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April 17, 2020

The Honourable Bill Blair
Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Blair,

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (CRCVC) is national charitable organization committed to providing support and services to victims of crime across Canada. One of the CRCVC's vocations is to advocate for victims of crime. More specifically, advocating to ensure that victim's voices are heard and recognized by the Canadian criminal justice system. We are writing in regard to the recent cancellation of observer attendance at the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) hearings. The CRCVC is responding to this cancellation in order to bring attention and awareness to the thousands of victims that will potentially be negatively affected by this decision, as well as the victims that have already been affected. We hope that the decision will thus be reversed and a method of recourse will be offered to those who have already not been able to properly participate.

As you know, as of mid-March 2020, the PBC updated policies in response to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the PBC will only be conducting hearings remotely by means of videoconferencing. However, at this time, the PBC will not be facilitating **victim and observer attendance**. This decision not only excludes victims from attending parole hearings, but it also silences their voices. In doing so, this decision does not separate registered victims from casual observers at hearings and thus infringes on the rights of victims outlined in the *Canadian Victim Bill of Rights*. As mentioned, the CRCVC is dedicated to ensuring that the voices of victims are heard, and we would like to express our concerns and displeasure of this decision.

We would like to remind you that the *Canadian Victim Bill of Rights* promises certain rights to victims of crime in Canada. The *Right to participation* is specifically relevant to this issue; victims have a right to convey their views when decisions are made that affect their rights under the *Act*, for example, at a parole hearing, and to have those views considered. Excluding victims from this process ultimately infringes upon this right. Not allowing victims to be a part of parole hearings where important information about the status of their offender is given does not satisfy the needs of victims. According to the [National Victims Roundtable on the Right to Protection in Federal Corrections and Conditional Release](#), participants expressed that victims want their voices heard. More specifically, to be given a



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meaningful and active role throughout the criminal justice process. This decision does exactly the opposite. An active role that is previously given prior to the pandemic has been taken away. We see no reason why victims should be disallowed to participate via videoconferencing in a secure way that follows guidelines associated with social distancing.

The CRCVC, would also like to bring your attention to the [Corrections and Conditional Release Act \(CCRA\)](#). Under this act, there is a presumption that victims are able to attend parole hearings, and if not, there are four rationales to consider. These rationales are related to disruptive behaviours, adverse effects as well as security and good order. We see no reason why the PBC could not consider accommodating victims when considering these rationales and other appropriate factors when there is a presumption of attendance.

Additionally, according to the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), in 2018 there were approximately [8,500](#) registered victims in Canada. Since 2016, the number of registered victims has been steadily increasing. We would like you to consider the possible detrimental effects this decision could have for the thousands of victims that are registered with the CSC. If the PBC continues to forbid victims to participate, important information relayed at hearings will not be heard at that present time. Allowing victims to have access to the hearing after it is completed does not give the opportunity for involvement and may result in additional concerns for victims. This is important as the [Multi-Site Survey of Victims of Crime and Criminal Justice Professionals Across Canada](#) found that **one-third of National Parole Board (NPB) respondents reported that most victims participate in serious cases**. The level of participation involved “providing new or additional information for use in conditional release, attending parole board hearings as observers, or presenting the statement in person or via audio or videotape”. By denying victims their rights, the PBC is denying victims the opportunity to ask questions, be present when the decisions are made, and to stay informed.

Our organization is frustrated that at the PBC’s decision to exclude victims from being a part of parole hearings on all levels of participation, including as observers. While we acknowledge the importance of social distancing and ensuring the health of all involved, the decision to exclude victims does not correspond with mandates for social distancing. Victims can still have an active role while maintaining this through the use of videoconferencing when available and relevant. We ask that that the PBC reconsiders this decision as soon as possible. This decision will impact thousands of victims negatively while infringing upon the rights outlined in the CVBR and CCRA.

We believe that you have the power to help the thousands of victims that will possibly be affected, as well offer a method of recourse those already affected, and push for change and guarantee the rights outlined in the Canadian Victim Bill of Rights for victims of crime in Canada are upheld.

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We therefore strongly embolden you to find alternative methods for victims to meaningfully participate in parole hearings as have various courts and tribunals throughout the country, who have allowed for teleconferencing and/or videoconference options for participants to be able to attend.

We look forward to your response,

Sincerely,

Aline Vlasceanu
Executive Director

CC: Heidi Illingworth, Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime

CC: The Honourable David Lametti, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

CC: Jennifer Oades, Chairperson, Parole Board of Canada