



January 26, 2021

TO: City of Toronto Executive Committee Members c/o Cathrine Regan

FROM: Susan Bender, Toronto Drop in Network

RE: Jan 27 EX 20.1 Community Crisis Support Service Pilot

Dear Executive Committee Members:

The community crisis support service pilots are a good example of what it means to ensure the right people are doing the job. This potential step has been won on the backs of the people who have been harmed or died during interactions with the police while they went through the intensely difficult, frightening and often unsupported experience of a mental health crises.

So I ask members of the Committee, are you really comfortable allocating a mere \$1.7 million for a project in three areas of the city only and for only one of the communities, Indigenous people, that is particularly at risk of a harmful response to health issues of this kind? With a project that will take a full year to develop when there is experience and solid knowledge and skills right here in the city and across North America to draw on.

This proposal is a small step, as some of you have said. A small step. At a time when family members, friends, communities across the city and across the world have sent a clear and heart wrenching message - we need a big leap, not small steps, and we have many programs that can be scaled up right now to move us faster and further. We call on you to also expand concrete support for grass roots initiatives and community-based services.

The Toronto Drop in Network participated in the development of the analysis and the options detailed in the report **Rethinking Community Safety: A Step Forward**. We participated because the experiences of people who come to drop-ins demand real change. People who are experiencing homelessness, who are forced to live on low or no income and who are connected to street life are diverse. They are Black. They are Indigenous. They are transfolks. They are youth. They live with mental health disabilities. They use substances. And all this collective diversity of lived experience across the population means people who are homeless are far more likely to experience violence than the housed population in this city. (Reported in, for example, Street Health Report, 2007)

I cannot even try to represent all their experiences of policing or of what a crisis intervention often looks like for them. As one community member shared with a worker recently: "When I was homeless it seemed to me that the homeless are a very easy target for cops. We have no where else to go and are treated with suspicion always, from carding to unwarranted search and often are ticketed for no reason other than trying to survive... The system isn't working! It

represses, costs money. I think all 911 calls regarding the homeless should be diverted to workers with the training and experience. That way the police can actually 'fight crime'." As community-based services, drop ins are also in a unique position of witnessing the effectiveness of alternatives to police responses to what are in reality social (economic, and political) issues. A recent consultation about policing and reform with African, Caribbean and Black drop-in program participants focused on what works: Programs that provide safe spaces to share and gather without fear of harassment and assault. Opportunities to be employed in these programs, to earn an income and to give back to the community they come from.

At drop ins, we see how important people (sometimes called peers), who “know what it is like”; who “have been through it too” are in this work. We see crisis responses by compassionate, skilled mental health workers who are able to keep everyone safe. We see people’s health and well-being improve because of caring and non-judgemental relationships with staff.

As another Torontonians connected to on drop in recommended: “Seek out people from BIPOC communities to develop and lead services to stakeholders.” Support solutions that are created by Black leadership; by Indigenous leadership; by leaders within the community of people who live with mental health issues - and by leadership of communities who have been bold enough to do things differently, with or without your support. Restorative Justice processes are being followed now in some drop ins.

When groups of African, Caribbean and Black drop-in program participants are asked to reflect on their experiences with police, they often don’t. “What will change if I share my story?” If people are sharing their stories and experiences see nothing changing, their stories are told in vain. This group called for investments in community. “People need to see changes to how services are provided in their communities to feel comfortable accessing them.”

Your current strategy to improve community safety and wellbeing is striking as much by what it does not do as by what it does. The current city budget also fails to reflect a commitment to address the deep inequities in this city that the pandemic has further revealed.

What can you do now in 2021:

1. Provide additional funding for a city-wide implementation of this project this year. The proposed pilots are yet again a short-term, fragmented, limited approach that are significantly underfunded compared to other jurisdictions. Increased funding is a key part of making a plan that’s more comprehensive, rather than nibbling away with little pilots.
2. Provide resources for appropriate safe places for people to go during a crisis and for follow up care, including case management, mental health counselling, substance use support and referrals to other services. It will take resources from all levels of government to make this happen, and the City must do its part - allocating much more than the \$500,000 /year beginning in 2022 that is imagined in this report.

As the City’s framework for the Community Safety and Wellness strategy already recognizes, this pilot is focused on reactive support. The report before you stresses that the success of the pilot models will also depend upon the existence of a community investment stream that can "support the broader service system within which the community crisis support service is situated."

You have an opportunity and a duty to look at the big picture. We urge you and all of council to commit to moving money and attention from what does not work, policing of social and health issues, to what does.

The report that TDIN contributed to, "**Rethinking Community Safety - A Step Forward for Toronto**" outlines a number of concrete opportunities.

- Expanding street outreach staff to support everyone experiencing homelessness could be achieved for \$17 million per year.
- Our 50 homeless drop-ins that currently give people a safe place to go and help them access supports and avoid conflicts with the law could be doubled for less than \$25 million per year.
- Adding a new safe-consumption site would cost \$4 million a year.
- 4 supportive housing units could be provided for the cost of one jail cell
- The number of Youth Hubs could be doubled for \$9 million
- The Game Changers programs could provide support and conflict resolution in every high school for less than \$6 million
- The number of youth outreach workers could be doubled for \$8 million, linking over 5,000 more youth to services, constructive activities and better long-term outcomes.

All of these examples, and many more outlined in our report, will mitigate crises and violence in our communities and improve community safety outcomes more immediately.

How to pay for it? TDIN adds our support to recommendations from Toronto Neighbourhood Centres:

1. Request the Police Services Board to direct their budget allocations for expanding their Mobile Crisis Intervention Teams and Neighbourhood Officers, to the proposed **Community Investment Stream** to support the pilots. We estimate this amount to be \$2.5 - 3 million
Assume additional revenues from the Provincial and Federal governments this year. Your draft budget already assumes \$860M to balance the budget. Given the Provincial and Federal responsibilities regarding mental health services and supportive housing, why not assume another \$20M or \$30M to start making headway on these critical wrap-around services?
2. Ask more of Torontonians who have more to contribute, and who have done well over the past years. Doubling the proposed residential property tax increase, with exemptions for homeowners on low or fixed incomes, would raise another \$23M. **This is the equivalent of requiring another \$22 a year per household.**

Committee members, you don't have anything to lose by being bold. But others have a lot to lose if you do nothing more than this pilot.

Sincerely,

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