



Living in
Community

Living in Community Submission to the 2021 Federal Pre-Budget Consultation

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On behalf of Living in Community, we are writing to offer several recommendations for the federal government's 2021 pre-budget consultation regarding the importance of providing increased funding and support for sex worker safety in Canada.

[Living in Community](#) (LIC) is a non-profit organization in British Columbia that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively improve the health and safety of sex workers and address community concerns as they arise. We focus on getting at root causes of issues like stigma, poverty, and gender-based violence that create systemic vulnerability not only for sex workers, but also for other community members. We undertake public education, advocacy, and sharing our unique model of collaboration with the goal of creating communities that are healthy and safe for everyone.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified, Living in Community and our stakeholders have become increasingly concerned about the health and safety of sex workers. This crisis is laying bare the inequalities that already exist in our society and exposing which groups and individuals are most vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and poverty. As your government begins to plan for an economic transition out of COVID-19, while supporting Canadians during the remainder of the crisis, it is more vital than ever to prioritize those who have fallen through the cracks for far too long.

We have heard from our stakeholders that the below recommendations are urgently needed. Background information for each recommendation is provided following this list.

Recommendations

Individual Income Supports:

1. Ensure that economic supports for workers are accessible to all sex workers, irrespective of immigration status.
2. Give funds to frontline organizations to distribute cash supports to sex workers ineligible for government supports.

Organizational Supports:

3. Ensure that government funding explicitly supports the safety of sex workers, not only victims of human trafficking and those looking to exit sex work.
4. Fund peer-based interventions to improve sex worker safety, including bad date reporting.

Background

Individual Income Supports:

1. Ensure that economic supports for workers are accessible to all sex workers, irrespective of immigration status.

Sex workers were among the first to see a sudden loss of income due to COVID-19 and are struggling to get through each day. While some sex workers have been able to pivot to online work or find alternative sources of income, not all sex workers have such flexibility. Im/migrant and street-based sex workers in particular have faced a total loss of income, and racism and xenophobia have led to even greater discrimination against im/migrant sex workers and sex workers of colour.

Further, as self-employed workers, many sex workers are not eligible for Employment Insurance or paid sick leave to protect their health and that of others. While the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the subsequent Canada Recovery Benefit have provided an important stop-gap for many workers and have been available to some sex workers, the eligibility criteria and application process make them inaccessible for many including those who are street-based or reliant on cash for survival.

If workers did not file their 2019 taxes or did not earn the \$5,000 minimum in the past year, they cannot apply. Some sex workers may not have a bank account, and others may fear sharing their personal information with a government due to uncertainty over how the information will be used. Sex workers without a fixed address have difficulty applying for government programs, and migrant sex workers and those with precarious immigration status have been ineligible to apply for CERB and CRB. Finally, for sex workers who are paid through bank e-transfers, receiving government supports through direct deposit may risk their clients' confidentiality, meaning these workers would avoid signing up for government programs that require banking information.

We therefore recommend that the eligibility criteria and application processes for any and all economic supports and programs for workers must be accessible to all sex workers, irrespective of immigration status. The \$5,000 minimum income threshold for eligibility should be removed.

2. Give funds to frontline organizations to distribute cash supports to sex workers ineligible for government supports.

Due to the concerns identified above, income and employment supports are often extremely difficult for sex workers to access. As a complement to our first recommendation, providing cash supports allows people to fulfill their individual needs with dignity and in a way more appropriate to their specific circumstances. Providing cash allows the government to overcome barriers to supporting marginalized individuals who may not have identification documents, employment records, or bank accounts. Further, individual cash supports can best be facilitated by support services that recipients already know and trust in their own communities.

Even as workers in other industries are able to return to their work safely, many sex workers will continue to face the inability to work coupled with barriers to existing financial supports. We therefore join WISH Drop-In Centre Society, PACE Society, and SWAN Vancouver in recommending that frontline organizations be given funds to distribute cash supports to sex workers.¹ We propose that Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) may be best positioned to distribute this funding.

Organizational Supports:

3. Ensure that government funding explicitly supports the safety of sex workers, not only victims of human trafficking and those looking to exit sex work.

From our work over the past 16 years, we know there are many misunderstandings about sex work which can have a dangerous impact on policy and funding priorities. One common conflation is between sex work and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trafficking and sex work are different and need to be recognized as such. Often, little to no support is available for those

¹ Letter from WISH Drop In Centre Society, PACE Society, and SWAN Vancouver to The Honourable Minister Morneau, April 17 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VIREJQ9rOOxtE8u4SdZRiBeCueps-zh8/view>

engaged in sex work who have not been trafficked, but who do experience violence, stigma, or barriers to accessing services and supports. Focusing on trafficking also erases the experiences of male, transgender, non-binary, and LGBTQ2SI sex workers, whose experiences the common trafficking narrative fails to capture.

A second misunderstanding can occur when funding and policy does focus on sex work, but from a perspective of encouraging folks to exit sex work. Not all sex workers are in a place to or want to exit sex work, yet they still have a fundamental right to safety and security.

Simply focusing on trafficking or on exiting dangerously reduces the programs and interventions available. Often, government funding available tends to focus on reducing trafficking or on exiting sex work as the only or major goals, with sex worker safety as an afterthought if it is included. This government must ensure that it is not inadvertently perpetuating a victim-blaming narrative through problematic framing in funding streams. Everyone has the right to safety, regardless of the kind of work they are engaged in; moreover, improving sex worker safety will also reduce trafficking as it reduces vulnerability to the conditions under which traffickers thrive.

Therefore, we recommend that Budget 2021 must include sufficient funding for programs and services that promote the safety and security of all individuals who engage in sex work, regardless of gender, circumstance or type of sex work, and without the sole focus being on exiting or trafficking services. In the past year, we have been pleased to see the federal government provide funding that sex work support organizations have been able to receive, particularly COVID-19 emergency funds provided through Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE). We recommend that this practice continue and be increased, such that organizations explicitly supporting the safety and health of sex workers can receive sufficient funding to do their work. Sex work organizations should be funded before organizations that want to eradicate the sex industry.

4. Fund peer-based interventions to improve sex worker safety, including bad date reporting.

Sex workers in British Columbia experience higher rates of violence than the general population, while Indigenous, homeless, im/migrant, and trans sex workers also face intersecting vulnerabilities. The majority of this violence is never reported to authorities due to multiple interacting barriers, and many opportunities to provide supports are missed.

These concerns have been heightened through COVID-19. The severe drop in income for sex workers, or drop in other income, has led to sex workers feeling unable to say no to dates, even those that may be unsafe. The geographies of work have shifted, and among those who remained on stroll were some individuals who were incredibly vulnerable due to homelessness and severe mental health concerns. Frontline organizations we work with also described more and more reports of violence against people who sell or trade sex, including being robbed of food, drugs, clothing and PPE, in addition to experiencing heightened sexual violence.

Bad date and aggressor reporting (BDAR), often simply called bad date reporting, is a grassroots response to legal and social barriers in the justice system. In BDAR systems, sex workers will report violent incidents or safety concerns to peers, outreach workers or online databases. This information is then distributed to other sex workers. Positively regarded within sex work communities, BDAR systems exist in some urban centres including Vancouver, Victoria, Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg. These local systems are often linked to outreach services in their respective sites.



Although a proven tool for responding to violence against sex workers, BDAR and associated safety education and supports do not exist in the majority of the country, with particular gaps in smaller, rural cities and towns. Further, BDAR systems often operate in silos with limited distribution, often targeting one or another segment of the sex industry, based on different age groups, genders and geography, with inconsistent formats/media, limited resources dedicated to documentation practice, information sharing and coordinating follow up supports.

In British Columbia, LIC and four frontline sex work support organizations have received funding from the Law Foundation of BC² and a family foundation in BC to design and implement a provincially-integrated BDAR system. This provincial bad date reporting system will link the existing local reporting systems and will include all sectors of the sex work industry in one integrated system. Local bad date reporting systems, once coordinated into a provincial system, will be more efficient for sex workers to use, can identify serial offenders or trends, and will increase sex workers' access to critical information.

The BC BDAR system will be the first of its kind in Canada and one of few geographically linked BDAR systems worldwide. We hope that, with dedicated funding, other regions across Canada will be able to expand their existing local BDAR systems and create geographically-linked systems. We therefore recommend that federal funding support peer-based safety interventions like bad date reporting in jurisdictions across the country.

² First of its kind provincial Bad Date Reporting system for sex workers to be created in B.C., <https://livingincommunity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BDAR-Press-Release-Final-.pdf>