

TWCA Toronto Women's City Alliance

Making Equality Matter.

April 14th, 2014

The Chair
Community Development and Recreation Committee
10th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Dear Councillor,

I am writing on behalf of Toronto Women's City Alliance with regard to the Committee's consideration of CD28.2 Feasibility of 24-Hour Drop-in Service for Women.

Toronto Women's City Alliance strongly supports the initiative to create a 24 hour drop-in shelter service for women in 2 locations in the east and west ends of Toronto. Given an existing emergency shelter system that is stretched to capacity and in which women are often turned away, this service is crucial for the well-being of women with precarious or no housing. Women are often referred to co-ed shelters— an untenable option for those who have experienced violence and do not wish to share common areas or meal spaces. In addition, the women's bedding space is often very small, thus reinforcing the need for increased capacity in the shelter system for women. In the course of our programming, we have met many women who have asked for more drop-in spaces, particularly in winter when the need is great.

While we appreciate the financial constraints of service expansion, it is imperative that a *new* drop-in service is created. SSHA's report notes the barriers faced by women attempting to access existing services as well as service users' desire for a new service which is accessible, modelled by peer-programming, feels safe, and allows for the creation of a new sense of community that reflects the needs of the diverse women who would access the space. To this end, Toronto Women's City Alliance urges the City to work with the province and federal government to secure financial support for this important service.

We echo the stakeholders' recommendations for trained staff who reflect and understand the safety, health and emotional needs of the women who access the drop-in shelter. The results of the consultation note the diversity of women who need the drop-in service—youth, pregnant women, Aboriginal women, members of the LGBTQ community, sex workers, women escaping violence, homeless/precariously housed, seniors, women with disabilities and women with mental health challenges. These categories often overlap and are equally important. Consider, for example, that Aboriginal people are overrepresented in homeless populations, one in five homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, and the rate of identification with the LGBTQ community is higher among the female homeless population (11%) than the male population (7%) (Street Needs Assessment 2013). Therefore, the design of a drop-in space must *recognize and balance* the need for safety with the structures that currently serve as barriers to access in the existing shelter system. Appropriately-trained staff who work to foster a sense of care, inclusion, harm reduction, and provide opportunities for women to be self-directed are all necessary for a low-barrier, safe and accessible drop-in space.

Toronto Women's City Alliance urges the Community Development and Recreation Committee to adopt this important initiative, give all means of support, and oversee its implementation in a manner that is conducive to effectively meeting the needs of homeless and precariously housed women in Toronto.

Sincerely,
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