July 16, 2020

Dear members of the Toronto Police Services Board,

I am writing this deputation regarding the subject: Recommendations for the Board Related to Current Events, in the June 17, 2020 Toronto Police Services Board Report. I am also writing as a white Therapist (Social Worker) working in the Greater Toronto Area in the field of children and youth mental health.

I want to begin by saying that agenda item number 6 is an important point to promote, which is to make the annual line-by-line breakdown of the Toronto Police Service’s budget publicly available. This is important so that Toronto’s residents know and understand exactly where their tax dollars go, especially considering how much of the City of Toronto’s budget is allocated to the Toronto Police Services.

I do have many concerns about the remainder of these recommendations. Firstly, it is no longer the time for more training, more advisory panels, more bureaucratic units, body cameras, or other reforms that will not structurally change the Toronto Police Services. These panels and trainings have already been tried (in Toronto and elsewhere), and we have seen that they are not effective at strengthening the accountability of Toronto Police nor do they reduce Toronto Police officers from enacting violence towards Black and Indigenous communities in the name of “self-defence”. Panels and trainings are not enough, and it is irresponsible to garner more “input” while Toronto Police continue to harm, kill, and surveil Black and Indigenous people at alarmingly disproportionate rates.

In my role as a social worker, I witness and hear about how racism in the Toronto Police services actually creates and makes flourish mental health issues in the first place. When Black and Indigenous people live under constant surveillance, in fear of being stopped by the Toronto Police, actually being stopped by the police for reasons white people are rarely stopped for, and losing family and friends to Toronto police officers’ violence in the name of “defending themselves”, it worsens mental health and wellbeing as it is exceptionally traumatic, oppressive, and dehumanizing. We do not need more trained police, we need fewer police officers; instead, we need more taxpayers’ money going to community-led programming and services that will actually support Black and Indigenous communities to thrive and not live under constant surveillance and (threat of) harm by Toronto Police Services.

No amount of training or advisory panel recommendations will reduce the harm and violence that the Toronto Police Services enact. As someone who works in the field of mental health, I believe that mental health and wellbeing can only be strengthened when larger structural changes to the Toronto Police Services are made, such as reducing its size, scope, and budget; de-arming all police officers (including tasers, batons, pepper spray, and firearms); removing the school resource officers from all schools; introducing disaggregated race-based data for better documentation of police violence and surveillance; and, to stop policing sex workers and drug users, as well as to remove all records of drug- and sex work-related charges.

Thank you,

Lee Berkowitz