



David Morris
Board Chair

Maura Lawless
Executive Director

519 Church Street
Toronto, Ontario M4Y 2C9

Tel: 416 355-6771
MLawless@The519.org

May 8, 2020

Dear Minister Morneau, Premier Ford, Ms. Suze Morrison MPP, Mayor John Tory,

Re: Urgent Government Action Required to Save Toronto's LGBTQ2S Village

Since 1975, The 519 has been a prominent and energetic LGBTQ2S community centre, serving our communities of common bond and our local neighbourhood. We are privileged to be central to The Village's history and its future. We have seen firsthand the rich sense of community that queer and trans owned local businesses, from independent grocers' to bars and clubs, bring to the neighbourhood. We have also seen too many of these businesses close their doors over the years. These are more than businesses, these are safe and protective gathering spaces for queer and trans communities and a vital force for LGBTQ2S economic security. COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on The Village. Our local businesses are in danger and need immediate support from all levels of government.

If local queer and trans owned businesses in The Village cease to exist post COVID-19, the few remaining positive and safer spaces in The Village will disappear. These establishments are the backbone of our community. Gentrification has vastly changed the landscape of The Village and severe increases to commercial rents are driving community-owned businesses, who already operate on razor-thin margins, to bankruptcy. Just this week, we wrote to the Prime Minister to bring attention to a sharp rise in targeted and homophobic and transphobic attacks that our queer and trans communities are experiencing in these unprecedented times. It is well evidenced that LGBTQ2S individuals face higher risks of mental health issues due to the effects of discrimination and social determinants of health. Post pandemic, we will need these local businesses more than ever – to continue to provide a safe haven and sense of community for local residents and the broader LGBTQ2S community.

It is also important to consider that many of these local establishments support and hire queer, trans and non-binary individuals – this includes performing artists like drag kings and queens, to musicians and actors, and to showcasing visual artists; to name a few. The lively art community is kept alive by these businesses. These performers and artists not only help to drive the success of these businesses, but also Toronto's rich tourism industry. People from around the world visit Toronto's Village throughout the year. In 2017, Toronto was selected as the third most LGBTQ2S-friendly city in the world. Without these establishments, Toronto will no longer be one of the world's top queer-friendly tourist destinations.

The 519 echoes the letter (dated: April 13, 2020) sent by the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association et al. to Ministers and calls on all levels of government to support the following:



(1) Commercial Rent Relief

- The Government of Ontario must work with all levels of government, landlords and tenants to establish a commercial rent relief framework for small/medium sized businesses.
- The Federal Government should amend the Canadian Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance Program to allow tenants, rather than landlords, to apply directly to this Program for much needed assistance.

(2) Interest Relief on Debt

- The Government of Canada must mandate that banks, credit card companies and credit unions implement an interest relief on mortgage deferrals, credit card payments and loans. Comprehensive action must be taken to give small/medium businesses a chance of reopening and rehiring employees, free of overwhelming debt.

(3) Financial Aid, Not Debt Referral

- All levels of government should prioritize access to financial aid including grants rather than debt referral measures to ensure that expenditures, and all incurred costs during COVID-19 closures are covered

In alignment with many other BIA's, The 519 fully supports the suspension of commercial evictions. These evictions will undoubtedly drive commercial rental prices up, and give no small/medium business a chance of affording increased rental prices.

The 519 also proposes an intergovernmental initiated emergency fund to protect queer owned local businesses/venues that have been hit hardest by COVID-19. Looking to another prominent queer-friendly city, London UK, Mayor Khan has dedicated over CAD 350,000 to this fund.

To our community, these spaces are central to the history of our community and its future. It is in these bars where we found love. It is in Glad Day Bookshop, where we read for the first time about ourselves. It is in the streets where we found our voice. And it is within the walls of The 519 where we found community. The impact of losing these vital spaces cannot be measured only in dollars and cents. It is about losing the very fabric of who we are as an LGBTQ2S community.

Not enough is being done, and the time to act is now. All levels of government must work together to support our safe spaces. Year after year, we continue to see a decline in queer owned establishments in Toronto's Village. The outcome of COVID-19 will be devastating and everything must be done to protect this community. The 519 and its community members continue to view The Village as our home, as our safe space. It is a welcoming and queer friendly destination for the rest of the city and for visitors from around the world. We stand behind and alongside locally owned queer organizations in The Village. We call on you and your governments to support our communities. Now is the time.



Sincerely,

Maura Lawless

David Morris

Located in downtown Toronto, [The 519](#) is a City of Toronto agency, a registered charity, and Canada's prominent LGBTQ2S Community Centre. The 519 strives to make a real difference in people's lives, while contributing to the advancement of LGBTQ2S rights and inclusion in Toronto and beyond. We take pride in being an organization that responds to the critical and emerging needs of our communities by delivering essential services for the most vulnerable and marginalized, and leading advocacy, anti-violence, and access to justice initiatives. The 519 has been a valuable and vibrant community hub offering service, space, and leadership for LGBTQ2S communities and the Church-Wellesley neighbourhood since 1975.