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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Case for a Civilian Led Crisis Response

Objectives:

- 1) People in medical crisis receive a medical response first.
- 2) Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) no longer responds to calls for service that are outside their scope or expertise.
- 3) A reduction in overall calls for service for WPS.
- 4) Better service to the community through a more effective evidence and community-based approach.

Winnipeg's current police led response, the Alternative Response to Citizens in Crisis, was launched in 2021 on a false premise. At the time both the Winnipeg Police Service and Shared Health representatives, the project's partners, insisted that a police presence was necessary due to the potential volatility of these calls for service. WPS Police Chief Danny Smyth said at the time: "...the reality is that police will always need to play a role in these calls for service as these situations can be violent and unpredictable....". This is despite the fact that community-led responses had been in operation for years.

"We have seen too many heartbreaking tragedies, not just in this past year, but for years. The WPS continues to insist they must be the lead on these calls when the evidence does not back that up. Chief Smyth, himself, has recently noted that according to WPS use of force reports, only 0.33% of calls result in any force being used. So why do we need police at all 20 some thousand well-being checks?" Angelina Pelletier, PAC Co-chair

"We do understand that there are inherent risks of a situation escalating. However, what the WPS approach does not recognize is that some people, due to their particular condition, substance used, past bad experiences with police etc... are actually escalated by a police presence. Just because a situation does not end in violence does not mean it was necessarily a success or as successful as it could have been. Someone can be intimidated into compliance furthering mental and emotional harm. A community led response would mean that the police would only be called if the community-based organizations' first responders felt they needed additional support." Abdikheir Ahmed, PAC Co-chair

“We cannot pretend that there is not a racial component to this issue. When one considers who has died in police encounters, we see that they are predominantly Indigenous, Black or other Racialized People. If the crisis response team was rooted in community, we may get better representation and results as the person in crisis would see themselves in the person trying to help them.” Lisa Forbes, Immigration Matters in Canada Coalition and PAC member.

“My friend was left waiting for over 8 hours for the WPS to arrive. And when they did, they decided she was fine and left her. When I finally got to her, it was clear she was not. She was hearing voices and had shocked herself multiple times as those voices told her to by dismantling a wall plug. I got her to hospital where she was admitted for a full breakdown. But the police thought she was fine?” Teruni Walaliyadde, SEED and PAC member.

“We in Winnipeg are very clearly heading in the wrong direction. At a recent inquest into 5 deaths in police custody, that is 5 previous deaths, not the most recent one, a police use-of-force expert said that all that is needed is for more police to show up at calls and have the paramedics arrive earlier so the person in distress can be subdued faster and then medicated. One can only assume this would be against their free will in these circumstances. How could this not just perpetuate harm? Kate Kehler, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg and PAC member

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