



To the Members of City Council,

Without question, shelter-hotels are not a solution to homelessness. Only housing – healthy, safe, accessible, culturally appropriate, truly affordable, sustainable housing – is the solution.

However, it is indisputable that when the City of Toronto took the steps to secure shelter-hotels for unhoused Torontonians, they raised the bar in homelessness services. This was a laudable and necessary step to allow people to self-isolate during COVID-19. It also allowed people greater privacy, including private access to a bathroom and shower, and the health benefits of a full night's sleep – something so difficult to achieve in a congregate setting or while living outdoors. That said, shelter-hotels are clearly imperfect: they are costly, they have had numerous issues in their implementation, and they have been the site of immense overdose and death. However, the alternative of congregate shelters is not an option at all. If the City of Toronto begins a transition back into these spaces next spring, many more lives will be lost.

COVID is not over, nor will it be over, or even winding down, by April. There are currently two outbreaks in Toronto's shelter system, both in congregate settings. While neither of these has manifested the Omicron variant, it is merely a matter of time before this variant is in the system. With this in mind, and with booster shots now entering the discourse around COVID safety, shelter residents are just 71% single-vaccinated, 61% double-vaccinated, and booster shots have not been prioritized for residents. They are incredibly vulnerable to COVID-19.

We also know that by next April, there will not be available housing for everyone who is, or who will be, unhoused – this will take years. When and if shelter-hotels are transitioned to congregate shelters, and we believe that they should not be transitioned, there will be residents who will refuse to stay in these spaces. This is inevitable, and it will be especially true if COVID-19 remains a persistent concern in the shelter system. The only safe and viable alternative for people will be encampments, which the City has yet to support through a formalized, human rights-compliant approach. A growth in encampments, coupled with a dearth of appropriate support directed to them, would further the humanitarian disaster already so apparent in Toronto's streets. Shelter-hotels are for many the best choice in the absence of housing, but encampments are the only option when faced with the prospect of a congregate shelter. Infection – and not just from COVID, but streptococcus A, tuberculosis, influenza, necrotizing fasciitis, and other diseases – theft of belongings, and the prospect of assault are all common



threats in congregate shelters, and they are not acceptable risks. If shelter-hotel leases expire, encampments will grow.

SSHA is being tasked with creating a transition plan from shelter-hotels. We urge the city to instead create a plan that extends the leases of all shelter-hotels past the spring, understanding they are still an urgently needed resource. Simultaneously, we urge the city to adopt the recommendations of [A Path Forward](#), and provide dignified support to those living outdoors and in encampments in the absence of brick and mortar housing. While Councillor Wong-Tam's notion to potentially fund rent supplements for everyone currently in the shelter system is laudable, it doesn't address those outside the system, or those who will need the system in the future as the cost of living rises in Toronto. And, to be sure, the system will be needed, which is why Toronto must continue to keep the bar raised and continue to provide dignified shelter-hotel space for unhoused people until there is available housing for all.

Sincerely,

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