

December 8, 2020

Honourable Adrian Dix
Minister of Health
Sent via email: HLTH.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Dear Minister Dix:

Congratulations on your re-appointment as Minister of Health and best wishes to you in your ongoing role in this pivotal position. During these challenging times the province needs continuity of leadership and PAN and our members appreciate all that you and Dr. Bonnie Henry have done to work to flatten the COVID-19 curve.

Minister, as we did last year, we write on behalf of the members of the Pacific AIDS Network* to respond to your 2020 World AIDS Day message. Once again, there is much to celebrate about the record low cases of HIV and AIDS in BC. Like you, we acknowledge and are grateful for the province's treatment as prevention approach and the critical role that the BC Centre for Excellence plays.

Community Based Organizations (CBOs) work with some of the most vulnerable members of our society and provide services that are flexible, timely, and highly cost-effective in communities across the province. In many instances, they are the vital link for people living with HIV (PLHIV) in maintaining their connections with healthcare and treatment adherence, not to mention their work in preventing HIV transmission through harm reduction programming, education and support of priority populations. The staff of many CBOs work in extremely demanding circumstances, often for lower wages / fewer benefits than clinical or health authority counterparts. Many others are volunteers that donate countless hours of their time. Furthermore, whether as paid staff or volunteers, many PLHIV work as community leaders, supporting their peers to engage with care and services. Given all of this, we were puzzled and disappointed to read, for the second year in a row, that your World AIDS Day message failed to acknowledge the critical contributions of PAN members and the community-based sector.

The front-line response, crucially, engages people in prevention, promotes and links them to testing, counsels them through the process, and links them to care, as well as delivering accessible education on prevention and harm reduction. Many people would be lost to the medical system without the deeply relational, non-stigmatizing approach of CBOs, either by never getting tested, or by not being retained by a system that can be at times indifferent, and which has been shown recently to be prone to racism and discrimination- especially towards Indigenous people. It is CBOs that bring the lived experiences of people living with HIV (as well as hepatitis C and/or those most at risk) to the table. It is CBOs that highlight and continue to lead the charge in calling for a human rights-based approach, challenging the many forms of stigma, discrimination and criminalization that undermine people's access to care and result in poorer health outcomes.

These strengths have also been essential throughout the overdose emergency, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Our STBBI public health infrastructure has been significantly impacted by COVID-19 and CBOs in BC have stepped forward to nimbly respond with compassion and creativity to this health crisis. Hospital-based and other public health STBBI testing, prevention, and support services have reallocated their staff and resources during COVID-19. CBOs have doubled down, in some cases expanding services and hours of operation while working to address

new urgent housing, income security, safe supply and other needs. This at the same time as continuing to combat the ongoing epidemic of overdose and overdose deaths which has been magnified during COVID-19.

These are no doubt extraordinary times and all of us are called to rise to the occasion. The dedicated staff and volunteers of PAN member and other community-based, not-for-profit organizations, will continue to do all they can. But to not have their efforts recognized on World AIDS Day is frankly demoralizing- which in an era of multiple health crises, staff burnout, and static funding for the sector, raises concerns about the sustainability of this important work.

Minster Dix we would like to request a meeting with you to provide the opportunity to highlight the important role that PAN member organizations, and the people they serve, have played in BC's highly successful fight against HIV. And we seek reassurance from the Ministry of Health, that the province's World AIDS Day 2021 message will be not be crafted in such a way so as to once again overlook the work of CBOs and PLHIV across BC – but that rather, their contributions will be noted and celebrated. And finally, in the interim, we would welcome any formal acknowledgement from the Ministry that we could circulate within our membership, that their work is seen, appreciated and necessary, to help boost morale during these extremely challenging times.

Sincerely.



Katrina Jensen
Co-Chair, PAN
Executive Director, AVI Health and Community Services



Patrick McDougall
Co-Chair, PAN
Director of Knowledge Translation and Evaluation, Dr. Peter AIDS Foundation

CC. Amanda van Baarsen, Senior Ministerial Assistant, Ministry of Health

*By way of background, PAN leads an inspired, strong, and effective community-based response to HIV, Hepatitis C, and related health and social justice issues. PAN is a proactive provincial network of over 40 community-based and allied organizations. Our work is grounded in collaboration to reflect the voices and needs of member organizations and communities. Our work in BC and with partners across the country includes advocacy, policy change, capacity building, leadership training, research and evaluation. See www.pacificaidnetwork.org.