

Deputation to City Executive Committee
January 27, 2021
Item EX20.1 - Community Crisis Support Service Pilot
Helen Armstrong

Hello Committee members,

I am speaking on behalf of 230 staff in CUPE Local 2289. I am the Recording Secretary with our union local executive. Many of us work front line at The Neighbourhood Group. We work daily with people who are over policed, and who have experienced trauma due to aggressive and inappropriate policing.

We are heartened to witness the conversation about alternatives to policing that has emerged during the pandemic. The city's willingness to put resources into the proposed community safety pilot projects is a step in the right direction. Our staff also recognize the city has few financial resources to put towards this work, especially at present. We agree that the Province must help.

But the reality is that the city has an opportunity right now to reallocate city resources to meet community need. We do not agree that the police should decide when these proposed pilot programs are used, or when police would respond themselves. Nor do we agree that police should expand their own mental health crisis response budget by an extra \$1.5 million when the non police mental health pilot is given such little money. The city must have control of these programs, not the police.

You will hear a number of calls today for City Council to act more boldly and not delay what is needed. The Rethinking Community Safety report from Toronto Neighbourhood Centres has concrete and practical ideas. Investments in alternatives need to happen this year, not a year or two after these small pilot projects are completed. We often see people who have experienced trauma and some we know have died at the hands of police. There must be action to divest at least \$65 million from the police budget this year.

We have first hand knowledge of community safety alternatives to share with you today.

Staff in our Youth Arcade have proven success with the positive youth development model and a mediation program called Game Changers. They use a peer development approach, which puts youth at the centre and builds them up as community leaders. Peer work is a proven community safety model which should be expanded across the city. We congratulate the city for expanding the youth lounge model in recent years. More need to be introduced this year.

TNG conflict resolution staff have proven success with alternative dispute resolution and de-escalation. This approach is desperately needed for many 911 calls that do not involve a weapon. Peer workers with lived experience of mental health issues, addictions, poverty, homelessness and more in our Urban Health and Homelessness program play key roles in our programs. They use lived experience to de-escalate people in crisis in our drop-in and other programs. Peers provide non-judgemental support. They help keep people out of hospital emergency and out of prison. Peer workers can play an important role in a mental health crisis response team, as they have in other urban areas. The TNC report points to success with this approach in the U.S and Australia.

Peer researchers in a social action group at TNG surveyed 46 drop in users five years ago to provide recommendations to the police modernization task force. Of those surveyed, almost all had been arrested for minor infractions, sometimes repeatedly. More than half had experienced police carding, and almost half said they were poorly treated when arrested by police. This poor use of city funds for over policing people – most of whom are homeless - is very frustrating, especially in a city that struggles to pay for needed community services.

Now is the time for the city to step up to meet the provincial call for a well developed community safety and wellbeing plan. We do not accept that we can only have small pilot projects and more consultation. This is hurtful to those who have been so active in calls to redirect police funding.

We urge you to implement the recommendations for this year's budget, submitted by the Toronto Neighbourhood Centres. By reallocating funding in this year's budget, you could ensure a quarter of the police budget related to homeless people, those in mental health crisis, youth and domestic calls would be better served. This means shifting \$300 in the next several years from police funding to community based services, as well as the mental health model used in the CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon.

We lift up and support the following urgent recommendations:

- Double our 50 plus drop-ins that currently give people a safe place to go and help them access supports and avoid conflicts with the law. This could be achieved for less than \$25 million per year.
- Add a new safe consumption site costing \$4 million a year. Our organization has been running such a site and saving lives. We want to see this life saving work replicated.
- Double the number of youth hubs which would cost \$9 million.
- Double the number of youth outreach workers for a cost of \$8 million.
- Link over 5,000 more youth to services, constructive activities and better long term outcomes.
- Expand the Game Changers programs, which could provide support and conflict resolution in every high school for less than \$6 million.

We live in a city with so much inequity, racism and mental health oppression. All of us must do our collective best to serve and work with communities facing increasing challenges. We see many people who are black, indigenous and/or living with mental health issues, often on the streets. Many have experienced aggressive policing. We support calls from these communities to create much better community safety alternatives.

We owe it to people like Andrew Loku and Sami Yatim who died during police confrontation to do much, much better.

Thank you.