

Thank you for the opportunity today. My name is Diana Chan McNally, and I am speaking today about the criminalization of people experiencing homelessness.

I have worked with people experiencing homelessness since 2014 as a frontline drop-in worker. During this time, I have had numerous interactions with both 14 Division and 51 Division in the context of the people I work with. These interactions have been overwhelmingly negative, and at the expense of the human rights and dignity of people who are unhoused.

I have seen an officer neglect to double check if a participant in my drop-in had an outstanding warrant, assume that he had one, and tackle him to ground, smashing his head on the pavement. He bled – a lot – and he did not have an outstanding warrant. His rights were grossly violated. I have had an officer refuse to administer naloxone on a person experiencing an overdose because they did not want to deal with the SIU investigation process afterward. That officer willingly refused to save someone's life just to avoid paperwork and scrutiny. I have seen two armed officers on the brink of violence with a man holding a small knife who was threatening to stab himself; if I hadn't physically stepped in between them to de-escalate, perhaps that man – Joe – would not be here. Because I am a trained community worker, and because I do not automatically perceive people who are street-involved as threats but rather as people, I know how to intervene. Just as important, I do not need any weaponry or physical additions to my 100-pound frame to achieve a safe, effective outcome when someone is in crisis. Police are not community workers like me; they are enforcers of the law, and their presence is inherently escalating.

On the law, the approach in our city, and thus of Toronto Police Services who enforce the law, is to view people experiencing homelessness as 'immoral' and 'degenerates', and thus criminal. This city – you – fail to view the law beyond the level of the individual and their perceived personal 'failings', or realize that the law is a mirror of the city itself, including all of the gross inequities that marginalize, and thus criminalize, people on the street.

And who are these people? In large part, they are Indigenous, and they are Black. In fact, 38% of Torontonians experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough identify as Indigenous, despite constituting just 2.5% of the city's population. Similarly, Black Torontonians are just 8.9% of the city's population, yet 31% of Torontonians experiencing homelessness identify as Black. The intersection of race and poverty is palpable in Toronto, and that intersection makes people who are homeless and of colour especial targets for policing. I have, of course, already described what that looks like on the ground.

Mayor Tory has publicly stated in a press conference that the 1,500 Torontonians who are living in encampments are “doing it as much as a political act as anything else.” To the Mayor, these people, whose existence owes not only to the pandemic, but also to the dual, long-standing crises of homelessness and a lack of affordable housing, are merely trying to survive. They are disproportionately Black, and Indigenous, and they are not dissidents, just survivalists in a city that continues to

fail them. That Mayor Tory would actively frame them as dissidents speaks to the ways in which he is personally upholding systemic racism, which is necessarily reflected in the Toronto Police Service, of which he is the Board Chair.

Because of that reticence to accept the systemic reasons why people in our city are homeless and living in encampments, and to counteract the continued policing of people experiencing homelessness, community services like drop-in centres have stepped up to provide supports where the City has otherwise failed. In addition to working frontline, I am also employed with the Toronto Drop-in Network, although I am speaking as myself, which includes a membership of 51 drop-in centres across our city. During the pandemic, 11 of our drop-in centres operated the only indoor spaces that were available to people sleeping rough. For over a month, these 11 spaces represented the only public showers and washrooms available in the entirety of Toronto. In addition to these spaces, 34 more drop-ins converted to takeaway services, helping to support the food security and resource needs of people excluded from the shelter system – again, well over 1,500 people. Drop-ins literally saved people’s lives during the pandemic, and we did so on budgets that have not seen an annual increase from the city in eight years. In fact, the 28 drop-ins that do receive funding from the city received just \$7.57 million in the 2020 budget – this is total, not each. While the City did provide additional funding for our services during the pandemic, in some cases this was as little as just \$6,000 per drop-in. Consider this in contrast to the budget of Toronto Police Services, which was allocated \$1.22 billion in 2020, and who have enacted some of the egregious situations against street-involved people that I’ve already described. When I look at this disparity in funding, I do not see a city and a municipal government interested in supporting the livelihood of people experiencing homelessness – again, people who are disproportionately Black and Indigenous – I see an underlying racist, classist ideology that seeks to criminalize them.

I am deeply disappointed in City Council for failing to address the systemic issues that are deeply embedded in the Toronto Police Service in a fulsome way. I am also deeply disappointed in Mayor Tory for undermining the democratic will of Torontonians who demanded a concrete defunding of the police by producing his own report ahead of Councillor Matlow’s motion. Like many of my neighbours who have already spoken, and will speak today and next week, I demand the reallocation of government funds from police services into community programs and supports. It is imperative that our city dispenses with policy and programs that take a reactive, punitive approach to addressing interpersonal violence and crisis. What our city needs is to adopt a proactive approach to dismantling the structural violence that creates homelessness, and makes racialized people overwhelmingly vulnerable to it.

To build healthy, safe communities, Toronto must defund the police, and reinvest those funds into initiatives that support the social determinants of health: affordable housing, nutritious food, decent work, access to health care, and social inclusion. People experiencing homelessness are not bad people; they are just people being subjected to the overwhelming violence of bad policy, and the police services who enforce it.