

July 4, 2023

Honourable Premier Andrew Furey  
Honourable Minister John Hogan  
Honourable Minister Paul Pike  
Mayor Danny Breen  
Deputy Mayor Sheilagh O'Leary  
Councillor Ophelia Ravencroft

We are writing in response to the June 8th announcement of Joint Funding to Support the Downtown Safety Coalition from the City of St. John's and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. We express sincere concern about this decision and distribution of funds from the City of St. John's and the Department of Justice with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Downtown Safety Coalition is a group working without the oversight of a Board, without public transparency or accountability, without terms of reference, and whose membership are largely already publicly funded. As it stands, this lack of structure leaves the community questioning if the intended use of funds will have a real impact on our safety, and if this group has the expertise required to make effective use of these funds.

It is important to recognize that "safety for all", a priority of the Downtown Safety Coalition, cannot be addressed by a group that is made up of police, tourism and hospitality, George St. Association, Music NL and municipal and provincial governments. These groups represent communities and facets of our city who are in fact the least likely to face or experience violence in our city and province. We wonder how we can begin to tackle the "complex issue of safety in downtown St. John's" without prioritizing poverty reduction, addressing the housing crisis, the realities of food insecurity, investing in our crumbling healthcare system or acknowledging the higher than national average rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in our province? If safety is to be the use for this funding, we need to be considering whose safety is being prioritized, who is defining safety, and what markers of safety would include as the City of St. John's and the provincial government invest this money in the Coalition. Number of foot patrols, arrests, etc. are quantifiable measures of policing, but not a valid measurement of community safety.

This investment in a "public education campaign to increase reporting crime" will not inherently make us safer. "See it, say it" is an American model geared towards increasing civilian surveillance. Over the last twenty years it has been found that feeding a crowd surveillance mentality actually heightens the risk and targeting of marginalized people who are already over-policed and most likely to be victims of violence themselves, especially people of colour. It would be irresponsible to place the unnecessary burden of surveillance with those who may not be equipped to consider how stigma and unrecognized bias can have us mistaking discomfort with danger.

Staff from the St. John's Status of Women Council participated in the Building Safer Communities Round Table event, hosted by the City of St. John's on February 1st 2023 with community members, neighbourhood associations, folks working in schools, non-profit

organizations and people working in various levels of government. Our impression from both the panel and roundtable discussions was that increased resources should go to capacity building for community and social supports, rather than funneled into increased policing efforts or campaigns like the one that has recently been funded. Part of the Round Table event included thoughtful discussion about how not all crime is violent, and not all safety concerns fit into the box of "crime". The overwhelming consensus from this event was that poverty was a major factor impeding safety, and that people living and working in poverty need more income and access to supportive services as a means to increase our collective safety. We now fear that this event was a checkbox exercise, providing the illusion of consultation that led to the recent funding announcement.

A meaningful approach to violence prevention in our downtown should centre, and at the very least must include, experiences of people who are subject to violence everyday in St. John's: women, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, people who are Black, Indigenous and of colour, and people who are over-policed and criminalized due to poverty, mental health, addictions and homelessness. To invest in any initiative that is not informed by these perspectives raises serious questions about decision making processes and contributes to eroded trust between government, police and communities who live with violence every day in our downtown and across the City of St. John's.

We ask that the City of St. John's and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador reconsider this funding decision, that they make decisions based on the findings from meaningful consultations that consider the root causes of safety concerns in downtown St. John's, and consider more sustainable and inclusive initiatives to build greater community safety.

Sincerely,

St. John's Status of Women Council  
First Light - St. John's Friendship Centre  
Migrant Action Centre  
Quadrangle NL  
Stella's Circle  
Thrive