

October 2, 2020



COUNCILLORS' OFFICE  
Councillor Rebecca Bligh

To City Council, City staff, and partners in the provincial and federal government,

I am writing to express my formal support for a number of businesses in the Downtown Eastside of the City of Vancouver, including The Healing Wave and the High Hopes Society among others, who are seeking exemptions from senior government to continue their operations as cannabis retail providers, as they attempt to address the ongoing opioid emergency through harm reduction and substitution services.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen the opioid emergency in British Columbia grow to new heights, and take record amounts of lives in our community. The tragic circumstances of the pandemic are ravaging our at risk communities, especially in the Downtown Eastside, and as a City we must be taking any action we can to protect our most vulnerable. A number of businesses providing essential harm reduction in the DTES have been faced with significant pushback from both landlords and the City.

The Serious Hope Society and Healing Wave is a non-profit cannabis retail store at 157 Cordova Street. The store is run by Neil Magnusson, who previously operated the Cannabis Substitution Project from the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) Office earlier this year, for medically seeking patrons as an alternative to illicit opioids. He has since incorporated the Cannabis Substitution Project into the Healing Wave premises and continues to service over two hundred patrons who seek the below market price cannabis as an alternative to opioid usage. Over the past few months I have been in conversation with John

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Conroy, who has been retained by the Healing Wave as legal counsel, as they seek to work with the provincial and federal government to become legally licensed or achieve an exemption to supply for medical purposes to a community in need.

The Serious Hope Society has been supported in a letter by Dr. M-J Milloy, the Canopy Growth professor of Cannabis Science at UBC and a researcher at the BC Centre on Substance Use. Dr. Milloy engages in research surrounding the benefits of cannabis in alleviating the overdose emergency, and has highlighted that cannabis can act as a substitute for opioids for those most at risk to opioid overdose: those living with addiction or chronic pain. Dr. Milloy emphasizes that research in Vancouver has identified the lower chances of illicit opioid use in those using cannabis, and that those using cannabis were more likely to stay in medical treatment for opioid usage. Dr. Milloy also emphasized the barriers to those in the Downtown Eastside face in accessing medical cannabis, and that Mr. Magnusson's Cannabis Substitution Project addresses this gap by providing essential harm reduction, the removal of which would increase the risks faced by those participating in the project who are most at risk. Mr. Magnusson is also a contributor to a variety of cannabis research projects in Vancouver, including those at UBC.

As they are illegally selling cannabis without a medical or recreational sales license, their landlord has posted an eviction notice effective August 31st last month. On September 16th, the Serious Hope Society and Healing Wave sent a formal request to the federal government for a Temporary Federal Ministerial Exemption by the Minister of Health under the authority of the Cannabis Act to legally allow the sale of below market cannabis at their current location for medical purposes. Such an exemption would remove the legal responsibility of the landlord to serve a notice of eviction to the Healing Wave, allowing them to remain at 157 Cordova. As the Serious Hope Society and Healing Wave are a non-profit retailer providing an essential harm reduction service during two separate public health emergencies, I am fully supportive that they receive this temporary exemption, and that the City of Vancouver and Province of British Columbia refrain from any enforced eviction, or legal action against Neil Magnusson, the Serious Hope Society and Healing Wave, or the landlords of 157 Cordova Street.

In addition to Neil Magnusson's operations, the High Hopes Research Society is another non-profit operating in the Downtown Eastside, that has faced significant obstacles in operating with a legal license. High Hopes provides access to up to ten grams of cannabis a month at no cost in a community based well-being program to manage the medical symptoms of marginalized members.

The High Hopes Society have submitted over sixty letters of support from members of the community who live and work in the Downtown Eastside, including from those working in cannabis research locally, health experts within the BC CDC, and members of the provincial Green Party. As their deadline to respond to the province is coming up shortly, a letter of support can have a positive impact in their petition to the province, with the hope that their future operations can continue unencumbered.

Both the Serious Hope Society and the High Hopes Society are addressing the opioid emergency in our most vulnerable communities by providing cannabis as a substitute to dangerous illicit opioids. Though their operations are not technically legal and do not meet the current requirements for medical cannabis supply, their essential harm reduction services are helping to alleviate the risk faced by those who use illicit opioids to address addiction or other medical symptoms, and they are backed up by a strong growing research base and medical background. I strongly support the efforts of both the Serious Hope Society and High Hopes Society to gain exemptions from the provincial and federal government, so their

operations can continue legally and save lives in our most impacted communities facing dual public health emergencies.

I hope staff and fellow councillors will also lend their support to their ongoing efforts, and that the province and federal government will proceed by extending their support for such businesses providing an essential medical service.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Bligh  
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