



VANCOUVER and DISTRICT LABOUR COUNCIL



July 14, 2020

VIA Email: **Honorable Harry Bains**, MLA, Minister of Labour – lbr.minister@gov.bc.ca

Honorable Shane Simpson, MLA, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction – sdpr.minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Ministers Bains and Simpson,

Thank you for your letter of June 11, 2020, addressing health and safety for Downtown Eastside resident, community health, and community social service workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. British Columbia has made great progress in recent weeks and months, allowing us to enjoy some cautious reprieve during the current Stage 3 reopening. However, we know that the possibility of another wave of COVID-19 cases remains a strong possibility for later this year, and this is the time to prepare.

We are happy to see that the Provincial Government has taken action to establish the Vulnerable Populations Working Group, which is working to identify and address homelessness and related issues. We note that homelessness continues to be a widespread problem, particularly for residents of the Downtown Eastside. We look forward to further action to ensure that housing is made available to all of those who need it. It's not only the right thing to do, but an important step in improving the safety of the unhoused, and the workers who provide them with important services.

We were also happy to hear that action is being taken to ensure presumptive coverage for workplace exposure to COVID-19, including retroactivity. It is critical that the necessary changes to the Workers Compensation Act be expedited to the greatest extent possible, and that it is ensured that all workers are covered by these changes.

In the month of May, 170 people died of illicit drug overdose in British Columbia. This number represented a record high for overdose deaths, the vast majority of which were linked to fentanyl poisoning. It is also notable that this is more people than have died from COVID-19 in the entire course of 2020 so far.

We applaud the steps taken to date to provide access to safer supply and encourage the province to continue this program permanently and to explore further steps to improve access. We also urge the BC Government to work with the Solicitor General to immediately decriminalize personal possession of drugs to reduce the stigma of substance use disorder and support engagement in harm reduction and treatment services. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the opioid crisis, and steps to address either of these public health emergencies also serve to help address the other.

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For front-line health and social service workers, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragile system they are employed in. Severe understaffing places incredible stress on workers battling multiple crises and the individuals they care for continue to be made even more vulnerable from the lack of adequate support. Front-line workers are essential in improving the health and wellbeing for very marginalized and stigmatized people struggling with multiple complex problems including experience of trauma, chronic substance use disorders, homelessness, mental illness, and physical disability. Low wages and poor working conditions do not honour this lifesaving work, and community health and social service employers are restrained from recruiting and retaining staff to deliver the health outcomes desired by the Government.

This also includes addressing the status of peer workers, who continue to do so much on the frontlines during the pandemic and are often not recognized as employees with all of the accompanying rights and entitlements. Now is the time to fund the expansion of paid peer worker programs, as well as initiatives to encourage social inclusion and the development of community. Rhetorically, all levels of government have celebrated the vital role of peers with direct lived experience in providing the necessary outreach expertise in connecting hard-to-reach individuals with health care and community services. For this recognition to become more than words, we urge the BC Government to help remove institutional barriers for peer workers to be formally respected. These barriers, specifically mandatory Criminal Record Checks, need to be re-examined so that peer workers, some working now for more than 20 years, can be formally accepted as health care employees – providing economic benefit for their employers, and deserving of rights preventing their exploitation. In cases where Criminal Record Checks are legitimately required, the results of such checks should not be a barrier unless there is reasonable cause to believe that a risk is posed to clients or others.

It is also critical that we all continue to do everything we can to avoid a potential outbreak in the Downtown Eastside, and to ensure that plans are in place to contain any such outbreak in the future. This includes providing appropriate PPE, cleaning supplies and funding for additional hours for cleaning, ensuring housing is available so that people have a safe space in which to physically distance or self-isolate if needed, providing sufficient washroom and handwashing facilities, and so forth. Previously, we have called for the implementation of clear guidelines for appropriate training for PPE use, developed in consultation with union's representing frontline workers. Now is the time to prepare by ensuring that all appropriate PPE, guidelines, and training are in place in case of a second wave.

Finally, we continue to assert that the key to responsive and effective pandemic response and beyond is consistent engagement in the decision making process with key stakeholders, including the unions who represent DTES workers. We remain available to share information and perspectives that will be helpful in planning the roll out of government announcements and programs.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

Yours Truly,



Stephen von Sychowski
President, VDLC

Cc: VDLC Executive Board