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TO: Community Development And Recreation Committee

RE: Deputation: Review of the Centralized Waiting List for Social Housing: Framework and Proposed Direction

Date: March 18, 2013

From: Brian Davis, Chair, Mental Health And Addictions Housing Collaborative

My name is Brian Davis and I am the Executive Director of Houselink Community Homes and chair of the Mental Health and Addictions Housing Collaborative of Toronto.

Houselink is a member of the Mental Health and Addictions Housing Network here in Toronto, which includes 31 supportive housing providers. Funded by the TCLHIN and the MOH & LTC, our common goal is to provide housing and relevant supports and programs to individuals and families who live with serious mental illness and/or problematic substance usage. The number of units within this network is approximately 4,600 units, with about 40% of the stock is shared. Shared meaning that one shares a kitchen or bathroom with others.

At you might guess, like Housing Connections, our coordinated access waiting list, called CASH, is growing exponentially. The waiting list opened in November 2009 and we currently have 6,000 individuals. Close to half of our applicants report no fixed address and therefore would be classified as disadvantaged according to the current City priorities. Also like Housing Connections, the many community agencies, shelters, and drop-ins serve as referral sources.

Because demand is so high, and resource so limited, a group came together in the spring of last year to begin to look at opportunities to integrate, and interface better with others serving the same population. This group, called the Mental Health and Addictions Housing Collaborative includes representation from Housing Connections, Toronto Community Housing, Alternative Housing Providers, Streets to Home and representatives of our Supportive Housing Network.

Despite our best efforts in the past few years in improving access, it is still very difficult for an individual to make an informed choice about which provider, as well as which corresponding supports or programs are the most suitable. When the most pressing need is to just have a roof over their head, choosing the right supports often becomes a low consideration. However we know from experience that having them in place, ensures, ultimately, a successful tenancy.

We applaud all the principles outlined in the review:

Adopting a Housing first approach - most of us in the network have applied this philosophy for years and we know that the housing first philosophy works provided that the right supports come in tandem with moving in. We know that for many, these supports need to be pragmatic, focused on housing maintenance, and they do change over time.

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Integration and Ease of Access We believe there are opportunities to ensure better informed choice and increase coordination and access through the review of local priorities and the enhancement of referral agreements, particularly with organizations like us that receive health funding . There are strategies to be piloted that could ease transitions to different levels of support across the housing continuum. For example, the City of Ottawa has an integrated approach that we believe has practical applications to be tested here in Toronto.

Choice Based Systems. Recently we consulted with our stakeholders; applicants, referral agencies, staff and residents on how to improve our wait list strategies. This includes establishing priority designations. This simple phrase came back -- “tenant directed moves” which speaks volumes to the importance of choice. Designing an integrated system to promote tenant choice will create both efficiencies and ultimately more stable tenancies.

We also know that the biggest challenge that we all face, regardless of how slick we can get these systems to work, is the dire need for more affordable housing which remains at a crisis level.

We really look forward to working with the City staff and Housing Connections on moving forward on this review and urge the committee to approve the framework and the direction.