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Re: 2015 Hostels Allocations to Relieve Occupancy Pressures

October 15, 2015

To: Community Development and Recreation Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. Social Planning Toronto is a not-for-profit organization engaged in independent social planning, community research and policy analysis.

We strongly support the City of Toronto's efforts to increase the number of emergency and transitional shelter beds. The need for more shelters and more shelter beds is clear and urgent.

In 2013, in response to strong public concerns about lack of access to shelters and homeless deaths, Toronto City Council re-committed to a service level standard of 90% occupancy for all sectors of the shelter system, including men, women, co-ed and youth. However, since that commitment was made, the City has never achieved its target of 90% occupancy. The shelter system has remained crowded with many shelters at or near capacity on a nightly basis.

While we advocate for safe, decent and affordable homes for all, Toronto is far from that reality. There are over 90,000 households on the waiting list for social housing and an ongoing homelessness crisis in our city. Until there is real investment in affordable and supportive housing, we need to ensure that the shelter system is there for people. It is a life-saving system and requires adequate funding to meet the survival needs of our most vulnerable neighbours.

We are pleased to see the staff recommendations for additional shelters and shelter beds.

I would like to raise three issues with you today. First, while the addition of new shelter beds is important, we are very concerned that many of these new emergency beds, in particular, will not be available until well into the winter months. According to the staff report, 13 emergency shelter beds have been added to the system but the additional beds included in this report won't start to become available until February at the earliest.

Last January, four homeless men died, including men who died on our streets. As winter approaches, we are deeply concerned that there will be more homeless deaths, in part, because we won't have the emergency shelter beds we need when we need them. We strongly recommend that Council immediately develop an emergency plan to get people through this winter, to prevent more homeless deaths, and to ensure access to shelter for people who are homeless. The staff recommendations do not address the serious threat that people are facing now and in the coming months.

Second, the staff report refers to the City's 90% occupancy service level standard and notes that these additional shelter beds will help alleviate occupancy pressures. However, it's unclear to what degree these new beds will address the problems of crowding and access to shelter. What are the projected shelter occupancy levels for the men, women, co-ed and youth sectors, once all 121 beds have opened? Will the shelter system be operating at a 90% occupancy across all sectors? If not, what are the plans to get the shelter system working for people; what's the timeline; and is Council prepared to commit the funds? We're not just talking about a number; we're talking about people's lives.

Finally, it is extremely important not only to provide funding for new shelters in response to this urgent need but also to facilitate the smooth and speedy opening of these new shelters. When it comes to locating new community services, including shelters, affordable housing and supportive housing, there can be a serious problem of NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) where some residents oppose the location of new services in their neighbourhoods. As we have seen recently, the opposition, even when coming from a small group, can be vocal, aggressive and intimidating. NIMBYism can also delay the process of establishing critically needed community services.

It's important to remember that access to shelter is not only a basic need for survival but also a human right. We look to Toronto City Council to be a leader in responding to NIMBYism and upholding the human right to shelter, housing and access to other critical services. We want to see the Mayor and Toronto City Council take a strong stand in support of homeless and vulnerable residents and their human right to access critical services. Community organizations would like to work with the City to address this troubling situation.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.