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Victoria, BC, V8W 1P6
[mayorandcouncil@victoria.ca]

ATTN: Mayor and Council – City of Victoria

Through Mayor Lisa Helps:

RE: Health, Social Services and Accountability in the Victoria Police Budget

We write to express concerns on behalf of Together Against Poverty Society (TAPS), with the proposed increase in funding to the Victoria Police Department (VICPD) through the 2019-2020 Draft Financial Plan.

In addition to the current provisional budget, past VICPD Budgets increase requests (2016-2019) have noted the impact of addictions, mental health and homelessness, in support of increased funding allocations. Past Councils have supported increases based on the narrative of police as the appropriate intervention in social supports by approving budget increases to the VICPD, while citing gaps in the social safety net and in particular a lack of supports in mental health and addictions. Historic increases to the VICPD budget, on the basis of social and health based interventions, have been approved without adequate evidence to support shifting the role of police toward roles traditionally performed by the social services and health sectors.

It is our view that these increases have unnecessarily strained police resources while increasing stigma against people from marginalised groups by presenting homelessness, mental health and poverty as matters that require a primarily criminal justice response. These resources have limited the capacity of the municipality to invest in alternative social and health base services that are desperately needed.

The City of Victoria has been vocal, along with other municipalities, in stating that mental health and addictions should be treated as health matters. To ensure that all current and future resources are appropriately allocated, we call on this Council to deny the approval of the VICPD 2019-2020 provisional budget pending the outcome of an independent audit of VICPD resource allocation toward matters that are unrelated to criminal justice, particularly the use of police resources to respond to calls involving overdoses from illicit substances.

We ask council to provide direction to the Victoria Police Board to engage a process for an immediate third party and independent efficiencies audit of existing police operations to determine the level of budgetary expenditure on non-criminal matters including but not limited to the following:

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The Law Foundation of British Columbia, United Way of Greater Victoria,
Province of British Columbia,
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and other generous donors.*

1. Calls and response to mental health related incident
2. Calls and response to overdose
3. Calls and response to overnight camping bylaw
4. Calls and response to panhandling and other survival economic activity
5. Calls and response to loitering chattel bylaw

We suggest that a timely and extensive audit is necessary in order for council to ensure that taxpayer resources are not misused through the prioritization of criminal justice responses to homelessness, mental health and addictions, over community based, peer led support services that save lives and increase the safety and security of people living in our community.

From the Voice of our Clients:

TAPS' clients regularly report on how the crisis driven nature of living in poverty is compounded by interactions with police through surveillance, daily displacement, confiscation of personal belongings, and disruption of grey market income generation necessary for survival. The following exemplify the use of police resources to respond to non-criminal matters resulting from poverty and social condition. Without additional resources these become cyclical interactions that are costly to the taxpayer and will only be effectively addressed through strengthening community supports:

1. Outdoor Sheltering: 7am wake up calls by police serve to make poverty invisible and negatively impact individual's health through exacerbating sleep deprivation and increasing anxiety.
2. Administrative Charges: Through police ordered conditions on a promise to appear, or conditions of bail and probation, individuals with disabilities and those living outside often struggle to attend for supervision appointments and court appearances. Failing to appear will result in warrant which must be enacted by police, often resulting in a period of incarceration. Despite multiple calls for reform on how police issue and ask for conditions upon release, we continue to see the VICPD dedicate an extensive amount of resources toward "administration of justice offences".
3. Redzoning: Clients barred from certain areas of downtown are sometimes forced to breach court ordered or police imposed conditions due to the need to access food, shelter, or overdose prevention sites. This breach of conditions can lead to a warrant for their arrest.
4. Police response to overdose calls during the opioid crisis: While other major jurisdictions like Vancouver have enacted policies which dictate that police should not be responding to overdoses calls as a matter of course, Victoria continues to dispatch police to these calls which are clearly health matters. Clients have indicated that the possibility of police attending to an overdose call can act as a barrier to that call being placed, especially if the individuals involved have outstanding administrative charges or conditions which could result in their incarceration.

Many of our clients have voiced negative experiences due to harassment, intimidation, and violence at the hands of law enforcement. Fear of the police is a common sentiment amongst the street community, particularly for people of colour. These experiences are reflected in a 2018 report conducted by PIVOT Legal Society based on interviews with 76 individuals from across BC:

"On the whole, study participants' reactions to engagement with police ranged from exhaustion at constant experiences of displacement, to anger as a result of a lifetime of harassment, to absolute fear. [sic] As they attempted to survive with minimal access to resources, people who took part in this study found it difficult to make sense of how the level of police attention directed toward them was connected to public safety."

Police involvement with the street community often serves as enforcement of unjust laws, suggests that poverty is inherently a threat to public safety, and perpetuates discrimination based on social condition. Increasing funds for social interventions by police into the lives of people living in poverty dismisses the life experiences repeatedly voiced by marginalized members of our community. Rather than continuing to exacerbate harm, these areas must be addressed by directing municipal funds towards improving access to basic needs for survival.

Police on Assertive Community Treatment Teams:

Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) medical outreach teams fill a needed gap in mental health and addictions services. Our clients note that ongoing support enables familiarity and opportunities to build relationships based on trust. However, our clients have also voiced frustrations with the close connection between their health and law enforcement as this introduces an element of intimidation and potential force. We recognize that certain clients of ACT teams have voiced support of police involvement but urge you to recognize that dissenting voices cannot share their concerns publicly due to fear of repercussions for doing so.

Police officers are empowered to apprehend under the *Mental Health Act* which means that individuals could be faced with enduring forced injections and/or institutionalization. Experiences with law enforcement during forced injections have been particularly traumatic for clients as well as their peer support network. Police presence increases anxiety which can negatively impact de-escalation techniques from peers and health professionals.

Overdose Crisis and Policing:

The negative impact of police inclusion in response to overdose was addressed via the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose which came into effect in May of 2017. BC Emergency Health Services notes that "while dispatchers may notify police of a suspected overdose, the presence of the police is to ensure the safety of bystanders and the responding paramedics."

We recognize that VicPD officers have offered the vital service of administering naloxone, however, immediate response to overdose within the street community is most often carried out by peers and is preferred. It is imperative that we invest in efforts to support peer networks and work to build an alternative overdose response framework for all members of our community. Citing the opioid epidemic as reason for increased funding sends the message that drug users are incapable of supporting each other and that drug use necessitates force to ensure safety.

Conclusion:

We appreciate your consideration of the experiences of our clients and urge you to reject any request for an increase in budget based on service delivery without clear and convincing evi-

dence through an independent audit showing its necessity, as well as the inability for other service providers and peer networks to respond to that need.

We also urge you to take this opportunity to communicate with the provincial government to advocate for changes to the *Police Act*, which would allow municipal governments to elect or appoint their own municipal police boards, rather than rely on provincial appointments. It is patently unfair for Mayor and Council to be delivered a demand for an increase in budget without having any control over the administrative body responsible for the oversight and operational accountability of its own police department.

Sincerely,



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