

Hello, my name is Heather Cunningham, and I am a member of the Dream Team. The Dream Team is a group of psychiatric consumer survivors who for the last ten years have advocated for more supportive housing for people who are homeless and who live with mental health issues.

On behalf of the Dream Team, I would like to commend the Chair of the committee, Councillor Mammoliti, and the Affordable Housing Committee for proposing this 10 Year Affordable Housing Action Plan.

For years, our members have spoken to community groups, policy makers, politicians, students, and community outreach and support workers to convey the message that affordable housing with appropriate individual supports is the most cost effective and socially efficient solution to the problem of chronic homelessness. More recently, we have developed workshops on issues pertaining to supportive housing; we have offered reminders that housing is a universal human right; we have conducted research that demonstrated how supportive housing actually benefits neighbourhoods; and we have partnered with groups across Ontario to battle the Not-In-My-Backyard mentality. In doing so, we – as individuals who were once homeless – demonstrate just how life-altering supportive housing can be.

We are very glad to see that our message has been heard.

I can tell you from personal experience that the prospect of losing one's home and mental wellness can sometimes be such a foreign

and scary concept, but these things can really happen to anyone, and it's important to demystify them and address them as best we can.

I have been living with mental health issues for four years, now. When I first got sick I was tree planting in Northern Ontario. Before that, I had been making strides towards a career in music and had been teaching for several years. But my music career was falling into shambles.

I was working at Starbucks in the mornings, teaching music in the afternoons, and going "home" at night to live in a shanty on Adelaide Street. Most if not all of the money I was earning was taken by the man whose turf I was living on. I was what you would call a Bridge Kid Runaway, and while living under a bridge I encountered gangs, I had money stolen from me, and I was sexually assaulted. I soon lost both my jobs and moved on to live in various other outdoor locations. Family and extended family eventually committed me to Hospital, but because there weren't any housing units available when I left Hospital, I once again had no fixed address. I ended up in the shelters.

At this point I felt like I was in reverse. I had gone from being a university student to receiving food and money from others.

But my life changed when a woman who worked for a homeless initiative program visited me one day at the Humane Society where I was training to volunteer. She helped me secure a spot in shared living. It was the first time I'd had a safe place to hang my hat in four years. That stability allowed me to receive invaluable help from support workers, trust partners, and groups pertaining to mental wellness. I pushed forward and worked towards getting a job and have since graduated from a college program. I have also become

active on boards and committees for housing initiatives; I am contributing to the community. There are a lot more people like me – There are many people who have experienced mental illness and homelessness and who are eager and able to contribute to housing solutions.

That is why we are also very encouraged by the Toronto Housing Charter. For recognizing that all residents should have a safe, secure place to live, as the United Nations Charter declares. We commend you for recognizing that equal treatment in housing without discrimination is a right -- that NIMBYism is a serious form of discrimination that will require creative solutions. And, of course, we are very encouraged by your plan to create more supportive housing; investing in housing and supports will end up saving lives and saving tax-payers' dollars.

Overall, the Dream Team thinks very highly of your Action Plan. In particular we would like to take you up on the notion that all residents have equal stake in Toronto's future. To that end we encourage you to offer a range of supportive housing models that involves consumer/tenant participation to varying degrees. Consumer survivors have skills, are ready to take the role of equal stake holders and contribute to solutions, just like anyone else. Offering opportunities for consumers to help run their buildings and programming could save funds while empowering individuals and promoting recovery. We urge you to recognize how consumer involvement is part of a more sustainable housing model. And we urge you to find opportunities for consumer involvement in all supportive housing projects, at all levels of decision-making.

On behalf of the Dream Team, I would like to thank you for putting forwards a plan that gives hope to those who feel that their lives have been pushed to the margins of society. I urge the Council to support the Affordable Housing Action Plan and to support our recommendation: that we use this Action Plan as an opportunity for consumer and tenant empowerment.

Thank you...