

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

June 15, 2023

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Living in Community presented to the Committee on June 15th, and also sent in our three recommendations via the Committee's 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 2024, we are making three recommendations for the provincial government to meet the needs of sex workers and frontline sex work support organizations across BC. These recommendations are informed by the members of the BC Network we convene, as we have surveyed members on their priorities and the needs in their communities before coming to speak to you today.

First, we call for increased funding for frontline organizations across BC that deliver peer-led and person-centered programming for sex workers. This kind of approach ensures that local, frontline organizations and projects, which know their community members best, have the necessary resources to provide options to their communities. We also ask that these types of organizations and programs receive funding before funding organizations whose sole aim is to eradicate the sex industry.

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. We know from

our work over the past 20 years that more criminalization, surveillance, and interference into the lives of consensual adults is not the answer to any concerns about safety or exploitation; access to services and resources that actually meet one's needs *is* the answer.

So not only have we heard from BC Network members that they need access to sustained, multi-year funding such that they can provide this type of programming in their communities, but we've also heard about the toll this work can take on frontline staff through burnout and other mental health challenges. This has been intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding these organizations is therefore also important to ensure that these staff, doing such vital work in all of our communities, have decent wages, benefits, and supports.

Second, we call for bold public investments that would support sex workers' rights, health, and safety, along with benefiting many others across BC. A few specific investments that we recommend here, and have called for in other consultations as well, such as the recent poverty reduction strategy consultation, are:

- accelerating a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing
- raising the social and disability income assistance rates to the poverty line
- making public transit fare-free and creating a publicly owned inter-city or inter-regional bus service, which must also integrate ferry services
- providing sufficient investment & planning around overdose deaths as a true health emergency

While each of these pieces of course includes a lot of detail and investment, overall these speak to an approach that gets at the root causes of why some British Columbians have a limited range of options available to them: poverty, colonization, criminalization, and lack of access to services, among other factors.

Third, we call for sustainable provincial funding for the BC Bad Date and Aggressor Reporting System which is being developed.

As I have spoken to this committee about before, 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. BDAR systems are peer-led tools where sex workers share information with each other to keep each other safe.

The BC BDAR project is underway, and we know this committee and this government has been receptive to learning about this project already – thank you! In order for the BDAR system to be sustainable and reliable into the future, the provincial government must support this project through sustainable funding over time.

Thank you again for hearing our recommendations today, which I will also be providing in writing after this session. I welcome any questions.