking of suicide or experiencing harms related to substance use, these groups will listen to you and can connect/direct you to other support services.  They work together with other community agencies: such as Aurora House, the Canadian Mental Health Association, AFM (Addictions Foundation of Manitoba), Oscar’s Place, the Beatrice Wilson Health Center; along with the Northern Health Region’s many programs and services. Some of these include Rosaire House Addictions Centre, the Mental Wellness and Recovery Program, and also working in conjunction with Beatrice Wilson Health Centre’s Community Wellness Department.

Dee Harvey, Community Health Developer, works within the Harm Reduction field.   This was the first time that I had heard this word as an organization, so naturally, I was curious as to what it involved.  So I asked, and this is what I discovered.  On a broad scale, harm reduction is about supporting people to feel empowered to make choices without judgement, no matter the behaviour or level of perceived risk.  Specifically, through the work of community committees such as the Play it Safer Network and the Hope North Committee, Harm Reduction is a person-centered approach that aims to reduce the health harms and social stigma for those who use substances and experience harms.  Harm reduction seeks to reduce the physical, emotional, and socially related harms associated with substance use.   Harm reduction does not require people who use drugs to abstain.  Harm reduction recognizes the need for non–judgmental support, and evidence further supports the theory that those who engage in harm reduction services are more likely to seek out supports in the future.  Harm reduction initiatives also include education around the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and blood borne pathogens (STI/BBP), such as Syphilis, HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis.   Various examples of harm reduction approaches include using the nicotine patch to reduce tobacco use, handing out harm reduction supplies to those who use drugs, and advocacy for mental health services.  Education surrounding overdose prevention and intervention; provision of harm reduction supplies, access and advocacy for medical and mental health services; providing assistance regarding treatment options, housing and income support, are all part of Harm Reduction services.

Krista Tooley, Coordinator of the Play it Safer Network for The Pas and OCN, spoke to the role of this organization in our Northern Communities.  Play it Safer Network is part of the provincial-wide Manitoba Harm Reduction Network (MHRN), and as noted on it’s website (mhrn.ca) : “The Manitoba Harm Reduction Network works toward equitable access, systemic change, and reducing the transmission of Sexually Transmitted Infections and Blood Borne Pathogens through advocacy, policy work, education, research and relationships.  We do this by administering regional harm reduction networks that provide services, education, advocacy and events that are relevant to their specific communities. We could be described as a network of networks!  We also do workshops, community projects, support organizations in creating or improving policy and services, and partner with peer-based organizations and groups of people who use drugs. We focus on harm reduction, access, community building, and the inclusion of people impacted by substance use in the services and decisions that affect them. We believe that harm reduction, equitable access and safer service delivery are important parts of supporting healthy communities”.  You may have seen condoms and/or other harm reduction supplies as part of our supply distribution in local bars and lounges, and the Play it Safer Network also offers local testing events and training.  Most recently, The Play it Safer Network partnered with the Hope North Committee to provide emergency kits consisting of hygiene and cleaning supplies to some of our communities underserved community members during the pandemic.

 Shellie Verville, a Mental Health Promotion Specialist at the Northern Health Region and Chair of Hope North - The Pas and Area Suicide Prevention Committee, explains life promotion is key to suicide prevention. Each year Hope North hosts a number of life promotion events, activities and gatherings that bring the issue of suicide to light in hopes there will be fewer people who die by suicide. The committee also seeks to increase knowledge and skills to the public - including collaborations with various local organizations and schools to address and prevent suicide in our communities.  Likewise, resources on suicide prevention and awareness were included in the Emergency Kits.  Hope North, The Pas and Area Suicide Prevention and Awareness Committee, and the Beatrice Wilson Health Centre created water bottles that featured two suicide prevention/crisis lines (toll free) on either side of the bottle. The first resource being Opaskwayak Health Authority 24/7 Crisis Line 204-623-0519 and the second, Klinic MB Suicide Prevention and Support Line (24/7) 1-877-453-7170. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young Canadians between the ages of 10-24.  For this reason, raising awareness about the prevalence of suicide is very important. Providing resources on suicide prevention can be a lifeline for someone considering suicide and can save a life. We can make a difference. Please go to Klinic’s [www.reasontolive.ca](http://www.reasontolive.ca/) to learn more about how you can find help, give help, or receive support after a suicide loss. You can also contact Shellie Verville for more information at 204-623-9638.

Community committees such as the Hope North Committee and the Play it Safer Network have resources to offer services and supports for those who experience harms.  Although these three have different roles within the Northern Health Region, they unite to work together towards common goals.  They regularly meet at the Northern Equity Table (NET) to network with each other and find common sense approaches to help strengthen connections within our community and region.  Recently they worked together to bring the Play it Safer Emergency Kit project to some of the vulnerable and disadvantaged people living in our community.   The NET group recognizes that due to social factors, such as stigma, discrimination, racism, and sexism; marginalized groups and individuals can fall through the cracks and sometimes be overlooked.  When the pandemic hit in March, the NET group went about to ensure that people were aware of the public health measures associated with COVID-19 and created a kit that would assist them in maintaining their health.  The Emergency Kit project came under the umbrella of Harm Reduction, but really involved many players to make it a reality.

The collaboration of these groups is ongoing, and by reaching out to make our communities safer, there is further awareness that these services are available for you or a family member in need of support.  For further information about the services offered, you can reach out to one of the Committee members at their contact information below

       Dee Harvey, Community Health Developer, 204 623-9553

       Krista Tooley, Play It Safer Network Coordinator, 204 620-2373

       Shellie Verville, Mental Health Promotion Specialist, 204 623-9638

“Anything is possible when you have the right supports in place.  A little support can go a long way in someone’s life.”  - Misty Copeland