

**Presentation In Support of the Budget 2021 recommendation for a Sex Worker Drop-in
Centre along Kingsway: Speaking Notes**

December 1, 2020

Halena Seiferling, Living in Community

Good evening, Mayor and Council, and thank you for the opportunity to speak tonight.

My name is Halena Seiferling and I am the Director of Community Engagement with Living in Community, a non-profit organization based here in Vancouver on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. I am speaking in support of the initiative included in the Budget 2021 recommendations to develop a sex worker drop-in centre on Kingsway, and wanted to share why this is such a critical and exciting proposal. I don't want to repeat too much of what Mebret Beyene from WISH shared earlier today, but I will add a few comments from our work with Living in Community, which might also address some of Councilor Carr's earlier question around community organizations and supports.

This recommendation follows up from a Council directive on this matter in 2018, coming from the Mayor's Overdose Emergency Task Force report, which we are pleased to see staff bring forward now for your consideration.

Living in Community is a multi-stakeholder initiative that brings together diverse community members to build relationships and address community concerns, centering the health and safety of sex workers. One of the projects we facilitate is SAFE in Cedar Cottage, a network of community members and neighbourhood stakeholders who meet regularly to discuss and address sex work concerns along Kingsway in the Cedar Cottage area. This project was created in 2014 to help address the lack of service providers around the Kingsway stroll, and robust community engagement was done at that time through interviews, group meetings, surveys, and conversations at community events. This work brought to life the dynamics between businesses, service providers, sex workers, and other residents.

A key finding from this initial community engagement was the urgent need for a drop-in space for sex workers on Kingsway. Sex work along Kingsway has been present since at least the 1990s, and this is one of the most consistent strolls in the city. There is diverse sex work that happens in the neighbourhood; however, there are few services available. Sex workers who work there have for decades expressed concern about their isolation, the levels of violence they

experience, and the lack of access to support services. They do not feel safe, and they also do not want to or cannot go to the Downtown Eastside, where many services are located, in order to access supports.

There has been historical, cyclical conflict between sex workers and other residents in the Cedar Cottage area, stretching back several decades. With the increasing development and gentrification happening more recently in this neighbourhood, there has again been increased conflict, and some parents and business owners express concern that there may be negative impacts of sex work happening in their community.

Yet, we know that when there are more services for sex workers, there is less conflict between residents. We all agree that everyone in the community deserves to be healthy, safe, and respected. When sex workers have a safe place to go to get the support and services they need, it benefits everyone. And like other workers, sex workers in the neighbourhood have a right to safety and dignity.

Earlier this year, we were very pleased to see the City implement a temporary washroom trailer on the stroll: the Kingsway Community Station operated by RainCity Housing. We know that this station has made a significant difference in the safety, security, health, and dignity of those who work on the stroll as they have a place to warm up, use a bathroom, check in with peers, and access supports. This has been especially necessary during COVID-19, as we know that sex workers have been hit extremely hard with a complete loss of income and have often faced increased levels of violence. In addition, many sex workers have also been unable to access government benefits during this pandemic that other workers receive. However, even now that the Kingsway Community Station will be indoors for the winter, this station is temporary, and is not a long-term solution to the needs of those in the community.

Having a permanent, accessible drop-in centre along Kingsway will be critical to ensuring the safety and health of sex workers in the community. Moreover, with the strong community support that exists in the SAFE in Cedar Cottage group, we know that many diverse stakeholders can work together to make the drop-in centre successful. The SAFE in Cedar Cottage group members include service providers, health and harm reduction organizations, anti-violence organizations, neighbourhood houses, sex workers, and other residents, in addition to liaising with the City's sex work social planners. By bringing these folks together in conversation at our monthly meetings, now held virtually, we continue to build trust, connection, and understanding among diverse community members.

We hope that this recommendation to you today will be implemented to ensure that sex workers and other residents in the Kingsway area will be safe and supported. Thank you.