



Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

Transcription prepared by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

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Presenting organizations: First United Church Community Ministry Society

First United attendees: Didi Dufresne

BCOHRC¹ attendees: Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Sarah Khan, Carly Hyman, Meghan Toal

Please note that third-party personal information has been removed from this transcript.

[Introductory comments by Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript.]

Didi Dufresne: Sure, thank you. Yeah, by way of introduction, my name is Didi Dufresne appearing before you on the unceded territory of Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish people. My pronouns are they/them and I identify as a queer white non-binary settler on these lands.

I have some amount of obvious discomfort always left speaking for our organization as well, that's just me personally. But you know, discomfort in talking about some of the aspects of hate today. Given my social location and don't want to frame myself, obviously, as an expert, but would like to speak out against like the hate that we have seen. And I'm thankful for the opportunity to do so today.

In terms of my organization, I work for the First United Church Community Ministry Society. For over 135 years, First United has sought to build better futures in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver by providing essential services, community connection and healing. One of the missions of the organization is to envision a neighborhood where every person, every person's worth is celebrated and all people thrive. We offer a variety of services including a meal program, shelter, legal advocacy services, and pastoral or spiritual care and support.

¹ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

I am the Advocacy Manager at the First United Church. I've been working here for approximately 11 years. In terms of advocacy, mostly provide legal support for anti-poverty, administrative, legal matters. Most frequently, we're working with tenants who are facing eviction or people who've been denied welfare or disability related benefits. We don't have a specific geographic mandate, but we do often see clients from the Downtown Eastside or people who used to live in the Downtown Eastside then got pushed out through gentrification. Many of our clients are Indigenous and people of colour, and many identify as living with disabilities.

As with other organizations that individuals living in the Downtown Eastside, we've noticed an increase in racially motivated hate, particularly anti-Asian hate. There's been an increase in anti-Asian graffiti and anti-Asian violence that's noticeable both being here in the neighbourhood and also through media reports.

Think it's important to note that people in the Downtown Eastside have long been dealing with the realities of racism, colonization, homophobia and transphobia, and poverty long before the pandemic existed, and will likely continue to deal with these realities on an ongoing basis.

During my work here in the community I've witnessed, not just in the pandemic, but more generally so, I've witnessed a significant amount of anti-drug user sentiment and stigma. It's difficult to say if this has increased in the pandemic because it's already just so pervasive, but clients generally consistently have to say that they don't have any addictions as a way to show that they are worthy of keeping their housing or worthy of dignity and respect.

So there's a lot of like hate towards people who use drugs, you know, and this is from people who may actually use drugs themselves, but as a way to try to gain any kind of humanity will speak out against drug users.

I think it's important to look and I don't have any, I don't have answers for has gotten worse or not. I wish I did, but I do wonder how so many deaths from the toxic drug supply that has increased significantly during the Covid pandemic, how that has increased this aspect of hate. And it has a real material effect on people, whether that be because they're evicted because they're doing or they're perceived to be drug users, or if they actually experience violence or denial of services for these reasons. Yeah, that's I think one aspect of the pandemic and hate related to the pandemic that I've seen that I thought would be important to raise.

Yeah, obviously the hate that we're seeing hasn't arisen out of a vacuum of the Covid-19 pandemic, like the vehicles of hate, whether it be racism, white supremacy, homophobia, they're all deeply entrenched in our colonial structures and cultures and, like we're living through a time where people seem to be emboldened to proclaim hate.

Obviously I think this has a lot to do with, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the political rhetoric connected by our neighbors to the South, focusing on blaming like a nation, China, for the coronavirus, I think emboldened people, and I believe this sort of xenophobia has significantly increased the acts of hate.

In terms of government response, I think it's incumbent on government and civil society to act more proactively with regards to condemning hate and giving people adequate tools to deal with



these incidents. Hearing, thinking of certain bystander trainings produced in the States by two groups: In code and collaboration of Hollaback and Asian Americans Advancing Justice in Chicago. And also SUCCESS here in Vancouver have hosted bystander trainings where people can develop tools to actually deal with hate when they see it, because I think you know, in terms of police and government response, at the end of the day, people are going to have to be responsible for speaking out against hate, and I think trying to give people tools to better do that is a primary way that like government and civil society can act to reduce hate. And I think it's very important and I'm happy to be a part of this and to see the government and your organization taking on this inquiry because I think waiting for, waiting to be reactive towards instance of hate obviously is not a productive and helpful framework of dealing with the issue.

I will keep my submissions brief. If you have any questions, just feel free to ask.

Sarah Khan: Thank you very much, Didi. That's very good to hear about. I was interested to hear about the, you mentioned the racist hate and hate against drug users. And do you have, I was wondering if you could, if you have any examples, some examples that you'd like to share of, deidentified of course, but any examples that you would like to share of that.

Didi Dufresne: Sure, I mean I can tell you that on eviction notices I have seen like drug use as the sole reason for an eviction. And not, you know, not saying like, "oh this person is using drugs and they have created *this* problem" but just straight up like a slur against people who use drugs as we're evicting them. They're druggies, for example. Yes, I've seen that and kind of variations of that, whether it be a formal eviction notice or a landlord saying like I have to evict this person because they're an addict. Yeah.

I can say yeah within the neighborhood in terms of like anti-Asian graffiti, it's pretty prevalent in the neighborhood. And graffiti - it's washed away like pretty quickly. It's not like something is staying up for six to nine months and so. Like just the other day, I noticed like two or three instances of Anti-Chinese graffiti in the neighborhood.

Sarah Khan: Do you know if anyone is documenting those as they see them?

Didi Dufresne: I don't, I don't know.

Sarah Khan: Do you have any other recommendations that you would – Actually, before I get to that, have you noticed an increase or more prevalence of forms of hate, outside of racial hate. We're taking a fairly broad definition of hate within the context of this inquiry, certainly much broader than other ways that has been defined. And I'm wondering, for example, if you've noticed anything related to an increase in gender-based violence or other forms of hate.

Didi Dufresne: - Yeah, I don't think I would be in the place to answer that question.

Yeah, gender-based violence, although I know it's obviously very prevalent, doesn't often come up in terms of our work specifically, like my work, so yeah, I wouldn't be able to speak to that.

Sarah Khan: No problem. Are you, do you have any – you talked about bystander training as one potential response to hate and being - and in order for us to be proactive as a society going



forward. Are there any other types of recommendations that you might offer to address or eliminate or prevent hate? Either during times of crisis or for other times?

Didi Dufresne: Right, and I am also aware there's the government hotline, like the anti-hate hotline and I think that's like - and specifically decoupling that from a police response - I think is helpful, given people's realities of dealing with the police and how racialized people and people of colour experience adverse impacts of calling the police. I think that is a good step.

Sarah Khan: Great. Thank you. Kasari, can I pass it over to you?

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Thank you so much, Didi. I just had one follow-up question and maybe more of a clarification. You talked about the significant anti-drug user stigma and then you talked about, of course, the dramatically increasing deaths pursuant to the opioid crisis. And you said something about the relationship there, and I just wasn't sure I totally, I caught the -

Didi Dufresne: Sure.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: - drawing out there.

Didi Dufresne: Yeah, and I think there I have some questions. Like if we're talking about during the pandemic, how has hate increased? I actually don't know. And I'm putting to you more a question, like, with such an increase in deaths due to the toxic drug supply and due to like the pandemic right? So obviously people are then using alone, they aren't able to get their support services that they need, and then more people are dying. How has that affected anti-drug user sentiment? I don't actually know. It's an open question to me.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: OK, thank you. I think those were all of our questions at this point.

Sarah Khan: I have one more if you don't mind.

During the pandemic, because so many services were closed, and available either through phone or online only, I was wondering if you had any comments on whether the lack of in-person services during the pandemic might have any relationship to a rise in hate or a potential rise in hate.

Didi Dufresne: I think, yeah, I mean, I think that's quite possible. I know that, so our services became a lot more strict in terms of who could access physically the space. I can, I can tell you that we for probably at least the first year of the pandemic, we were seeing far less people, like far less of our usual clientele, so people who were either street entrenched or living in pretty extreme poverty in the neighborhood. And instead we were available by telephone. We're seeing people from a lot of other - other communities. Of course we assisted people when they asked for help. That wasn't a problem. But I did, I did wonder where people were going for support for our program. Given that they couldn't get in-person support and just people were not really around, so I do think that the lack of services would contribute or exacerbate any existing issues, including hate, for sure.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Along those lines, do you - have you seen, I think there's probably a number of reasons we can tease out, and you've touched on some of them about the increased



opioid deaths during this time, or toxic drug supply deaths – do you see any correlation there? Or did you see a decreased emphasis from government in terms of programs and services during the time because of COVID, or sort of just the same, but other reasons that the deaths increased?

Didi Dufresne: I mean I think it was more difficult for people to access any of those kinds of services. So yeah, especially very early on, with there being like a lockdown. I think people were not being able to access safe injection supplies or like it became a lot difficult and people were also reluctant. So whether the service was maybe open, I know I have a friend who was working at one of the safe injection sites and reported like nobody's coming in. So then people are, you know, so whether or not the service is open, people were still reluctant to use the. And then also, I know reports from people saying that they're not able to go to their 12 step program or whatever kind of support that they would get for using. They wouldn't be able to access that or it's significantly difficult from the pandemic.

Commissioner Kasari Govender: Great. OK, I think that is actually all of our questions. Thank you again, Didi. Really appreciate you making the time to be here with us and to give us that insight into what's happening in the Downtown Eastside.

Didi Dufresne: Thank you so much.

Sarah Khan: Really appreciate it.

Meghan Toal: I believe you receive. The email regarding the December 1st Workshop on survey feedback for the public survey that will be released at the end of January, just reminding on that and we will follow up soon.

Didi Dufresne: Perfect, thank you so much.

Sarah Khan: I would just add that we have written submissions deadline. Just to reiterate that if you would like to make written submissions, we have a deadline of March 31st. Written submissions or video submissions. Those are also open for some time.

