This statement is made on behalf of the Board of Directors of John Bruce Village Housing Co-operative. John Bruce Village is a housing coop in Parkdale that offers subsidized and affordable rental housing to 40 households.

Our diverse community includes Black, Indigenous and people of colour, recent immigrants, people with mental health and other disabilities, LGBTQ2S folks, retirees, multi-generational families, artists, and working professionals.

Many of our members have had negative experiences with the police that have led to lasting post-traumatic stress and fear of police interactions. Furthermore, the presence of police in our community re-traumatizes them and doesn’t make them feel safe.

This is why we have decided as a Board that we actively choose NOT to engage the police when mental health crises or other conflicts arise.

The Toronto Police Services Board is proposing to renew its “commitment to an effective response to persons in crisis,” and proposes to do so by expanding the mandate of the Board’s Mental Health and Addictions Advisory Panel, the expansion of the Mobile Crisis Intervention Team Program, and collaboration with the City of Toronto and other partners to develop new community based models (Recommendations 3 and 4.)

I’d like to use this as an opportunity to share a real life example of a community-based response by our co-op. I hope it demonstrates how the ever-expanding mandate of police (such as the reforms and mandate expansions you have proposed today) are not the solutions we need. We need investment in resilient community-based interventions and supports.

Last year, our Board started receiving complaints about the behaviour of one of our community members. This resident was exhibiting behaviour that was erratic and threatening, and some of our neighbours were concerned and even afraid for their own safety. (It’s also worth noting that this individual has a complicated history with the police, which further informed our approach.)

Through a collaborative process that involved external mediators, numerous conversations with everyone involved, accountability check-ins, a behaviour agreement and open communication, the matter has been resolved peacefully, and with many of the relationships in question restored.

In past mental health crises, the police would have been called immediately to “resolve” this situation. But we know from the track record of the Toronto police, that their presence would very likely have led to more conflict, or worse.

Recommendations 3 and 4 are not solutions to the reality that police are ill-positioned to respond to mental health crises and other sources of community conflict. These kinds of reform measures further disempower communities by perpetuating the idea that the police are the natural first line of defense when community conflict arises. And the results of this are often deadly, especially for our neighbours who are Black, Indigenous or people of colour.

There is momentum right now to redefine what public safety in our communities actually is. I implore the Board to remove the use of police officers to respond to mental health crises and re-allocate these resources to community-based and community-led models that are more equipped to deal with these crises. Thank you.