



## **Committee of the Whole Report**

For the Meeting of June 18, 2020

---

To:	June 18, 2020, Committee of the Whole	Date:	June 11, 2020
From:	Councillors Alto & Potts		
Subject:	Council Endorsement of Letter to Federal Minister re Emergency Income Support		

---

### **Background**

For some years, the City of Victoria has supported the PEERS organization and its programs and policies sustaining workers in the sex trade.

PEERS has been granted city funding sporadically since its opening, and in particular has been awarded strategic planning grants annually since 2015.

In 2014, the City of Victoria wrote to the then Prime Minister and federal government opposing that government's efforts, through proposed changes to applicable Criminal Code provisions, to effectively re-criminalize prostitution and thus recreate unsafe working conditions that endangered sex workers (Motion and letter attached).

Now, sex workers have been excluded from federal government programs seeking to redress financial losses due to COVID-19.

On May 22, women's rights and equality-seeking organizations in Canada wrote a joint letter to the federal government, calling for low-barrier emergency income supports for sex workers, who thus far have been left out of the pandemic response in Canada. The authors of that letter have made it public on Amnesty International's website, and called on organizations like the City to endorse that letter.

In response to that letter, government suggested that local organizations working with sex workers apply to the \$350 million Emergency Community Support Fund. Most sex worker rights groups and other grassroots organizations serving marginalized communities do not fit the stated criteria to apply for such funds – they are often not registered non-profits or charities, and are made up of marginalized individuals. As well, that Fund does not cover income replacements.

Three months into the pandemic, Canada continues to fail some of its most marginalized community members by neglecting to provide supports that could be available to sex workers. Government must provide low-barrier, accessible emergency income supports or to sex workers.

Many sex workers ceased their work to comply with social distancing regulations. In its response to the pandemic, the federal government has committed to ensure that everyone in

Canada has equal access to income supports. Canada's response must include low-barrier, accessible income supports for sex workers.

### **Resolution**

That Council endorse the attached letter to federal Minister Maryam Monsef, and that the Mayor write a further letter to Minister Monsef to advise her of that endorsement, with a copy to PEERS Victoria.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alto', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Councillors Alto

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be a stylized 'S' or 'P'.

Councillor Potts

**Joint letter to government from equality-seeking organizations (to be endorsed):**

May 22, 2020

Minister Maryam Monsef

Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development

22 rue Eddy Gatineau, QC J8X 2V6

RE: Emergency income supports for sex workers urgently needed

Dear Minister Monsef,

Thank you for your steadfast commitment to women's rights and gender equality, including your prompt action to mobilize funding to address the gendered impacts of the pandemic. We write at this time to urge that—further to your mandate to ensure that GBA+ is conducted of all government decisions—you ensure that sex workers and other women and gender diverse people working in informal economies and criminalized contexts, are not left out of the COVID-19 response.

Sex workers are one of the most marginalized groups in Canada. Since the start of the pandemic, many sex workers have stopped direct-contact sex work to comply with social distancing guidelines. Others are out of work with the closure of strip clubs and massage parlours. Some sex workers—including those most marginalized—are not able to stop working and face an increased risk of surveillance. Most sex workers abruptly lost all their income, but because of the precarious and criminalized nature of their work, many sex workers do not qualify for CERB or other emergency income supports.

Internationally, UNAIDS released a public statement on April 8, 2020, highlighting the concern that “as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers all over the world are experiencing hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment.” The statement noted that “when they are excluded from COVID-19 social protection responses, sex workers are faced with putting their safety, their health and their lives at increased risk just to survive.” UNAIDS “calls on all countries to take immediate, critical action, grounded in human rights principles, to protect the health and rights of sex workers” such as by ensuring “access to national social protection schemes for sex workers, including income support schemes.”

Faced with this situation, many sex workers' organizations across Canada have conducted community fundraisers, in most cases providing \$100 stipends to sex workers. But \$100 is insufficient for sex workers to cover the cost of housing, food, and other essential for their families.

Sex workers are stigmatized and targeted by the public, law enforcement and government, and many workers legitimately fear discrimination and avoid contact with government and social services. More marginalized workers may not have bank accounts. The criminalization of sex work is a direct barrier for sex workers who cannot and do not want to risk interacting with government agencies. This means that any government efforts to include these marginalized communities in emergency income supports must rely on civil society organizations with strong community connections who are best placed to receive funds and directly channel them to those who need them, and can provide anonymity and safety.

The Prime Minister said that “Only by protecting each other can we protect ourselves.” To protect each other, and to ensure that human rights are at the centre of Canada's pandemic response, the 3 federal government's pandemic response must recognize the vulnerabilities of

particular communities and be non-discriminatory. Canada must guarantee equal access to income supports for sex workers.

Minister Monsef, we call on you to take action to comply with UNAIDS' urgent recommendations. As immediate first steps that should include:

1. Urgently allocating funding to civil society organizations working directly with sex workers, with flexible granting mechanisms allowing organizations to transmit funds using pre-paid debit cards and other low-barrier methods to the communities they serve; and
2. Meeting with sex workers' rights organizations to discuss their concerns and jointly develop response strategies.

We very much welcomed your Ministry's swift action in transferring funds to Women's Shelters Canada, empowering that organization to direct funds directly to women's shelters across the country. We are asking you to do the same to ensure that some of the most marginalized women and gender diverse people are afforded the same access to emergency income supports as other people out of work across Canada.

We hope to hear back from you soon. The Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, an alliance of 26 sex worker rights groups across Canada—the majority of which are run by and for people who sell or trade sex—is available to virtually meeting with you at your earliest convenience to further discuss this matter. For more information and to schedule a meeting please email Jenn Clamen, National Coordinator, at [contact@sexworklawreform.com](mailto:contact@sexworklawreform.com). We plan to release this Open Letter publicly on May 30, and look forward to being able to include updated information about the government's response to these concerns by that time.

Thank you very much for your urgent attention to this pressing human rights issue. We look forward to hearing further from you and your officials.

Sincerely, Signed by:

1. Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights
2. Amnesty International Canada (English)
3. Amnistie internationale Canada francophone
4. BC Civil Liberties Association
5. Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform
6. Canada Without Poverty
7. Canadian Labour Congress
8. Canadian Civil Liberties Association
9. DisAble Women's Network of Canada
10. Egale Canada
11. Fédération des femmes du Québec
12. International Women's Rights Project
13. Inter Pares
14. Oxfam Canada
15. National Association of Women and the Law
16. Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)
17. Social Planning Council of Winnipeg
18. West Coast LEAF
19. Women's Legal Education & Action Fund (LEAF)
20. Women's Shelters Canada
21. YWCA Canada

Endorsed by:

1. Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic
2. Oxfam-Québec

CC: Minister Chagger Bardish, Minister of Diversity and Inclusion; Minister Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion; Minister Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health; and Minister David Lametti, Minister of Justice; Minister Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development