



Report to Council

From the Office of Councillor Amy Lubik

Date: March 16, 2020
Subject: Sick Leave for Part-time, Precarious and Contract Workers

Purpose

That the Mayor's office write a letter to the relevant provincial and federal political leaders calling on them to enact immediate sick leave benefits for our most vulnerable workers who work part time, contract and/ or precarious jobs in our communities and advocate for a halt on evictions during COVID-19.

Recommendation

WHEREAS there are no provisions in BC Employment Standards Act allow for paid sick leave;

WHEREAS the medical health officers and epidemiologists are calling for people to stay home, impacting incomes and forcing people to choose between work and their health;

WHEREAS most municipalities have staff who do not qualify for EI, paid sick leave or other necessary benefits but serve our communities admirably;

WHEREAS, We as local leaders recognize that economic security is fundamental to public health, and that we are only as healthy as those most vulnerable, least economically secure, and least covered by our social services. Thus we must do all we can to keep people secure enough to take care of themselves and endure a quarantine or treatment if required;

THEREFORE THAT Port Moody Council write to the relevant provincial and federal political leaders to call on them to enact immediate sick leave benefits for our most vulnerable workers who work part time, contract and/ or precarious jobs in our communities including:

- increasing duration of EI sick leave from 15 to 26 weeks;
- providing emergency special EI payments for vulnerable workers who lose shifts due to closing of places of employment
- reducing qualifying hours for EI
- creation of a special fund for workers who don't qualify for EI
- providing special "income relief" for health care workers, as was done with SARS
- provide worker protections and supports if a worker needs to provide care to a person for a reason related to COVID-19 such as a school or day-care closure.
- Create supports for Arts and Entertainment sector workers
- amend the BC Employment Standards Act to make paid sick leave mandatory for all part time, full time, temporary and contract work undertaken in the Province of

BC, and undertake a review of other jurisdictions to set a reasonable minimum standard if allowable sick days in a calendar year

AND THAT Port Moody call on the provincial government to halt all evictions during this time as recommended in the report dated March 16th, 2020 from the Councillor Amy Lubik regarding Sick Leave for Part-time, Precarious and Contract Workers.

Background

The provincial government and federal government are hurrying to support our communities during the COVID-19 outbreak; however, with increasing closures of businesses and public services, many workers are left without supports, which, considering that 50 % of BC residents live paycheck to paycheck can put undue financial pressure on some of the most vulnerable in our work force ([BC CTV News](#)).

Some of the measures taken by the federal government are helpful those who already have access to EI, but not those who do not as outlined in a recent article by [Unifor](#) “Many unionized workers have job and income security provisions in their collective agreements in the event of shift reductions, or the need to take sick leave, but not all workers have those protections.” Further, Port Moody is the City of the Arts, and COVID is impacting the livelihoods and [stability of arts and entertainment workers](#), who are frequently trapped in the precarious and “gig economies.”

Discussion

Not all BC workers have protections if they need to take time away for [COVID related reasons](#); [Ontario is in](#) the process of providing some relief for workers, which should be emulated by BC. [An article in the Tri-City News](#) captured similar sentiment from the BC Government Employees Union:

[BCGEU] is calling on provincial and federal governments to protect workers from lost pay or termination as both levels of government ramp up appeals to self-imposed 14-day quarantines — or isolation if they are sick — in an effort to stem the spread of COVID-19.

“While B.C.’s response to the virus has been hailed for its thoroughness from a public health perspective, the recommended 14-day self-isolation has brought to light serious concerns for workers and their families,” the BC Federation of Labour said in a press release Tuesday.

“Workers should not have to choose between their health and their ability to keep their jobs and pay their bills,” said BC Federation of Labour president Laird Cronk in the press release. “Ensuring paid and protected sick leave during a pandemic is an immediate and practical step governments can take to protect public health, limit the spread of infection, and remove an untenable choice for workers.

“Paid and protected sick leave is not some luxury benefit. It’s an essential public health priority,” added Cronk. “Let’s make sure our response to this virus doesn’t exacerbate economic insecurity.”

From Behind the Numbers (March 2020):

Lessons from COVID-19: We are only as strong as our weakest link

There is a lot we still don't know about COVID-19 (coronavirus) and how hard it will impact Canada. But one thing we're learning: we are only as strong as our weakest link.

COVID-19 is exposing a number of weak links globally and here in Canada.

For starters, critical to containing COVID-19 are two new 2020 buzzwords—social distancing and self-isolation. Health officials are asking people to do their part by staying home if they're sick and preparing to have two weeks' worth of medicine and provisions.

While staying home is known to help curb the spread of COVID-19, it's hard advice to swallow if you're poor, working poor, in the service industry, or self-employed.

As Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction Director Tom Cooper points out in this [Hamilton Spectator op-ed](#), the working poor can't afford to take unpaid time off and people on fixed (low) incomes—such as people on social assistance—don't have extra cash to stockpile provisions. "If we truly want to keep our communities healthy and protect against the spread of illness, whether COVID-19 or anything else in the future, we need to pay more attention to the relationship between health and income inequality in Canada," Cooper writes. It's not just the poor who face barriers. Precarious workers have challenges too.

Jon Shell, managing director and partner at Social Capital Partners, points out that self-employed workers will suffer from COVID-19.

"Spare a moment for the self-employed today as you focus on not touching your face," Shell tweeted. "They can't avoid travel, need to go to client sites, and get no income if they self-quarantine. No corporate support and our social support system isn't designed to help them at all.

"We constantly push people to be 'entrepreneurial' and to 'hustle.' Let's remember that the lack of an appropriate and fair safety net for the self-employed is one of the many things this crisis is exposing. We need to fix it."

In this [Toronto Star column](#), Jim Stanford, director of the Centre for Future Work, points to the need for legislated sick pay, better job security for workers who may need to follow the 14-day self-isolation COVID-19 protocol, and better employment insurance provisions for workers who cannot work because of illness.

Legislated sick pay is key: research shows that cities and states in the United States that require employers to provide paid sick days have [fewer flu cases](#).

Getting rid of the need for doctors' sick notes is also key. Why flood doctors' offices with sick people when they should be at home resting and not spreading contagion?

COVID-19 could rock the global economy

Speaking of contagion, fears over [COVID-19 and an oil sell-off](#) led to panic in the stock markets Monday, forcing the New York and Toronto stock exchanges to [briefly halt trading](#).

In the U.S., United Airlines and Jet Blue Airlines are [cutting back flights](#) due to a drop in demand due to COVID-19 fears.

Meanwhile, the U.S. [Federal Reserve](#) and [Bank of Canada](#) have cut interest rates in an attempt to protect the economy from a COVID-19/oil sell-off downturn.

Businesses are [cancelling travel, conferences, and meetings](#) in response to the COVID-19 threat.

It's a reminder that the economy is only as strong as the health of our communities. And as [Italy completely shuts down](#), COVID-19 is teaching us that we are only as strong as our weakest link in the global public health chain.

That's why investments in public health—disease prevention, health promotion and protection—are so critical.

Cuts to public health hurt

It's a lesson that seems to have gotten lost in Canada, all these many years after the SARS outbreak.

Across Canada, provincial governments have cut back on public health spending. Just last year, the Ontario government made a move to slash public health budgets and the Alberta government is in the process of implementing similar funding cuts. Other provinces have also seen [dwindling public health investments](#) over the past decade.

The irony of public health is that it's undervalued until an invisible virus emerges, making the value of public health visible. After SARS, that visibility led to new investments in public health, but over time, funding has dwindled.

[This Springer article](#) says “governments around the world underinvest in public health and public health research.”

In the OECD, health spending for prevention is rarely higher than 6% of the health care budget. In Canada, only 5.5% of total health spending goes to public health, such as food and drug safety, health inspection, and health promotion.

Trevor Hancock, retired public health professor at the University of Victoria, calls the underinvestment in public health [short-term thinking](#).

“There are several factors at play, one of which may be that public health does not generate headlines, whereas dramatic life-saving interventions do,” Hancock writes.

“When public health is effective, nothing happens; nobody writes headlines about the hundreds of cancers that did not happen, only about the latest hi-tech drug or intervention that reduced the death rate from cancer.”

The advent of COVID-19 is helping us see public health in a new light.

When it comes to trying to contain COVID-19 spread, we have strengths. Canada's public health professionals took many lasting lessons from the 2002-03 SARS outbreak and they are better prepared for COVID-19 than some countries.

Protocols were in place to quickly identify potential COVID-19 patients and the source of infection, test them, treat them in hospital if needed and, otherwise, ensure they're self-isolating for 14 days. Even jurisdictions in the U.S. are struggling to meet these basics.

Communications from public health officials in Canada have been steady, transparent, and reliable. In times of uncertainty, trust is key.

In order to maintain trust, Canada's public health system needs to be better funded over the long haul. In the short term, expect pressure on the federal and provincial governments to respond to the dual crisis of COVID-19 and oil sell-off with major stimulus initiatives.

Economists are already talking about the need to ["supersize" refundable tax credits](#) like the GST or the Canada Child Benefit, to get cash in the hands of those who need it. But this is also a moment to correct the chronic underfunding of public health units across Canada. If we manage to contain COVID-19, it will be because of individual efforts to follow public health protocols and because of the expertise of public health officials in quickly establishing those protocols.

These are our strongest links in the system. Let's invest in keeping them strong. In this time of uncertainty, we must be advocating for the stability of those who are most impacted in our communities.

Other Option(s)

That the report dated March 16, 2020 from Councillor Amy Lubik Regarding Sick Leave for Part-time, Precarious and Contract Workers be received for information.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications related to this report.

Communications and Civic Engagement Initiatives

There are no communications or civic engagement initiatives related to this report.

Council Strategic Plan Objectives

This report is aligned with Council's Strategic Plan objectives through the following:

- Having the Courage to lead
- Promoting an inclusive and healthy community