



Living in
Community

**Submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government
Services: Annual Budget Consultation**

From Living in Community Society

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Background

On behalf of Living in Community Society, we are writing to offer recommendations for Budget 2022 regarding the importance of increased funding and support for sex workers across BC. As the province begins to rebuild from COVID-19 – and given this government’s focus on an inclusive recovery for everyone – our recommendations speak to the need for that lens to include sex workers.

[Living in Community](#) (LIC) is a provincial non-profit organization based in Vancouver. Centering sex workers’ rights, Living in Community convenes diverse stakeholders in order to: understand a range of experiences and perspectives; inform sex work-related policies and practices of governments, service providers, and community organizations; and provide education and training to support these goals. We focus on root causes of issues including colonization, capitalism, criminalization, racism, and discrimination that create systemic vulnerability for sex workers, and we seek to build understanding and common ground with other community members.

LIC also facilitates the BC Sex Work Support Service Network, a group of over twenty organizations that provide frontline services, supports, and advocacy with and for sex workers in their communities. Network members are located across British Columbia and the Yukon. The Network meets regularly to share best practices, learn from each other, and strengthen our unified voice for sex workers’ rights across BC.

This year, we know that sex workers and sex worker-serving organizations across the province are continuing to experience devastating impacts from COVID-19. Many sex workers have experienced a significant or complete loss of income, have been ineligible for federal government supports such as the CERB or EI, and have struggled to access community services because many frontline organizations have had to reduce their services and hours. Moreover, since provincial support programs like the BC Emergency Benefit required that applicants be first approved for the CERB, sex workers were also ineligible for provincial support programs.

For the Budget 2022 consultation, we surveyed Network members on their priorities and we therefore include their perspectives in our submission here. Our recommendations focus on the need for increased core funding for support services and programs that would improve sex workers’ safety and wellbeing as valued members of our communities across British Columbia. These recommendations are further explained below:

- 1. Ensure that provincial funding explicitly supports the safety of sex workers, not only victims of trafficking and those looking to exit sex work.**
- 2. Provide funding to sex work support organizations across the province as an economic inclusion and recovery priority.**
- 3. Provide funding toward the provincial Bad Date and Aggressor Reporting system which is being developed.**

Recommendations

- 1. Ensure that provincial funding explicitly supports the safety of sex workers, not only victims of trafficking and those looking to exit sex work.**

From our work over the past 17 years, we know there are many misunderstandings about sex work which can have a dangerous impact on policy and funding priorities. As we have noted in past presentations to this Committee, past budget consultation reports have included the need to address

gender-based violence and human trafficking; however, still relatively little support is available for those engaged in sex work who have not been trafficked, but who do experience violence.

Trafficking and sex work are different and need to be recognized as such. In addition, sex workers who are not in a place to or do not want to exit sex work still have a fundamental right to safety and security. Focusing only on trafficking or exiting dangerously reduces the programs and interventions available. Focusing on trafficking also erases the experiences of male, transgender, non-binary, and LGBTQ2SI sex workers, whose experiences the dominant trafficking narrative fails to capture.

Therefore, we recommend that Budget 2022 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. Sex work organizations should also be funded before organizations that work to eradicate the sex industry; in other cases of violence affecting marginalized individuals, it would be unheard of to fund organizations that aim to abolish these folks' chosen and legal work, so the same principle should apply to sex workers.

2. Provide funding to sex work support organizations across the province as an economic inclusion and recovery priority.

Since most sex workers did not benefit from the provincial government's previous support programs for which other workers were eligible, like the BC Emergency Benefit, providing more support to frontline organizations now is urgent to rectify some of this previous exclusion. We therefore recommend that the provincial government connect with frontline sex worker-serving organizations across the province and proactively provide them with funding in Budget 2022 as a priority line item for COVID-19 recovery and economic inclusion.

Given the barriers that many sex workers have experienced in accessing government supports during the pandemic, we recommended last year in a letter to several Ministers and MLAs that funds could instead be given to frontline organizations to distribute cash supports to sex workers in their communities. 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. One year later, we believe that providing funding in Budget 2022 to these frontline organizations is crucial to support this group of workers, who have so far been left out of other worker supports, to get back on their feet as we recover from COVID-19.

We would be happy to help facilitate these connections through our work with the BC Sex Work Support Service Network. The Network is comprised of both sex work organizations and their allies like anti-violence organizations and women's shelters which provide services to sex workers where no local sex work organization exists.

These local organizations know their communities best, and many are already facing funding shortages and barriers in tracking down and applying for new grants every year. This has become even more of an urgent need due to COVID-19, whereby many frontline services have had to close or reduce their programming to comply with public safety measures, and are now facing an increased need for their services while they are understaffed, under-funded, and burnt out. We therefore recommend that sex work support organizations across the province receive proactive funding to improve sex worker safety, wellbeing, and inclusion, allowing them to focus on providing the programming their communities need instead of applying to endless short-term project grants.

3. Provide funding toward the provincial Bad Date and Aggressor Reporting system which is being developed.

A provincial Bad Date and Aggressor Reporting (BDAR) system is an urgent need for sex workers in British Columbia. ‘Bad dates’ refers to cases where sex workers experience harassment, assault, or other types of violence while working. In BDAR systems, information is collected about the perpetrators and then distributed to other sex workers to screen their clients and increase their safety. The BC Sex Work Support Service Network has reiterated the importance of BDAR systems, particularly for sex workers who travel and work across the province, as well as for sex workers in communities with intensive resource extraction.

In the past year, work has begun on a provincial BDAR system. In January 2021, five organizations who came together as a working group to launch this project – PACE Society in Vancouver, Peers Victoria, SWAN Vancouver, WISH Drop In Centre Society in Vancouver, and Living in Community – successfully received three years of funding from the Law Foundation of BC and a private family foundation to research, develop, and create a provincial BDAR system.

The BC BDAR system will be the first of its kind in Canada, and one of a select few geographically linked reporting systems internationally. The project will include province-wide community consultations with the BC Sex Work Support Service Network and other sex workers across BC to ensure this system will meet the needs of the diversity of sex workers in rural and urban areas of BC.

We know that the provincial government is interested in this project and wants to support it. Last year, we were pleased to see this committee include our recommendation for provincial funding of this project in its budget consultation report. Further, Living in Community received funding this past March through the Province’s Civil Forfeiture funding stream to support this initial stage of the BC BDAR project, and Living in Community has also met with the Honourable David Eby, Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Housing, and the Honourable Mike Farnworth, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General, to provide an overview of this project.

While the BC BDAR project is off to an exciting start, the provincial government must support this project through increased funding. Sex workers who engage with the justice system to report bad dates repeatedly experience stigmatization and vulnerability, which is why many prefer sex worker-led BDAR systems instead. This means that the provincial government’s existing legal and justice systems are not meeting the needs of all British Columbians, and therefore the government must support the BC BDAR system as a complementary program. Investing in community-led supports like the BC BDAR system is also more humane – not to mention more cost-effective – than letting violence occur and then addressing the subsequent health, legal, and justice interventions needed.

In these early years of the BC BDAR project, provincial government funding would ensure that more sex workers and sex worker-serving organizations can participate fully in the project’s education sessions, consultations, and feedback sessions to ensure that this tool will meet the needs of sex workers across BC. More funding would also support enhanced research and analysis to ensure we can adequately measure the impacts this tool will have.

Thank you for accepting our submission in this consultation. In closing, we will quote one of the BC Sex Work Support Service Network members when asked why participating in this Budget 2022 consultation is important to them: “Sex Trade Workers deserve to be treated as equals within the workforce and compensated the same as any other worker. [We need] safety for Sex Trade Workers and [we need to] eliminate the stigma.”