



WePress

March 11, 2021

Vancouver City Council:

- Mayor Kennedy Stewart
- City Councillor Rebecca Bligh
- City Councillor Christine Boyle
- City Councillor Adriane Carr
- City Councillor Melissa De Genova
- City Councillor Lisa Dominato
- City Councillor Pete Fry
- City Councillor Colleen Hardwick
- City Councillor Sarah Kirby-Yung
- City Councillor Jean Swanson
- City Councillor Michael Wiebe

Via Email

Dear Mayor Stewart and Vancouver City Councillors,

Re: July 2020 Motion titled “Decriminalizing Poverty and Supporting Community-led Safety Initiatives”

We write to you as representatives of community organizations, including organizations identified in the July 2020 Motion *Decriminalizing Poverty and Supporting Community-led Safety Initiatives*¹ (“the Motion”). We are renewing our call on the City to divest from policing and invest in community-based services, specifically non-police interventions that support people who are impacted by homelessness, toxic drug supply, mental health distress, and those working in informal economies and criminalized industries, such as sex work.

This motion recognizes that many groups, organizations, and individuals in the City already have the skills and abilities to lead community-led safety initiatives. The expenditures associated with this Motion, and

¹ Vancouver City Council, “Standing Committee of Council on Policy and Strategic Priorities” (2020, July 22, 23, 24 & 27), online: City of Vancouver: <https://council.vancouver.ca/20200722/documents/pspc20200722min.pdf>, resolution B, page 17.

future related work, must be made available to directly-impacted groups and organizations and supported with transparent reporting, including line item details. The work of decriminalizing poverty, defunding police, and investing in community-led safety initiatives remains an urgent priority for our organizations. In December 2020, Council further approved funding related to this motion, costed at \$300,000, as part of the initiative to “Increase Focus on Equity and Critical Social Issues.”²

Despite ongoing actions that call attention to the importance of disarming, defunding and abolishing police, our organizations have yet to hear from City Hall regarding how the funding allocated for this work will be disseminated. This work must proceed quickly - the reality of police brutality and police killings has not ceased, including in the city of Vancouver.

Although the *Decriminalizing Poverty* Motion was approved last year, there have been multiple initiatives from the Vancouver Police Department that contradict Council’s stated commitments. This includes the deployment of the Neighbourhood Response Teams³ initiative and the creation of the Trespass Prevention Program⁴, and most recently, news that a wealthy donor has earmarked \$100K annually to “provide additional resources to VPD officers who are dealing with individuals in crisis due to mental health or addiction issues,” as outlined by Vancouver Police Foundation executive director Andrea Wright.⁵

These initiatives and investments flout efforts to decriminalize poverty, and instead design new pathways to criminalization, particularly for people who rely on public space. Furthermore, since the Motion was passed, there have been multiple police-involved incidents of serious harm or death, based on reports from the Independent Investigations Office of BC, the civilian oversight agency of the police in BC. There have also been multiple high-profile incidents of police misconduct, subject to investigations by the Office of the Police Complaints Commissioner.

These incidents include:

- VPD officers caught “laughing and snapping photos with dead man” on February 24, 2021⁶
- Violent arrests of Indigenous Youth (Braided Warriors) on February 19, 2021^{7,8}

² City of Vancouver, “Vancouver Budget 2021” (n.d.), online: City of Vancouver <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/2021-budget-building-the-budget.pdf> B-45

³ Vancouver Police Department, “VPD Releases Results from Neighbourhood Response Team” (2020, December 18), online: VPD <https://mediareleases.vpd.ca/2020/12/18/vpd-releases-results-from-neighbourhood-response-team/>

⁴ Vancouver Police Department, “Report to the Vancouver Police Board, Board Report #2010C02” (2020, October 19), online: VPD <https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/agenda/2020/1029/SP-5-2-2010C02-2020-015.pdf>

⁵ Mike Hager, “Developer’s \$1-million donation to Vancouver police charity raises alarm” (2021, February 22), online: Globe & Mail <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-private-money-donated-in-vancouver-for-public-policing-of-the-downtown/>

⁶ Karin Larsen, “2 Vancouver police officers caught on video posing with dead man on Third Beach” (2021, February 26), online: CBC News <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-police-posing-dead-body-beach-1.5933589>

⁷ Union of BC Indian Chiefs, “Indigenous Youth Condemn VPD Brutality and Charges Laid for Peaceful Sit-In; Call on Canada to End Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion” (2021, February 22), online: UBCIC https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/condemn_vpd_brutality_and_charges_laid_for_peaceful_sit_in_calls_on_canada_to_end_tmj

⁸ Braided Warriors, BLM-Vancouver & Defund 604 Network, “OPEN LETTER: regarding the violent arrests of Braided Warriors on February 19, 2021” (2021, February 27), online: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxxh8FrE4n6309ndUpXj3r2ehDFcxYwFNjkO9fSvRv3KkhgA/viewform>

- 2 VPD officers were charged on December 8, 2020; stemming from the violent arrest of Jamiel Moore-Williams in 2018⁹
- IIO Investigation 2021-025 (Dog bite @ KT Tent City/Strathcona Park)
- IIO Investigation 2021-006 (Fatal incident at Hastings & Princess)
- IIO Investigation 2021-004 (Police shooting at Powell & Princess)
- IIO Investigation 2020-292 (Fatal incident at Terminal Ave Tim Hortons)
- IIO Investigation 2020-262 (Dog bite from PSD)
- IIO Investigation 2020-267 (Fatal incident at Hastings between Abbott & Carrall)
- IIO Investigation 2020-191 (Serious injury - dog bite @ Main & Hastings)
- IIO Investigation 2020-243 (Serious injury @ Kingsway -2900 Block)

The harms of policing and criminalization include lasting physical, emotional, social, and psychological impacts. During 2020 Budget Proceedings, numerous speakers sought to highlight the harms of criminalization and the lasting impact of police violence - particularly for Black and Indigenous communities, unhoused neighbours, sex working communities, and people who use illicit substances.^{10,11}

The City of Vancouver has the opportunity to support initiatives that augment the role of community-based crisis response. In addition to transparent data and budgets, the City must design permanent funding for programs that prioritize this work as part of the path to defunding the police. The funds to support this work are available if Council defunds the VPD in its 2022 budget¹². Many of these programs already exist, but organizations must continuously expand and stretch their mandate and services with a fraction of what the municipal police force receives annually. While Council voted to freeze police expenditures at 2020 levels, there has been no clear response from the Vancouver Police Board. We continue to advocate for the importance of redirecting public funds towards directly-impacted communities.

In conclusion, we emphasize that we are calling on the City of Vancouver to:

1. Divest from policing and invest in community-based services, specifically non-police interventions that support people who are impacted by homelessness, toxic drug supply, mental health distress, and those working in informal/grey economies, such as sex work.

⁹ Office of the Police Complaints Commissioner, “NEWS RELEASE: Statement from the Office of Police Complaint Commissioner regarding criminal charges involving Vancouver Police officers” (2020, December 8), online: OPCC <https://opcc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-12-08-News-Release-Moore-Williams.pdf>

¹⁰ Vancouver Police Department, “Report to the Vancouver Police Board” (2021, January 30), online: Vancouver Police Department <https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/agenda/2021/0218/4-2-2102G01-Board-Report.pdf>

¹¹ BC Civil Liberties Association, “Coalition of Organizations Call for End to Vancouver Police Department Trespass Prevention Program” (2021, January 28), online: BCCLA <https://bccla.org/news/2021/01/coalition-of-organizations-call-for-end-to-vancouver-police-department-trespass-prevention-program/>

¹² BCAPOM et al., “Joint Statement Re: Vancouver Police Department 2021 Operating Budget” (2020, December 14), online: Pivot Legal Society https://www.pivotlegal.org/joint_statement_re_vancouver_police_department_2021_operating_budget

2. Provide and make available to directly-impacted groups and organizations the expenditures associated with this *Decriminalizing Poverty* Motion, and future related work, supported with transparent reporting, including line item details.
3. Design permanent funding for programs that prioritize the work of decriminalizing poverty and supporting community-led safety initiatives as part of the path to defunding the police.

Sincerely,

Battered Women’s Support Services

BC Civil Liberties Association

BC Association of People on Methadone

Black Lives Matter - Vancouver

Centre for Gender & Sexual Health Equity

Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War

Defund 604 Network

DTES Women's Centre

Hogan’s Alley Society

Metro Vancouver Consortium

Overdose Prevention Society

PACE Society

Pivot Legal Society

Restoring Collective

Sanctuary Health

SWAN

Tenant Overdose Response Organizers

Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users

WISH Drop-In Centre Society

WePress

cc: Paul Mochrie, Acting City Manager
 Sandra Singh, General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services
 Mary-Clare Zak, Managing director, Social Policy and Projects Division
 Alycia Fridkin, Social Planner II, Social Policy and Projects Division
 Sylvia Green, Planning Analyst, Social Policy and Projects Division
 Stephanie Johanssen, Executive Director, Vancouver Police Board

Background

Decriminalizing Poverty and Supporting Community-led Safety Initiatives Motion

The following motion was unanimously approved by Vancouver City Council at the July 2020 Standing Committee of Council on Policy and Strategic Priorities meeting.¹³

A. Ask the police board to itemize the work they do that is related to mental health, homelessness, drug use, sex work, and the amount of money spent on it, including the number of tickets issued from enforcing related by-laws as well as the cost of this enforcement.

B. Ask staff to seek input from BLM, WISH, CCAP, BCCLA, Hogan's Alley Society, Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services Society, VANDU, PACE, DTES Women's Centre, Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, Battered Women's Support Services, PIVOT and the John Howard Society, people with lived experience, equity-seeking, and other community groups as well as housing and health providers, social service providers and non-profit societies specializing in human rights, mental health and addictions, about how the City could support existing and future community-based harm reduction and safety services.

C. Ask staff to report back as soon as possible with a plan, timeline and budget to de-prioritize policing as a response to mental health, sex work, homelessness, and substance use and to prioritize funding community-led groups, non-profit societies and others with the experience and training to deliver harm reduction and safety initiatives in these areas.

D. Direct the Mayor to inform the Vancouver Police Board that it is this Council's priority to respond to mental health, sex work, homelessness, and substance use with initiatives led by community, health agencies, social service providers and non-profit societies rather than policing.

E. Direct staff to prepare a written submission with Council's input to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act, with a special focus on how provincially funded and delivered services must be transformed in order to successfully refocus resources at the municipal level;

FURTHER THAT Council direct staff to report back with proposed recommendations for the aforementioned written submission in Q4 2020 or at a time determined after consulting the Parliamentary Committee Office regarding deadlines for written submissions.

¹³ Vancouver City Council, "Standing Committee of Council on Policy and Strategic Priorities" (2020, July 22, 23, 24 & 27), online: City of Vancouver: <https://council.vancouver.ca/20200722/documents/pspc20200722min.pdf> at pages9-17