

## **Emergency Declaration: Toronto Shelter System is a Disaster**

November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017

**To :** City of Toronto Community Recreation Development Committee and City of Toronto Council

The City of Toronto's shelter system is in complete crisis. We are approaching the winter months and overdose deaths are on the rise, yet there has been no commitment from City Officials to open or enhance emergency shelter in a meaningful way. Despite the five "respite"-short term- visit centres, recently announced by the city of Toronto, the current shelter crisis will not be alleviated.

The opening of new shelter beds is not keeping pace with beds lost and the growing homeless population. The city is relying on the floors of drop-in centres and the Out of the Cold program to provide relief to those who cannot access a shelter bed. Drop-ins and churches are not an adequate alternative to shelter beds or even a sufficient emergency measure. The conditions in these facilities are leading to illness and premature death. **Emergency spaces that comply with basic shelter standards must be immediately opened as an interim measure until the 90% shelter occupancy policy is met.**

Repeated demands to keep the shelter occupancy at 90% have gone unanswered. In 1999 and again in November of 2013, City Council promised to ensure occupancy does not exceed 90%. They have failed to keep their promise.

At present, shelters are full. They operate at nearly 100% capacity every night and hundreds of homeless people are unable to access safe and appropriate shelter. Poor access to suitable shelter results in sleep deprivation, stress and trauma which fuels the opioid crisis and leads to illness and death. Drug users and those with complex needs experience barriers to accessing shelters. People are sleeping outdoors and on the floor of drop-ins. Drop-ins and warming centres are not an acceptable low-barrier shelter. **Immediate access to low barrier shelter beds is needed.**

Existing shelters are overcrowded and use flex beds on a consistent basis. Flex beds are mats and do not constitute emergency shelter. Such conditions are leading to health issues and outbreaks of insects and infectious disease. The utilization of flex beds as a permanent measure must end. **The city must immediately open 1000 new shelter beds to relieve the overcrowding in existing shelters and bring occupancy rates below 90%.**

We demand the following in response to this desperate crisis:

- 1) **The city must open 1000 new shelter beds to meet the standard of 90% shelter occupancy across all sectors. This must include low-threshold, harm reduction focused shelter.**
- 2) It is taking years to open a sufficient amount of shelters and people cannot endure the conditions at drop-ins, warming centres, Out of the Colds and the streets any longer. Facilities that can offer improved conditions must be opened until occupancy rates reach 90%. Last winter an average of 300 people spent the night at crowded drop-ins, Out of the Colds and warming centres. These facilities are not adequate and are not shelter. The city must do something NOW to improve this desperate situation. Therefore : **On November 20, 2017, The City of Toronto's Community Development and Recreation Committee must direct hostel services to provide emergency relief by immediately opening at least 400 emergency shelter spaces in large facilities like gymnasiums – within 30 days. Emergency facilities must meet basic shelter standards by providing an adequate number of bathrooms and showers and at least 2.5 feet between cots or beds. These emergency spaces must be sufficiently low threshold, harm reduction focused and the majority must be located within the downtown core.**

The undersigned,

**Street Health**

**Sistering**

**Regent Park Community Health Centre**

**South Riverdale Community Health Centre**

**Parkdale & Queen West Community Health Centre**

**St. Stephen's Community House**

**Sanctuary**

**The Interfaith Coalition to Fight Homelessness**

**Sound Times Support Services**

**Cupe Local 79**

**Houselink Community Homes**