



## **Downtown Eastside Women's Centre calls on City of Vancouver to increase and expedite safe spaces in the DTES during COVID-19**

**Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh)/Vancouver, B.C. (October 1, 2020)** - The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC) is extremely worried that there is a lack of safe spaces in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. DEWC is concerned that this lack of safe space and access to critical services disproportionately impacts DTES residents, particularly women, is inequitable, will drastically increase the number of deaths and incidents of gender-based violence, and severely worsen mental health. The City of Vancouver must immediately respond to this humanitarian crisis with concrete actions, particularly as the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of COVID hits the DTES.

DEWC is following COVID-19 protocols, complying with indoor physical distancing requirements, and has been trying to get a patio space set up outside of the Drop-in Centre (302 Columbia St.) so that women have more spaces to safely interact and access respite from the street, access basic needs, services, and supports. DEWC has been continually thwarted by red tape, unlike restaurants, which have had the capacity to facilitate opening patio spaces, as well as tacit support from the City through fast-tracked permitting processes. While the City has blocked off a street lane in front of the Drop-in Centre for the purpose of an outdoor patio, the space is not wheelchair or scooter accessible, nor can women be safely distanced. When women leave DEWC there are limited other safe spaces for them to go.

Summer Rain Bentham, President of DEWC Board, stated: "At this point we are increasingly angry that already vulnerable women don't have enough safe, women identified spaces to gather during COVID, while many quickly erected restaurant patios sit empty. It is critical that homeless and precariously housed women be protected as much as possible from COVID and given the common decency of a place to sit or access critical supports. In the last two weeks, a young woman died outside the street market, and her dead body was there for hours until someone noticed. Women need somewhere to go that is safe - this must be a priority. COVID has exacerbated the disparities and poverty that many residents in the DTES, and particularly women, already face. The City of Vancouver must consciously and urgently address this using every power it has available."

We call on Mayor Kennedy Stewart and Vancouver City Council to:

1. Immediately facilitate, fund, and fast-track patios and outdoor heated tents in the DTES with particular attention to ensuring women-only spaces are created.

2. Reopen community centres in and adjacent to the DTES with COVID-19 protocols in place.
3. Work with service providers in the DTES to create a City of Vancouver Concrete Action Plan for COVID-19 Prevention and Response in the DTES with particular attention to re-opening spaces.

**Media contacts:**

Summer Rain Bentham, DEWC Board President: (778) 232-4789

Andrea Glickman, DEWC Board Member: (604) 842-2977