

September 3, 2014

Dear Members of the Senate Committee,

Honourable Bob Runciman, bob.runciman@sen.parl.gc.ca  
Honourable George Baker, george.baker@sen.parl.gc.ca  
Honourable Mobina S.B. Jaffer, mjaffer@sen.parl.gc.ca  
Honourable Piere Hugues Boivenu, boisvp@sen.parl.gc.ca  
Committee Clerk Shaila Anwar, lcjc@sen.parl.gc.ca

AIDS Vancouver Island (AVI) is proud to express our support for the Senate submission provided by PEERS Victoria Resources Society on concerns related to Bill C-36.

AVI provides prevention, treatment and support services for people living with, and exposed to risk factors for, HIV/AIDS. We offer support and information for people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C, harm reduction services, and a wide range of group and community-based programming. We are active across Vancouver Island in health promotion education and work collaboratively with organizations to promote the health and well-being of the communities we serve, including sex workers. We are committed to advocating for social justice and the right to access supportive health care services. Stigma, criminalization of sex work and drug use, and social marginalization significantly and negatively impact the lives of the diverse groups of people who access our services.

We have a long-standing partnership with Peers Victoria Resources Society that includes providing education on HIV, hepatitis C, harm reduction, and sexual wellness to clients and to staff, and arts-based programming that gives participants an opportunity to explore personal identity and concepts of wellness. We value our work alongside PEERS and share many of the same priorities, including the ongoing work of dispelling common myths about HIV/AIDS, drug use and the sex industry, as well as addressing stigma, discrimination and the negative impacts of criminalizing people who use drugs and people who engage in sex work.

Our understanding of some of the risks connecting HIV/AIDS and sex work are reflected in a recent article published in *The Lancet*<sup>i</sup>:

Sex workers have disproportionate risks and burdens of HIV worldwide.

Punitive approaches to sex work have hindered responses and abetted the spread of HIV.

Stigma and discrimination challenge sex workers' abilities to protect themselves, their families and their sexual partners from HIV.



An estimated 33-46% of new HIV infections in sex workers and clients could be averted over the course of a decade if sex work were decriminalized. Specifically, 72 infections in female sex workers and clients in Vancouver, BC could be averted at a cost-savings of approximately \$24 million in that city alone.

There is a rich evidence base for community-based interventions, particularly where sex workers take the lead to improve health outcomes and adherence to human rights.

Peers has shown particular leadership in developing skills and capacity amongst sex workers to lead the way in supporting the health and safety of people in the sex industry. A recent focus of AVI's Harm Reduction Services in Victoria has been the development and support of leadership by people who have experiential knowledge related to illicit drug use, sex work, poverty and HIV and/or hepatitis C. We employ six part-time Harm Reduction Workers specifically for their experiential knowledge related to drug use and sex work, and they play a vital role in how our services are delivered. It is a priority of AVI to continue supporting initiatives that centre the life experiences and knowledge of people who may be at risk for, or living with, HIV in prevention efforts.

We share concerns expressed by Peers that Bill C36 will cause harm to sex workers by discouraging collaborative relationships with health providers, social service organizations, and the police. The Bill will undoubtedly increase the violence that sex workers face in the context of criminalization and further isolate and marginalize sexually exploited youth. In particular, we believe that Bill C36 would reinforce risk for HIV/AIDS amongst sex workers and their clients and stand in the way of prevention efforts to reduce the incidence and impact of HIV across Canada.

Organizations led by sex workers must be heard, and we urge the Senate Committee to listen carefully to their concerns regarding how the criminalization of sex work and Bill C36 affects their lives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristen Kvakic".

Kristen Kvakic, RSW, MSW  
Director of Programs, Acting Executive Director

**<sup>1</sup> An action agenda for HIV and sex workers**

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