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**HEALTH  
PROVIDERS  
AGAINST  
POVERTY**

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Dear city councillors,

On behalf of Health Providers Against Poverty, an Ontario-based coalition of healthcare workers who are concerned for those facing homelessness, we are writing in support of ongoing funding for warming centres to remain open throughout the winter months. It is our understanding that this program has been referred to in the budget process but not included in the preliminary budget set earlier this month.

We work with people living in poverty, many of whom experience homelessness. We have seen first hand the severe health impacts that exposure to cold can have on our clients, such as losing fingers and toes from frostbite.

Last year, the city was shocked by the death of two homeless men sleeping on the streets. These tragic deaths, however, only represent 1% of deaths caused by cold weather.<sup>1</sup> The less publicized, but much more common deaths are those due to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, such as heart attacks, strokes, and pneumonia. Occurring 1-4 weeks after exposure,<sup>2</sup> these are the deaths unseen and unattributed to being underhoused in the cold. People facing homelessness in Toronto are at the highest risk of death from cold, with much higher rates of underlying heart disease, asthma, high blood pressure, COPD, and diabetes.<sup>3</sup>

Opening the warming shelters only when temperatures drop below  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  is arbitrary, and is not based on scientific evidence. In Paris, it was found that when daily temperatures reached a minimum of  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$  and maximum of  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$ , the risk of excess death was greater than 15%.<sup>4</sup> Until optimal thresholds are established in Toronto, and sufficient housing and shelter is available for everyone, warming centres need to remain open throughout the winter months.

City shelters are already struggling to provide beds for those who need them, and the city has consistently not met its target of keeping shelter occupancy below 90%. Our clients, many of whom have mental health challenges as well as physical illnesses, tell us that they are afraid to stay in shelters due to overcrowding. And sometimes, even after repeated calls, there are no appropriate beds available in the system, leaving people with few options.

Warming centres are a vital stop-gap measure that expands the options for people in desperate need of warmth during the cold winter months, and we call on the city to formally ensure warming centres stay open throughout next winter.

Sincerely,



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Dr. Mike Benusic  
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University of Toronto

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