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take a hike

FOUNDATION®

June 28, 2019

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
Room 224, Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Contact: Deb Abma-Sluggett, Director of Philanthropy and Government Relations,
deb@takeahikefoundation.org, 604-679-3558

Dear Committee Members:

Take a Hike is a full-time alternate high school program providing a solution for vulnerable youth with complex needs. Youth who have slipped through the cracks of the mainstream school system- adolescents experiencing mental health and substance use challenges, behaviour issues, and the effects of trauma. We engage these students in school and mental health supports through the outdoors and adventure. For many youth, our program is their entry-point to mental health services.

In 2018, we recommended that government increase funding for public education programs that integrate prevention and early intervention mental health supports for vulnerable youth – programs like Take a Hike. Thank you for recognizing this recommendation and mentioning Take a Hike in your report.

We are encouraged by the province's newly released report *A Pathway to Hope* and its focus on child and youth mental health. We recognize the clear alignment between our program outcomes and the plan's vision for mental wellness and improved mental health care for targeted population groups and local communities, and the objective to help young people now while reducing the demand for services down the road.

We see some positive first steps in this report with the move away from the current crisis-driven system, and funding being made available to schools and non-profit organisations meeting the urgent need for early intervention services. We agree that the right type of treatment early on is essential to reduce a life-long struggle with mental and physical illness, and the associated long-term social and economic costs.

We applaud the progress made with the erase initiative in schools, and the recent announcement of a \$10M investment in the not-for-profit sector to provide free or low-cost counselling services. These are very positive first steps.



We fear, however, that with 84,000 children and youth experiencing mental health disorders in our province that investment equates to \$119.05 for each child and youth, over three years. This pales in comparison to the \$6.6B annual cost to address the overdose crisis. Imagine the impact that together we could have if we had similar spending on prevention as we do on treatment.

The *Pathway to Hope* plan outlines the economic returns of early intervention services. Early findings in our current research conducted by PwC in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, highlight the long-term social and economic return of investment in the intensive evidence-based programming of the innovative Take a Hike model.

Growth Since 2018

In 2019, we are on track to increase the number of vulnerable youth we serve by 50% within one year. In February, we opened a classroom in Delta. In September, we will open a program in Nanaimo – our first on Vancouver Island – and increase our reach in the West Kootenays. We are targeting 2020 to open a classroom in Surrey, and we are working with two additional school districts on Vancouver Island with a critical need for early intervention mental health supports for youth in their communities.

In 2019, we were recognized as an Honour Roll nominee for the Cmolik Prize for the Enhancement of Public Education in BC, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Education 2030 Working Group visited Take a Hike as an example of an innovative education program.

We have been working with PwC and the Ministry of Education's Analytics Branch to measure the long-term value Take a Hike is contributing to society, with first results becoming available in late 2019. We also received our largest ever investment, from a single private donor: \$765,000 over three years to support our vision of scaling province-wide.

Recommendation

While high school graduation rates are increasing, there are still a significant number of youth who do not experience success, especially Indigenous learners, youth in care and students with diverse needs. According to the Ministry of Education, one in eight students in the province have one or more mental health disorders, and 40% of those have a mental health disorder concurrent with substance use: these challenges often contribute to student struggles in school.



With an estimated 70% of mental health and substance use problems having their onset during childhood and adolescence,¹ Take a Hike provides youth with access to early intervention mental health services when and where they need it. With a clinical counselor embedded in each classroom using evidence-based practice and a trauma-informed approach, Take a Hike treats the root cause of youth mental health issues in a timely way. Students are supported by healthy relationships with skilled and caring adults, in a culturally safe and person-centred environment, increasing protective factors and reducing risk factors.

Take a Hike re-engages students in school through adventure and the outdoors, and supports their physical and mental health and their social and emotional development *in* school as they pursue their Dogwood diploma. Every child needs access to a quality public education that provides an opportunity to reach their potential, but not everyone fits into the mainstream school system.

Recommendation: Increase funding for evidence-based public education programs like Take a Hike that integrate prevention and early intervention mental health supports for vulnerable youth with complex needs.

Over the past 19 years, Take a Hike has developed a unique and impactful program model supported by academic research and practice-based evidence (see attached ‘Theory of Change’ for more on our evidence base). We are one of the few programs in the province with full-time mental health clinicians embedded in the classroom providing regular continuous care.

The success of the Take a Hike program depends on having access to dedicated and skilled teachers, youth and family workers, clinical counselors, adventure-based learning specialists and other school and program staff.

Impact

Since 2000, Take a Hike has helped to meet the needs of hundreds of vulnerable youth and their families across BC. Over the last five years 88% of our grade 12 students graduated, and over 80% of our 2017 graduates were enrolled in post-secondary education within one year of graduation. Preliminary program evaluation results show that Take a Hike alumni have the social and emotional skills, resiliency and mental health and wellbeing required to navigate the challenges of early adulthood.

¹ BC Government - Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions (2019) A pathway to hope: A roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia. P. 18. Retrieved from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/initiatives-plans-strategies/mental-health-and-addictions-strategy/bcmentalhealthroadmap_2019web-5.pdf



While Take a Hike is designed to impact students' education and mental health and wellness outcomes, our program has seen noted success in areas including: Indigenous youth and Aboriginal education; youth in care; crime and gang prevention; substance use and harm reduction; sport, physical activity and healthy living; preparing students for higher education and post-secondary transitions; preparing students for the modern workforce; and decreasing downstream effects on social services by helping youth become productive members of their community (see attachment, Case for Path to Provincial Reach).

Costs and Savings

The cost of youth not graduating high school is well documented, including poorer health outcomes, an increased likelihood of unemployment, lower wage earnings, poverty, and higher social costs. Studies have also shown that for every \$1 spent on mental health supports, society saves \$37.

There is province-wide demand for the Take a Hike program:

- We have been approached by over half the school districts in the province;
- 53 Members of the Legislative Assembly, from both the Government and the Opposition, have told us they want Take a Hike in their constituencies;
- We have met with senior executives in five different ministries, all of whom want to help us scale across the province;
- The Ministers of Education and Mental Health and Addictions are champions for Take a Hike.

Our vision is to meet community demand and make this life-changing program available province-wide. According to a study we commissioned in 2018, we have the capacity to raise \$2.5M annually through private donations. This would limit the program's growth to ten classrooms serving 200 youth each year.

While the community has contributed close to \$10M over the past twenty years to support the youth we serve, the provincial government has contributed \$150K. **We need an expanded partnership with the provincial government to achieve our vision of making Take a Hike available to vulnerable youth across the province.**

A government investment of \$6M over five years will:

- Enable 320 students and their families to benefit from the program each year, serving 16 school districts province-wide.
- Be matched by \$12M raised in the community during this five-year period.
- School districts will provide in-kind an estimated \$18M in the form of teachers, youth workers, classroom space and administrative support.



- For every dollar the government invests in a Take a Hike classroom, the community will be investing two and school districts three.

The province of BC is now prioritizing the transformation of mental health and substance use care for youth and their families and providing more services in schools.² Take a Hike is a proven, innovative education and mental health program with a twenty-year track record of engaging some of the most vulnerable youth in BC and helping them become resilient young adults and contributing members of our society. Together, we have the ability to meet the unique needs of many more vulnerable youth and positively impact our province's society and economy.

Sincerely,

Gordon Matchett, MBA, HBOR
Chief Executive Officer
Take a Hike Foundation

Attachments or Supporting Documentation:

- Take a Hike Theory of Change: A detailed look at the Take a Hike model and supporting academic evidence base.
- Case for Path to Provincial Reach

² BC Government - Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions (2019) P. 18