

Gord Perks

Councillor Ward 14 Parkdale-High Park



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Monday May 28, 2012

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

From: Councillor Gord Perks
Chair, Toronto Drug Strategy Implementation Panel

Re: **Loss of harm reduction beds at the Schoolhouse shelter**

Harm reduction is a key component of the Council-approved Toronto Drug Strategy (TDS), which also includes prevention, treatment and enforcement. Recommendation 28 of the TDS calls for the City and other groups to "determine what additional harm reduction services may be needed within the shelter system and to determine appropriate service models and sources of funding to better respond to the needs of homeless people with substance use issues." Establishing appropriate funding sources is a key piece of this work as the shelter system is not funded to provide health services.

At its meeting of May 24, 2012, the Toronto Drug Strategy Implementation Panel discussed potential implications of the City's decision to close the Schoolhouse shelter. This 55-bed transitional shelter for men is located at 349 George Street. The main residents of this program are men with a history of homelessness and active alcohol use. Dixon Hall has been the operator of this program although the building is owned by the City of Toronto.


In 2009, Dixon Hall informed the City they are no longer able to operate the program as it does not fit with their strategic directions, and staff in the City's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration Division made the decision to close the program. The reasons for closing the Schoolhouse include physical plant issues and lack of appropriate onsite supports and programming. Staff are working with existing residents to secure permanent housing in the community and have suspended new admissions as of November 2011.

The TDS Implementation Panel is concerned about the impact of the loss of these 55 beds. People who are homeless and have serious issues related to substance use have a difficult time accessing beds in the shelter system, which is primarily abstinence-based, as well as in rental market housing. While specific

programming has not been provided at the Schoolhouse, these beds have effectively served as harm reduction beds by providing a safe, stable environment where men with alcohol use issues could stay.

At its May 23, 2012 meeting, the Community Development & Recreation Committee had before it a staff report on the status of the Schoolhouse closure. This report was referred to the June 26, 2012 meeting to allow for speakers and debate as some community groups have been actively advocating on this issue. The TDS Implementation Panel is also concerned about the potential impact of loss of these shelter beds. In that regard, the Panel is asking the Board of Health to forward this communication to the Community Development and Recreation Committee for consideration at the June 26th meeting.

Sincerely,



Councillor Gord Perks