



Living in
Community

**Living in Community Submission to the 2024
Federal Pre-Budget Consultation**

info@livingincommunity.ca

August 2023



On behalf of Living in Community, we are writing to offer several recommendations for the federal government's 2024 pre-budget consultation regarding the importance of providing appropriate funding and supports for sex workers in Canada.

[Living in Community](#) (LIC) is a provincial non-profit and registered charity, based in Vancouver. Centering sex workers' rights, LIC convenes diverse stakeholders from across British Columbia and beyond 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.

In this consultation, we want to focus on structural and foundational actions which would support sex workers in Canada along with many other marginalized residents. Background information for each recommendation is provided following this list.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that government funding explicitly supports the rights and the safety of sex workers, not only victims of human trafficking and those looking to exit sex work.
2. Fund peer-based and person-centered programs to support sex workers.
3. Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing.
4. Ensure that the forthcoming Canada Disability Benefit is comprehensive and accessible for sex workers.

Background

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

From our work over the past 20 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 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 significantly 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 workers' rights and 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 2024 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 be funded prior to funding organizations that want to eradicate the sex industry.

2. Fund peer-based and person-centered programs to support sex workers.

Sex workers experience higher rates of violence than the general population, while Indigenous, homeless, im/migrant, and trans sex workers also face intersecting vulnerabilities.¹ 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 were intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The severe drop in income for sex workers led to many 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.

To support sex workers to access services and programs that work for them, we recommend funding peer-led and person-centered organizations and programs. 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 – through your funding streams, eligibility criteria, and approach overall to non-profit funding – this government 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. More criminalization, surveillance, and interference into the lives of consenting adults is not the answer to concerns about safety or exploitation; access to services and resources that actually meet one's needs is the answer.

3. Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing.

Housing is a major concern for diverse sex workers. Many street-based sex workers are homeless, underhoused, or are living in substandard housing that is unsanitary, infested with vermin, and

¹ Benoit, C (2016). Lack of Confidence in Police Creates a Blue Ceiling for Sex Workers Safety. Canadian Public Policy. Volume 42 Issue 4, December 2016, pp. 456-468.

unsafe, particularly for women. Some individuals may be trading sex simply to have a place to sleep overnight in circumstances where they can exercise little choice. Other sex workers may be couch-surfing or staying in shelters where rates of sexual assault is very high.

Many sex workers with housing experience discrimination and stigma when trying to work from home, or struggle to find housing that suits their work needs. Being able to bring a client into one's own space is far safer than doing sex work on the street, and yet many sex workers live in housing where there are guest bans.

The housing crisis, in BC and across the country, is immense, and must require action from all levels of government. The federal government has a considerable role to play in creating more housing, providing incentives and levers for other governments to create more housing, and providing leadership and a clear direction toward an end to homelessness and precarious housing.

4. Ensure that the forthcoming Canada Disability Benefit is comprehensive and accessible for sex workers.

Many sex workers live with a disability. Though comprehensive data across the country is lacking, 73% of sex workers in a recent study in British Columbia identified as disabled.²

For many people with physical and/or mental disabilities, sex work may be an attractive and viable job because it may bring more flexibility in hours, work settings, and remote work options. At the same time, people with disabilities incur more costs than their non-disabled peers, which may lead some to seek out additional sources of income, like sex work. As noted in the same recent BC research report, "sex workers with disabilities pointed to numerous disability-related costs that push them into sex work they wouldn't do otherwise, for example: medications, assistive devices, replacing items due to memory issues, and specialized dietary needs."³

Due to the stigma and criminalization surrounding sex work, workers often experience barriers claiming or benefitting from government income assistance programs. Many sex workers are not eligible for Employment Insurance or paid sick leave, as they cannot legally be employees. When federal COVID-19 benefits were offered, including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the subsequent Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB), the eligibility criteria and application process were inaccessible for many sex workers including those who are street-based or reliant on cash for survival. And, if workers did not file their 2019 taxes or did not earn the \$5,000 minimum in the previous year, they could not apply.

Moreover, if sex workers were already receiving disability benefits when CERB was introduced, they were not eligible to receive CERB. For sex workers "who were unable to access the CERB due to already receiving disability assistance, contrasts between the CERB amount (~\$2000/month) and existing disability assistance rates (~\$1300/month) highlighted the disposability of people with disabilities by policymakers."⁴

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

² Machat, S. et al (2023). By Us, For Us: A Needs and Risk Assessment of Sex Workers in the Lower Mainland and Southern Vancouver Island. Transitions Metro Vancouver Consortium. https://wish-vancouver.net/content/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/by_us_for_us_-_a_needs_and_risks_assessment_of_sex_workers_in_the_lower_mainland_and_southern_vancouver_island_-_web.pdf

³ Ibid, pp. 14

⁴ Ibid, pp.14

without a fixed address have difficulty applying for government programs, and migrant sex workers and those with precarious immigration status were 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.

Based on this context, we recommend that the forthcoming Canada Disability Benefit must be comprehensive and accessible for sex workers. While we will defer to disability advocacy organizations and social policy experts on the specifics of the benefit – and we look forward to following the consultation process beginning this August⁵ – we recommend the benefit should include the following principles, and that Budget 2024 be properly resourced to uphold these principles:

- The amount should be enough to “[e]nable people with disabilities to meet their needs and live with dignity. This includes having the income to pay for basic needs including housing, food, and clothing.”⁶
- Based on the CERB being \$2,000 per month (in 2020, prior to recent historic inflation), the monthly amount should be at least equivalent to CERB in 2023 dollars, and should be indexed to inflation.
- The process to apply and receive the benefit should be accessible, not administratively burdensome, and should include supports to help people understand it.
- There should not be clawbacks for those receiving support through another federal program, and the payment should be calculated based on individual income (rather than on household income).
- The benefit should be available to residents irrespective of immigration status.
- Administrative staff should not act on anonymous tips related to suspected sex work of applicants or recipients, as sex workers have experienced this behaviour as invasive harassment and discrimination when accessing other government supports.
- The payment should be portable, meaning one can easily move between provinces and territories without disruption in their payments.
- In addition to exemptions at the federal level, no existing provincial/territorial exemptions should be reduced as a result of the new benefit.⁷

⁵ Employment and Social Development Canada (2023). Starting the engagement process to design the Canada Disability Benefit Regulations. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/07/starting-the-engagement-process-to-design-the-canada-disability-benefit-regulations.html>

⁶ Inclusion Canada (2021). Canada Disability Benefit: A Vision and Design Outline. <https://inclusioncanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Canada-Disability-Benefit-Vision-and-Design-July-2021-FINAL.pdf>, pp 3.

⁷ Ibid