

Ward 27, Toronto Centre-Rosedale  
City Hall, 100 Queen Street West  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Suite A5  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 2N2

Tel: 416-392-7903  
Fax: 416-696-4300  
Councillor\_wongtam@toronto.ca

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Councillor Jaye Robinson, Chair  
Members of Community Development and Recreation Committee

Dear CDR Committee Chair and Members,

**Re: CD 19.1 Update on Emergency Shelter Services**

**BACKGROUND:**

I have been keenly participating in the discussions and monitoring staff reports about Toronto's shelter services and of particular growing concern is the ongoing contradiction between frontline service providers' alleged demand and city staff's purported supply of emergency shelter beds.

As a result of the ongoing Downtown East Revitalization Study which my office is working on in partnership with City Planning staff, I have now personally visited the majority of shelters, homeless drop-in centres and Out of the Cold programs in Ward 27 and even some beyond our ward borders. This has given me the opportunity to meet and speak with many men and women using Toronto's emergency shelter system and front line staff working in the system.

Consistently and repeatedly, the clients and shelter staff unknown to one another from different areas of our city are reporting similar conditions. Specifically, they are claiming that the shelters are crowded, occasionally dangerous, often at capacity and unable to absorb more clients. During extreme weather alerts, both the homeless clients and shelter staff claim that it is near impossible to find accessible and available emergency shelter beds. Furthermore, the homeless and street-involved men and women have reported that it is has become increasingly difficult to access emergency shelter services when needed and often times they are forced to seek shelter beds in multiple facilities in one night before giving up because of their fatigue, uncertainty of supply, travelling distance between shelter locations and expiration of evening time.

At the end of February 2013, Social Planning Toronto initiated a short survey to better understand the experiences and perspectives of Toronto shelter providers regarding access to shelter for people who are homeless. 55 shelters from the City of Toronto's website were contacted and invited to participate in the survey that was conducted. Results were obtained from twelve community organizations operating 15 shelters, including ten emergency shelters, three violence against women (VAW) shelters, one transitional shelter, and one Out of the Cold program. Participating shelters included those operating in the downtown core and the inner suburbs, serving single men, single women, singles and couples with pets, single women and youth, women and children, refugees, all adults, and single youth.

Preliminary findings demonstrate that on Saturday February 9, 2013 ten out of fifteen shelters were full with no available beds and five shelters had between one and two beds available each. To view the findings of the survey, please visit: <http://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/news/toronto-shelter-providers-a-short-survey-preliminary-report/>.

The report before today's Community Development and Recreation Committee meeting, entitled "Update on Emergency Shelter Services" states that "...in 2012, Hostel Services received a total of 302 complaints about shelter services. Of these, 11 complaints related to access to a bed and just one complaint was due to being advised that there were no available beds. Notwithstanding this evidence, there continue to be anecdotal reports that people seeking shelter are being told that no beds are available and no effort is made in assisting them in finding shelter. These reports could be symptomatic of perceptions about the adequacy and appropriateness of the overall system of housing and homelessness prevention services. They may also reflect concerns about the efficiency of the City's emergency shelter services."

There is oddly no detailed information in the staff report regarding the nature of the 302 complaints that were not related to access to the shelter system. It would be helpful for City Council, service providers and the public to be aware of the outcome of those complaints to enable the shelter service sector to be more flexible in their planning and implementation and to introduce proactive measures to improve the system in the future.

From my own interviews with shelter clients and front line staff, I respectfully disagree with city staff's conclusions that the situations experienced by stakeholders this winter are "anecdotal" in nature. The discrepancies in information, based on the experience of shelter users and shelter service providers versus the City's own information, are too significant to overlook.

Therefore, I support a third-party investigation into the operations and outcomes of this City Division to identify inadequacies and enable improvements to the overall shelter system. The objective of such an investigation is not to lay blame on any particular entity but rather to develop a thorough understanding of how to address the deficiencies in our shelter services. While such a third-party investigation is underway, it is crucial that City Council continue to respond to the ongoing need for additional emergency shelter beds especially during extreme weather fluctuations. In 1999, City Council unanimously adopted recommendations contained in the Status Report on Capacity of the Emergency Shelter System that stipulated the shelter occupancy levels not exceed 90% for allowance of greater flexible in the system. With the deaths of eight homeless and street-involved individuals this year alone, clearly, it is time for us to immediately return to those shelter standards.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. City Council direct the General Manager of Shelter, Support, Housing and Administration to work with Facilities Management during extreme weather alerts to identify city-owned facilities, including where shelter spaces can be accommodated to increase accessible and safe shelter spaces for Toronto's homeless population by ten per cent when needed with any necessary additional funding being drawn from the Social Assistance Review Fund.
2. City Council request the Ombudsman to conduct a comprehensive investigation and review of Toronto's shelter and social housing system and to report back with recommendations on how to improve, properly accommodate and streamline the supply and demand for emergency shelter beds and to further develop proper communication and implementation protocols for the homeless population during extreme weather alerts.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Kristyn Wong-Tam  
Councillor, Ward 27  
Toronto Centre-Rosedale

KWT/mw