



Monday July 5, 2021

Dear members of the Finance and Economic Development Committee,

Please accept my written submission to the July 6th committee meeting on behalf of the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW). I am incredibly grateful to be getting my second vaccine during the time of this meeting. The City and its residents have done an outstanding job vaccinating as many people as possible – and while we should have done more to prioritize essential workers – we have done very well. But imagine how much better we could have done had Ottawa Public Health had more resources?

Therefore, I'm writing today, to request that the Committee amend the budget so that the proposed 3% increase to the Ottawa Police Service is reduced to 0%. There are so many important issues that are causing residents of our amazing city to suffer and that merit your urgent attention. The pandemic has shone a light on these tears in our social fabric. How can we strengthen this social fabric? It is made stronger through meeting basic needs and providing meaningful connection and belonging, not by enhancing the budget for policing.

Based on 2019 City data, funding for the Ottawa Police Service accounts for 9.5% (\$358M) of the City's expenditures; meanwhile community agencies receive a stagnant \$24.2M a year "to respond to current and emerging needs to promote equitable, inclusive and sustainable service access for a diverse population." This represents less than 7% of the total police budget, and just 0.64% of the City's overall budget. OCTEVAW, along with 160 other organizations in the City, is waiting for the decisions about how this fund will be allocated over the next five years. There was no increase proposed for this sector, just a scarcity mindset for social service organizations delivering essential support and services to our community. Essential supports and services that helped our residents survive the pandemic.

The calls for defunding and de-tasking the police are being embraced by municipalities across North America. Here in Ottawa, there are both City and community analyses underway for developing and implementing alternatives to mental health crises. Recently, 613-819 Black Hub Noir released the report they commissioned that was prepared by Vivic Research: "[Alternatives for a Safer Ottawa: non-police mental health crisis response report](#)" (2021). A stronger economic argument couldn't be made: non-police mental health crisis response will be better aligned with community needs AND cost less.

With that, I would like to bring your attention to a string of failures by OPS to serve survivors of gender-based violence and violence against women (VAW). These failures are both endemic to policing and appallingly specific to OPS.

The Globe & Mail's 2017 "Unfounded" series found that one in five women is not believed when she reports her sexual assault to police. This investigative series by Robyn Doolittle was done because of the leadership of [local VAW advocate Sunny Marriner](#) – because we have seen failure upon failure, year upon year, of the police service to respond appropriately to sexual assault incidents. Only 5% of survivors of sexual violence even report their assault to police. It is not typically a 911 emergency call; it is a call made later to protect other women and people from assault.

That brings me to those rare occasions when survivors *do* call the police on 911 during an assault. Most are calling 911 because they or their children are in danger from partner violence: they are being choked and pick up the phone to call 911 to stop the violence.

Based on data the Ottawa Police Service provided to VAW advocates (likely omitted from the budget increase request from OPS that connects to their performance) **only 14% of domestic violence reports to police resulted in charges** being laid in 2020.

We know the fatal consequences this can have with the recent **femicide of Hanadi Mohammed**. She had reached out for help, but our systems failed her.

Indigenous, Black and women of colour (IBPOC) who report abuse and assault are less likely to be believed; meanwhile, people from these same communities are mass policed and mass criminalized. Our systems are failing survivors.

How many [survivors](#) and other vulnerable women will be harmed by [police officers](#) who are [purportedly there to protect them](#)? How many officers' salaries will this committee and taxpayers be willing to pay while they are on leave and under investigation for egregious misconduct?

Of great concern for OCTEVAW is that we have a police service that, time and time again, fails survivors in ways that are deeply sexist and corrupt and go well beyond the common lapses ascribed to police departments across North America.

How many survivors feel a chill in wanting to report violence to the OPS, when the president of the Ottawa Police Association calls a [local woman organizer fundraising for a women's cause a f*cking c*nt](#)? How can a police service whose union president, only recently voted in again, speaks so strongly and negatively about a woman and women's causes, be accorded any respect? How can the OPS claim to be trustworthy and supportive of survivors?

How can we—how can you—accept that the Deputy Chief appointed to lead on VAW issues met with the entire VAW sector to develop an action plan for improving police response, only to be suspended within a week for alleged [sexual harassment](#)? This happened in Ottawa in March 2020. There is no way OPS leadership didn't know this was about to happen, and still, this happened. We have never spoken publicly about this sorry episode until now, but I invite you to imagine the distrust and discouragement this had caused.

How many Ottawa policewomen survivors have been sent to a ["fake psychologist"](#) – someone impersonating a psychologist — to share their most intimate feelings about surviving sexual

harassment and violence in the workplace, only to be labelled a “crazy liar,” as was just reported by the CBC? It’s staggering to think of the many layers of deception required to orchestrate such an elaborate ruse, and of the silent complicity of many officers. The level of corruption and harm apparent from this incident goes beyond the pale. At the very least there should be a third-party investigation to determine whether the disgraceful way this woman officer’s assault was handled was the norm.

Even if it were an isolated incident, which seems unlikely in view of prevailing attitudes toward women described above, how are we ever to regain confidence in this police service to provide unbiased support to survivors of violence, whether inside or outside the force? Given the sheer number of failures by the Ottawa Police Service to serve and protect survivors of gender-based violence and violence against women, let alone the racist and lethal violence that has resulted from other interactions, it is this Committee’s duty to reject the 3% increase. This money needs to be spent elsewhere. It needs to be spent in the community – to be provided to those best equipped to assist survivors of violence against women and gender-based violence; those that are supporting people experiencing mental health crises; those engaged in harm reduction work; and others doing important work with those most impacted by oppression and systemic sexism, racism and colonialism.

As long as survivors are calling the police to stop violence – in the moment or after the assault, to keep it from happening to others, advocates will continue to do what they can to support efforts to improve the Ottawa Police Service’s response. However, we must all be very clear that this is not a “choice” made by survivors.

Calling the police is the only option right now – this is constrained choice and far from optimal as a tool to stop violence. It is not a choice when there are no other options. It is vital for our community to give survivors other tools to stop the violence that don’t rely on a police or criminal justice response.

We need to invest in preventing violence from happening in the first place. We need to invest in supports for survivors and those who cause harm to enable the conditions to limit violence as much as possible. We need caring communities that support survivors, keep an eye out for each other and don’t shame or blame survivors—who can assist in dealing with and preventing gender-based violence – along its entire spectrum - before it escalates to serious or lethal physical violence. When violence does occur, we need to provide real and multiple options for survivors to reach out for help.

Do the right thing. Freeze the OPS budget. Invest in caring communities.