



SPHÈRES



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Concerted, integrated action for sexually exploited persons aged 12 to 24

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This document is inspired by the 2022-2023 Discretionary Request written by Sylvie Boivin, General Manager, L'Anonyme; René-André Brisebois, Professional Coordinator, IUJD; Marie-Noëlle L'Espérance, General Manager, En Marge 12-17; and Nathalie Gélinas, Coordinator, SPHÈRES project; members of the SPHÈRES Steering Committee.

Mélessandre Gagnon-Lemieux, Pivot Youth Worker, SPHÈRES project provided contributions to this document, for En Marge 12-17; Laurence Magnan Tremblay, Research Assistant; and Marie-France Blais, Professional Coordinator, IUJD.

This is an English translation (2025) of the original French document (2023).

Considering that the participants of the program and the members of the intervention team are primarily women, the feminine gender shall be used throughout this document. However, the program is open to people of all gender identities. The same applies for members of the intervention team.

SPHÈRES program objectives

The SPHÈRES program supports sexually exploited individuals aged 12 to 24 in building a positive identity, reclaiming their power to act and developing their autonomy so that they can make lasting positive changes.

As such, SPHÈRES is a specialized program that brings together key services needed by these vulnerable young people in order to ensure integrated care that targets several risk and protective factors simultaneously. Follow-ups in the SPHÈRES program are entirely voluntary and highly individualized. The services offered are based on the needs identified for and by each young person – needs that tend to evolve throughout their follow-up.

Interventions within the SPHÈRES program are guided by six fundamental principles: 1) humanistic approaches, 2) trauma-informed practices, 3) the transtheoretical model of change, 4) motivational interviewing, 5) harm reduction and 6) relapse prevention.

More specifically, the SPHÈRES program aims for the following:

- Use a participatory and collaborative approach to create a positive, reassuring, warm and motivating intervention framework.
- Structure interventions to encourage self-exploration and self-reflection in the persons being assisted rather than pressuring them to behave according to the expectations of youth workers.
- Focus on the needs of those being assisted rather than on the risks they pose to themselves or others, without denying or minimizing the existence of these risks.
- Bring about and sustain the changes necessary for the improvement of the personal and social well-being of sexually exploited persons by supporting their power to act as well as promoting their self-fulfillment to counteract their numerous experiences of social devaluation.
- Promote hope by enabling the persons being assisted to envision positive opportunities for their future, modify the course of their lives, and realize their most cherished aspirations.



Population served

The SPHÈRES program is aimed at persons aged 12 to 24 who recognize that they are or have been sexually exploited and who aspire to a better life.

The majority of those assisted are female and receive youth protection services. The average age of these individuals is 17. They have complex profiles, notably presenting post-traumatic symptoms. In addition, many are under the influence of a pimp and exhibit substance use problems and/or delinquency.

Main activities

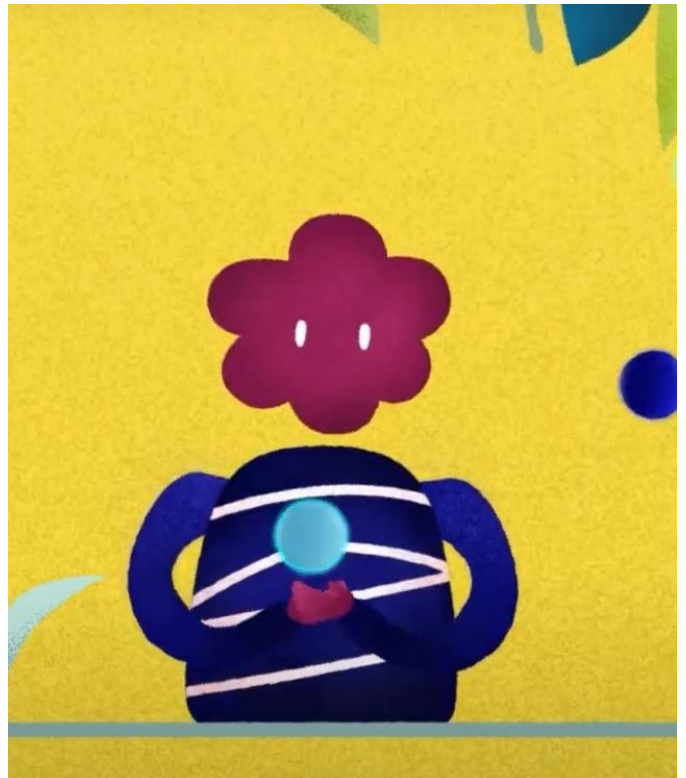
The SPHÈRES program meets the needs of sexually exploited youth through a multitude of activities. Participation is voluntary and highly personalized support is provided to young people with very different backgrounds and experiences.

Clinical support

The intervention team, drawn from a variety of institutional and community organizations, is committed to adopting a common intervention approach regardless of their respective missions and mandates. In concrete terms, a SPHÈRES intervention consists of assessing a person's stage of involvement in the sexual exploitation cycle¹ and working on her motivation to get out of it. Youth workers work with participants to identify strategies and activities that could meet their needs differently and support them in a process of change that respects their pace and perception of their situation.

Meeting the most important and urgent needs

In addition to this support throughout the change process, youth workers ensure that these individuals are assisted in the meeting of their various needs. When these needs are not met, they become factors that facilitate the return to sexually exploitative environments. This assistance takes a variety of forms. For example, it can involve supporting the person through the legal process or accompanying the person to certain organizations in order to obtain specialized services or advice. Support also involves establishing an emergency plan to ensure the safety of each participant.



¹ See the Frame of reference for sexual exploitation interventions (Brisebois and Fredette, 2021), p. 8

<https://iujd.ca/fr/abus-et-exploitation-sexuelle>

Self-discovery and experimentation activities

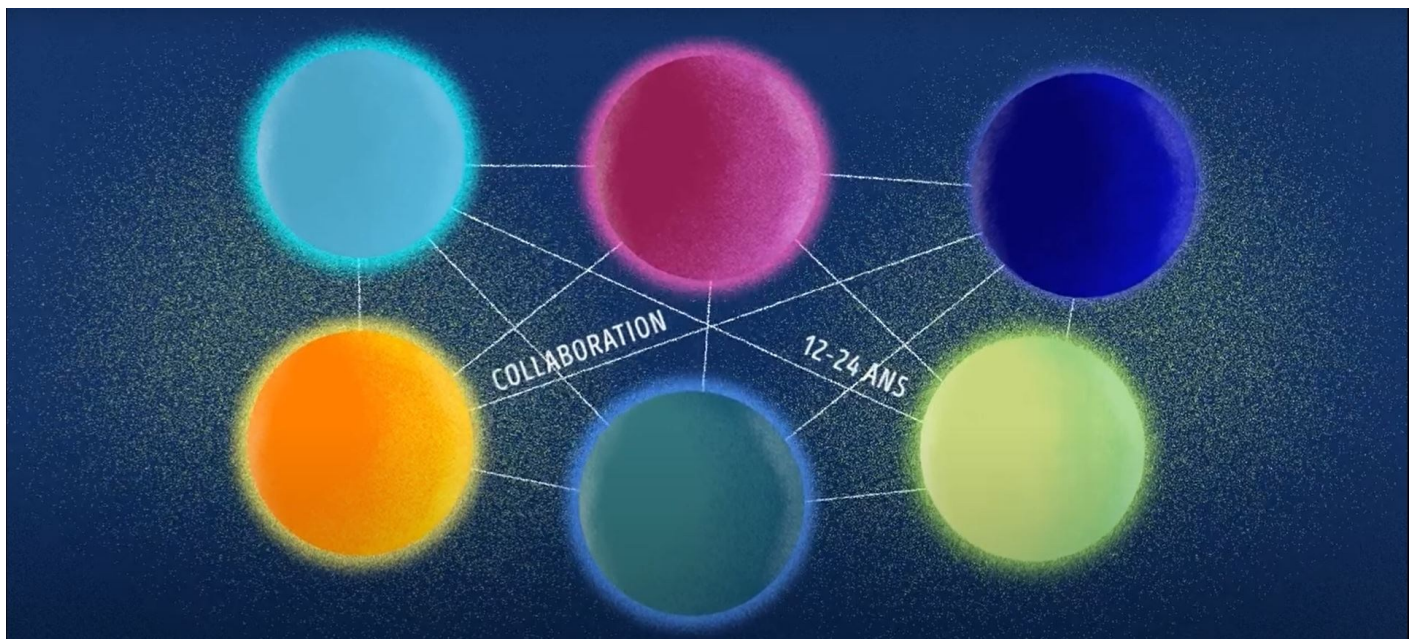
Youth workers in the SPHÈRES program guide participants through a wide range of activities designed to establish a meaningful therapeutic relationship with them, resolve their ambivalence, and support their motivation to change. Participants are exposed to a multitude of opportunities for self-discovery, self-assertion, development of a positive self-image, acquisition of new skills, testing their strengths and abilities, and self-liberation, all to encourage the aspiration for a better life. Through artistic, athletic, cultural, and recreational activities, they develop new positive experiences that prevent them from maintaining the negative self-perception linked to their sexually exploitative lifestyle. Thanks to these activities, young people

are able to define themselves differently and discover interests and passions that motivate them to avoid situations in which they would be at risk of sexual exploitation.

The **Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté** brings together researchers and professionals who contribute to the development of knowledge and practices concerning troubled youth in Quebec. Its work focuses on issues of maltreatment, behavioural disorders, delinquency and social integration as well as the professional practices of those working with troubled youth and families.

Partners involved in the SPHÈRES program

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 Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (and its "Les Survivantes" program), the Marie-Vincent Foundation, En Marge 12-17 and L'Anonyme to establish joint action to support sexually exploited persons in their efforts to change.



The project's development, trial, and assessment have been coordinated by the CCSMTL's Institut universitaire Jeunes en difficulté (IUJD) from 2017 to 2024, in collaboration with several partners. By 2024, En Marge 12-17 will take over coordination of the program. In keeping with the goal of concerted and integrated action, each of the SPHÈRES partners contributes to the program according to its specific expertise and provides a unique perspective during discussions with the Clinical Committee.



Here is a brief overview:

<p>Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal</p> <p>Québec</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acts as a liaison between the different services and programs at the CIUSSS to identify participants for the SPHÈRES program. It is the largest referring organization for the program. - Supports partners in their understanding of the Youth Protection Act, its proceedings and related challenges.
<p>Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux de l'Ouest-de-l'Île-de-Montréal</p> <p>Québec</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acts as a liaison between the different services and programs at the CIUSSS to identify English-speaking participants for the SPHÈRES program. - Supports partners in their comprehension of the Youth Protection Act, its proceedings and related challenges.
<p>L'ANONYME</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers preventive school and community workshops on sexual exploitation and the promotion of egalitarian relationships, which allow for the identification of young people in need of the SPHÈRES program. - Provides support on sexual health related tools and concepts to be worked on during interventions with sexually exploited youth.
 <p>EN MARGE 12-17</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers emergency shelter or a break from the streets in an effort to provide a 24/7/365 safety net to SPHÈRES participants and support their entourage, especially their parents. - Provides needed support to young people in accessing various resources available in the community. - Creates a link between the SPHÈRES team and the various services provided by the organization.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers psychotherapy to SPHÈRES program participants (minors and adults) regardless of waiting list restrictions. - Offers clinical support to all program youth workers involved in therapeutic and trauma-informed interventions.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using a peer-based approach facilitates meetings between participants of the SPHÈRES program and of the program "Les Survivantes" to offer support to victims who do not wish to follow legal proceedings. - Facilitates the liaison with the police for legal proceedings and supports the team in all legal and youth safety matters. - The program "Les Survivantes" is now available in the Greater Montreal area as well as at the provincial level.

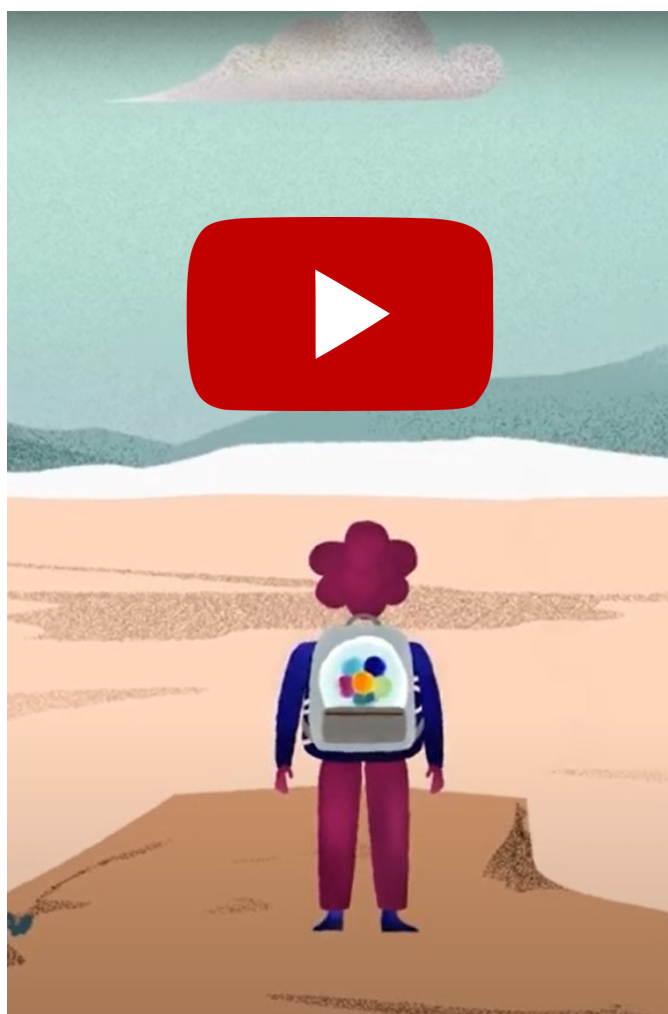
Benefits of concerted, integrated action

The benefits of concerted action in interventions with troubled youth, including sexually exploited youth, have been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature. The implementation of the SPHÈRES project has made it possible to create concerted action by adding integrated value. Through its innovative, concerted and integrated action, SPHÈRES has enabled those involved to transform themselves through contact with others, thereby collectively creating a new identity and a different approach to working with persons in sexually exploitative situations. More specifically, the concerted, integrated action of SPHÈRES aims to accomplish the following:

- Promote consistency in interventions between the various community and institutional organizations working with sexually exploited individuals.
- Ensure the continuity of services available to sexually exploited persons regardless of age or legal status.
- Offer services specifically adapted to sexually exploited persons who do not have access the range of services usually available to individuals who are struggling.
- Support sexually exploited persons in a process of reconstruction and self-realization likely to encourage a change in lifestyle while respecting their integrity, pace and power to act.

The program offers specific, specialized services to persons in sexually exploitative situations, in complement to the regular activities and missions of partner organizations. As such, SPHÈRES does not replace existing services, but adds value by meeting needs not addressed by these services.

We invite you to watch our video describing our integrated, concerted action.



Program benefits

An evaluation of the pilot project's implementation reveal beneficial effects for both program youth workers and participants. Here are some examples:

Intervention team members:

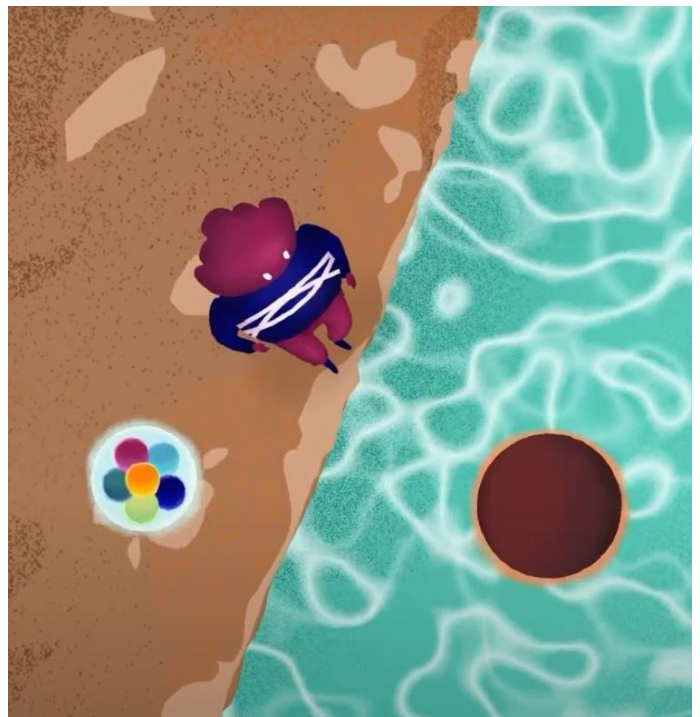
- They report a strong sense of personal effectiveness.
- They feel well equipped and trained to support young people in sexually exploitative situations.
- They consider themselves supported by other members of the Clinical Committee.
- They perceive that they have an influence on the decisions made.

The persons assisted:

- They emphasize that SPHÈRES has enabled them to work on different aspects of their lives that revolve around sexual exploitation.
- They mention that discussions with their youth workers have enabled them to reflect on their relationships (with friends, family and romantic partners), substance use problems, and their value as a person.
- Many say that the activities in which they have taken part with SPHÈRES have allowed them to experience positive emotions and helped them discover new interests.

Although the evaluation of the SPHÈRES project's implementation did not target its effects, it is nevertheless possible to identify certain perceived benefits. An impact assessment will be conducted shortly to confirm these positive effects.

With cautious optimism, the picture that emerges from these results is that youth workers succeed in raising young people's awareness of the risks of commodifying sexual services. In more than half of all cases, youth workers reported significant effects on young people's assessment of these risks. It seems the youth workers are able to make them realize the difficulties of exercising control over clients and pimps. However, it seems more difficult to get young people to want to distance themselves concretely from people involved in sexually exploitative situations.



Data from self-reported measures highlight that motivation to change is low among SPHÈRES project participants, but that their resilience and well-being seem to improve over time. This finding needs to be qualified, given that when they joined the project, participants had secondary objectives for change that were not directly aimed at ending the commodification of sexual services. They aspire more to change certain aspects, often in parallel, which are generally detrimental to their health and/or safety. However, the work of the youth workers seems to encourage participants to take action and better analyze the risks of the situations they encounter.



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Testimonials

You know, I kind of got it in my head that prostitution was the only way out for me, but, you know, she told me that I should give myself a chance to discover other things, because me, I can't relate to other things. You know, I see myself more into prostitution, so if you take that away, I feel lost. So, she told me to give myself a chance to ... find out who I am (...) And also, she told me I had to get to know myself and encouraged me to find a job (...) And, you know, she encouraged me to have, to create a new identity and to know myself, and she helps me so much, like you don't know how much she helps me, it's like ... I love her! (1927)

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After ..., well, I'd like her [SPHÈRES youth worker] to be there until I feel totally confident about my life, my choices. Because I make a lot of bad choices. And I wouldn't hide that sometimes, well, you know when my rent comes up, everything comes up at the same time and I end up with 10 bucks ..., I wouldn't hide that sometimes I'm tempted to go back to doing things that aren't right. So, I'm hoping that she [SPHÈRES youth worker] stays with me until I have more confidence in myself. (1907)

Sharing expertise and supporting the implementation of SPHÈRES

Sexual exploitation is a multi-faceted problem which, to be adequately addressed, requires equally multi-faceted interventions. We believe that the SPHÈRES program deserves to be offered to all sexually exploited persons aged 12 to 24. What's more, an evaluation of this recognized initiative, which has inspired professionals at many levels, has revealed promising results.

SPHÈRES program partners are already sharing their expertise in various intervention settings concerned with sexual exploitation. They are currently working on developing a service proposal to support organizations wishing to implement SPHÈRES while taking into account the particularities, needs, and initiatives already in place in their given region. If you have any questions or are interested in the program, we invite you to contact us for further details.

SPHÈRES website

<https://www.programmespheres.ca/en/>



TELEPHONE : 514-896-3590

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