

4. Supporting the Call for Changing the Cheque Day Paradigm

At the Regular Council meeting on May 14, 2019, due to time constraints, Council referred the following motion to the Regular Council meeting following the Standing Committee on Policy and Strategic Priorities meeting to be held on May 15, 2019, as Unfinished Business. Subsequently, the motion was referred to the Standing Committee on Policy and Strategic Priorities meeting on June 12, 2019, to hear from speakers, with a start time of 3pm.

MOVED by: Councillor Kirby-Yung

WHEREAS

1. MLA Jane Thornthwaite submitted a private bill titled the *Welfare Payment System Reflection Act* calling upon the Province of BC to change the practice for distribution of social assistance cheques;
2. The bill asks the Province of British Columbia to call upon the Minister responsible for the processing of income assistance to prepare a report on alternatives in payment processing to individuals receiving assistance, and states the report must consider but is not limited to considering the following:
 - (a) Providing welfare, disability assistance or other income assistance in multiple payments throughout a month as opposed to single monthly payment;
 - (b) Alternative payment systems that enable responsible spending of assistance;
3. Further, the bill indicates that the Ministers conducting this consultation must consult with, but are not limited to consulting with, individuals receiving welfare, disability assistance or other income assistance, groups advocating for those receiving welfare, disability assistance or other income assistance, and the Union of BC Municipalities;
4. In April 2016 the Province of BC declared the increase in overdose deaths a public health emergency. Vancouver has been at the center of this crisis. Fentanyl-detected overdose deaths were 152 in 2016, 306 in 2017 and 337 in 2018. BC Coroners confirmed Vancouver overdose deaths were 232 in 2016, 376 in 2017 and 387 in 2018. In conjunction with the overdose health emergency, the practice of distributing social assistance cheques on the same day/s creates acute service demand peaks for first responders, putting a strain on first responder and City staff resources that can exceed capacity to deal with incidents. This has created increasing job and emotional stress on our first responders;
5. Medical health experts and first responders know there is a significant spike in drug-related deaths within days of people receiving their social assistance cheques. On average, overdose deaths can be 40% higher during income assistance payment week according to the BC Coroners Service report on Illicit Drug Overdose Deaths in BC (2009-2019);
6. Vancouver averaged about 22 overdose calls a day to B.C. paramedics in 2017 and has averaged about 20 calls a day in 2018 according to BC

Emergency Health Services. Insite once averaged a couple of overdoses a day but in 2018 saw closer to seven a day after the fentanyl crisis took hold, and recorded 16 overdoses on a cheque day and 11 the following day;

7. The call to change the current cheque day distribution practice has been endorsed by Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services;
8. In December 2018, Council unanimously adopted the Mayor's Overdose Emergency Task Force - Recommendations for Immediate Action on the Overdose Crisis recognizing it will take concerted efforts to change the course of the crisis. The report included calling for collective action for systemic changes;
9. Dr. Lindsey Richardson, Research Scientist at BC Centre on Substance Use and Associate Professor, Sociology at the University of BC, was the principal investigator leading a study on the impact of alternative social assistance disbursement on drug-related harm or TASA 'cheque day' study. Initiated in 2012, the study recognized that synchronized payments have been linked to escalations in drug use and unintended but severe drug-related harms, including overdose, as well as spikes in demand for health, social, financial and first responder services;
10. Vancouver needs continued concrete action on prevention, treatment and recovery options for mental health and addictions to turn the tide on the number of deaths. Changing and varying cheque schedules may be one small brick in a bigger wall that could break down the social phenomenon of a one approach distribution practice. Further, change will help alleviate the strain on overdose services, and the significant physical and emotional toll on our first responders, city staff and support organizations.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED

- A. THAT Council endorse the Welfare Payment System Reflection Act bill for the Province of BC to consider alternatives in payment processing to individuals receiving welfare, disability or other income assistance.
- B. THAT the Mayor, on behalf of Council, write to the Premier, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction as well as the Minister for Mental Health and Addictions, stating Council's endorsement and encouragement to consider alternative cheque day distribution practices.
- C. THAT the Mayor, on behalf of Council, write to the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) stating Council's endorsement and encouraging them to ask member municipalities to endorse the call for the Province of BC to consider alternatives in payment processing to individuals receiving welfare, disability or other income assistance.

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