

April 8, 2020

Honourable John Horgan
Premier and President of the
Executive Council
Via Email only: premier@gov.bc.ca

Honourable Melanie Mark
MLA Vancouver- Mount Pleasant
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Honourable Shane Simpson
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Honourable Judy Darcy
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Honourable Adrian Dix
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Honourable Selina Robinson
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Honourable Michelle Mungall
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Honourable Scott Fraser
Minister of Indigenous Relations and
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OPEN LETTER: Immediate and Sustained Measures to Protect Vulnerable Communities in the DTES from COVID-19 Transmission

Dear Premier Horgan, Minister Mark, Minister Simpson, Minister Darcy, Minister James, Minister Dix, Minister Robinson, Minister Mungall, Minister Fraser and Ms. Dean:

We are writing to express our grave concern for the vulnerable residents living in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), where high levels of trauma, poverty, crowding, homelessness, drug addiction, and mental illness create a high-risk environment for a potential aggressive outbreak of COVID-19. Indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented in this vulnerable population, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic stand to exacerbate the intergenerational trauma, marginalization, violence, cultural and traditional knowledge loss inflicted by colonization.

Given the severity and lethality of this disease, we urgently call upon the Province to immediately expand efforts to stop or slow the potential



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transmission of COVID-19. While the City of Vancouver's deployment of hand sanitizing stations and increased sanitation and food delivery services in the DTES are steps forward in addressing this situation, we see the need for more broader, comprehensive and sustained actions that accurately reflect the reality and needs of DTES residents and that are issued from the provincial level.¹

We request that the Province immediately take the following actions:

- Provide immediate, free Wi-Fi coverage throughout the DTES to ensure that people in isolation can access vital online resources and services, including virtual doctor meetings to set up safe supply delivery. Increasing connectivity is crucial for the urban Indigenous population, many of who are cut off from community, family, loved ones, and in-person ceremonial and cultural interactions;
- Order BC Housing to immediately convert additional vacant hotels and private Single Occupancy Rooms into temporary housing equivalent so there is space for homeless people to self-isolate, then transition this into permanent housing;
- Increase capacity of mobile primary care to DTES community for those unattached to health care to ensure they can access life-saving prescriptions for ongoing health issues and be connected to safe supply;
- Increase support for organizations to secure temporary shelter for those fleeing domestic and/or gender-based violence. While Prime Minister Trudeau has pledged \$30 million for women's shelters and sexual assault centres across the country and \$10 million for Indigenous women and children's shelters, more provincial funding must be made available for women's shelters, violence prevention organizations, and sexual assault centers in the DTES;
- Develop and implement a province-led food security plan for people in the DTES that is health and culturally-based and requires minimal physical contact;
- Create a provincial hazard pay fund for lower wage frontline workers in non-profit organizations. To ease the burden on these important organizations, their workers should be able to apply for and receive a supplemental stipend directly from the Province;
- Procure temporary hotel space for frontline workers so they can effectively self-isolate to prevent the spread of COVID to the vulnerable populations they work with and also their immediate family members;
- Direct Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry to release an order that people in the DTES and similar areas of crowdedness should proactively be provided with non-medical masks to reduce the possible transmission of COVID-19, and be provided with clear instructions on the etiquette of wearing

¹ A total of 2,223 individuals were identified as experiencing homelessness in Vancouver in 2019. The majority were sheltered (72%) and 28% were unsheltered. While the total number of individuals experiencing homelessness is the highest it has been since counts began in 2005, the growth has slowed over the last two years (2% between 2018 and 2019). Continued Overrepresentation of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness Who Identify as Indigenous • A total of 495 survey respondents identified as Indigenous, representing 39% of all respondents. Based on the 2016 Census, Indigenous people accounted for 2.2% of Vancouver's total population. The proportion of survey respondents identifying as Indigenous was higher for unsheltered (46%) than sheltered (34%).

masks (when and where they should be worn, whether they can be homemade, etc.);

- Distribute personal protective equipment to frontline workers;
- Enforce strict physical distancing measures for the crowds of people lining up to receive and cash social assistance cheques and mitigate future crowds by funding Peers to assist signing people up for bank accounts (direct deposits) and stagger payments over a few days;
- Provide a safe drug supply to all drug users at risk of fentanyl poisoning, withdrawal, and other harms associated with substance-use as the COVID crisis has further compromised the illicit drug supply. We need to keep people alive;
- Add more support for coordination of DTES frontline organizations and support agencies regarding these recommendations; and
- Provide a measured, appropriate, culturally-safe response to the COVID-19 pandemic to those who are unhoused and overlooked by current pandemic protocols as articulated in every recommendation in the [petition](#) launched by Scott Clark, North West Indigenous Council President; Chris Livingstone, Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction Society, founder and board member; Chrissy Brett, Oppenheimer Tent City Liaison; and the Carnegie Community Action Project.

Like you, we are gravely concerned about a potential catastrophic and critical outbreak of COVID-19 in the DTES. We need to act strongly and proactively. The above-outlined directives are aimed at maximizing connectivity, providing the means and capacity for the vulnerable and homeless to self-isolate, supporting front-line organizations and workers, and reducing crowding and human-to-human contact.

We urge you to protect those in our society that are most in need of our care and attention and to remember that any impacts COVID-19 have upon the DTES will ripple outward and invariably affect us all. We respectfully ask for a meeting via phone with all of you as soon as possible to discuss.

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Grand Chief Stewart Phillip



Chief Don Tom



Kukpi7 Judy Wilson

On behalf of the BC ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS:



Regional Chief Terry Teegee

CC: Dr. Bonnie Henry, Provincial Health Officer
Charlene Belleau, Chair of the First Nations Health Council
Mayor Kennedy Stewart, City of Vancouver
Jenny Kwan, MP, Vancouver East
Don Bain, Special Advisor to the Premier
First Nations Summit