

**December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Re: QS4.4: Actions to Respond to the Drug Poisoning Crisis in Toronto**

As a City Agency committed to the health, happiness, and full participation of 2SLGBTQ and Downtown East communities, The 519 works with some of Toronto's most marginalized community members. We strive to make a real difference in people's lives, while working to promote equity and justice. Through our work, we are acutely aware of the harmful effects that the criminalization of drug use has on 2SLGBTQ community members, especially those experiencing homelessness. We stand in full support of the Toronto Board of Health's recent request to decriminalize the personal possession of illicit substances within the City of Toronto's boundaries and provide the following comments in an effort to ensure that the lived experience and needs of drug-using 2SLGBTQ community members are reflected within this much-needed policy change.

For several years, The Yonge-Church Corridor has had the highest level of overdose calls and one of the highest levels of drug poisoning rates in Toronto. Home to 1.1% of Toronto's population, in 2020, 8% of all overdose calls came from the area which includes the Church-Wellesley Village. Through working closely with drug-using community members and 2SLGBTQ community members experiencing homelessness, we see the impact that the criminalization of drug use has on our community members, and the barriers that it creates with regards to queer, trans, and 2-spirit individuals being able to access the supports that they need to get on to the path of wellness.

Too often, these barriers result in death. As we read aloud the record number of names of community members lost at the 2021 Trans Day of Remembrance, many were community members experiencing homelessness and substance use issues. These names included those we worked with tirelessly to get access to hotel and shelter beds, only to see them die by drug poisoning.

The community anchor model and evolving Toronto model that Toronto Public Health has described are essential to the safety and wellbeing of 2SLGBTQ communities. All too often, we hear from community members after an overdose that they did not call 911 because they were scared they would be arrested. Every day, we have community members turn to our organization to find them much needed supports because they do not have anywhere to go. Sadly, those supports often simply don't exist.

A dedicated focus by the City of Toronto on investing in and advocating for alternatives to criminalization for drug users, including treatment options, expanded harm reduction services are essential to the health and wellbeing of vulnerable 2SLGBTQ communities.



Decriminalization cannot happen in a vacuum. The success of this approach is predicated on a holistic and intersectional understanding of what is required for equity deserving community members to move towards wellness. As well as a fundamental acknowledgement of the trauma caused by systemic discrimination as root causes of substance use.

It is not uncommon for the people that we work with to find themselves unable to access substance use or mental health services that are affirming of their gender expression or sexual orientation. It is all too common for community members to access supports, only to find themselves in situations that are hostile and discriminatory.

As The City of Toronto continues to move towards a harm reduction and health-focused lens in relation to drug use, an equity-based understanding of the broader social determinants of health are essential to ensuring positive outcomes for 2SLGBTQ community members. Queer, trans and two-spirit folks who use drugs will not be able to move towards wellness and stability without a seismic shift in the way support systems provide appropriate and affirming supports. Additionally, mental health and substance use treatment can only be useful if they are accessible and affirming for people living in poverty. An understanding of the stigma of drug use needs to understand the specific ways in which the stigma that many 2SLGBTQ community members face is deeply intertwined with their drug use and experiences of transphobia and homophobia.

The 519 staff have been on the frontline of responding to the opioid drug poisoning crisis. Our staff regularly provide life-saving interventions for people who are overdosing. This work is unfunded, but we do it because we must. We also grieve with our communities, our staff and community partners for the lives lost.

At the same time, we are very aware of the negative personal and community impacts that methamphetamine use also creates within 2SLGBTQ communities. Through our Toronto Public Health funded Breaking the Ice outreach program and our longstanding drop-in programming, we see the harmful effects that methamphetamine use has on a wide range of our community members, as well as how the broader social service, substance use treatment, and mental health service sectors while many well intended are ill-equipped and not sufficiently resourced to deal with this crisis. We urge this committee and Toronto Public Health to ensure that any move towards the decriminalization of drugs and enhanced supports for people who use drugs includes the specific needs of 2SLGBTQ people who use methamphetamine.

The 519 is eager and willing to work with Toronto Public Health, the 2SLGBTQ Advisory Committee, the communities we work with, and our community partners to ensure that the proposed decriminalization of personal possession is embedded within deep



consultation of 2SLGBTQ communities to ensure that their unique experiences, needs, and hopes to build the necessary affirming approaches, strategies and interventions will be successful. We strongly encourage the 2SLGBTQ Advisory Committee to call on City Council and all levels of government to invest in the development of these essential programs and services that will respond to this crisis and save the lives of so many people in our community.

Sincerely,

Maura Lawless