July 16, 2020

Greetings board members, city councillors and Mayor Tory.
Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit this deputation.

My name is Kristina Koski, I have lived on Roncesvalles Ave for the past 8 years and have been a Toronto resident my entire life. I am white, and the daughter of a road worker and elementary school teacher. I’ve always lived in mixed neighbourhoods both economically and culturally/racially. I’m so grateful to have grown up in these neighbourhoods as there is a level of community care that doesn’t always exist in the outer suburbs. But with that diversity and connection came the knowledge that police treat me differently than they can treat my peers based on the colour of their skin AND the side of the street they lived on.

Instead of barraging you with stats, I’m going to relay a few stories:

I have been a victim of violence on the street while in a vulnerable state and had the privilege of police coming to my aide, handling my situation with care and consideration. However, I know women of colour who have experienced this similar violence who have not been treated with the care or respect that I have. One friend (with unsupported mental health issues), was only treated by police as an “ongoing problem.” As a victim, she would call for help and was the one considered to be the problem. She ended up living on the street as her mental health deteriorated.

I have not seen her in 5 years. I do not know if she is still alive. It was clear the police did not take her seriously. If she had the support of the city and of the province (in terms of funding of programming) her story could be very, VERY different. Instead, the little support and help she had was stripped from her by the government, dignity stripped from her by the police. These are the very institutions that should have kept her safe. If our tax dollars went to the programs she needed instead of into the pockets of the police that mocked and dehumanized her, she might be thriving today.

Some friends run an encampment support network here in Toronto, and they filmed a resident (with permission) who relayed his experience of an officer raiding his camp looking for stolen goods without a warrant. A bicycle was in question. The resident said just a few days before he had registered the bike as purchased by him with police just to avoid an altercation like this one, but the officer insisted on continuing his search. What this signals to me is either one of two things:

1. The officer was told to target a marginalized community and harass its residents without warrants by his superiors or,
2. The officer was bored that day and took it upon himself to target a marginalized community and harass its residents without warrants.

In these anecdotes that I am limiting for purposes of time (there are more) it is clear to me that the police can freely make arbitrary judgement calls based on their own personal biases. Officers who break the law and breach their social (and literal) contracts are protected by the very-likely biased investigations of the SIU. If, on the slight chance the SIU finds the officer at fault, the union still protects them with paid vacation (aka suspension-with-pay).

In terms of the body camera debate, aside from the obvious fact that funding could be routed to PERMANENT housing, mental health and addiction support, wouldn’t body cameras only embolden officers who don’t think they’re the ones with the problems? And even if the body cams catch cops mistreating civilians / committing violence themselves, isn’t the purpose of the union to make sure they hang onto that six-figure salary?

This is system is a farce to me, much like the city hall meeting to vote on the defunding motion was a couple of weeks ago. I watched all 9 hours for everyone to agree that “there’s a problem.” What a colossal waste of time. We need drastic reform. We need to defund the police and re-route that money to programs that can actually help our neighbours. We need to remove the biases from policing. What happened to Regis Korchinski-Paquet is nothing new, and we all know it (including you). We need to put more community care back into our communities.

Defund the police by 50% (I’m sure a bunch of it can come from those suspended-with-pay cops). Scrap the body cameras.

Demand support from the province to make this happen.

Re-route that money into permanent affordable housing.

Institute living wages for all

Decriminalize drugs / allow the mental health professionals handle drug and mental health cases.

If Minneapolis, New York, Los Angeles and other major north American cities can do this, so can we.

Thanks again for your time. Stay healthy.

Respectfully, Firmly, Sincerely,
Kristina Koski

Roncesvalles Ave. Toronto.

PS. I would like to thank and commend my councillor Gord Perks for voting on the correct side of these issues during that city hall meeting. I hope he continues to push for these changes our city (and cities everywhere) so desperately need.