

## Deputation to Community Development and Recreation Committee

### Item 21.16

#### **“Review of Current Winter Respite Services and Planning for 2017/18 Winter Season**

**June 7, 2017**

#### **Susan Bender, Manager of Toronto Drop In Network**

The Toronto Drop In Network has a membership of over 50 drop ins across Toronto that work with people who are homeless or who are socially isolated. My comments draw on the experience of our member drop ins including staff and participants and on what we have learned about the needs and experience of the people who come to drop ins.

Drop ins occupy a vital and somewhat unique space in our communities. We strive to be spaces where people can feel safe, secure, welcome and accepted. We provide opportunities for people to be involved and engaged in the drop in space and in the programming that drop ins offer. And we provide appropriate and quality referrals and support for people that respond to where people are at and where they want to be.

24 hour drop ins are a response to a particular need for a safe space overnight and especially for people particularly at risk of violence or who need flexibility and low barrier access to overnight space – sex workers, people who are using drugs in the moment, for example. 24 hour drop ins fill a critical gap in what is available for people who are homeless or street involved.

24 hour drop ins are not shelters. They are not a winter relief program. The fact that they are low barrier is because the organizations that provide them have been intentional about that. It is not surprising then that 24 hour drop ins are the preferred overnight “shelter” space for some people. This is despite the fact that they are not set up for people to sleep in proper beds or otherwise conform to shelter standards.

I ask you to consider other reasons people may use 24 hour drop ins rather than go to shelters. How many of the people who have gone to a 24 hour drop in have service restrictions and cannot stay anywhere else? We know there are barriers for people who have pets, for couples, for example.

Drop ins in general and 24 hour drop ins (both the full year and the winter relief 24 hour drop ins) have been overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues people are dealing with. There is so much trauma, pain, serious health issues including mental health crisis and substance use issues. Drop ins are becoming crisis response centres; and overflow shelters that are trying to respond to intense medical emergencies and other kinds of crises without the adequate funding for resources, staffing and in some cases specialized training to prevent or respond to the kind and range of issues that people who come to the drop ins are facing.

Here are some recommendations for better meeting the needs of people who are homeless and socially isolated during the winter months and all year long:

- Planning that recognizes the distinct and separate roles that 24 hour drop ins and homeless shelters have and that does not substitute more and higher quality shelter beds with 24 hour drop in and Out of the Cold Program spaces.
- Planning that recognizes the limits to a Housing First approach and provides resources that respond to where people are at and provides supports that may be needed before an individual can move into and thrive in their own housing.
- More emergency shelter beds, in facilities that ensure adequate sleeping space, washrooms and showers and meet other shelter standards. Warming centres and Out of the Colds were not intended as long-term or permanent solutions to the lack of adequate shelter or affordable housing options. The target of 90 new beds in 2017 will not meet the need.
- Provision of low-barrier shelters - following the model of low barrier drop ins. This includes measures to reduce the number of service restrictions. (Restorative Justice, harm reduction model)
- Funding for more floor staff and crisis workers in 24 hour drop ins.
- Inclusion of other support strategies including the development of substance use crisis response system, with the Toronto LHIN's.

I encourage this Committee to question the current trajectory of downgrading the City's response to the crisis of homelessness and to provide leadership and funding that will ensure that there are enough adequate (appropriate, safe, accessible) spaces for people to go during the night, every night, when they do not have a home to go to.