Tasha Buchanan

Subject:	In the Wake of the Tumbler Ridge Tragedy: A Call for Unity Around Democratic Principles

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Dear Mayor and Council,

With the deepest condolences, I write in the aftermath of the tragedy in Tumbler Ridge to honour the victims and to express heartfelt sympathy to their families, loved ones, and the community now living with unimaginable loss. My thoughts remain with the survivors, the first responders, and all those affected.

Although this tragedy occurred in one small community, its implications reach every municipality in British Columbia. Moments like this compel reflection — not only on what happened there, but on what we can learn together, and how our public institutions can better protect the communities they serve across the province.

This letter is written in that spirit.

A Pattern of Tragedy and Unanswered Questions

In recent years, British Columbia has experienced several extreme acts of violence, including:

- the Tumbler Ridge tragedy

- the Lapu-Lapu Festival vehicle attack in Vancouver (April 2025)

- the Saanich bank shootout (June 2022)

Each event is unique. No single cause can explain such complex acts of violence. What they do share, however, is an unsettling degree of public uncertainty about what, if anything, was known or attempted by institutions beforehand.

In the case of Tumbler Ridge, details are still emerging, but early statements from RCMP leadership have already confirmed a history of police visits to the family home for mental-health checks alongside multiple apprehensions under B.C.'s Mental Health Act. There is, as yet, no transparent explanation of the decision-making behind those actions or how lessons will be applied going forward.

In the Lapu-Lapu Festival attack, Vancouver Police publicly described the accused as having a "significant" and "extensive" history of interactions with both police and mental-health services, despite having no prior criminal record, and being under the supervision of a mental-health care team at the time. Yet even with this high volume of institutional contact, including involuntary hospitalization, there is still no clear, consolidated public account of what supports were attempted, how risk was assessed, or what changes will follow. From a public-safety standpoint, that absence is itself a critical data point: after so many interactions with our systems, the reasonable expectation is that risk would be reduced, not followed by catastrophe.

This same case is still moving through the courts, and a judge has already found the accused fit to stand trial based on expert psychiatric evidence heard in a dedicated fitness hearing. Much of that evidence, and the reasoning behind the decision, remains sealed under a publication ban until the criminal process has run its course. The public is effectively asked to trust that systems functioned as intended while the very information that could confirm or challenge that belief is withheld. For municipal leaders trying to make policy decisions, that is a structural transparency problem, not a minor detail.

In the Saanich case, police stated the suspects were "not known to police." However, that phrasing is usually limited to criminal records and does not speak to possible school-based interactions, particularly given the informal nature of many School Liaison Officer (SLO) roles, where officers may interact with students without consistent or centralized record-keeping. This does not mean such interactions occurred in this case; it simply underscores that the public has no way to know, because the systems required to provide clarity are non-existent.

Mayors and Councils should find it especially troubling, then, that the current provincial government chose to dismiss the duly elected SD61 school board after trustees voted to cancel their defunct SLO program precisely over these concerns about accountability and transparency, acting under specific guidance from the BC Human Rights Commissioner and only after extensive outreach to all involved stakeholders.

Taken together, these cases raise a fair systemic question that communities are entitled to ask:

> **In situations where there has been — or may have been — repeated contact with police, health services, or other public institutions before a major crisis, how can communities have confidence in those systems when there is no fully transparent explanation of what was tried, what failed, and why risk was not reduced?**

When tragedies occur without clear public accountability and shared learning, trust erodes — and trust is a cornerstone of public safety.

Destigmatization, Internal Culture, and Public Safety

These tragedies also underline a simple reality: destigmatization is not a social nicety — it is a **public-safety strategy.**

When stigma surrounds identity or mental health, people are less likely to seek help, families struggle to navigate services, and institutions tend to respond reactively instead of collaboratively. The same is true inside our public systems: when staff feel stigmatized or unsafe speaking up, culture deteriorates and the system's ability to respond constructively to people in crisis is weakened.

In earlier letters, I have shared examples of public servants describing stigma and dysfunction inside their own workplaces. In the wake of Tumbler Ridge, we have also seen how quickly stigma and disinformation can spread around identity and mental health, even as local governments and health authorities try to focus on support and healing. This is exactly why destigmatization and transparency must be built into our public systems from the inside out, not added after the fact.

Public safety improves when:

- mental-health support is accessible and coordinated,

- communication between services is clear and accountable, and

- communities feel safe seeking help before crises escalate.

If we continue to fund structures that are dysfunctional or punitive in practice, we are not just wasting money — we are reinforcing the very conditions that allow risk to grow unseen. We can no longer afford to keep our voices quiet about the need for destigmatization of our public services.

Technology, Stigma, and the Transparency Gap

The Province is now rolling out new digital tools to assist police in mental-health crisis response, including **HealthIM** — a provincially funded digital "public-safety" system that guides officers through a brief mental-health risk screener and lets them review safety and de-escalation information drawn from prior contacts, while transmitting standardized clinical information to health-care partners in real time.

On paper, HealthIM is described as an evidence-based risk-screening tool meant to improve coordination, safety, and outcomes during mental-health and substance-use crisis calls. But technology does not sit in a vacuum. It lands inside existing cultures.

Where individuals have already experienced stigma or dismissive treatment from public institutions, the idea that police can now access and transmit additional, highly personal mental-health information at the tap of a screen does not automatically build trust — it risks amplifying fear. If front-line culture has not yet been meaningfully de-stigmatized across the province, faster access to stigmatizing labels, historical notes, and incomplete narratives may simply harden assumptions rather than improve care.

This is why destigmatization is now more urgent than ever. If we are going to give institutions powerful new tools that surface intimate details about people's lives, then those same institutions must be held to an equally high standard of transparency about their own decisions, outcomes, and use of that data. If information about individuals can be accessed instantly in moments of crisis, then information about institutional decisions, lessons learned, and systemic performance must also be accessible to the public.

Technology cannot be allowed to deepen a one-sided transparency gap, where residents are fully exposed while systems remain opaque. Any digital expansion of police access to mental-health information — including HealthIM and similar tools — must be matched by clear rules, independent oversight, and robust public reporting, or it will simply embed stigma more deeply into the very systems we are told will keep us safe.

Global Leadership and Local Reality

At the World Economic Forum, Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke about the need for governments to recognize that old assumptions no longer hold and that real resilience now requires honesty, unity, and a willingness to change systems that are no longer fit for purpose. That message of unity was echoed again in the days after Tumbler Ridge, when he invited the leaders of all federal parties to travel with him to the community, and they stood together at a vigil to speak of national solidarity and shared grief.

Those gestures matter. They signal that public safety and community wellbeing are not partisan issues.

At the same time, federal and provincial policy choices are reshaping the landscape in which municipalities must now operate. Ottawa has committed significant new funding to increase RCMP capacity, including a multi-year plan to hire 1,000 additional RCMP personnel and invest in federal policing across Canada. In theory, these investments should enhance safety. But on the ground in British Columbia, many small communities still rely on tiny, understaffed RCMP detachments, long backup times, and expensive downloaded emergency-communications costs that local governments neither designed nor control, and which could be impeding public safety as a whole.

E-Comm 911 operates as a stand-alone corporation under the Business Corporations Act, providing centralized emergency communications while municipalities shoulder rising costs. Independent reviews have already identified issues with its governance, financial controls, and cost structure, and recommended reforms to make the service more sustainable and accountable to local governments. Yet municipalities are still being asked to pay more into a model where real influence over priorities and performance remains limited.

From a municipal perspective, this creates a tension that Carney himself has described in the international context: authority and resources are often centralized, while risk and responsibility are pushed downward. The language of unity and resilience at the national and global level is welcome — but it must translate into structures where local governments have the tools, information, and authority they need to keep their residents safe.

For mayors and councils, the question is not whether to stand with communities like Tumbler Ridge in their grief. You already do. The question is whether the systems surrounding you will allow that solidarity to become structural: more transparency, more local oversight, and fewer situations where municipalities are asked to fund arrangements they cannot meaningfully shape.

Municipal Leadership Matters

In this environment, municipal leadership has become more important than ever.

I wish to acknowledge and commend:

- **The Mayor and Council of the City of Colwood**, for prioritizing transparency and calling for investigation and clarity regarding policing infrastructure. Their actions correctly demonstrate that public safety *must* be grounded in openness and accountability.

- **The Mayor and Council of the City of Langford**, for defending democratic process, fiscal clarity and their citizens in general in the face of complex budget pressures, rising service costs and other areas.

- **The municipalities that have united to challenge E-Comm funding arrangements**, demonstrating that collaboration and principled action remain powerful tools for protecting local governance.

- and **many other recent examples** of Mayors and Councils upholding democratic principles across the province.

These actions reflect the strength of municipal leadership across British Columbia.

They are also directly relevant to smaller, more remote communities like Tumbler Ridge. The RCMP detachment there has only five members; at the time of the shooting, two officers were on duty, two came in

from off-shift, and one was out of the community. Backup had to drive in from other towns, and paramedic resources had to be reinforced from outside the area.

In this case, the officers' response was rightly described as heroic, and their speed almost certainly saved additional lives. But the structure itself — tiny detachments, long distances for backup, limited local ambulance capacity — exposes just how thin the margin is. In communities like this, nobody needs a lecture to understand why having a partner and adequate coverage are not luxuries; they are basic conditions of safe response.

At the same time, municipalities across B.C. are being asked to absorb emergency-communications costs they do not control. Downloaded E-Comm and 911 fees have long forced local governments into impossible trade-offs: paying more to sustain centralized arrangements while struggling to maintain the front-line staffing and coverage their residents actually rely on.

For a large city, those pressures are serious. For a small municipality with a five-member detachment and a single full-time ambulance unit, they can be existential. It is understandable that many municipalities feel they cannot afford to build and operate their own fully independent emergency-services infrastructure, but that reality makes it even more urgent to ask a harder question: who ultimately pays the price when local governments are required to keep funding centralized structures that are not clearly demonstrating they are reducing risk?

Every dollar redirected into unexplained or poorly governed cost increases is a dollar that cannot go toward ensuring officers are not responding alone, that paramedic coverage is adequate, and that local public-safety gaps are actually being closed.

This is why municipal unity on issues like E-Comm cannot stop at one region or one news cycle. When municipalities stand together to demand transparent cost structures, fair governance, and a say in how emergency-service dollars are spent, they are not simply arguing about budgets. They are defending the practical conditions that determine whether small communities have enough people on the ground when it matters most.

The Need for Structural Reform

When systems lack transparency and clear accountability, decision-makers are forced to operate with incomplete information. Funding then risks sustaining structures whose effectiveness cannot be fully evaluated. Without reliable data, lessons learned, and open review, it becomes difficult to identify what is working, what is not, and where reforms are needed.

An entire structural shift is necessary: away from opaque, stigma-tolerant systems and toward governance grounded in destigmatization, transparency, fairness, and measurable outcomes. That means:

- post-incident reviews that are **independent, timely, and made public wherever possible**;

- funding arrangements that are linked to **clear performance metrics and open reporting**, not just institutional survival;

- workplace cultures in policing, bylaw, and other public services where **stigma and retaliation are not tolerated**, and where staff are supported to raise concerns early; and

- legal and policy frameworks that recognize **mental-health information as highly sensitive**, with strong safeguards around when and how it can be accessed and transparency surrounding exactly how it is being used on a case by case basis.

Such a shift is essential if we are to prevent future tragedies and rebuild public trust. Without it, we risk continuing to pour resources into systems and structures that cannot show they are reducing risk — and, in the worst cases, *may be quietly amplifying it*. A system that normalizes or weaponizes stigma will struggle to engage with mental illness safely; it will keep turning preventable crises into avoidable catastrophes, no matter how much funding it receives.

A Call for Unity Around Democratic Principles

Public safety depends on:

- trust in institutions,

- confidence in oversight, and

- lessons being learned openly after tragedies.

Municipalities are uniquely positioned to uphold these democratic principles. You are closest to the communities who are grieving now, and closest to the front-line staff who are asked to carry impossible loads with limited support — often within systems that local governments do not fully control.

The new provincially funded HealthIM mental-health screening app is just one example. This system is being deployed through provincial ministries and police leadership, yet the consequences of how it is used will be felt in municipal streets, schools, and homes. When policing is provided by a federal force using provincial tools, local democratic oversight becomes even more distant. Municipalities cannot meaningfully de-stigmatize or reform what they cannot see, cannot question, and do not govern.

By standing together, local governments can:

- Advocate for fully transparent, independent reviews after major incidents — including Saanich, Lapu-Lapu, and Tumbler Ridge — so communities can understand what was tried, what failed, and what must change.

- Insist on meaningful oversight of services funded by municipal taxpayers, including E-Comm 911. Municipalities should **not** be expected to fund or host systems over which they have no real say.

- Explore local alternatives where appropriate — including municipal policing and locally governed emergency-communications services — so that accountability flows back to elected councils rather than disappearing into federal–provincial arrangements.

- Tie future funding support to clear conditions: public reporting, measurable outcomes, and demonstrable efforts to address stigma and workplace culture inside public institutions, not just "more money into the same structure that is failing."

- Use forums such as UBCM and regional tables to coordinate positions, share information, and resist further downloading of risk and cost without corresponding local control.

In the media conversation that follows tragedies like Tumbler Ridge, there is often a familiar pattern: opinion-based commentary that frames the response primarily as a need for more funding for the very same systems, and reassurances that such events are aberrations. For years, many in British Columbia could tell themselves that school shootings were a problem that "only happened in the United States." That is no longer credible. Calls for resources are understandable, but if grief is channelled only into preserving existing funding streams, without examining whether the current structure is actually working, then the opportunity to make people meaningfully safer will have been missed.

Municipalities do not have to accept that narrative. You can demand better data, better governance, and better culture — and you can refuse to support any model that expands access to residents' personal information while keeping institutional decisions hidden from public view.

It is important to say plainly that this letter — and the series of letters that preceded it — were written with one central aim: to prevent exactly this kind of tragedy from occurring. It is too early to know what motivated the Tumbler Ridge shooter, and it is possible that the full answer will never be known. In other cases, such as the Saanich shootout, public explanations have leaned on concepts like an "internet bubble." That may capture part of the story, but communities are also entitled to ask harder questions about offline experiences — including whether prior contact with school-based policing or other institutions left individuals feeling stigmatized, dismissed, or targeted. Those questions do not blame any one profession or identity; they simply refuse to ignore the role that stigma, power, and silence can play when people lose faith that lawful avenues will ever lead to fairness.

The intention behind raising these concerns is not to score political points after the fact, but to ensure that the next potential tragedy is interrupted long before it reaches another classroom, festival, or bank. When residents call for help, the systems they rely on must be both effective and accountable — and the people working inside those systems must be supported, not stigmatized.

In Tumbler Ridge, it is not only the families of the children and teacher who were killed who are grieving. Surviving relatives of the accused — including children now left without one or both parents — are also victims and will equally carry the weight of what happened for the rest of their lives. Around the world, there are instances where, over time and entirely on their own terms, families on opposite sides of a tragedy have chosen to build unexpected forms of relationship and support: shared community rituals, informal mentoring, and in rare cases even guardianship or adoption-type arrangements. No one can or should prescribe that path here; it would have to be voluntary, survivor-led, and carefully supported. But municipalities can recognize that true healing sometimes includes making space for survivor-led, restorative forms of unity — between families, neighbours, and communities — if and when those directly affected ever seek it.

This is *not* a political issue.
It is a **civic** one.

Transparency, destigmatization, and shared accountability are some of the strongest foundations of *public safety.*

Respectfully,

Philip Perras
Student at Camosun College

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Kamloops, BC,

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