

OPIRG TOWNHALL REPORT

**CONSULTANT:
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BACKGROUND

OPIRG Carleton is a student-led, student-funded organization based on Carleton campus that aims to do research, education and create spaces for students to organize.

For years, there have been incidents of anti-Black racism and ableism within the organization, the services they provide and the members that service the spaces. Many students have complained of microaggressions, violent incidents, a lack of tangible harm reduction practices, and general problematic behaviour.

Additionally, within a few weeks of the current global pandemic, a former member of the organization experienced a mental health crisis. This was following months of seeking support from OPIRG and repeatedly getting ignored, neglected, stigmatized and ostracized. This has prompted OPIRG Carleton to host a town hall and seek external consultation to address structural anti-Blackness and ableism with the organization.

GOAL

OPIRG Carleton has retained PD Consulting to host a town hall. The goal to provide a safer space for students to share their experiences within OPIRG Carleton. PD Consulting provided an in-house active listener for additional emotional support considering the triggering topics that were discussed.

FINDINGS

There is a long withstanding culture of rampant anti-Black racism within the organization. This intersection with structural ableism means the very students OPIRG is attempting to support are often left in the fringes.

It's clear there are very little accountability and conflict resolution procedures causing folks who are problematic in the space to continue to frequent even after being violent to other members. This, in turn leaves Black, disabled and marginalized people frequenting the same even more vulnerable.

Many individuals named a culture of cancellation that exists at OPIRG; a lack of compassionate and empathetic approaches to those with disabilities, mental health issues or who are neurodiverse. There is also a lack of structural supports as well for those individuals.

Additionally, the internal dynamics of the organization obstruct the ability to deliver quality, accessible and safe environments. The tension that exists between the board and staff is very palatable. Though both board and staff interact with service users, the board was explicitly referenced in problematic behaviour.

Ultimately, OPIRG failed its service users. The organization has a long way to go to become the organization they aim to be and repair trust that has been broken with the broader community, especially those that have been directly harmed.

SHORT TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

- A formal apology to the loved ones of the individual that passed. There has yet to be a public acknowledgement of OPIRG's implication in the circumstances that occurred. This needs to occur urgently with an emphasis on how anti-Black ableism contributed to his passing.
- Recurring grief sessions specifically for the individuals involved. Some of the sessions will be led by mental health professionals many Black folks in the margins do not have access to.
- OPIRG will not engage, seek input or any further consultation from the community affected without adequately compensating for the invaluable insight community members are providing.
- The feedback email will continue to exist as a means for people to share feedback about OPIRG. This will be monitored by someone outside of the organization.
- Programming and education to raise awareness of microaggressions, harm reduction processes etc.,
- Statement of accountability posted on OPIRG social platforms addressing the anti-Black racism, ableism, stigmatization of drug use, etc
- Bystander training for staff and board to recognize and address microaggressions, stigmatization and otherwise violent behaviour
- De-escalation training for staff and board Create accessibility guidelines for every space, meeting or event OPIRG hosts including asking for access needs, allergies, and offering childcare, travel and food.
- Front-facing programming to address misogynoir within OPIRG
- Reintroduction of the harm reduction collective centered on Black and Indigenous strategies for harm reduction
- Implementation of the safer space policy created by QTBIPOC members

LONG TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recurring internal board and staff mental health first aide training and suicide prevention.
- Recurring anti-oppression sessions for staff and board with a specific emphasis on anti-Black racism, misogynoir, ableism, and Islamophobia
- The creation of a Black-led mental health and addiction services support network in partnership with other Ottawa-based services and organizations
- Programming initiatives for Black mental health for service users
- Programming and/or workshops for mental health first aid training and suicide prevention for community members
- Art-based events to promote community building, engagement and culturally responsive practices.
- Creation of community conflict resolution processes to address problematic behaviour and individuals that frequent the space
- Creation of conflict resolution processes to address problematic staff and board behaviour
- Creation of internal campus working group to liaise community complaint processes and case management.
- Said working group to undergo de-escalation and anti-oppression training
- Creation of a community toolkit and/or resource page on main OPIRG Carleton website that entails COVID-19 supports; mental health workers, food banks, and employment boards external to institutional supports