

September 24 , 2021

BY EMAIL

Public Safety Chair Hon. Adrienne Adams
250 Broadway, Suite 1877
New York, NY 10007

CC:

Speaker Corey Johnson
City Hall Office
New York, NY 10007

RE: ADVOCATES URGE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY TO HOLD THE NYPD VICE UNIT ACCOUNTABLE FOR ABUSE AND HARASSMENT PERPETRATED BY THE UNIT

Dear Chair Adrienne Adams:

The Vice Squad is primarily tasked with policing offenses deemed immoral, such as consensual sex work, street-level narcotics use, and gambling. In reality, Vice officers have a long history of exploiting and harassing sex workers, coercing sexual favors, and falsely arresting sex workers and perceived clients. Yet, despite decades of scandals and complaints from sex workers, the Department of Investigation has failed to meaningfully investigate, while Mayor Bill de Blasio refuses to hold abusive Vice officers accountable. Vice's funding has remained intact, while community groups, mutual aid efforts, and advocates struggle to fund programs that actually reduce harm and meet the needs of the same marginalized sex workers and survivors that Vice targets.

The process of stopping Vice's abuses and explore reallocating Vice's funding to services for sex workers and survivors can begin with the New York City Council Public Safety Committee's September 27 meaning on "reducing the responsibilities of the NYPD." We urge the committee to carefully consider the testimonials from Vice survivors and other advocates, and to be guided by their recommendations in determining Vice's responsibilities and funding.

It is shocking that in an era of increased awareness of sexual harassment and misconduct, Mayor de Blasio refuses to reign in Vice officers that perpetuate sexual violence. In 2019, former Vice Detective Ludwig Paz - along with seven other Vice officers who were caught - organized an exploitive prostitution ring worth over \$2 million. In 2017, Vice officer Michael Golden was caught having sex with numerous noncitizen sex workers while he was on duty, and then arresting them. That same year, Yang Song, a 38 year-old immigrant that worked as a masseuse and sex worker in Queens, jumped nearly forty feet to her death during a Vice raid. Prior to her death, she accused a Vice officer of sexually assaulting her while wielding his gun and threatening her with arrest. Yet, after each of these scandals, the Mayor's response ranged from anemic to non-existent. To date, there have been no city-led investigations of Vice's systematic abuses.

Notably, nearly all of Vice’s arrests are of women and non-binary people. They are also disproportionately LGBTQ+, with Black and Latinx transgender people disproportionately targeted.

Vice’s abuses are not just gendered; they are acutely racist. Nearly 93% of Vice’s targets for purchasing sex are Black, brown or Asian, while 90% of those targeted for selling sex are people of color. Almost all of those Vice officers prey upon are in low-income neighborhoods. Under Mayor de Blasio, New York City has paid more than \$1 million to settle false arrest claims by people targeted for patronizing. A recent [ProPublica report](#) provides numerous accounts of former Vice squad members targeting men of color, and intentionally arresting men engaged in innocuous behavior solely for the purpose of increasing overtime pay.¹ In the same report, numerous former Vice officers recount how members of the unit use their positions to harass sex workers while prioritizing earning overtime over the welfare of community members. In the report, retired Detective Richard John Kopack noted “That’s what it’s all about, making money, from the lieutenant to the sergeant on down... You want to eat? You guys want to make some money tonight? Make some arrests, do what you got to do.” Similarly, retired Sergeant Stephen Antiuk gleefully described seeing naked sex workers as a perk of the job, and he noted “undercover [officers] can have a nice, cold beer and watch a girl take off her clothes - and he’s getting paid for it.”

This corruption has gone on for decades.² Following the most recent Vice scandals, numerous city and state elected officials have called for Vice to be investigated, or disbanded. To date, their calls for Vice accountability have gone unanswered. As many of Vice’s practices are shrouded in secrecy, we do not even know the full extent of their harassment and degradation of vulnerable populations.

A public hearing will shed light on Vice’s misconduct, while also enabling community members and organizations to testify about how Vice’s funds could be reallocated to programs and services that elevate the same communities Vice has persecuted for decades – and that will actually curb sex trafficking. The city needs to meaningfully invest in non-compulsory services for survivors of intimate partner violence, including adequate housing, job training, and peer-led outreach with special consideration given to ensuring uninsured and noncitizen sex workers have meaningful access.

New York City desperately needs more funding for job training, housing, and economic survival programs for runaway and homeless LGBTQ+ young people, who are eight times more likely than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts to sell sex to survive. The City also needs to fund

¹ Joshua Kaplan and Joaquin Sapien. “NYPD Cops Cash In On Sex Trade Arrests With Little Evidence, While Black and Brown New Yorkers Pay the Price.” ProPublica, Dec. 12, 2020, available at: <https://www.propublica.org/article/nypd-cops-cash-in-on-sex-trade-arrests-with-little-evidence-while-black-and-brown-new-yorkers-pay-the-price>

² In 1972 the Knapp Commission – a 5 person investigatory panel comprised primarily of former judges to investigate police corruption – found evidence of systematic corruption from Vice officers, including participating in running brothels and using their badges for discounted sex from sex workers. The Mollen Commission in 1994 found similar evidence. While both of these made recommendations, it is clear that reforms did not go far enough to end Vice’s repeated harms toward communities. Moreover, these investigations did not specifically look at the harm Vice policing causes to sex workers, massage workers, and survivors of trafficking. The Knapp Commission Report on Police Corruption (1972), <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll69/id/3893/>; The City of New York Commission to Investigate Allegations of the Police Corruption and Anti-Corruption Procedures of the Police Department (1994)

peer-led outreach to massage workers, street based sex workers, and trafficking survivors in multiple languages, and offer harm reduction trainings. Further, peers should be used for non-carceral responses for community complaints, while connecting workers with competent reproductive healthcare, mental healthcare, and legal assistance for housing, immigration, and wage theft. The City should fund hotlines and physical spaces led by peers for sex workers and trafficking survivors to access services in multiple languages, including Korean and Chinese.

Many of these services and programs began as a community response to the harms caused by Vice—and have proven effective in supporting and elevating sex workers, massage workers, survivors of trafficking, and others. To promote true community safety and curb Vice abuses, it is imperative that the city reallocate Vice’s funding to programs that actually support the communities that Vice harms.

It is clear that Vice policing is broken, and that it has been for decades. The Public Safety Committee can play a critical role in budget justice by considering recommendations by advocates to invest in community resources, rather than Vice policing.

Signed,

Black Freedom Project

Black Trans Nation LLC

Bridges4Life

Brooklyn Community Bail Fund

Brooklyn Defender Services

Center for Community Alternatives

Decrim NY

Decriminalize Sex Work

GAPIMNY—Empowering Queer & Trans Asian Pacific Islanders

Gender Equality New York

GOSO - Getting Out & Staying Out

Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club

Legal Aid Society NYC

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center

Lesbian & Gay Democratic Club of Queens

LGBTQ+ Caucus of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys

Make the Road NY

Marsha P Johnson Institute

New Pride Agenda

New York Anti-Violence Project

New York Civil Liberties Union

New York Communities for Change

New York Immigration Coalition

Police Reform Organizing Project

Release Aging People in Prison/RAPP Campaign

The Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center

Sex Workers Outreach Project Brooklyn (SWOP Brooklyn)

Soan Institute

Swallowtail Healing Collective

Trans Equity Consulting

Transgender Law Center

VOCAL-NY

YaGa Unite We Strive Association