

Julie Amoroso
10th Floor, West Toronto, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Letter in Support of SafeTO Implementation Plan and Recommendations

Dear Chair and members of the Executive Committee,

This letter is submitted in support of the SafeTO Implementation Plan and Recommendations going before the City of Toronto's Executive Committee on January 26, 2022.

Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Areas (DYBIA), with a membership of some 2,000 businesses and property owners and a combined commercial property value of \$6 billion – is one of the City's larger BIAs. We have been actively investing in a safe and inclusive neighbourhood since 2015, notably through collaborative partnerships that include social agencies, businesses, police and other community stakeholders.

We support the SafeTO recommendations to resource mental health crisis response; gun violence reduction programs; and supports for individuals and communities impacted by violence. Perhaps most importantly, we support the recommendation to create a shared data resource that breaks down silos in reporting and drives collaborative, full-picture analysis from a multitude of different sectors and sources. We also strongly support the recognition in SafeTO that healthy safe neighbourhoods and communities are critical for economic development.

Many of the SafeTO recommendations align with the DYBIA's Nine-Point Action Plan and we are supportive of the recommendations in conjunction with work being done on our plan. The plan is appended for reference.

The need for a Community Safety and Well-being Plan, like SafeTO, that addresses neighbourhood issues of both safety and inclusion is very much needed. The pandemic has only magnified this need.

In Downtown Yonge, we prioritize the need for a Safe and Inclusive Neighbourhood – one that tries to address street-based poverty, crime and homelessness in a constructive, root cause manner rather than simply relying on an enforcement model. Our position and approach are laid out in our *Safe & Inclusive Streets Strategy 2017*, a document that underscores our belief in collaboration across all community stakeholders to address issues of shared concern. Our commitment to these principles is reflected in our on-street crisis and outreach programs, as well as ongoing research and resources, a full description of which can be accessed at <https://downtownyonge.com/safe-inclusive/>

Since 2016, DYBIA has piloted several different partnered outreach initiatives, which culminated in the establishment of a full-time crisis outreach team called the Community Engagement Team (CET) in Summer 2018. Before the outbreak of Covid19 in March 2020, the CET had engaged close to 7,000 individuals on-street in Downtown Yonge and responded to more than 550 crisis calls from local businesses and social agencies. A 22% referral rate was achieved to the services that clients were offered or requested. Since the CET returned on-street in late July 2021, they have engaged with an average 360 people per month and responded to some six overdoses per month. In addition, the team has engaged with community members an average 63 times a month, sharing resources and educating businesses, security teams and retail workers.

During the pandemic, we also pivoted to a partnered outreach model to best use the outreach resources available. The program works with a range of programs in Downtown Yonge to provide several collaborative outreach sessions a week on-street. By the end of 2021, our partnered outreach program had undertaken 46 weeks of partnered outreach, usually with four or five sessions weekly. The CET's partners include: the Community Safety Team at the Bond emergency shelter; the Multi-Disciplinary Outreach team (MDOT); the harm reduction outreach team from The Works at Toronto Public Health; and the Neighbourhood Community Officers from 51 and 52 Divisions of the Toronto Police Service.

As a business community, we understand and acknowledge the need to provide support and resources to the neighbourhood's most vulnerable community members. Our neighbourhood is the location of not only the Bond emergency shelter which opened in Fall 2020, but also The Works supervised consumption site (which opened in 2017), as well as several social agencies and programs that work to alleviate social challenges – all of whom we partner with to find solutions to the neighbourhood's challenges.

However, while our commitment to our most vulnerable community members is unwavering, Downtown Yonge is increasingly seen as a neighbourhood that is unsafe – a serious reputational risk that compromises the health and well-being of our residents, employees, businesses, visitors and students as well as those seeking services.

The rise in behaviours related to substance use, mental illness, poverty and homelessness on-street – compounded and magnified by the pandemic – negatively impacts on perceptions of safety and inclusion of Downtown Yonge. We increasingly see open drug use, erratic and aggressive behaviours, shootings, assaults on retail and security staff in the area as well as the victimization of extremely vulnerable people who are on-street because of these same social challenges.

DYBIA has conducted an annual *Safe & Inclusive Streets Survey* since 2018, which seeks input from residents, students, business and property owners, social agencies, employees and visitors to the neighbourhood. The 2021 survey highlighted significant concerns:

- Since March 2020, 43% of respondents feel that safety in Downtown Yonge has gotten worse.
- 49% of respondents do not feel safe walking the neighbourhood between 7pm and 11pm; and 82% do not feel safe walking in the neighbourhood from 11pm to 6am.
- The main safety concerns were identified by respondents as people sleeping on the streets (81%); aggressive or erratic behaviours (78%); drunken or intoxicated behaviour (78%). A further 60% identified vandalism, graffiti and deliberate property damage as a key concern.

- While the abovementioned safety concerns are social issues and not criminal ones, we note that 30% of respondents have witnessed a violent crime in the preceding 12-month period. More than 10% reported being the victim of a property crime and five percent reported being the victim of a violent crime.
- Furthermore, business and property owners reported a higher victimization rate – more than 25% of business and property owners have been the victim of theft and 14% the victim of violent crime. A significant 50% of business and property owners have likewise witnessed a violent incident in the preceding 12-month period.
- Data from the CET show that 80% of crisis outreach calls are from businesses in Downtown Yonge, with social agencies and the police accounting for about 10% each. These calls typically deal with individuals needing harm reduction services, food or shelter in addition to acute on-site counselling or specialized de-escalation.
- We furthermore note that of all the CET interactions during August to December 2021, some 75% were wellness checks and almost 30% of total interactions were with individuals who were unfamiliar to the team and in many cases new to the neighbourhood.

In short, we see social challenges getting worse at the same time that crime and perceptions of safety are getting worse. We believe strongly that these issues of safety and inclusion need to be tackled collaboratively and through active partnerships that include social agencies, residents' groups, police, schools and the business community.

We do not have the luxury to work in silos, but need to come together to collaborate, partner and problem-solve in the most community-driven way possible.

Many of our business and property owner members, as well as other community stakeholders, feel unable to talk about the negative consequences of shelter programs or harm reduction programs for fear of a potential backlash and sanction and accusations of NIMBYism. The impact of expressing concerns in public is also one of reputational risk, a deterrent to visitors and shoppers coming to Downtown Yonge and something that our members are justifiably concerned about – especially after almost two years of lockdowns.

As always, DYBIA stands ready and willing to play our part:

- We have developed a Nine-Point Action Plan based on our extensive work in safety and inclusion and append it to this letter for reference.
- We will continue to invest in crisis outreach, including the partnered programs.
- In partnership with the BIA Office at the City, we will continue to offer de-escalation training for street front businesses throughout Toronto.
- We will continue to participate in the Yonge-Dundas operations and leadership tables.
- We will continue to provide resources for those seeking access to social programs and to those wondering how to report different incidents.

Most of all, we will strive to ensure that Downtown Yonge – and the downtown at large – is a safe and inclusive place, for all who live, work, play, seek services, learn, shop or invest here.

Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to submit this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Garner", followed by a horizontal line.

Mark Garner

Chief Operating Officer

Downtown Yonge BIA

Cc: Board of Directors, DYBIA
Executive Committee
Mayor Tory
Deputy City Manager, Paul Johnson
Councillor Wong-Tam
Councillor Layton
Councillor Thompson
Toronto Public Health