



Dear members of the City of Hamilton Police Services Board,

We would like to share the MSU's call for change in approaches to public safety in Hamilton. Over the past year, the MSU joined many Hamiltonians and local organizations calling for a reduction in police funding. We believe that re-examination of our policing system is a critical task to engage in, and while this relates to the 2021 budget, it also extends much further. Hamilton residents have indicated a sustained, long-term interest to reduce reactive and punitive law-enforcement models and build community-centred responses to needs and conflict. The Hamilton Police Services Board should reflect this interest in its governance and future decisions.

We would like to highlight that the MSU's position and the public dialogue about police does not equate to a disinterest in public safety. Rather, we seek an inclusive, equitable and expanded definition of safety that recognizes the systemic injustices experienced by certain communities because of policing. That includes racism against Black and Indigenous people, who have been proven to be disproportionately harmed and mistreated in the Canadian criminal justice system, as noted in recent human rights commission reports on police interactions in cities like Toronto and Halifax.^{1 2} It includes treatment of people with mental illness or substance use issues and those experiencing homelessness who are made *unsafe* when their behaviour is criminalized and their crises handled by armed law enforcement officers. We've seen examples of these issues in Hamilton through incidents widely reported in the media, such as carding³, the events of Pride 2019,⁴ and handling of encampments and homeless populations during the pandemic. A model of public safety that fails to consider *all* perspective not only perpetuates the recurrence of these problems, but also diminishes trust in safety authorities amongst racialized, low-income, and other social groups. That effect was demonstrated in a recent MSU survey, where student responses indicated doubt in the HPS' ability to safely serve minority and marginalized communities⁵. We believe that students and the broader community deserve to have their feedback received in good faith, and to see their concerns addressed.

Many cities have provided exemplary responses to the current conversation on policing. Civilian-led, non-police crisis intervention teams like CAHOOTS⁶ in Oregon and STAR in Colorado⁷ have been very successful. In Canada, Toronto recently approved a similar pilot program that will send civilian crisis workers as first responders for certain 9/11 calls.⁸ These programs diminish the broad burdens placed on enforcement and result in more effective and humane care of residents. Our progress towards these models and de-tasking police of calls related to health and social issues will depend on resources and cooperative effort. Resources can come from reallocated police funding, which requires budget reductions like we've seen in Austin and Seattle last year,^{9 10} as well as smaller examples in Edmonton and Halifax.^{11 12} Vancouver and Toronto also froze their 2021 police budgets, illustrating that regular, annual budget increases are not necessary.^{13 14}

Thus, we ask that the Hamilton police board works toward a 2022 budget with at least no increases, and ideally significant reductions that allow for re-allocations towards more community safety services. This can be done by striking a working group to focus on this goal as Ottawa's police board has done.¹⁵ That work could be supplemented by other actions that would support transitioning



our public safety approach. For example, Toronto's police board's reform recommendations include identifying non-core police services that could be delivered by alternative service providers and identifying funding areas currently allocated to police that can be re-allocated to new community safety programs.¹⁶

This process requires public engagement. Last year in cities like Toronto, Calgary, and Ottawa, interested residents were able to discuss perceptions of the police through open forums like town halls and public hearings, and accessible meetings.^{17 18 19} We ask that the Board clarify the methods of public consultation used in the budgeting process and increase opportunities for open participation.

Increased transparency would also be valuable. For example, Toronto's board has implemented an online dashboard where the public can easily evaluate their progress on reforms.²⁰ The process of hiring a new police chief is another opportunity for transparent information-sharing, such as publicizing this Board's precise selection criteria. Such measures would help the public evaluate how the Board is working towards change.

Finally, we understand that some of these topics will be addressed in the upcoming Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan. We look forward to that progress, and we hope that the voices of McMaster students are incorporated. But even beyond the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan, we believe it is incumbent of this Board to contribute towards the development of more inclusive and equitable approaches to public safety in Hamilton.

Sincerely,
The McMaster Students Union

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