



Vancouver Island Persons Living
with HIV/AIDS Society (VPWAS)

101-1139 Yates Street
Coast Salish Territory
Victoria, BC V8V 3N2

Statement - VPWAS at Pride; Honouring the History of Pride as Protest

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Vancouver Island Persons Living with HIV/AIDS Society (VPWAS). For a quarter of a century, VPWAS has been advocating for and providing support and services to individuals on Vancouver Island living with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. While we have participated in Victoria Pride for many years, this year, to mark 25 years of activism and resistance in the HIV/AIDS movements, we will not be walking in this year's Pride Parade. We do so as an act of resistance. We value our partnership with the Victoria Pride Society and make this decision after careful reflection and contemplation of the impacts of the HIV/AIDS and HepC epidemics in the area known as Canada, and across the globe.

Recent discussions and decisions regarding uniformed police involvement in Pride parades have come to the fore of queer politics in Canada, questioning what inclusivity looks like in the context of Pride. As a peer-based organization that advocates for structurally vulnerable people living with HIV/AIDS and HepC, we feel it is important to take a stance in support of communities that bear the brunt of state and police violence in Canada, including those that make up the membership of our organization. We want to honour the history of Pride as a protest by opting out of the parade.

We are intentionally not participating in the Pride parade this year as an act of resistance, as an act of solidarity and as a continuing act of protest. More than ever, we feel that it is critically important for Pride to return to its roots as a political protest engaged in anti-oppressive work aimed at liberation for all people who fall within the rainbow family. We are doing this for the following reasons:

- The HIV/AIDS and HepC epidemics continue to claim lives, both in Canada, and across the globe. HIV criminalization has ensured the perpetuation of an epidemic that continues to impact our communities. We are not walking in the parade as a reminder of the work that has been done, and that necessarily needs to continue, in curbing the HIV epidemic in Canada, and the world.
- The Overdose Crisis being experienced in BC is claiming more lives than at the height of the HIV epidemic. We understand that the war on drugs and criminalization continues to contribute to the high propensity of overdose deaths in this province. We are not walking in the parade to acknowledge and highlight the lack of response to the opioid epidemic by all levels of government. We are not walking in the parade to remember and honour the thousands of people dying from preventable overdose deaths in this province.
- Racialized communities along with youth are at the forefront of queer activism in Canada. We commend groups like Black Lives Matter and YOUTHCO who have continued to press Pride societies across the country to do better and to divest from police participation in Pride. We hope to practice solidarity with these inspiring groups who continue to resist in the face of violence at the hands of police and the broader Pride community. We are not walking in the parade to highlight the importance of racialized and indigenous lives, especially in the face of growing racism and anti-black hatred.

- Across the globe, people within the rainbow family continue to face extreme violence and repression from their respective state governments and communities. In Canada, xenophobic and racist immigration policies continue to claim the lives of those seeking refuge. We are not walking in the parade as a reminder that Pride is political and that our efforts to provide liberation for communities across the globe precedes our desires to celebrate our achievements. We refuse to accept borders and immigration policies that detriment Queer people across the globe.
- Indigenous peoples across North America are defending the land which they live on and the communities they live in. We are not walking in the parade to make the connections between settler colonialism and mainstream (corporate) Pride movements. We call on others to show solidarity and work alongside Indigenous communities in their struggles against colonialism and its environmental and social impacts.
- Poverty and homelessness continue to claim lives in our communities. It is estimated that nearly half of homeless youth in the province fall within the rainbow community. Government inaction, compounded by gentrification, continues to create barriers for low-income individuals in the Pride community. We will not walk in the parade as a sign of our continued commitment to marginalized individuals in our community.

Once again, we believe now more than ever, Pride must return to its roots as a political and social movement. Pride is a protest. Pride is resistance. While we won't be participating in the parade, we welcome you to visit our booth at the Pride Festival where we aim to disseminate information about support services for HIV and HepC positive individuals.

For more information, please write to Piotr Burek at info@vpwas.org.

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