

Presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services for the 2023 Provincial Budget: Speaking Notes

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For its 2023 provincial budget consultation, the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services changed its consultation process. Rather than accepting written submissions, organizations could complete the Committee's online survey or submit recommendations through the online submission form, in addition to signing up to present directly to the Committee.

Living in Community presented to the Committee on June 14th, and also sent in our two recommendations via the online submission form. Below are our speaking remarks from our presentation.

Good morning Committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today from the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

My name is Halena Seiferling and I am the Executive Director of Living in Community. Living in Community, or LIC for short, is a provincial non-profit, based in Vancouver, that does education and training, policy advocacy, and community development across the province to advance a sex workers' rights-based approach to policies and practices.

LIC also convenes the BC Sex Work Support Service Network, which is a group of twenty five organizations that provide frontline services, supports, and advocacy for sex workers in their communities across all regions of BC.

In Budget 2023, we call on the Province to invest in peer-led, person centered, and localized services and responses for sex workers. This focus is informed by our work with the BC Network and by what they have seen in their own communities, both before the COVID-19 pandemic due to decades of criminalization and stigma, and as a result of how COVID-19 has further exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

The past few years have been extremely difficult for sex workers and sex worker-serving organizations. At the beginning of COVID-19, sex workers completely or significantly lost their income, and many struggled to access community services because frontline organizations had to reduce their services and hours. During the pandemic, many sex workers were ineligible for both federal and provincial supports such as the CERB and the BC Emergency Benefit, and faced intensified stigma and judgement about their work as well as increased surveillance by law enforcement.

Now, we are in the next phase of difficulty: with the declaration that the pandemic is 'over' comes the end of so-called "emergency" temporary COVID-19 funding. However, in the past two years, this province's overlapping crises around the toxic drug supply, poverty, and homelessness have gotten worse, and staff at frontline organizations are experiencing mental health crises of their own as they struggle to provide the services their communities need. In short: frontline organizations are being asked to do even more than before, at the same time that COVID-19 funding is ending.

All of this is also happening within a resurgence in concern about human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Exploitation and trafficking in any labour sector is abhorrent and must be stopped; however, approaches taken here must be evidence-based. From our work over the past 18 years, we know that more criminalization, surveillance, and interference into the lives of consensual adults is not the answer. However, misguided approaches to anti-trafficking often call for these responses.

These misguided approaches lead to the criminalization of sex work, driving sex work underground. This creates unsafe working conditions, prevents sex workers from reporting violence when it does occur, makes it hard to identify true victims of human trafficking, and actually creates further systemic vulnerabilities to trafficking and exploitation. This is the system we have under the current Canadian laws.

So, while we share concerns about safety and exploitation, the approach we recommend is to ensure that local, frontline organizations and projects have the necessary resources to provide options to their communities. This approach must be taken before funding organizations whose sole aim is to end the sex industry or further criminalize people. This approach not only supports the rights of sex workers, but also ensures that sufficient services are available for victims of trafficking. Therefore our recommendations for Budget 2023 are:

- 1. Provide increased funding for frontline organizations across BC that deliver peer-led and person-centered programming.**

Peer-led programming means that peers – in this case, folks who have worked or currently work in the sex industry – have leadership roles in the creation and delivery of programs and services. Those with lived experience provide invaluable insight into what will and won't work, and they must be listened to if organizations want their programming to be effective and impactful.

Person-centered programming means that the person seeking services can choose for themselves what works best for them; they will not be forced to change behaviours or aspects of their lifestyle in order to get the services they need, and they have options to choose from.

By funding this type of programming, the Province can ensure that folks are getting the specific supports that they need without prescribing one solution that is meant to work for a variety of needs and experiences, and without further criminalizing or marginalizing people.

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

Living in Community, along with four sex work organizations in BC, is jointly guiding a three-year project to develop and create a provincial Bad Date and Aggressor Reporting system, or BDAR system. This project is an example of the type of program identified under our first recommendation. BDAR systems are peer-led tools where sex workers share information with each other to keep each other safe.

While the BC BDAR project is off to an exciting start, the provincial government must support this project through funding. Provincial funding would ensure that more sex workers and sex worker-serving organizations can participate fully in the project's consultations to ensure that this tool will meet the needs of diverse sex workers across BC.

Thank you again for hearing our recommendations today, which would both protect vulnerable folks from exploitation as well as uphold the rights of sex workers. I welcome any questions.