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**Housing Action Now's Comment on the Review of Current Winter Respite Services
and Planning for the 2017/18 Winter Season - CD21.16
Wednesday, June 7, 2017**

People are unnecessarily dying each winter because the City's shelters and winter respite services are overcrowded and can't meet the increasing demand. It's an unacceptable situation, and putting a stop to these preventable deaths is critically important. And yes, these recommendations are clearly a step towards preventing people from dying on the streets this coming winter. However, the recommendations in this staff report are little more than a series of bandaids being proposed as a way to stop bleeding, when the problem we're talking about is more like multiple organ failure.

Toronto will likely always need some emergency shelter and winter respite services because there will always be some people who find themselves in emergency crisis situations and in need of temporary shelter or a safe place to stop in at night and access services. But these recommendations are neither addressing that short-term need, nor do they move us closer to a city where all residents can realize their fundamental right to housing. The recommendations are an inadequate response to the increasing homelessness in our city, which is largely caused by the shamefully inadequate provision of affordable housing by all levels of government, including this one. This housing crisis is being exacerbated by Council's refusal to make the City's affordable housing crisis a budget priority or to invest the funds needed to both prevent TCHC units from being closed due to disrepair and to build more affordable and subsidized housing units.

That said, these recommendations are clearly a step towards preventing people from dying on the streets this coming winter - deaths which we simply cannot accept in a city with as much wealth as Toronto. Therefore, Housing Action Now generally supports the report's recommendations, but only as part of a short-term strategy to deal with an immediate crisis situation. We firmly believe that Council must address increasing homelessness by not just maintaining, but increasing the city's supply of rent-g geared-to-income, deeply and permanently affordable housing, including supportive housing.

Specifically, we have concerns about two specific recommendations in the report:

Our first concern is with the proposed expansion of 24 hour Winter Respite Drop-in Services. In the report, 24 hour Winter Respite Drop-in Services were described as providing a client-centred, pet friendly, low barrier/low threshold service in a less formalized and structured environment, with services that include warm food and drinks, referrals to shelter and other services. Nowhere in this description does it mention the fact that 24 hour drop-ins are spaces where people are sleeping crammed together on mats on every available surface, their belongings and pets piled up around them, for weeks at a time, 24 hours a day, in conditions that are hard on both staff and service users and obviously don't meet the City's shelter standards. Later in the report it is noted that the City pays \$3,800 per person per month for this mat and piece of crowded floor-space. \$3,800 would get you a nice room to yourself in an Airbnb downtown and 3 restaurant meals a day for a month, or two months

in a nice 1-bedroom apartment. Yes, we absolutely need to provide more people with shelter, but I find it hard to believe that doubling the capacity of this program is the best we can do for people when we're talking about this kind of money.

Our second concern is with the proposed expansion of the Out of the Cold program. The staff report acknowledges that the Out of the Cold program, a program that is privately operated and funded by faith-based organizations around the city, has become "an essential service response that meets the needs of a particular population of people who are homeless...that should be recognized as an important component of the WRS response for vulnerable individuals." That the City relies on faith-based organizations and their donors to pay for the City's failure to provide adequate services and to generate revenue from its residents through taxation is shameful. It's even more shameful that the City is planning to unload even more of its responsibility for providing and funding public services onto these organizations. This downloading of responsibility is unacceptable, and "staff will explore the opportunity to provide a basic food stipend and access to an emergency fund for building repairs" does not make it acceptable.

On a positive note, we are glad that this report recommends the extension of continuous operation of Winter Respite Services for the whole cold weather season, from November 15 to April 15. This is important for both operators and service users, as the report acknowledges.

We are also pleased with the recommendations to improve the data collection, measurement and coordination of referrals, as we believe this to be necessary for making informed service decisions.

A final point. Toronto is becoming the most unequal city in Canada, and that is reflected and exacerbated by our city's approach to housing. We cater to the whims of homeowners who are reaping massive wealth increases due to rising home values by keeping their property taxes at the lowest level in the GTA, and meanwhile, when it comes to those in housing need, we are willing to close TCHC units, fall far short of our Housing Opportunities target of 10,000 new affordable rental units by 2019, and allow over 100,000 families to wait endlessly on the subsidized housing waitlist, spending their winters sleeping on mats on church floors.

We need our leaders to cater to those in need in our city, not those who are already comfortable.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this decision.

Melissa Goldstein
Chair, Housing Action Now