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Living in Community ends formal partnership with Vancouver Police Department

After sixteen years of attempts to build a positive working relationship with the Vancouver Police Department (VPD), Living in Community's Steering Committee has decided to remove the VPD as a Steering Committee member.

Living in Community (LIC) is a non-profit organization based in Vancouver that brings diverse stakeholders together to collaboratively improve the health and safety of sex workers and address concerns about sex work. LIC's Steering Committee includes individuals with current or former experience in sex work, sex workers' advocacy and service organizations, the City of Vancouver, Indigenous organizations, business organizations, anti-violence organizations, and other community-based organizations with an interest in the rights of sex workers.

LIC began as a community initiative in 2004 following significant distrust and concern between sex workers and police in Vancouver. LIC was designed to begin new conversations among the VPD, sex workers, and other community members to build trust and work toward shared goals through respectful collaboration.

After sixteen years of trying to build this partnership with the VPD, Living in Community has decided that many actions of the VPD have not been in accordance with these principles of mutual respect and collaboration. Several events over the past few years, both pertaining to LIC and happening within broader community circles, have led to decreased trust of police among many sex workers, sex work organizations, and their allies in Vancouver. The issues that have affected Living in Community's relationship with the VPD include Detective Constable Jim Fisher's misconduct case and conviction, the subsequent investigation into three VPD Counter Exploitation Unit officers in connection with the misconduct of Detective Constable Fisher, the VPD placing one of LIC's Steering Committee members under investigation, and the VPD declining on several occasions to work with LIC to provide sex work training to VPD officers. Further, several Steering Committee members have for years reported concerning incidences of police surveillance and harassment of sex workers in multiple Vancouver neighbourhoods, which have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with exacerbated effects. Finally, it is worth noting that these developments have occurred within the context that while sex work itself is legal in Canada, most other aspects of sex work remain criminalized (including purchasing sexual services and communicating for the purposes of purchasing sexual services), leaving many stakeholders feeling a fundamental difference to police agencies which have a mandate to enforce the laws.

In recognition of these concerns, in May 2019 LIC's Steering Committee decided to temporarily remove the VPD as a Steering Committee member. In 2020, the Steering Committee held a series of meetings to discuss this issue thoroughly, and decided to officially remove the VPD as a member. Given the issues stated above, LIC's repeated efforts to work with the VPD, and the lack of tangible

changes in the VPD's sex work-related policies and practices, LIC has come to recognize that it is impossible to both uphold our community commitments and have the VPD on our Steering Committee. Moreover, it is imperative that the relationship between LIC and any member of our Steering Committee must be one that is reciprocal in nature, and this is not what we have seen overall throughout our relationship with the VPD.

This decision was not made as a result of the renewed movements in summer 2020 to defund or abolish policing agencies. This decision was made in consideration of the specific history between LIC and the VPD, including both the accomplishments and the challenges faced within the past sixteen years. However, we note that the rise of these movements represents a boiling over of longstanding concerns that many community members have had about community safety, access to justice, and accountability of policing agencies that LIC and other groups have been advocating on for many years.

While this decision ends LIC's formal partnership with the VPD, we are all members of this community and therefore are always in relationship. This transition point is an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship, and LIC is open to a future change in the relationship. However, in order for this relationship to repair and transform into one that is centered in transparency, respect, and reciprocity, there must first be a clearly demonstrated commitment from the VPD to protecting and advancing the rights of sex workers.

VPD Chief Constable Adam Palmer and Deputy Chief Constable Laurence Rankin were informed of this decision on November 30, 2020.

Living in Community supports sex workers and sex work organizations engaging or disengaging with the VPD in the various ways they may choose to. LIC will continue to bring together diverse stakeholders to build relationships and address community concerns around safety and health, centering the needs and experiences of sex workers.

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