


Joint Open Letter on Decriminalizing Poverty

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March 11, 2021

Via Email

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

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* (<https://council.vancouver.ca/20200722/documents/pspc20200722min.pdf>) (“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 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 (<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/2021-budget-building-the-budget.pdf>), costed at \$300,000, as part of the initiative to “Increase Focus on Equity and Critical Social Issues.”

“ This work must proceed quickly - the reality of police brutality and police killings has not ceased, including in the city of Vancouver.

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 Teams (<https://mediareleases.vpd.ca/2020/12/18/vpd-releases-results-from-neighbourhood-response-team/>) initiative and the creation of the Trespass Prevention Program (<https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/agenda/2020/1029/SP-5-2-2010C02-2020-015.pdf>), and most recently, news that a wealthy donor has earmarked \$100K annually to “provide additional resources to VPD officers (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-private-money-donated-in-vancouver-for-public-policing-of-the-downtown/>) who are dealing with individuals in crisis due to mental health or addiction issues,” as outlined by Vancouver Police Foundation executive director Andrea Wright.

“ There have been multiple police-involved incidents of serious harm or death, based on reports from the Independent Investigations Office of BC

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 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-police-posing-dead-body-beach-1.5933589>)” on February 24, 2021
- Violent arrests of Indigenous Youth (https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/condemn_vpd_brutality_and_charges_laid_for_peaceful_sit_in_calls_on_canada_to_end_tmx) (Braided Warriors (<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScxxh8FrE4n6309ndUpXj3r2ehDFcxYwFNjkO9fSvRv3KkhgA/viewform>)) on February 19, 2021
- 2 VPD officers were charged on December 8, 2020; stemming from the violent arrest of Jamiel Moore-Williams (<https://opcc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-12-08-News-Release-Moore-Williams.pdf>) in 2018
- 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 (<https://vancouver.ca/police/policeboard/agenda/2021/0218/4-2-2102G01-Board-Report.pdf>), numerous speakers sought to highlight the harms of criminalization and the lasting impact of police violence

(<https://bccla.org/news/2021/01/coalition-of-organizations-call-for-end-to-vancouver-police-department-trespass-prevention-program/>) - particularly for Black and Indigenous communities, unhoused neighbours, sex working communities, and people who use illicit substances.

“ The City of Vancouver has the opportunity to support initiatives that augment the role of community-based crisis response.

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 budget

(https://www.pivotlegal.org/joint_statement_re_vancouver_police_department_2021_operating_budget). 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.
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 Vancouver

Tenant Overdose Response Organizers
Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users
WISH Drop-In Centre Society
WePress

cc:

Paul Mochrie, Acting City Manager
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Stephanie Johanssen, Executive Director, Vancouver Police Board

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 by Sozhan Sayehilahi
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