

Deputation to City of Toronto Executive Committee

Re: Community Support Service Pilot (Ex20.1)

Gerstein Crisis Centre emerged out of the Mayor's Action Task Force commissioned in 1984 and co led by Reva Gerstein, a Psychologist in Toronto and Pat Capponi, a Psychiatric Survivor Activist. Our work is rooted in community based, non-coercive approaches that are grounded by the involvement and leadership of people with lived experience. We have provided a 'made in Toronto' non-police crisis alternative for over 30 years and we commend the City of Toronto on this report that seeks to strengthen existing community responses and increase the capacity for a socially just, community-led, integrated system of crisis support.

We recognize the broad community consultation that has informed this proposal. The proposed iterative approach, which allows time for greater collaboration, will contribute to the development of a successful initiative. We urge you to centre the work going forward on elevating the voices of people with lived experience of mental health and the organizations that represent them. It is essential that the expertise of lived experience is involved at all levels of the initiative from the development and delivery of services, to leadership, governance, and accountability.

We agree that an equity-based, anti-oppressive and anti-racist approach is essential to creating a system that promotes healing and well-being. Significant historical and current forces, such as racism, stigma, oppression, colonialism, over policing and criminalization have for decades, been met with active opposition from equity seeking communities and allies looking for structural change. Organizations have emerged to provide alternative options to long-standing, existing and sometimes harmful approaches, to support the communities' well-being. We strongly endorse an approach that acknowledges and builds on established expertise in community organizations so that we leverage and benefit from the work that has already been done. What is needed is foundational, structural change that would shift current responses and provide the community with an accessible pathway to a mental health crisis response that is an alternative to Police and Emergency Services.

We are concerned that the financial commitments expressed by the city to support the new initiatives will not be sufficient and fall short of what is needed to achieve the intended outcomes. Without adequate investment at the front-line, community level, services will not be able to keep up with demand and will leave the community in the status quo position, leaving police as the default response. Gerstein Crisis Centre consistently operates at well over 90% capacity, handling over 40,000 crisis calls last year alone, in addition to MT team visits in the community and crisis stays at two short-term residential sites and we are not alone. Significant community investment, far greater than what is outlined in this report, is needed if the objective of a viable alternative to a Police and Emergency Services response for crisis is to be achieved for our City.

We strongly urge the City to re-examine their own budget and secure further funding in collaboration with the province.

We look forward to building on our many years of experience and collaborating, partnering, and allying with others across the city to create an integrated, community based, socially just crisis care system.

January 26, 2021

Submitted by: Susan Davis, Executive Director, Gerstein Crisis Centre