

Dear Economic and Community Development Committee,

The shelter system is in crisis. Shelters are often full and hundreds of people sleep outside in tents to avoid the unsafe conditions within them. The amount of deaths within shelters has increased and this year at least four people have died from cold exposure. Rising rents and stagnant incomes are leading to growing homelessness in our City. We cannot afford to lose any shelter spaces. The addition of private hotel rooms has led to improved wellbeing for many people. We cannot afford to lose any hotel rooms.

Accessing a shelter bed is more difficult than ever. Beds are not available when people need them. Prior to the pandemic it was possible to walk into a 24 Hour Drop-In or the Peter Street Referral Center to get out of the cold. Now no overnight spaces can be accessed on a walk-in basis. To access shelter people must call the intake line every hour. They often wait on hold for extended periods of time only to be told to call back in another hour. People who are homeless often struggle to access phones making this process nearly impossible. I know many people who have just given up- their experience has shown them that a bed is rarely available so they have stopped trying to access one. Violence against women beds are also often full. I have seen women return to unsafe relationships because they have nowhere else to go.

Overcrowding, poor conditions and low staffing ratios create unsafe environments within shelters. Many people prefer to sleep outside because the shelter system is not safe. People are frequently exposed to violence or theft in the often crowded and stressful environments. Others use substances and cannot access proper accommodations to use drugs safely. There were 46 opioid poisoning or suspected drug-related deaths in the Toronto shelter system in 2020 alone. The majority of shelter spaces are in congregate settings making exposure to infectious diseases a significant risk. There have been at least 1,696 positive COVID-19 cases and nine deaths related to COVID-19 within the shelter system.

The lack of safe shelter has detrimental effects on people's health. Many people feel trapped within the system. Shelter staff are overwhelmed and largely unavailable and people struggle to find support to access rent subsidies, housing and other needed resources. I have seen people grow tired, depressed and hopeless while staying within the shelter system.

Offering private hotel rooms has provided needed respite for many people. People's health and wellbeing often improves dramatically after accessing a private room. Everyone needs access to privacy, sleep, a safe place to store belongings and a stable place to stay. All shelters should offer private rooms.

Please ensure the "COVID-19 Shelter Transition and Relocation Plan" works to strengthen then shelter system and improve the health of those who depend on it by:

1. Creating 6,000 new permanent, non-congregate shelter beds or RGI housing units over the next six months to address the shortage of safe shelter. Existing resources cannot be responsibly closed otherwise.
2. Repealing the 'no camping' bylaw. Violent evictions only cause harm. People need access to safe shelter and housing.
3. Work with people who use drugs to implement harm reduction measures in all shelters- create supervised consumption sites and offer peer led safety checks. People depend on one another for overdose response- shelters should permit guests.
4. Expropriate 214-230 Sherbourne St. for RGI housing and build an additional 5000 RGI housing units every year.
5. Keep shelter-hotels open and take direction from residents as to where they want to go. Hotels have become stable homes for many people. Don't close hotels until residents have places to go that they deem adequate.

Thank-you,

Jessica Hales, Nurse Practitioner, Regent Park Community Health Centre