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Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister,

For 45 years, The 519 has been responding to the critical and emerging needs of LGBTQ2S communities in Toronto by delivering services for the most vulnerable and marginalized, and leading advocacy, anti-violence, and access to justice initiatives. Since the City of Toronto ordered the closure of community centres in Toronto on March 13, The 519 has reimagined our programs and services to continue to meet the needs of the most marginalized in our community through the provision of immediate basic needs assistance, including access to food, clothing, hygiene products, and harm reduction supplies. These supports are available and will continue to be available seven days a week, including holidays, for the duration of this crisis.

Queer and trans communities are, by nature of their very fabric, strong and resilient. We have had to be. We have survived generations of abuse and discrimination, survived with next to no legal protections, survived targeted and violent policing, survived public health indifference, survived religious persecution, survived psychiatric abuses, survived bashing and hate motivated crimes, survived criminalization. Our survival has come with the knowledge of unspeakable loss – lives extinguished as a result of indifference by our governments and state institutions and those who continue to believe that we should not exist.

It should come as no surprise that our community is experiencing a sharp rise in targeted homophobic and transphobic attacks. While laws have changed, the protections they offer are often experienced in our communities theoretically. Our laws are only as strong as those tasked to uphold them – the police and the broader criminal justice system continues to be plagued by discriminatory attitudes and a lack of insight into what it means to be queer or trans in our country, particularly at the intersections of race and class and all of the other ways that we are made marginal.

In our communities, safety comes in numbers. We move in groups and share information with one another, in real time, about where danger lurks. We mobilize quickly to respond to threats and design interventions that recognize the different ways that we live and work and



play. Strategies that recognize that the price of visibility is the constant threat of violence and strategies that rely on our ability to come together to keep each other safe.

The current realities of COVID-19 have presented countless challenges to our organization and to queer and trans communities across this country. As a community disproportionately impacted by chronic illness and disease, we are more at risk if we contract this virus and less likely to receive affirming healthcare. As a community disproportionately impacted by hate motivated violence, we are more at risk of being attacked and less able to access crisis supports or safe haven. As a community disproportionately impacted by substance use and depression and at higher risk for suicide, we are more at risk of harm and death as a result of social distancing. As a community that does not reflect the heteronormative assumptions around what constitutes a household, we are at a higher risk of a targeted enforcement of bylaws.

These are not assumptions; they are our realities and they are evidenced in our conversations with our communities every single day. The impact of public health measures, emergency management and enforcement strategies, and the shuttering of organizations and institutions mandated to protect the most vulnerable are not actions that impact our society equally despite government and media narratives that would lead one to believe otherwise.

These are amidst the darkest days that our organization has ever experienced. Of the hundreds of people lining up to access the supports that we are struggling to provide, many are begging us to tell them when this is going to end. Amidst a backdrop of desperation, the daily reports of homophobic and transphobic violence, unrelenting news of suicides and overdoses, and no signs of relief in sight we can't help but ask the same question.

Queer and trans communities, and all marginalized people, will continue to feel the social and economic impact of this pandemic for years to come. We need resources and strategies now that reflect this reality and that will help us respond in ways that will prevent more loses. We have grown weary of apologies from governments that come too long after we have counted our dead. We want action now.

Sincerely,

Becky McFarlane

Senior Director, Programs and Services, The 519