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**Housing Action Now
Comment on the 2018 City of Toronto Budget
Wednesday January 10, 2018**

Good evening. I'm here to speak to you on behalf of Housing Action Now, a coalition of Toronto residents and community organizations that advocates for safe, decent and affordable housing for all Torontonians.

The following is our feedback regarding the 2018 City of Toronto Budget:

I'm here, once again, to remind you about the affordable housing and homelessness crises Toronto is experiencing and to ask you to do something about them; to walk the walk instead of just talking the talk.

In 2017, 225 units of affordable housing were built. That's 20% of the City's target of 1,000 units per year. And every night in 2017, over 5,000 people slept in homeless shelters and on mats on the floor.

In 2018, SSHA is anticipating that the waitlist for affordable housing will grow by an additional 2,000 households, while the Affordable Housing Office's target for 2018 is the completion of 816 affordable housing units. The homelessness crisis is so great that SSHA projects no improvement in shelter occupancy levels, despite current plans for new beds.

In other words, City staff anticipate that if this budget is approved as-is, in 2018, three times as many households will be added to the affordable housing waitlist as units of new affordable housing will be added to our housing supply, and the numbers of homeless will continue to increase.

So as we near the end of your term on Council, after four years when affordable housing was supposedly a priority, the affordable housing crisis is still a crisis, and the situation continues to get worse.

Given the situation I just described, to say that the current shelter crisis we're experiencing is anything but a direct result of our affordable housing crisis, is ridiculous. Yes, we need better mental health services and more supportive housing, yes we need the federal government to stop financially abandoning refugees who haven't landed on their feet after a year in this country, and yes we need both levels of government to help us finance social housing. But the fact is that poor people in this city, regardless of why they're poor, cannot find affordable places to live and end up homeless. And once they become homeless, they are faced without adequate services to support them.

What this budget is lacking, just like the last three budgets of this Council, is the funding necessary to meaningfully address our affordable housing crisis and the resultant homelessness crisis.

What we need in the 2018 budget is this:

- A commitment to create a minimum of 1,000 additional shelter spaces right now, spaces that conform to the City's shelter standards and will be able to accommodate all of those currently sleeping on mats on floors.
- A commitment to opening respite spaces to accommodate the current need not satisfied by the shelter system, plus capacity for possible emergencies and unanticipated increases in need.

- Funding to support a serious expansion of efforts to build new affordable housing. We need to be exceeding our targets, when we're not even coming close to meeting them.
- Funding for the 2018 Poverty Reduction workplan as a way to prevent increasing homelessness. That includes funding the TCHC Tenants First implementation plan.
- Funding for the Moss Park Overdose prevention site. We should not be relying on volunteers and donations to provide this critically necessary public service. The City should fund its portion of the Toronto Urban Health Fund to access funding for it.
- An increase in Community Partnership and Investment Program (CPIP) funding so that nonprofits can comply with the minimum wage increase for their staff without putting their programs and services in jeopardy.

As Matt Elliot noted this week, the real cause of our shelter crisis is a political culture at city hall that looks at stories of vulnerable people being unable to find safe shelter, that examines numbers showing the city's nightly failure in meeting its 90 per cent shelter occupancy target, and says, "you know, our real priority is keeping property taxes low."

He noted that the solution to the shelter crisis is in the city's budget.

A real commitment to affordable housing and addressing homelessness involves being proactive and anticipating the need and increasing spending on housing services, social supports and long-term affordable housing, to build capacity. A municipal government devoted to a long-term fix and to supporting vulnerable people would make those investments before the need reached a breaking point.

It's also a failure in good fiscal management, since it costs us less to prevent problems and be proactive than to respond retroactively or to emergencies. It's a failure in good governance, you can't claim to be good managers of the city's finances if you go through these budget exercises every year, only to end up scrambling to pull money together every winter and every summer to respond to predicted and preventable emergencies in the shelter system.

And yet, for the past 8 years Toronto's mayors have not been proactive, have not planned and invested, and have instead called for budget freezes or budget cuts, and Council has supported those calls. The crisis that happens each time the temperature drops, is one that you created. You can fix the crisis, but you need to change the behaviour that created it in the first place.

As Stephen Hwang and Kapri Rabin noted this week, property taxes for houses and condos in Toronto are lower than all other GTA municipalities and lower than Hamilton and Ottawa. A modest increase in property taxes, above the rate of inflation, would help Toronto to meet the life-or-death needs of our most vulnerable residents. There are programs in place to help defer property tax increases that low-income seniors and people with disabilities can't afford. To ensure that low-income people aren't adversely affected by an increase in property taxes, these programs could be enhanced. So it's not vulnerable homeowners that Councillors are trying to protect, and it's disingenuous to claim otherwise.

It has been heartening and inspiring to see residents of Toronto pool their money, time and skills to find and pay for hotel rooms for some people without shelter, an overdose prevention site that has saved hundreds of lives. But we have a more systematic way of doing this, and one that has the potential to

reach people across our city. It's called the property tax. And I am asking you again, for the millionth time, it feels like, to use it.

A society that builds inclusive neighbourhoods that truly and meaningfully provide for members would include: mental health support at the early stages when the needs arise; schools that provide kids with the skills and education they need, so that their family's inability to afford a tutor or extra-curricular activities does not put them at a disadvantage; housing that is available and affordable to people of all income levels in all parts of the city so that homelessness is history.

If we start to see the need for winter respite centres decrease because people can use actual homeless shelters, then and only then can we reduce the number of respite centres.

If we see homelessness decrease as a result of increasing the supply of affordable housing, then and only then can we reduce the number of shelter beds.

But to simply refuse to fund homelessness services until people are in immediate danger of freezing to death while doing next to nothing about affordable housing because you think it's someone else's problem, is irresponsible, inhumane, incompetent and inexcusable.

As others have noted, homelessness doesn't end on April 15th , the day when hundreds of mats on floors across the city are scheduled to disappear. People need shelter 365 days a year. You don't stop needing your home once the snow melts, and neither do people who don't have a home to begin with.

Yesterday a man went into the Maxwell Meaghan homeless shelter because he had no home and needed somewhere to sleep. He left the shelter in a body bag. Dying in a shelter isn't much more dignified than dying on the street. Giving a person a mat on the floor to sleep on is not an adequate way to address homelessness. Homeless shelters are not an adequate way to address homelessness. These bandaid solutions are critically necessary right now, but they shouldn't be. The only reason they are, is because of your government's refusal to do what it can to respond to our affordable housing crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this year's budget.

Melissa Goldstein,
Chair, Housing Action Now