

Review of the Tenant Hotline Service

(City Council on November 23, 24 and 25, 1999, adopted this Clause, without amendment.)

The Community Services Committee recommends the adoption of the following report (October 21, 1999) from the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services; and further that, upon adoption by City Council, the clause be forwarded to the Budget Advisory Committee for consideration during the 2000 Operating Budget process:

Purpose:

This report reviews the findings of an operational and organizational review of the tenant hotline service operated by the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations and suggests appropriate next steps for the City.

Financial Implications:

If the policy decision in this report is adopted, the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services will propose increased funding in the 2000 Operating Budget for an expanded tenant hotline service.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the following actions be taken in light of the findings of the Organizational and Service Review of the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations:

- (1) Council confirm that a tenant hotline is a valuable information and advisory service for tenants in the City of Toronto that should receive City funding;
- (2) City funding for the tenant hotline service be provided through a competitive process, and the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services proceed with a request for proposals for an expanded tenant hotline service, based on specific services standards that include: operation seven days per week, multiple language translation, after-hours call return, ongoing training for counsellors, and client satisfaction measures;
- (3) in order to ensure that the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA) and the community have adequate time to prepare for a request for proposals, to give the FMTA time to address governance issues raised in the Review, and to ensure the continuation of a hotline service until the competitive process is complete:
 - (a) the new, expanded hotline service not commence until July 1, 2000; and
 - (b) the existing purchase of service agreement with the Federation of Metro Tenants' Association for operation of the tenant hotline be extended to June 30, 2000, at the current level of funding; and

- (4) the appropriate City officials be authorized to take the necessary action to give effect to these recommendations.

Council Reference:

Review of Tenant and Landlord Services and FMTA:

At its meeting on May 19, 1999, the Community and Neighbourhood Services Committee recommended that Council approve a series of eviction prevention projects, including continuation of funding for a tenant information hotline service. As part of recommending continuation of the Tenant Hotline for 1999, it was agreed that the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services would report back with a review of FMTA, the services they provide, City funding of those services, as well as an examination of the relationship between FMTA services and information provided to tenants by the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal.

Staff of Planning, Social Development, Municipal Standards, Legal and Finance service areas have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

Background:

“Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: Report of the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force” (January 1999) suggests that tenants require a continuum of services in order to maintain their housing, and stresses the significance of the Federation of Metro Tenants’ Associations Tenant Hotline in the prevention of homelessness. The report identifies the challenges facing the hotline service and the FMTA and recommends (Recommendation No. 44) that the City ensure that sufficient funding is available so that callers can get through to receive information.

The Review of Information and Advisory Services to Tenants and Landlords (October 1999), as discussed in a separate report to your Committee, also stresses the importance of the FMTA Tenant Hotline in providing information and advice to tenants. The study identifies the hotline as a key resource for tenants who do not meet low income criteria for legal aid assistance, and notes that a number of agencies would like to see the hotline hours extended and assistance made available in a number of languages.

History of City Funding for FMTA Hotline:

The FMTA has received municipal funding since 1976, initially with annual grants from the former City of Toronto and, since 1990, with purchase of service agreements that have continued with the new City of Toronto. FMTA funding has changed significantly in the last several years. Up until 1996, the FMTA received core funding from the Province and Metropolitan Toronto, in addition to the former City’s hotline funding. When this core funding was eliminated, the former City increased its support from \$44,520.00 per year to \$97,510.00 and became the sole government funder. In recent years, the new City’s agreement for hotline service has become FMTA’s sole source of government funding aside from small contracts for specific projects such as the Tenant Survival Guide.

The current review consists of an organizational and service review carried out by Liz Yorke and Associates (an external consultant hired through a request for proposal process) and a financial

review conducted internally by City Audit staff. The purpose of the review was to provide an evaluation of the FMTA and its key services, in particular, the City-funded Tenant Hotline, and an examination of the adequacy of financial support provided by the City. The review included individual consultation with FMTA stakeholders, including past and present Board members and staff of the FMTA, member tenant organizations, tenant service providers, other telephone information service providers, and a number of tenants who have recently used the Tenant Hotline. The key findings and suggestions for City action are discussed below. Appendix A provides the executive summary and recommendations from the consultant's report. The complete report will be on file with the City Clerk by October 29, 1999.

Discussion:

Key Conclusions of Hotline Service Review:

The following are the key conclusions from the Yorke review:

- (1) In addition to the tenant hotline, FMTA offers a wide range of services and an integrated approach which is significant to the City's tenant community, such as information/advice and referrals, tenant organizing, and advocacy on behalf of tenants.
- (2) The services provided by FMTA are of high quality, provide a sense of trust and security for tenants, and are well respected in the tenant service sector.
- (3) The delivery of the tenant hotline service is accurate, informative, sensitive and patient, and staffs' knowledge of tenant issues is up to date.
- (4) There is concern that the current staffing, telephone system, and hours of operation have not kept up with demand for the hotline service due to limited funding; as a result, tenants have significant difficulty getting through to the hotline.
- (5) FMTA services are not available in languages other than English, with the exception of some hours of service in Spanish.
- (6) Although aspects of FMTA may overlap other organizations, there is no actual duplication of service with the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal (ORHT), community information centres, community legal clinics and other agencies. The FMTA is relatively unique in that it not only provides information services, but it also advises, advocates and serves all tenants without restrictions on income level or geographic area (i.e., within the boundary of Toronto). As noted in the Review of Information and Advisory Services for Tenants and Landlords (also before your Committee), the ORHT, as a quasi-judicial body, is mandated only to give information about the law, not advice to tenants or landlords. Legal clinics will advise tenants if they meet low income criteria, within particular catchment areas, and to the extent that their limited resources allow.

Suggested Improvements to the Hotline Service:

Yorke suggests that the hotline could be improved by the addition of the following resources:

- (a) an additional full-time staff person to operate the hotline;
- (b) a one-time allocation for an automatic telephone distribution system;
- (c) a professionally designed website to support the hotline; and
- (d) multiple language assistance on the hotline.

The study notes that the FMTA is attempting to maintain other activities that support the hotline service, including outreach and tenant organizing, but there is little funding available for these activities. Yorke recommends that the City consider providing a separate funding allocation for these activities.

Organizational Review - Measures to Strengthen the FMTA:

Yorke's conclusion, based on consultation with various stakeholders, is that the FMTA is widely recognized as a unique organization that is entirely tenant focused and addresses a wide range of issues related to tenants. The FMTA has a positive working relationship with other organizations, and this facilitates the effective referral of tenants who need different kinds of services.

In the last few years, the major success of the FMTA has been its ability to keep the organization in operation and maintain a range of services to tenants in spite of severe funding cuts; however, this was necessarily accomplished by reducing staff costs and operating expenses to such an extent that the FMTA no longer has adequate staff or resources to fulfil all of the various objectives of the organization (e.g., advocacy, law reform, tenant organizing, etc.)

As a result of the recent, unavoidable emphasis on survival, the FMTA Board has not been able to set clear priorities or develop a strategic plan that addresses issues such as succession planning, benchmarking, monitoring and evaluation of services, and fundraising. Despite the significant shift in funding (i.e., loss of core funding), the structure of the Board and FMTA priorities have not made corresponding adjustments to reflect the fact that the dominant source of funding is now the hotline agreement with the City.

To strengthen and renew the FMTA, Yorke recommends that the Board of Directors undertake a formal process for setting of priorities, develop a strategic plan and prepare a detailed proposed budget to support the plan. Such a strategic plan would address issues around staffing, governance, fundraising, and quality assurance of the hotline service.

Financial Review:

The City Auditor has conducted a financial review of the Association, consisting of an examination of audited statements for the past five years, a review of the current budget, and a review of the accounting practices and financial controls of the FMTA. Audit staff have interviewed staff of FMTA and their bookkeeper, and visited the FMTA office to review documentation and observe the service provided.

The Auditor has identified issues that should be addressed in the future funding arrangements for this service. In terms of funding related to the hotline, he suggests that the City's agreement could be made more clear in terms of administration of the hotline service, in particular to ensure that the nature of the service is clear and the costs are separately identified in the Association's budget. The Auditor also supports our plan to issue a proposal call for the hotline service, with specific service standards identified, so that funds will be provided on a competitive basis. In terms of general financial practices, the Auditor has advised that he feels the FMTA has adequate financial controls.

Next Steps for the City of Toronto:

Based on the Yorke Review of the FMTA hotline and the broader review of tenant and landlord services (reported separately to the Community Services Committee), the City's objectives related to the FMTA and the hotline should be as follows:

- (1) To ensure that a high quality, accessible hotline service is available to all tenants in the City of Toronto.

- (2) To help strengthen the FMTA, as a trusted and longstanding agency supporting all tenants in the City.

The study describes the nature of changes that would make the hotline a better service, and the ways in which the FMTA could develop a plan to strengthen the Association. Yorke's conclusion is that more resources must be applied to the hotline if a high standard of service and greater accessibility to the service are to be achieved.

While the FMTA has established credibility in the community and demonstrated the value of operating the hotline in a full-service agency, it could be argued that there are other community agencies that could operate an effective hotline service for tenants. The most prudent, and accountable way to launch an expanded hotline service would be to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) based on specific service standards and a new funding level. These service standards would include: operation seven days per week, multiple language translation, after-hours call return, ongoing training for counsellors, and client satisfaction measures.

However, given the reliance of the FMTA on the hotline funding, we propose to extend their existing agreement for six months (to June 30, 2000) during which time we will proceed with an RFP process, for a new agreement to commence July 1, 2000. This will give the FMTA time to develop a strategic plan and to set priorities related to the services it provides, and will also ensure there is no gap in the provision of this necessary service. At the same time, the FMTA has been invited to submit to City staff a plan for organizational development as recommended by Yorke, and staff will determine the nature of City support that could be provided to assist with this planning process.

Conclusion:

In light of the Organizational and Service Review of the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations, the City should take steps to ensure that a high quality, accessible hotline service is available for tenants in the City of Toronto. A request for proposals should be issued for this service, with specific standards. The City should also recognize the important role that the Federation of Metro Tenants Associations plays in the tenant community by supporting their efforts to undertake an organizational planning process, building on the suggestions made in the Review.

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Appendix A
Executive Summary and Recommendations:
Organizational and Service Review of The Federation of
Metro Tenants' Associations

(Prepared By Liz Yorke And Associates)

Purpose of the Review:

The City of Toronto sought the services of an external consultant to undertake a service/organizational review of the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA) in June 1999. The purpose of the review of FMTA was to provide FMTA, the City, and the community with:

- an evaluation of the organization;
- an evaluation of FMTA key services, in particular the City funded Tenant Hotline and the level and means of financial support provided by the City; and
- a clear picture of FMTA's role in the community, its strengths and weaknesses guidance for change.

The review was carried out with participation of the FMTA and City staff, and with information from current users of the Tenant Hotline and from tenant service providers.

Focus of the Review:

The focus of the service and organizational review included:

- examination of FMTA's governance and mandate, organization and operation, and service delivery;
- assessment of FMTA's role in the tenant service provider community in the City of Toronto;
- identification of options for change and improvement in FMTA; and
- examination of the role, resources and level of funding provided by the City of Toronto to support these services.

Review Activities:

The review of FMTA took place from July 21 to October 19, 1999. Activities undertaken during the review included:

- review of background material;
- consultation with stakeholders;
- participation in progress meetings with the Management Committee; and
- preparation of draft and final reports.

Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations:

The Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA) is a non-profit federation of tenants' associations, individual tenants, individual members of non-profit co-operatives, honorary supporters, and associate members, united in the following goals:

- To organize and encourage the organization of tenants.
- To educate tenants and the general public about issues concerning tenants and housing policy.
- To provide information, advice and other assistance to tenants.
- To further the interests of tenants by lobbying and otherwise campaigning for tenant protection in the laws.
- To promote decent and affordable housing as the right of all Canadians.

Providing Services to Tenants Since 1974:

FMTA has been providing services to tenants since 1974. Prior to 1996, the Federation had a considerably larger budget than at present, and was able to provide a broader range of services to tenants. The structure of the Board of Directors reflected this broad range of services and

continues to do so. Since 1996, the only consistent funding the Federation has received has been for the Tenant Hotline.

FMTA Services:

The services provided by FMTA to the tenant community are:

- Tenant Hotline, including the Eviction Line, which provides information and advice to any tenant about their rights and obligations as tenants;
- follow-up and referral services for tenants who use the Hotline;
- assisting with the organization of tenant associations; and
- lobbying and advocacy work on behalf of tenants.

Assessing FMTA Services: Strengths and Weaknesses:

The report describes a process undertaken to examine the strengths and weaknesses of FMTA's services. The report indicates that it is difficult to provide a completely objective analysis of FMTA's services, as the information, advice, and referral sector tends to be value and volume driven and does not yet have broadly accepted performance standards. A significant amount of time during the review was directed specifically to developing an understanding of the quality of the services provided by the Tenant Hotline. On the basis of the responses provided by the people who assisted with the review, the consultant believes that the services provided by the Tenant Hotline, tenant organizing services, and the tenant advocacy work undertaken by the Federation are of a consistently high quality and are well respected in the City of Toronto's tenant service provider sector.

The existence and operation of the Federation's services provides a sense of trust and security for tenants, as it does not require client identification, it focuses solely on tenant issues, and its services are available for all tenants regardless of the kind of housing they live in, income level, and location.

Tenant Hotline services are delivered in an accurate, informative, calm, sensitive, patient manner. Staff members' knowledge and information about tenant issues is consistently up to date.

FMTA staff tend to have positive working relationships with staff in other organizations. FMTA contributes to a wide range of matters significant to the City of Toronto's tenant community and is able to offer an integrated perspective.

The weakness most frequently identified during the review was the difficulty that both service providers and clients experience in getting their telephone calls through to FMTA's services. At this point, given the current FMTA budget, this weakness is absolutely beyond the control of the organization due to lack of funding and resources. Several service providers indicated that they are experiencing similar problems, and that they are unable to keep up with the demand for

information and advice. FMTA's services, including Tenant Hotline services, are only available in English, with the exception of some hours of service in Spanish.

Assessing FMTA Governance, Organization, and Operation:

The report describes a process to examine governance, organization and operational issues. From the perspective of governance, organization and operation, FMTA's strengths include: demonstrated success in keeping the organization in operation in the midst of severe budget cuts and a culture which has shifted to a decreasing emphasis on funding support for tenants; providing leadership which allowed for flexibility and adaptation about service delivery, so that tenant services were maintained; introduction of a new computer program, so that service delivery can be delivered more effectively; modernizing the operation of FMTA, including the introduction of a new postage system which is able to track mail outs; and developing and maintaining positive relations with most print and electronic media.

The report describes several areas where the governance, organization and operation of the Federation appears to be weak. These include: although the only significant funding which the Federation receives is from Shelter, Housing and Support, and the focus of that funding is on the Tenant Hotline, the structure of the Board of Directors does not reflect this and the operation of the Hotline does not appear to be addressed on a regular basis by the Board; the Board of Directors has not set clear priorities nor has it developed a strategic plan for the organization; the Board of Directors does not have a nominating committee or a succession plan for the on-going governance of the organization; in the long term, the operation of the Tenant Hotline and other services are at risk, due to low salaries and the demands on all employees, without increased funding from either the City or from other sources; although the Board of Directors has examined various fundraising possibilities and has applied for many grants over the years, a fundraising plan has not yet been implemented.

The report also indicates that the separation of the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Directors and the executive director are not clear.

Review of Purchase of Service Agreement:

The report describes the process used for review of the Purchase of Services Agreement. The report indicates that selected parts of the Agreement need to be modified so that the services to be provided by FMTA and the monitoring and evaluation process to be used by the City of Toronto will be clearer.

Highlights of the recommendations for the City include:

- clarification of the Purchase of Service Agreement to indicate that City funds should be solely for the operation of the Tenant Hotline;
- funding for assisting with organizing tenant associations, on request, should be provided by an additional allocation (separate and distinct from funding for the telephone information service); and

- the City should work with FMTA to make sure that resources are available for Board of Director and organizational development, specifically for setting priorities and for development of a strategic plan.

Overview of Recommendations:

Highlights of recommendations for FMTA include:

- development of a set of priorities for FMTA and a related strategic plan;
- development of a detailed proposed budget;
- FMTA should work with the City to improve the telephone system for the Tenant Hotline, so that a variety of features are introduced into the system - such as, a tracking strategy for busy signals, abandoned calls, length of calls, waiting time, and other features and a strategy should be designed to use the tracking system for one year, at the end of each quarter, so that benchmarks for the Tenant Hotline can be developed;
- the possibility of securing increased resources for the Tenant Hotline should be explored to include:
 - an additional full time staff person to work on the Tenant Hotline;
 - a full time executive director, with primary responsibility for tenant organizing;
 - a one-time capital allocation for an up to date automatic telephone distribution system; and
 - a professionally designed web site to support the Tenant Hotline;
- FMTA should develop a service evaluation and monitoring strategy, which will:
 - address quality factors;
 - address volume factors;
 - result in reasonable service standards and benchmarks; and
 - will include regular reporting to the Shelter, Housing and Support Division, as the funders of the service; and
- the Board committee structure be re-examined, based on the delineation of responsibilities, identified priorities, and the strategic plan, and to include:
 - a Tenants Services Committee; and
 - a Tenant Hotline Committee.

(A copy of the “Final Report: An Organizational and Service Review of the Federation of Metro Tenants’ Associations” was forwarded to all Members of Council with the Supplementary

Agenda of the Community Services Committee for its meeting on November 4, 1999, and a copy thereof is on file in the office of the City Clerk.)

The Community Services Committee submits the following communication (November 4, 1999) from Councillor Gordon Chong, Don Parkway:

While I agree with Recommendations Nos. (1) and (2), I disagree that FMTA should continue the hotline until June 30, 2000. The process should be expedited.

The heavy reliance on unsubstantiated criticism from FMTA directed against the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal troubles me - especially when it is given a veneer of objectivity in a memorandum from City of Toronto staff implying it is staff opinion rather than FMTA supplied. One final thought occurs to me: if FMTA provides such an invaluable service, why, after over 20 years of existence, has it not been able to persuade a majority of its constituency to support it financially, thereby obviating the necessity for public funding?

I trust the RFP process will be extremely meticulous.

The Community Services Committee reports, for the information of Council, also having had before it during consideration of the foregoing matter communications from the following:

- (undated) from Ms. Jennifer Gonsalves requesting that the Review of the Tenant Hotline Service be handed over to the Fraud Squad of the Toronto Police Service for forensic audit in view of the objections outlined in her communication; and further that the City hire a credible accounting firm to investigate the accounting practices of the organization;
- (November 4, 1999) from Ms. Anne Dubas, President, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 79, attaching a copy of a letter to The Honourable Claudette Bradshaw, Federal Co-ordinator for Homelessness, urging the Federal Government to revive a national housing strategy and infrastructure program that will house the homeless and meet the needs of lower-income Canadians; and
- (November 4, 1999) from Councillor Michael Walker, Chair, Sub-Committee to Restore Rent Control, advising that Members present at the informal meeting of the Sub-Committee on October 29, 1999, endorsed the recommendations contained in the report of the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services.

The following persons appeared before the Community Services Committee in connection with the foregoing matter:

- Ms. Jennifer Gonsalves;
- Mr. Howard Tessler, Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations.
- Ms. Elnaor Mahoney, Tenants' Advocacy Group;

- Mr. Tim Rourke; and
- Mr. Cliff Martin, The Public Housing Fightback Campaign.