



SPHÈRES

PROGRAM

Interagency  
intervention  
program  
for sexually  
exploited  
persons  
aged 12 to 24

Common Intervention Framework

*Sphères Program*

COLLECTION  
INSTITUT UNIVERSITAIRE  
JEUNES EN DIFFICULTÉ

Québec 

**Editorial**

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C'est-à-dire

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For more information about the SPHÈRES program, please visit [www.spheresprojet.com/en/](http://www.spheresprojet.com/en/).



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# Table of Contents

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<b>PREAMBLE</b> .....	6
<b>SPHÈRES INTERVENTION COMPONENTS</b> .....	7
<b>Concerted action and mobilization</b> .....	7
Partner training .....	9
Awareness and promotion .....	10
Youth worker support .....	11
<b>Individualized psychosocial follow-ups</b> .....	11
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	12
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	13

# Preamble

Breaking the cycle of sexual exploitation is complex, despite the will to do so. The withdrawal<sup>1</sup> from such a situation involves a lot of back and forth. It requires physical healing as well as psychological and social rehabilitation. Interventions adapted to sexually exploited persons must enable them to heal their traumas, build a positive identity, regain control over their lives, make choices, exercise their power to act and develop their autonomy.

The SPHÈRES program relies on the collaboration of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal (CCSMTL), the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux de l'Ouest-de-l'Île-de-Montréal (CODIM), the Montreal police force's Les Survivantes program, the Marie-Vincent Foundation, En Marge 12-17 and L'Anonyme to implement concerted actions in order to support the change efforts of individuals facing sexual exploitation. More specifically, it aims to achieve the following:

- Meet the basic needs of these persons in ways other than through the commodification of their sexual services.
- Reduce the physical, psychological, relational, social and legal harms associated with the commodification of sexual services.
- Allow them to develop a life plan aimed at the fulfillment of their personal aspirations and their socio-professional integration.
- Improve their overall personal and social well-being.



The SPHÈRES program was originally conceived by Martin Pelletier and René-André Brisebois of the CCSMTL. Its name was determined from a brainstorming session involving Lynn Dion of the CODIM, Mélissandre Gagnon-Lemieux of En Marge 12-17, Shanda Jollette of L'Anonyme, Martin Pelletier of the CCSMTL and Sophie Saint-Louis of the CCSMTL, who are members of the first clinical team of youth workers.

The name of the program brings to mind not only the different spheres of people's lives and their power to influence them, but also the different fields of action of the partner organizations involved with them and the importance of their collaboration. In addition, its logo is a nod to Montreal's emblematic Biosphère. The colours are those of the partner organizations participating in the program, and the predominant flower on the orb symbolizes hope. Finally, the title of the youth worker notebook, *My Stratosphere*, alludes to all the layers of concerted action required to support sexually exploited persons in all spheres of their lives.

The degree of collaboration of institutional and community resources that are recognized as credible in a given community contributes to the considerable variation in services available to sexually exploited persons. This close collaboration is fundamental to the implementation of the SPHÈRES program in other regions of Quebec.

The SPHÈRES program is intended for persons aged 12 to 24 who recognize that they are being or have been sexually exploited or have been engaged in activities related to the sex trade. Men, women and all individuals whose gender identity is "other" (e.g., neutral, androgenous, trans, etc.) are eligible for the program. However, recognition of the harms associated with the commodification of sexual services is required for admission to the program, even if the persons are not yet committed to changing their situation.

The program is voluntary. At no time should it be imposed or used as a means to coerce sexually exploited persons to receive services or counselling that they do not seek.

The common intervention framework presents the different components of the SPHÈRES program.

**The humanistic values of empowerment and mobilization as well as respect for the integrity, multitude of experiences, pace and safety of sexually exploited persons are the basic foundations of the SPHÈRES program. Anyone wishing to implement the SPHÈRES program shall respect and promote its fundamental values.**

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term "withdrawal" refers to the process of abandoning the sex trade, terminating the commodification of sexual services or leaving a sexually exploitative situation.



# SPHÈRES intervention components

The intervention components of the SPHÈRES program are based on principles, which involve the premises of humanistic and trauma-informed<sup>2</sup> approaches, transtheoretical models of change,<sup>3</sup> motivational interviewing,<sup>4</sup> harm reduction<sup>5</sup> and relapse prevention.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, the SPHÈRES program:

- Relies on a participatory and collaborative approach to establish a positive, reassuring, warm and motivating intervention framework, both for the persons being helped in the program and the youth workers who support them;
- Structures the intervention in order to promote self-exploration and introspection in the persons being helped rather than encouraging them to behave according to the expectations of youth workers;
- Focuses more on the needs of the persons being helped rather than the risks they pose to themselves or others, without denying or minimizing the existence of these risks;
- Values the development of the persons being helped to counterbalance their many experiences with social devaluation. To do so, the program promotes the power of these persons to act in order to bring about and sustain the changes necessary to improve their personal and social well-being;
- Encourages hope by enabling the persons being helped to foresee positive prospects for the future, change the course of their lives and achieve their most cherished aspirations.

The SPHÈRES program is based on a theory of change<sup>7</sup> involving two main steps: the co-construction of a common intervention framework for sexual exploitation and the implementation of clinical support and activities to assist sexually exploited individuals.

The program is designed, on the one hand, around the concerted action and mobilization of the various partner organizations engaged in the fight against sexual exploitation and, on the other hand, around the individualized psychosocial follow-ups intended for sexually exploited minors and adults who wish to make changes to their lifestyle.

## Concerted action and mobilization

First and foremost, the SPHÈRES program requires partnership and concerted action between the various organizations in a given region which are concerned with the sexual exploitation of minors and adults. The goal is to strengthen the ability of these organizations to address the harms surrounding the commodification of sexual services.

To facilitate co-operation between professionals working with the same person or group of people, youth workers must first express their perception of the problem to be addressed. They must also discuss their respective scope of practice and their expectations of their immediate colleagues and partners.<sup>8</sup> Effective action requires a shared analysis of problems and solutions, which is a huge challenge when it comes to coordinating the actions of youth workers from different intervention environments who adhere to different intervention philosophies. This is particularly true when it comes to sexual exploitation. There are many conceptual and moral disagreements when partners discuss best practices for working with those who commodify their sexual services.

Consequently, it is important to allocate the necessary time and resources to enable youth workers from different environ-

2 Dodsworth, J. (2012). Pathways Through Sex Work: Childhood Experiences and Adult Identities. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42 (3): 519-536.

3 Prochaska, J.O., and DiClemente, C.C. (1982). Transtheoretical Therapy: Toward A More Integrative Model of Change. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 19 (3): 276-288.

4 Miller, W.R., and Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change* (2nd ed.). New York, New York: Guilford Press.

5 Brisson, P. (1997). *L'approche de réduction des méfaits: sources, situation, pratiques*. Québec, Québec: Comité permanent de lutte à la toxicomanie, Government of Quebec.

6 Marlatt, G.A., and Donovan, D.M. (2005). *Relapse Prevention: Maintenance Strategies in the Treatment of Addictive Behaviors*. New York, New York: The Guilford Press.

7 A way of describing how a group hopes to achieve a given long-term goal that serves as an aid to developing solutions to complex social problems. See Anderson, A.A. (2005). *The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to the Theory Development*. Columbia, Washington: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change.

8 Ødegård, A. (2005). Perceptions of Interprofessional Collaboration in Relation to Children with Mental Health Problems. A Pilot Study. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 19 (4): 347-357.

ments, who carry out concerted and integrated actions with sexually exploited persons, to share their knowledge regarding the commodification of sexual services and the intervention processes to be implemented with the protagonists: exploited persons, pimps, clients, family and friends, citizens, etc. These discussions are necessary for the consistency of the interventions carried out with sexually exploited persons and, consequently, for their effectiveness. The discussions must be based on data supported by research rather than the personal values and intuition of youth workers, and they must be facilitated on an ongoing basis by those with the appropriate expertise.

### **EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS FOR PARTNERS TO ADDRESS<sup>9</sup>**

What is the collective perception (i.e., the perception of all partners) of the situation in which sexually exploited persons find themselves? Are they a homogeneous or heterogeneous group? Is the situation for minors different from that of adults?

What is the collective perception of the situation of people who sexually exploit others? Are exploiters a homogeneous or heterogeneous group? Is the situation for pimps different from that of clients?

What is the collective perception of the social circle (e.g., parents, spouse, siblings, friends, neighbours, etc.) of sexually exploited persons? Should the family and friends be involved in an intervention carried out with a sexually exploited person? Are certain family members or friends collaborators in the intervention or clients of the intervention?

What is the collective perception of the social circle (e.g., parents, spouse, siblings, friends, neighbours, etc.) of people who sexually exploit others, regardless of whether the exploiter is a pimp or client? Are the people close to those who sexually exploit others a homogeneous or heterogeneous group? Is the situation of the people close to those who sexually exploit others different from that of clients?

What is the collective perception of the mandate and nature of the work of each partner organization with regard to sexual exploitation?

What is the collective perception of the attitudes of the partner organizations toward each other? Are the relationships respectful or strained? What expectations do the persons representing them have of the others?

How do we collectively view the intervention processes that need to be put in place to address sexual exploitation? Are these processes dynamic or static?

How do we collectively view the ability of sexually exploited persons to change their situation? What are the collective expectations of how sexually exploited persons need to change their situation in order to agree that an intervention has been successful?

Within the framework of the SPHÈRES program, these discussions take place through ongoing training as well as awareness, promotional and support activities provided to youth workers from the various institutional and community organizations. The structure of the SPHÈRES program facilitates the realization of all these activities.

<sup>9</sup> Inspired by Ødegård, A. (2005).





To learn more about the structure of the SPHÈRES program, please consult the *Support Guide for the Implementation and Sustainability of the SPHÈRES Program: Foundations, Structure, Funding, Research and Issues*.<sup>10</sup>

## Partner training

The implementation of the SPHÈRES program relies on the initial and ongoing training of the youth workers and other professionals of the partner organizations participating in the program. This annual training offer is also intended for the various organizations that are concerned with the issue of sexual exploitation and that request it (e.g., schools, youth centres, homeless resources, hospitals, local community service centres, etc.). These organizations, even if not directly involved in providing SPHÈRES program services, are environments that can serve individuals who commodify their sexual services, thus contributing to the fight against sexual exploitation. They are also likely to identify individuals in sexually exploitative situations who could benefit from the services of the SPHÈRES program.

The training necessary for the implementation of the SPHÈRES program focuses on the following:

- Sexual exploitation (i.e., definitions, profiles of the protagonists,<sup>11</sup> risk and protection factors, consequences, etc.)
- Criminal networks' organization of the commodification of sexual services for commercial purposes<sup>12</sup>
- The process of engagement in a sexually exploitative lifestyle<sup>13</sup>
- Harm reduction and relapse prevention
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Interventions in crisis and acute risk situations<sup>14</sup>
- The transtheoretical model's stages of change
- The motivational interviewing approach<sup>15</sup>

In short, the initial and ongoing training provided to partners cover all components that make up the SPHÈRES program.

### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SPHÈRES PROGRAM

To implement the SPHÈRES program and ensure its sustainability, it is recommended that educational sessions on the realities of Aboriginal peoples (First Nations and Inuit)<sup>16</sup> be held. Training and coaching sessions on vicarious traumas or compassion fatigue are also recommended. Working with sexually exploited persons who are victims of trauma is not without its consequences on a personal level. Helping people who have been traumatized exposes youth workers to the risk of becoming traumatized themselves.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is important to take care of them to ensure their well-being so that they in turn can support sexually exploited individuals in their efforts to change.

10 Brisebois, R.-A., Gélinas, N. and Fredette, C. (2022). *Support Guide for the Implementation and Sustainability of the SPHÈRES Program: Foundations, Structure, Funding, Research and Issues*. Quebec, Montreal: Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.

11 Persons who are sexually exploited or commodify their sexual services, persons who sexually exploit others or profit from the sale of the sexual services of others (pimps), and persons who purchase the sexual services of others (clients).

12 Includes all groups involved in organized crime (e.g., mafia, outlaw biker gangs, street gangs, etc.).

13 As developed by Fleury, E., and Fredette, C. (2002). *Guide d'accompagnement et d'animation de la bande dessinée Le silence de Cendrillon*. Québec, Montréal: Centre jeunesse de Montréal – Institut universitaire.

14 Inspired by the *Safety Assessment and Crisis Plan* of the Wraparound process (Texas Department of State Health Services, Mental Health Services for Children and Adolescents, 2018).

15 Including the use of the *My Stratosphere youth worker notebook*. For more details, see: Gélinas, N., Brisebois, R.-A. and Fredette, C. (2022). *My Stratosphere youth worker notebook – SPHÈRES program*. Quebec, Montreal: Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.

16 As recommended by the Select Committee on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors of the Government of Quebec, whose report was submitted in December 2020.

17 Geoffrion, S., Goncalves, J., Marchand, A., Boyer, R., Marchand, A., Corbiere, M., and Guay, S. (2018). Post-traumatic Reactions and Their Predictors among Workers Who Experienced Serious Violent Acts: Are There Sex Differences? *Annals of Work Exposures and Health*, 62 (4): 465-474.

This training offer was developed thanks to the expertise acquired by the creators of the SPHÈRES program. The partner organizations involved in the initial implementation of the SPHÈRES program in Greater Montreal have extensive experience in sexual exploitation training and the promising practices in the field. They also maintain a fruitful collaboration with the professionals who are experts in the clinical approaches at the heart of the program.<sup>18</sup>

**Partner organizations involved in the SPHÈRES program and their collaborators are in a position to guarantee the provision of training necessary to implement the program in other Quebec regions. Their contribution can be considerable in providing and improving – province-wide – the initial and ongoing training of youth workers involved with persons in sexually exploitative situations and relationships, as recommended by the Select Committee on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors.<sup>19</sup>**

## Awareness and promotion

Awareness and promotional activities provide an opportunity to meet with youth workers from different institutional (including police forces) and community intervention environments in order to present the SPHÈRES program and discuss commercial sexual exploitation and its issues.

On a regular basis, the person in charge of the management and clinical coordination of the SPHÈRES program, youth workers, and other professionals from the partner organizations that are members of the clinical committee,<sup>20</sup> travel to the different intervention environments involved with sexually exploited persons in order to present the program, discuss the profile of eligible persons and offer their support to the people who work there. These meetings promote the mobilization of organizations dedicated to the fight against sexual exploitation in a given region and facilitate the recruitment of participants to the SPHÈRES program. They are also a unique opportunity to discuss promising approaches to sexual exploitation and to present the intervention framework on which the SPHÈRES<sup>21</sup> program is based. In addition, the person in charge of the management and clinical coordination of the SPHÈRES program, youth workers, and other professionals from the partner organizations that are members of the clinical committee (including the research representative), regularly participate in various knowledge transfer activities organized by the institutional and community network (conferences, symposiums, scientific days, etc.).

In doing so, activities that promote and raise awareness of the SPHÈRES program serve to implement a common intervention framework in sexual exploitation both in the Greater Montreal area and all regions of Quebec.



18 Trauma-informed approaches, the transtheoretical model of change, motivational interviewing, harm reduction and relapse prevention.

19 Recommendation no. 22 in the report from the Select Committee on the Sexual Exploitation of Minors submitted on December 3, 2020, in the National Assembly of Québec, <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/commissions/csesm/mandats/Mandat-41757/index.html>.

20 To learn more about the structure of the SPHÈRES program, see: Brisebois, R.-A., Gélinas, N. and Fredette, C. (2022).

*My Stratosphere youth worker notebook – SPHÈRES program*. Quebec, Montreal: Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.

21 Brisebois, R.-A. and Fredette, C. (2021). *Frame of reference for sexual exploitation interventions*. Quebec, Montreal: Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.



## Youth worker support

The concerted action and mobilization of the intervention partners in the SPHÈRES program are achieved first and foremost through the clinical support that the youth workers and other professionals of the partner organizations that are members of the clinical committee provide to each other. This support is provided through informal discussions, clinical committee meetings and ongoing training sessions on the motivational interviewing method. This collaborative approach not only encourages consistency in the interventions carried out with SPHÈRES program participants, but also promotes the transfer of knowledge. What's more, it facilitates the generalization of knowledge and acquisition of hard skills and soft skills related to sexual exploitation. It also ensures the well-being of youth workers providing direct services to SPHÈRES program participants. Youth workers and other professionals from the partner organizations that are members of the clinical committee can also count on individual supervision by the person in charge of the management and clinical coordination of the SPHÈRES program, if necessary.

The concerted action and mobilization of the intervention partners in the SPHÈRES program then rely on the clinical support received from members of the institutional and community networks concerned with the issue of sexual exploitation (e.g., police forces, schools, youth centres, homeless resources, hospitals, CLSCs, etc.). This support, whether ad hoc or ongoing, is provided by the person in charge of management and clinical coordination, youth workers, and other professionals from partner organizations that are members of the clinical committee. It is done individually (e.g., telephone, email, face-to-face meetings) or in groups (e.g., team meetings, committees, coordinating groups). In doing so, youth workers involved in the SPHÈRES program contribute more broadly to the prevention of sexual exploitation and the screening and treatment of sexually exploited persons. They also contribute to educating and raising the awareness of professionals who work with these people.

## Individualized psychosocial follow-ups

The mobilization and concerted action of SPHÈRES program partners help ensure individualized, sustained and prolonged psychosocial follow-ups with sexually exploited minors and adults who wish to make changes to their lifestyle. In concrete terms, this means providing a follow-up that may include individual meetings with a youth worker, recreational or cultural activities, support toward specialized resources, and help with studies or employment.

The nature and duration of the activities carried out as part of the psychosocial follow-ups vary according to the needs of the participants, their progress and the context in which they find themselves. The SPHÈRES program is designed to support and assist persons who commodify their sexual services for as long as they need the help. This approach promotes skill maintenance and, ultimately, the withdrawal from a sexually exploitative lifestyle.

In accordance with the motivational interviewing method, the first step of the follow-up aims to create a relationship of trust and to define, with the persons being helped, the problems (i.e., harms and risks) that they perceive with regard to their current situation. As well, based on principles of the harm reduction approach, the primary objective of the intervention advocated by the SPHÈRES program is not to break the cycle of sexual exploitation against the person's will, but to reduce the risks and harms (e.g., physical and psychological abuse, violence, addictions, isolation, insecurity, etc.) associated with the commodification of sexual services.

In the short term, psychosocial follow-ups are intended to improve the physical and mental health of SPHÈRES program participants. They also aim to increase participants' sense of security and strengthen their motivation to make changes to their lifestyle. In the medium term, the persons being helped should be able to develop and increase their sense of personal effectiveness and control over their lives by targeting their most pressing needs. They should be able to do this by taking concrete steps to promote their psychological well-being, physical and emotional safety, socio-professional integration, and the strengthening of their identity. Also in the medium term, participants should be more aware of their strengths and limitations as well as what is both preventing and helping them in maintaining what they have achieved. In the long term, the SPHÈRES program should enable the persons being helped to gain autonomy and resilience and to increase their power to act in order to reduce and ultimately stop – if they so desire – the commodification of their sexual services.

**To learn more about the intervention tools and strategies used to support and coach persons being helped in the SPHÈRES program, please consult the *My Stratosphere youth worker notebook*.<sup>22</sup>**

22 Gélinas, N., Brisebois, R.-A. and Fredette, C. (2022). *My Stratosphere youth worker notebook – SPHÈRES program*. Quebec, Montreal: Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté of the Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal.



## Conclusion

The SPHÈRES program is based on the idea that a sexually exploited person, whether a minor or an adult, is both a victim of violence who must be cared for AND a person who is free to make choices, however risky they may be for his or her safety. As a result, the SPHÈRES program focuses on the ability of sexually exploited persons to change the course of, and regain control over, their lives from a harm reduction perspective (i.e., pragmatic and humane) rather than a prohibition perspective (i.e., control and alienation), whose harms greatly outweigh its health, social and economic benefits.

The SPHÈRES program relies on the close collaboration of institutional and community partners to support the change efforts of sexually exploited persons. It is guided by the belief that instead of simply managing the risks to which sexually exploited minors and adults are exposed, it is more effective to support, in a concerted manner, their ability to make choices that are good for them and their power to solve their problems, whatever they may be.

In the end, the SPHÈRES program believes that the most effective approach consists of supporting these persons so that they can reduce or even eliminate the harms that threaten their safety and development. The SPHÈRES program considers the best strategy to ensure the protection of sexually exploited minors and adults to be the development of their autonomy so that they can avoid ending up on the street or staying there. To achieve this, they must be exposed to every opportunity to test their judgment, practise making choices, assert themselves, develop their social skills and exercise their power to act, not only in a static environment that ensures their safety, but also in a safe, dynamic environment as proposed by the SPHÈRES program.

The creators of the SPHÈRES program share the conviction that the innovative approach proposed merits widespread adoption throughout the province of Quebec in order to lessen the prevalence of sexual exploitation and reduce its harms. The humanistic values advocated by the SPHÈRES program (i.e., empowerment, mobilization as well as respect for the integrity, multitude of experiences, pace and safety of sexually exploited persons) make it a promising participatory and collaborative intervention for cases of sexual exploitation.

*"We brought people into the world, maybe we should listen to them."*

*Serge Fiori, Quebec singer-songwriter*



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