



Ombudsman  
Toronto

*Listening. Investigating. Improving City Services.*

## **Ombudsman Toronto Report**

Enquiry into  
City of Toronto Winter Respite Services  
2017-18 Season

March 19, 2018

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Ombudsman Toronto began its Enquiry into two aspects of the City's Winter Respite services in early January 2018. The Enquiry looked at the internal and public-facing communication of information about Winter Respite sites and conditions at the sites. It followed a 2017 Enquiry in which the Ombudsman made a number of recommendations to improve communication and establish maximum capacities and over-capacity protocols for the Winter Respite sites.

### **Communication of Information about Winter Respite Sites was Inadequate**

The Ombudsman found that the information the City provided to the public about Winter Respite sites was overwhelmingly outdated, inaccurate and inconsistent.

- The City's Shelter Support and Housing Administration division (SSHA) did not share up-to-date information with the City's 311 information hub or the SSHA Central Intake call centre. As a result, staff incorrectly told members of the public at least three times that there was no room at the Winter Respite site in the Better Living Centre at Exhibition Place. The Ombudsman is concerned there were likely other instances in which staff gave out incorrect information.
- The City uses inconsistent terminology for its Winter Respite sites. In internal and public-facing communications, it calls them by at least 12 other names, including "cold weather spaces", "24/7 winter respite service", "respite drop-ins" and "winter overnight services." This causes confusion and contributes to communication problems.
- The City of Toronto's website is unclear about what people should do if they need to use a shelter or a Winter Respite site, or if they want information about these services.
- There is a lack of clarity about the roles of several City departments that provide information and referrals to these services, and inadequate co-ordination among them.

### **Conditions at Winter Respite Sites were Inconsistent and/or Inadequate**

- During its Enquiry, Ombudsman Toronto visited nine Winter Respite sites. There was inconsistency in the levels of service and, at some sites, unacceptable conditions. For example: some sites did not have showers; others had between one and five showers; only three sites had ramps, elevators or accessible toilet facilities; none had special beds or cots that could accommodate people with mobility challenges.
- The indoor temperature at one site was unacceptably low.

The City has now begun to develop service and maintenance standards for the Winter Respite sites.

## **Recommendations**

Given the urgency of the situation this winter, the Ombudsman made nine recommendations while the Enquiry was still underway. As a result, SSHA agreed to immediately take several important steps, which it did. Those included that it:

- update 311's information
- publicly report detailed site occupancy numbers daily and improve the information it shares with City staff
- implement regular, ongoing temperature checks at all Winter Respite sites
- establish an ongoing checklist for general housekeeping, electrical issues, fire safety, and washroom facilities until the City establishes formal Winter Respite site standards.

This report makes nine additional recommendations. They include that the City:

- require all staff to use the same terminology, which should be clear and user-friendly
- clarify the roles of 311, Central Intake and SHARC (the Streets to Homes Access and Referral Centre)
- develop a system for sharing up-to-date information on occupancy at Winter Respite sites
- improve data collection and the use of data for intake and planning
- ensure that the City's website contains the information people need
- consult with people using the services, agencies, professionals working on behalf of the homeless and other stakeholders on ways to improve the quality of the services to better meet the needs of the people who use them.

SSHA and the City have agreed to implement all of Ombudsman Toronto's recommendations.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Ombudsman Toronto works as informally, practically and quickly as possible to understand and resolve problems. We conduct Enquiries as a flexible way to gather information and search for resolution of issues that arise by way of complaint, or as a result of public concern.
2. This report outlines our recent Enquiry into the City's Winter Respite services, concerning two specific issues:
  - 1) communication of information, both internal and public-facing; and
  - 2) site conditions.
3. Winter Respite services are part of the City's overall shelter system for people experiencing homelessness, administered by its Shelter Support and Housing Administration Division (SSHA). The City funds Winter Respite sites. Most are operated on the City's behalf by community agencies; the City operates others directly.
4. Winter Respite sites are low-barrier places intended to temporarily provide people experiencing homelessness a place to sleep, a warm meal and referrals to health and housing support services.
5. Winter Respite sites are different from shelters. Shelters are more formalized, provide specialized programming, and are subject to a clear set of expectations, guidelines and minimum requirements, known as the *Toronto Shelter Standards*. SSHA tracks shelter bed availability and clients through SSHA's online system, called the Shelter Management Information System ("SMIS").
6. According to SSHA, Winter Respite sites are "designed to engage and provide service to people with more complex needs who may otherwise not access traditional shelter beds."<sup>1</sup>
7. The fact that Winter Respite sites are low barrier means that people using them do not have to comply with many of the requirements found in shelters. Pets are welcome, and people using a site need only provide their name (and in some cases their gender identity, depending on the type of site) to access a space. There are no curfews and people may come and go as they wish, subject to site capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> February 20, 2018, Report for Action CD26.5, "Update on Emergency Shelter Services", from Deputy City Manager, Cluster A to the Community Development and Recreation Committee:  
<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2018/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-112757.pdf>.

8. Since their introduction a few years ago, Winter Respite sites have gradually become a significant component of the City's shelter system. What was originally intended as a temporary solution to meet demand for shelter has become a fixed part of the City's response to homelessness. At its meeting on January 31, 2018, City Council directed SSHA to retain operations of the necessary Winter Respite sites beyond the scheduled end date of April 15, 2018.
9. The City has committed publicly to providing a warm, welcoming and safe place for those experiencing homelessness<sup>2</sup>. It has assured the public that the services it provides are sufficient for everyone who needs them.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF WINTER RESPITE SERVICES**

10. Demand for shelter services in Toronto has been increasing since at least 2012, in both cold and warm weather.<sup>3</sup> Average nightly occupancy in Toronto's emergency shelter system grew from 4,095 in January 2016 to 5,663 in January 2018.<sup>4</sup>
11. As part of its response to meet this increase in demand, the City introduced two "24-Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins" during the 2014-15 winter season, operating only during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts. These services operated in addition to the City's shelters as well as other community services such as year-round Drop-Ins<sup>5</sup> and Out of the Cold programs.<sup>6</sup> During the 2015-2016 winter season, the City operated the two 24-Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins continuously during the coldest months of January and February.
12. For the 2016-17 winter season, the City operated 24-Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts between November 15 to December 15 and continuously from January 1 to April 15. To accommodate demand, the City added a third Overnight Cold Weather Drop-In, open from

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<sup>2</sup> City of Toronto's January 4, 2018, Backgrounder on Homelessness Services:

<https://www.toronto.ca/home/media-room/backgrounders-other-resources/city-of-torontos-homelessness-services/>

<sup>3</sup> October 5, 2016 Report for Action, "2016-17 Winter Readiness and Update on Shelter Occupancy", from General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to the Community Development and Recreation Committee.

<sup>4</sup> City of Toronto's *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage* webpage:

<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-census/>.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Toronto Drop-In Network, all drop-ins provide an informal social setting, respond to some basic needs, and offer some sort of programming. They vary in their individual mandates and the services they offer. Generally, drop-ins offer a flexible service model that is meant to respond to a need in a particular community.

<sup>6</sup> Every winter, 16 faith-based organizations come together to operate Out of the Cold programs, volunteer-run initiatives offering warm, safe places for people to eat dinner, spend the night, and access additional services.



9 p.m. to 9 a.m., accessed primarily through referrals from the two 24-Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins.

## **OMBUDSMAN TORONTO'S 2017 ENQUIRY**

13. Last winter, in response to media reports that the City was providing inadequate space for Torontonians facing homelessness in the winter months, Ombudsman Toronto conducted an Enquiry into Cold Weather Drop-In Services.
14. Released in May 2017, our Enquiry report recommended that SSHA:
  - i. Determine a reasonable maximum capacity for each of its 24-Hour or Overnight Cold Weather Drop-Ins, and formalize over-capacity protocols
  - ii. Communicate with the public in response to concerns that there was inadequate shelter in cold weather
  - iii. Work with researchers conducting a study of one Toronto Drop-In service.
15. SSHA agreed to implement our recommendations.
16. Ombudsman Toronto continued to monitor SSHA's implementation of our recommendations. By the start of the 2017-18 winter season, November 15, 2017, they had determined capacity for each Winter Respite site, implemented a Capacity Management Protocol, and had cooperated with the research project.

## **EXPANSION OF SERVICES FOR THE 2017-18 SEASON**

17. In preparing for the 2017-18 winter season, the City acknowledged the importance of what they now call "Winter Respite services"<sup>7</sup>, and extended the season so these services would operate continuously from November 15, 2017, to April 15, 2018. They planned to increase the number of sites from the previous winter from three to five, growing overall capacity from 160 to 250.
18. In fact, the capacity of the Winter Respite sites has increased dramatically during the 2017-18 winter season, much more than the City originally planned. As of February 28, 2018, there were eight Winter Respite sites open, with an overall capacity of 660 spaces.

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<sup>7</sup> The City uses various terms for Winter Respite services, as discussed in detail below. In 2016-17, the City called them "24-hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins", the term we used in our 2017 Enquiry Report. In 2017-18, the City variously uses "Winter Respite sites", "Winter Respite services", and several other terms.

## REPORTED COMMUNICATION FAILURES AND PUBLIC CONCERN

19. In late December 2017 and early January 2018, media reported that City staff had told members of the public over the phone that certain Winter Respite sites had no available spaces when that was apparently not true.
20. At the same time, Toronto Public Health issued an Extreme Cold Weather Alert which lasted from December 25, 2017, through to January 8, 2018.<sup>8</sup> Public concern about how the City was providing services to the homeless mounted. Temperatures in Toronto during this period reached record lows.<sup>9</sup>
21. Reports of four phone calls in which the City may have given the public incorrect information caused us concern about whether Winter Respite services were being delivered fairly and effectively.

## OUR RESPONSE: THE 2018 ENQUIRY

22. On January 2, 2018, we announced that we would be looking into the City's Winter Respite services for people experiencing homelessness.
23. Our Enquiry focused on two areas:
  - 1) Communication about Winter Respite services, specifically:
    - a) What happened during four reported calls made by members of the public who said the City gave them incorrect information?
    - b) Was the City's internal and public-facing communication about Winter Respite sites adequate?
  - 2) Conditions at the Winter Respite sites  
Were they adequate for the City to fulfill its stated commitment to provide a warm, welcoming and safe place for people experiencing homelessness?
24. In conducting our Enquiry, we:
  - interviewed staff at SSHA, community agency staff at Winter Respite sites, and users of Winter Respite services
  - interviewed many concerned members of the public, front line workers and professionals who work with people experiencing homelessness and/or who work on homelessness policy

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<sup>8</sup> City of Toronto's *Statistics on Extreme Cold Weather Alerts in Toronto* webpage: <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/statistics-on-extreme-cold-weather-alerts-in-toronto/>.

<sup>9</sup> Aguilar, Bryann (2018, January 5). "It's official... Toronto breaks record for cold weather for Jan. 5." *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved from: [www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com).

- reviewed extensive documentation including policies, protocols, operating agreements, reports from various sources and other documents
  - consulted with people addressing homelessness in other municipalities and provinces
  - visited several Winter Respite sites.
25. In reaching our findings and recommendations, we considered all of the information we gathered, in addition to what we had learned from our 2017 Enquiry.
26. The success of any Ombudsman Toronto Enquiry depends heavily on our ability to gather evidence, ask questions and get answers. We received excellent cooperation from City management and staff, as well as from Winter Respite site management and staff. We also appreciate the valuable input we received from members of the public, including professionals and people using the services.
27. Often in our Enquiries, we gather and analyze extensive evidence before making recommendations or reporting on what we have found. In this case, given the urgency of the issues, as well as the City's quickly changing delivery of these services, we made nine immediate recommendations for service improvements during the course of our Enquiry. As detailed below, the City accepted and implemented all of them.
28. With respect to each of the two issues we looked at, this report outlines:
- the evidence we gathered
  - our findings
  - steps the City has taken since this Enquiry began, many of them in response to our recommendations
  - our further recommendations for improvement of Winter Respite services.

## ISSUE 1: THE CITY'S COMMUNICATION ABOUT WINTER RESPITE SERVICES

29. The City provides intake and referral information to the public about Winter Respite services through three main portals: the Central Intake call centre, the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre ("SHARC"), and 311 Toronto (the City's 24 hour call centre and online resource which provides information about City services, "311"). Each of these portals is discussed in detail below.

	Methods of Contact	Services Provided
Central Intake (CI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Phone</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conducts intake, assessments and referrals for people experiencing homelessness</li></ul>
Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre (SHARC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Phone</li><li>• In-person</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conducts intake, assessments and referrals for people experiencing homelessness</li><li>• Other services:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 24 hour drop-in/respice service on-site (without sleeping facilities)</li><li>○ 40 shelter beds on site</li><li>○ Health and housing supports offered</li><li>○ Free phone access, laundry and showers available for use</li></ul></li></ul>
311	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Phone</li><li>• Fax</li><li>• E-mail</li><li>• Website</li><li>• Phone/tablet app</li><li>• Text message</li><li>• Twitter</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provides information about City of Toronto services and programs</li><li>• Allows people to make service requests for some City divisions</li></ul>

### FOUR PHONE CALLS REQUESTING WINTER RESPITE SERVICES

30. The media reported four telephone calls in late December 2017 and early January 2018 in which members of the public were given wrong information about capacity at City of Toronto Winter Respite sites.
31. We gathered information about each of the four calls by interviewing the member of the public who made the call, as well as City staff. We also reviewed all available records and recordings of each call.

### *1) DECEMBER 26 CALL TO 311*

32. A member of the public called 311 to ask for locations of "warming centres" in downtown Toronto. He complained that 311 told him there was only one location – the Better Living Centre, located on the grounds of Exhibition Place ("BLC").
33. We reviewed 311's recording of the call and spoke to 311 staff.
34. During the call, the staff member's supervisor told them to direct the caller to call the BLC directly, or alternatively to tell the caller they could stay warm in malls or libraries. The staff member followed these instructions.
35. 311 staff told us that they had had trouble accessing information about Winter Respite sites. Upon further review, it became clear that 311's internal database contained outdated information.
36. The Director of 311 reported that SSHA had not provided 311 with updated and accurate information. He also acknowledged that in this incident, 311 staff did not effectively search and obtain accurate information outside the internal database as required.

### *2) DECEMBER 28 CALL TO CENTRAL INTAKE*

37. Someone called Central Intake asking about shelter beds for himself and his pregnant girlfriend. The caller was not actually looking for space but rather calling to see what information he would be given. He was recording the call.
38. Central Intake staff asked to speak to the caller's girlfriend so they could conduct a full intake interview with her. The caller said she could not come to the phone because she was asleep in a nearby coffee shop. The staff member suggested that the couple go to one of two nearby Winter Respite sites from which they could call back for a full intake and assessment.
39. We reviewed the caller's recording of the call. We also spoke to staff and management at Central Intake, who told us that they require each individual client to participate in a thorough intake over the phone before they can make a referral to a shelter or specific Winter Respite site.

### *3) DECEMBER 30 CALL TO CENTRAL INTAKE AND THE BETTER LIVING CENTRE*

40. A community volunteer called 211<sup>10</sup> to check on available spaces at the BLC Winter Respite site. Her call was transferred to Central Intake, where staff

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<sup>10</sup> 211 is a 24/7 helpline and online database of community and social services within Ontario. All three levels of government and United Way fund 211.

told her the site was full. The caller said she then called the BLC directly and staff there also told her there was no space.

41. SSHA data shows that on December 30, only 71 of 100 available spaces at the BLC were occupied.
42. We did not have a recording to review in this case but phone logs verified that the caller did call 211 and was transferred to Central Intake. She also called the BLC.
43. Central Intake staff told us they did not recall this phone call. The staff member on duty at the time, however, said she had heard from a colleague earlier in her shift that the BLC was full.
44. Staff on duty at the BLC that night denied telling anyone that it was full.

#### *4) JANUARY 1 CALL TO CENTRAL INTAKE*

45. The same caller from December 28 called Central Intake again on January 1, 2018, asking about "available beds" near him, stating he was located near Queen and Dufferin in the "west end". He then specifically asked about the BLC.
46. He recorded this call also. We reviewed the recording.
47. During the call, Central Intake staff told the caller the BLC was full.
48. SSHA data shows that on January 1, only 83 of the 100 spaces at the BLC were occupied.
49. When we interviewed the Central Intake staff member who spoke to the caller, she told us she had put the caller on hold and called the BLC. She said staff at the BLC told her they were at capacity. Neither the recording nor the phone logs support her version of the events.
50. The Central Intake Manager told us that the staff member did not follow protocol in this case.

#### **SSHA TERMINOLOGY**

51. For the 2017-2018 winter season, the City changed the name for what it used to call "24-Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins" and "Overnight Cold Weather Drop-Ins", to "Winter Respite services".
52. Winter Respite services are one of many services the City provides for people experiencing homelessness.

53. Appendix A shows the official terms SSHA has been using during the 2017-18 winter season. The chart includes SSHA's own definitions, and various other terms the City uses interchangeably.
54. The City uses at least 12 other terms in place of "Winter Respite Services" in its internal and public-facing communications:
- winter respite sites
  - winter service locations
  - winter respite programs
  - respite system winter services
  - cold weather spaces
  - 24-hour respite drop-ins
  - 24/7 winter respite service
  - 24-hour winter respite drop-ins
  - winter respite
  - respite drop-ins
  - winter respite drop-ins
  - winter overnight services
55. It also uses some of this terminology interchangeably to refer to drop-ins and warming centres, as shown in Appendix A.
56. We asked SSHA staff and leaders about this inconsistent use of language, and whether they believed it could cause or contribute to public confusion about the services offered by the City.
57. One member of management said they believed this was not a major concern for the public since people who frequently use the services understand the differences among them. Another staff member however acknowledged the importance of having clear terminology at least at the intake and referral stage.

#### **INFORMATION ON THE CITY OF TORONTO WEBSITE**

58. The City's website provides information for the public on services for people experiencing homelessness.

59. We reviewed the *Homeless Help*<sup>11</sup> and the *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage*<sup>12</sup> webpages.<sup>13</sup>
60. On the *Homeless Help* page are six green "buttons":
- winter services
  - shelter
  - housing help
  - meals
  - clothing
  - drop-ins
61. Each button takes the user to an interactive city map, where they can see locations of and information about available services in that category. Users can filter locations on each map based on specific features of the services.
62. The map groups Winter Respite sites (referred to as "respite drop-ins" on the website) with Out of the Cold programs and drop-ins that offer TTC tokens during cold weather alerts.
63. There is no information about accessibility of Winter Respite sites on the *Homeless Help* webpage.
64. SSHA communications staff told us that the *Homeless Help* webpage was designed and tested with the help of people who use shelter and/or Winter Respite services. This design took place before the 2017-18 winter season.
65. The City's website is not clear about what should be the first point of contact for someone requiring shelter or Winter Respite services. The *Homeless Help* webpage lists 311 as the number to call for "street outreach." The numbers for Central Intake and SHARC are both included on the "Winter Services" map, but the page does not include a description of what they are or what they do.
66. In fact, when a user clicks on SHARC's location at 129 Peter Street on the map, it lists Central Intake's number, with SHARC's number as an alternative, labelled "administration".
67. A different webpage, *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage*, shows daily capacity and occupancy of each shelter and Winter Respite site. SSHA Communications staff told us this information is not located on *Homeless*

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<sup>11</sup> City of Toronto's *Homeless Help* webpage: <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/housing-shelter/homeless-help/>.

<sup>12</sup> City of Toronto's *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage* webpage: <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/housing/housing-and-homelessness-research-and-reports/shelter-census/>.

<sup>13</sup> Evidence taken from the City's website is current to January 28, 2018.



*Help* because it is not designed for people using shelters and Winter Respite sites.

68. Some professionals and frontline workers told us that they regularly accessed the information on *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage* in order to better understand capacity and availability.
69. During our Enquiry, we found out-of-date information on both webpages. One small example: on the *Homeless Help* link to information about meals, there was a "2017/2018 Winter Holiday Meal List" of meals available between December 22, 2017 and January 1, 2018. As of February 28, 2018, this list was still there.

### **THREE PORTALS FOR INTAKE AND REFERRAL SERVICES**

70. The City provides Winter Respite site capacity information to the public, performs intake and makes referrals through three main portals:
  - Central Intake
  - SHARC
  - 311
71. When a person is looking to access a Winter Respite site, they can either contact one of those three portals for information and/or a referral, or go directly to a Winter Respite site. If that particular site cannot accommodate the person, it can refer them to another Winter Respite site.
72. Winter Respite sites themselves also play another important role in the intake and referral process, as they are required to regularly communicate occupancy and capacity to SSHA.

#### **CENTRAL INTAKE**

73. Central Intake is a call centre staffed by SSHA counsellors. They accept phone calls from people looking for long term housing options, shelter beds, spaces at Out of the Cold programs, 24-Hour Drop-Ins or Winter Respite sites. After conducting an intake and assessment, they refer callers to the appropriate place. Central Intake does not provide in-person services.
74. Central Intake takes calls from two different locations, depending on the time of day. Between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m., it operates out of the Greenfield Family Centre, located near Sheppard Avenue East and Bayview Avenue. Between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m., it operates out of a shelter called Family Residence, on Kingston Road in Scarborough.

75. Between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m., Central Intake has two to four counsellors and one supervisor on duty. There are four counsellors on duty between 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. At night, there is one counsellor and one supervisor.
76. Counsellors, who are trained social workers, are expected to answer phones, conduct a full intake and assessment for each call, make referrals, and document each call.
77. Staff told us that they handle many calls per shift. The Manager told us that call volume has increased "substantially" in the last four years, while staffing has remained about the same. When counsellors are unable to take calls, those calls wait on hold in a queue.
78. Some frontline workers told us about routinely having to wait on hold for a long time when seeking service from Central Intake.
79. Central Intake counsellors reported that call volume is high and they feel pressure to work fast on calls. They told us that sometimes, instead of phoning Winter Respite sites to check whether space is available, they instead suggest that callers go to SHARC at 129 Peter Street, where they can wait inside while a SHARC staff member searches for a referral to a Winter Respite site.
80. Counsellors use SMIS to help them make referrals to shelters. SMIS contains information about shelter bed availability across the City, which is updated daily. Counsellors keep track of the referrals they make using SMIS.
81. According to Central Intake, SMIS is not used by Winter Respite sites, Out of the Cold programs, or 24 Hour Drop-Ins. This means that Central Intake staff must keep a separate daily intake list of callers who are referred to those services in a single Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.
82. In order to refer a caller to a Winter Respite site, Out of the Cold program, or 24 Hour Drop-In, counsellors must first verify whether a particular site has space. They are required to do so by putting the caller on hold and phoning the site directly. However, counsellors told us they sometimes cannot get through to the site in question. They also told us that sometimes they do not phone the site if they have heard information from their colleagues about occupancy earlier in their shift.
83. Counsellors told us that they have had difficulty contacting Winter Respite sites to check for space. In particular, they told us about problems reaching the BLC on certain evenings this winter season. Sometimes nobody would answer. At one point, the phone number was not in service.

84. Management at the BLC told us that in their first month of operation, they did not have a landline, and were operating with only one cell phone. On one occasion, the phone was stolen and on another, it was not working.
85. Central Intake counsellors also reported that they were confused about the BLC's location at Exhibition Place, and how to get there by public transit. They also said they had seen media reports on television about a person who had allegedly tried to go into the BLC, only to find out its doors were locked.
86. Staff at Central Intake reported that for all these reasons, they were reluctant to refer people to the BLC.
87. We asked whether Central Intake staff ever call SHARC for information about Winter Respite site capacity. They said generally, they do not.
88. In response to our 2017 Enquiry, SSHA developed its Capacity Management Protocol for use this winter season. This protocol instructs Winter Respite sites on what to do when they reach 80% capacity, as well as when they reach 100% capacity. At both 80% and 100% capacity, Winter Respite site staff are instructed to contact SHARC and Central Intake to notify them of their occupancy and to stop accepting referrals.
89. Staff and management at Central Intake were unaware of the Capacity Management Protocol.
90. Central Intake staff reported not knowing specific details about certain Winter Respite sites. They also said that since new sites were opening and closing, and capacity at some sites was changing, they were overwhelmed by the changes in information. This made them reluctant to give referrals to certain places.
91. Central Intake staff told us that sometimes, they first learn about changes to SSHA's services when the City communicates the information to the public. They said it would be helpful to have advance notice of changes, especially given that they work in shifts, and it "takes time to get messaging out."
92. Central Intake staff also told us that there have been times where SSHA has prioritized sending SHARC important information first. They gave the example of the opening of the Salvation Army New Hope men's shelter in January 2018. They said that one staff person happened to be speaking with SHARC, who told them the new shelter was opening. Central Intake staff said this was how Central Intake first learned of it.

## THE STREETS TO HOMES ACCESS AND REFERRAL CENTRE (SHARC)

93. SHARC is located at 129 Peter Street in downtown Toronto. It is the headquarters of the City's street outreach program, and SHARC staff view it as the "hub" for the City's entire shelter system. SHARC is a multi-service site which offers walk-in and phone referrals to shelters, drop-ins, Winter Respite sites and Out of the Cold programs. SHARC also offers a 24 hour drop-in/respite service on-site (without sleeping facilities). SHARC connects people to housing services and has a 40 shelter beds on site.
94. SHARC's *Intake Policy* outlines intake procedures for its various services, as well as additional information such as client rights and rules.
95. Under SHARC's *Intake Policy*, it collects information about each person who comes to 129 Peter Street and enters it into SMIS, to "aid in the referral, admission, discharge and general case management of clients."<sup>14</sup> SHARC told us that it produces a *Daily SHARC Winter Respite Report* which records the number of people occupying each Winter Respite site at specific times, and client details such as gender, age, mobility and whether clients are single or with families. SHARC sends this report each night to SSHA management.
96. SHARC staff told us that since not all Winter Respite sites have access to SMIS, SHARC is in "regular contact" with all the Winter Respite sites for up-to-date information. SHARC staff told us that their long-standing relationships with shelter and Winter Respite site staff allow them to communicate well with each other.
97. SHARC staff told us that they will either find a space for someone, or will let them stay at SHARC overnight if a space cannot be found. They said they never turn anyone away. SHARC staff explained that they "match" people to existing spaces by gender, age or family status.
98. City communications refer to SHARC only as a resource where "youth and adults can get a walk-in referral".<sup>15</sup> A professional healthcare worker who frequently uses the Winter Respite site referral system for their clients told us they believed that SHARC was "only a room with chairs." They did not think it was a resource for referring clients to Winter Respite sites. A City communications staff member told us that they understood that SHARC and Central Intake performed the same function.
99. There is no mention of either Central Intake or 311 in SHARC's *Intake Policy*. SHARC staff told us they were not really connected to Central Intake, but that Central Intake should call SHARC if it cannot make a referral to a shelter

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<sup>14</sup> SHARC *Intake Policy*, pg. 1.

<sup>15</sup> City of Toronto's *Homeless Help* webpage: <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/housing-shelter/homeless-help/#shelters>.

through SMIS. Counsellors at Central Intake told us they generally do not call SHARC for information.

100. The City's *Shelter Intake Business Process Review* from May 2017 found an unclear and unfocused mandate for Central Intake and SHARC, and recommended reviewing, clarifying and communicating the mandate, objectives and policies for shelter intake and accessing services for Central Intake and SHARC.

### **311 TORONTO**

101. 311 is a 24-hour, one-stop hub for information about the City of Toronto and its programs and services. It is accessible by phone, website, e-mail, Twitter and phone or tablet app.
102. 311 staff can also initiate a service request for a member of the public with City divisions which have been "integrated" into 311. Integration enables 311 to provide direct service to members of the public because it has access to real-time back-office databases. Not all City divisions are integrated into 311, including SSHA.
103. The Director of 311 told us in mid-January 2018 that his team was working to have SSHA become an "integrated partner" and they were in the process of drafting the Minutes of Understanding which would allow next steps to proceed in building that relationship.
104. 311 maintains an online "Knowledge Base" for each City division, agency and corporation, which contains essential information about its services.
105. When someone calls 311 looking for space at a shelter, drop-in or Winter Respite site, the staff person on the phone searches the 311 Knowledge Base system. Using search terms such as "homeless", "shelter", "respite" or "cold weather," staff are expected to locate accurate and up-to-date information about City shelters and Winter Respite sites.
106. 311 does not have access to real-time information on the availability of Winter Respite site space. When we reviewed the 311 Knowledge Base, it directed staff to "warm transfer"<sup>16</sup> inquiries about Winter Respite site space or capacity to Central Intake. It did not suggest directing calls to SHARC.

### **311's Information from SSHA**

107. Each year, 311 sends current Knowledge Base content to each City division's Subject Matter Expert, who then has two weeks to review it and provide

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<sup>16</sup> The 311 staff member stays on the line with the caller to make sure the transfer is completed.

updates. City divisions must also provide prompt updates when there is a change.

108. On September 13, 2016, 311 staff sent SSHA the Knowledge Base content to be updated for 2017. On September 30, the SSHA Subject Matter Expert responded that SSHA was in the midst of a re-organization and asked for an extension to early 2017. 311 agreed.
109. On June 13, 2017, having not yet received an update from SSHA, a 311 manager followed up. SSHA returned its Knowledge Base reports one month later, on July 12, 2017. 311 told us that it updated its system with that information within two weeks.

### ***Ombudsman Toronto Discovered Outdated and Incorrect Information in 311 SSHA Knowledge Base***

110. The Ombudsman called 311 on December 31, 2017, after the media reports of 311 staff wrongly telling the public there was no Winter Respite space available. Staff at 311 assured the Ombudsman they were responding accurately to requests. They sent her web links to two Knowledge Bases and told the Ombudsman these were the sources 311 staff relied on to inform the public.
111. On January 5, 2018, we examined the two links: "Extreme Cold Weather Alerts" and "24-Hour Drop-In-Centres." The content included current updates about temporary warming centres, but listed only three Winter Respite sites. One was not in operation in the current year, and the other two had also operated the previous winter. Four of the six open Winter Respite sites were not listed.
112. We contacted SSHA and 311 management that day to inform them of the inaccurate content so they could correct it, and to ask how this problem had occurred.
113. The 311 Director responded the same day and explained this link had been missed when the City updated its website. He assured the Ombudsman the issue was now resolved and that all Knowledge Base content relevant to homelessness issues was now up to date.

### **311 Telephone "Direct Prompt" Option**

114. On January 4, 2018, the Mayor announced "Project Warmth", directing the public to call 311 if they or someone else were in need of shelter.
115. One aspect of Project Warmth involved 311 arranging for a dedicated phone line and a dedicated team to triage, respond to and warm transfer these calls as necessary. 311 added a recorded message so callers could be connected

directly to the dedicated line. Each 311 shift from January 5 to at least February 28, 2018, had two or more staff assigned to that line.

116. Callers to 311 heard a series of recorded messages. The fourth prompt was the direct connection to the Project Warmth line, stating, "If you are seeking shelter for yourself or someone you see on the street, please press 4."
117. We received a complaint that callers had to listen to one minute and 40 seconds of other information before being prompted to access information about shelters and Winter Respite sites. The complainant believed that this was too long, and was concerned that people in need of service might hang up before then. We called on January 16, 2018, confirming the amount of time it took to hear the Project Warmth prompt.
118. The 311 Director told us the triaged voice menu existed before Project Warmth, that the order was based on call volume.<sup>17</sup> The 311 Director said that in urgent circumstances, such as an Extreme Cold Weather Alert, he would consider an interim measure to move up the homelessness prompt.

#### **HOW SSHA COLLECTS AND USES INFORMATION ABOUT WINTER RESPITE SERVICES**

119. SSHA told us that when clients arrive at Winter Respite sites, either by referral from SHARC or Central Intake, or on their own, site staff are required to complete an intake with the client and report it to SSHA.
120. Winter Respite sites provide a low-barrier service. Therefore, the only information they ask people to provide are their names, and if relevant to the space, their gender identification. They do not require ID.
121. Besides collecting this information from clients, Winter Respite sites are required to keep track of occupancy and report it to SSHA. They are also expected to follow the Capacity Management Protocol.
122. Each of the sites we visited conducts intake differently. Some require people to check in by midnight to secure a space for the evening; others allocate spaces around dinnertime. Some do so on a rolling basis throughout the day.
123. Every morning, Winter Respite sites are required to do a 4 a.m. headcount to determine the number of people using a cot or mat. The Winter Respite sites report these headcounts to SSHA, sometimes specifying the number of men, women, transgendered people, couples, pets, people using mobility devices and other details.
124. SSHA does not currently share any of this information with Central Intake, besides the total headcount despite the fact that some Winter Respite sites

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<sup>17</sup> Between January 4 and January 17, 2018 at 8 a.m., 311 received 2,249 calls regarding homelessness.

reserve spaces by gender. If a site's 4 a.m. headcount does not record a person's gender, Central Intake staff might refer someone to that site for a vacancy that is not actually available to them.

125. We learned that in January 2018, SHARC initiated regularly scheduled check-ins with all Winter Respite sites at specified times each day to obtain up-to-date occupancy data. This data assists SHARC in making referrals.
126. SSHA did not share this data with Central Intake until the Ombudsman suggested that it do so.
127. SSHA also told us that they do not currently use detailed Winter Respite site user data for planning, but said they would be reviewing all available program data for analysis in preparation for the 2018-2019 winter season.

#### **OMBUDSMAN TORONTO FINDINGS ABOUT COMMUNICATION OF WINTER RESPITE SERVICES**

128. Our finding with respect to each of the four calls is as follows:

<b>Call</b>	<b>Findings</b>
1) December 26 call to 311	311 gave the caller wrong information
2) December 28 call to Central Intake	No communication error found
3) December 30 call to Central Intake and Better Living Centre	Both Central Intake and Better Living Centre gave the caller wrong information <sup>18</sup>
4) January 1 call to Central Intake	Central Intake gave the caller wrong information

129. The four calls illustrate serious shortcomings in the City's intake and referral system for Winter Respite services.
130. Our Enquiry revealed several problems with the City's internal and public-facing communications about its Winter Respite services.

#### ***INCONSISTENT TERMINOLOGY CAUSES CONFUSION***

131. SSHA uses a wide variety of unclear terminology to refer to the various services it provides for people experiencing homelessness. We found that for each service the City offers, it regularly uses several different terms.

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<sup>18</sup> Despite the BLC staff member's denial that any caller was told the site was full, we find the caller's evidence to be more reliable on this point. The caller was likely to have a better recollection of the call because she was looking for help for a client. She also immediately reported the results of the call to the media.



132. We found at least twelve different terms the City has used this season to refer to Winter Respite sites. Terminology between and within the *Homeless Help* and *Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Usage* webpages was also inconsistent.
133. Unclear terminology leads to confusion about what services are available. Clear and consistent terminology is important because at every point of the process, the people administering these services must understand one another. Staff at Winter Respite sites, Central Intake, SHARC and 311 must all have current and accurate information on what services are available and where, so they can refer people to the most appropriate locations.
134. The public also needs to know what services the City provides. The people using Winter Respite services are not a set, static group. It is not sufficient to assume that people using the services understand the differences among them. Also, people familiar with these services are not the only members of the public who use this information.
135. The responsibility for clearly communicating with the public about City services and for coordinating intake and referral functions lies squarely with the City. It needs to do better.
136. The City should decide on consistent language, define the terminology it uses (both for staff and for the public) and stick to it.

*INFORMATION IS OUTDATED, INACCURATE AND INCONSISTENT*

137. The evidence we gathered in this Enquiry showed that overwhelmingly, information related to Winter Respite services was outdated, inaccurate, and inconsistent.
138. This communication problem has had a critical effect on the delivery of Winter Respite services.

**311 Relied on Incorrect, Obsolete Information**

139. Besides our finding that 311 gave someone asking about Winter Respite sites incorrect information, we also discovered that 311's information about Winter Respite sites was out of date and wrong.
140. It was the Ombudsman who brought this to the City's attention. This raises the question of how many times 311 actually gave incorrect information to callers before updating its Knowledge Base.

### **Central Intake Gave Callers Wrong Information**

141. Our review of the phone calls showed that Central Intake gave incorrect information about Winter Respite services to two people. Again, this finding raises the question of how many other times this happened.
142. Central Intake staff reported that call volume is high and they feel pressure to work fast on calls. They also reported having trouble contacting Winter Respite sites to make referrals, instead choosing to rely on old, second-hand information from colleagues.
143. Staff's response to these circumstances contributed to critical mistakes in two of the calls we reviewed. In both, Central Intake staff did not call the BLC to determine whether it had spaces. Instead, they simply told callers that the BLC was full. One staff member told us she did call, but phone logs showed otherwise. In the other, the staff member could not recall the specific call but had heard that the BLC was full earlier in the day. She said she likely would not have called to confirm it was still full.
144. Central Intake needs accurate and up-to-date information about Winter Respite services if it is going to refer people to them.
145. SSHA should also review whether Central Intake is adequately resourced to perform its role in an effective and fair way.

### **Homeless Help Webpage Lacks Important and Up-to-Date Details**

146. The City told us that its *Homeless Help* webpage was designed and tested with help from people using shelter and/or Winter Respite services. Nevertheless, we found that as more Winter Respite sites became available in 2018, the webpage was increasingly difficult to use as a tool for determining what services were offered and where.
147. It is crucial that the City provide up-to-date, accurate, and clear information to the public on its website.

### **SSHA Should Make Better Use of Data**

148. SSHA needs to better track Winter Respite site use both for real-time use and for future planning. Real-time, accurate tracking of space availability by gender identity or other relevant criteria (such as accessibility needs, family status) would eliminate the need to telephone Winter Respite sites each time a person needs a space. Similar detailed, disaggregated data on Winter Respite site use would assist SSHA in planning future Winter Respite sites and other initiatives to support people experiencing homelessness.

#### *INTAKE AND REFERRAL PROCESS LACKS COORDINATION*

149. The City has not clearly defined the roles of 311, SHARC and Central Intake in the intake and referral process for Winter Respite sites. This led to confusion not only among 311, SHARC and Central Intake and their respective staff, but also for other City staff, Winter Respite site staff, members of the public and the media.
150. We recognize that the Winter Respite site system expanded significantly and quickly this winter season. Regardless, SSHA should have anticipated the need for coordinated intake and referral processes.
151. It is incumbent on the City to ensure that SHARC, Central Intake and 311 work in a co-ordinated way to ensure fair and effective service delivery. Further, the City should clearly inform the public who to call for knowledgeable service and helpful referrals.

#### **STEPS THE CITY HAS TAKEN TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION**

152. Since this Enquiry started, the City has made a number of changes to its communications around Winter Respite services, at our recommendation, and on its own initiative.

#### *FOUR IMMEDIATE CHANGES MADE AT OMBUDSMAN TORONTO'S RECOMMENDATION*

153. When we told 311 that its information was wrong, 311 worked with SSHA to correct and update its SSHA Knowledge Base on January 5, 2018.
154. At our recommendation, on January 14, 2018, the City began daily reporting to the public of occupancy numbers for each individual Winter Respite site, showing both capacity and actual use.
155. As a result of our discussions with SSHA about inconsistent terminology, it developed a "crib sheet" for 311 and Central Intake staff on January 10, 2018.
156. When we learned that SHARC was obtaining occupancy numbers throughout the day from Winter Respite sites, we recommended on January 26, 2018, that SSHA share those numbers with Central Intake. It began to do so.

#### *CHANGES MADE ON THE CITY'S OWN INITIATIVE*

157. On January 4, 2018, SSHA seconded a specialized staff member from Toronto Paramedic Services to address immediate operational challenges. SSHA set up a Divisional Operations Centre to provide structure, coordination and support for Winter Respite staff, as well as staff at Central

Intake and SHARC. The Divisional Operations Centre played a key role in planning and providing logistical support to the various sites.

158. Senior management at SSHA told us they had not decided how long it would leave the Divisions Operations Center running, but said the Winter Respite system must first "stabilize".
159. On January 5, 2018, SSHA also seconded a communications centre expert from Toronto Paramedic Services to address communication challenges. The communications expert told us he was doing a thorough review of all internal and public facing communication, including intake and referral. Again, it was unclear how long this expert would be assisting SSHA.

## **ISSUE 2: CONDITIONS AT WINTER RESPITE SITES**

160. During our Enquiry, we visited nine Winter Respite sites:
  - Yonge and Bloor Site, 21 Park Rd.
  - Downtown East Site, 323 Dundas St. E.
  - Scarborough Site, 705 Progress Ave.
  - Better Living Centre (BLC) Site, 195 Princes' Blvd.
  - Downtown West Site, 25 Augusta Ave.
  - Parkdale Site, Women only, 201 Cowan Ave.
  - Regent Park Site, at 402 Shuter St. (now closed)
  - George Street Site, 354 George St.
  - Annex Site, 348 Davenport Rd.
161. We observed conditions at each site, and reviewed available service agreements between the City and each of the service providers.
162. We spoke with staff at the Winter Respite sites, and with many of the people using them. We also spoke with frontline workers and professionals who work on behalf of people experiencing homelessness about conditions in the Winter Respite sites.

## **WINTER RESPITE SITE LOCATIONS, SERVICES, AMENITIES AND USAGE**

163. As of February 28, 2018, seven of the eight open Winter Respite sites were operated by one of six community agencies:
  - Salvation Army
  - Warden Woods Community Centre
  - Homes First
  - Margaret's Housing and Community Support Services (two sites)
  - St. Felix Centre
  - Fred Victor Centre

164. Some Winter Respite sites were housed in City buildings and others were in buildings leased to the community agencies. Most were staffed by the agency, but one was run by City staff. Other sites that opened and closed earlier in the season were also operated by City staff.

#### *CONTRACTS FOR OPERATION OF WINTER RESPITE SITES*

165. Each of these community agencies has a written contract with the City to provide Winter Respite services.
166. We reviewed these contracts and found notable discrepancies among them.
167. While the contracts outline basic services for each Winter Respite site, they differ in what basic services the City requires of the agency. For example, staff training requirements differ among the contracts. Some contracts provide for numbers of staff required per shift, while others do not.

#### *BUILDINGS AND LOCATIONS*

168. Many of the Winter Respite sites are located within walking distance to local transit. Most are close to local amenities such as coffee shops, libraries and supportive services and agencies.
169. Winter Respite sites located in different types of buildings, some of which had been built for other specific purposes. For example, one building was previously a place of worship. Another was originally a youth detention facility. One Winter Respite site was located in an industrial plaza. Given these varied physical characteristics of individual buildings, the services available among Winter Respite sites also varied.
170. Of the eight Winter Respite sites open as of February 28, 2018, only three had ramps or elevators and accessible toileting facilities. None of the sites, however, had special beds or cots to accommodate people with mobility challenges.
171. SSHA senior management told us that in 2017, its staff along with staff from the City's Real Estate Services and Facilities Management Divisions investigated over 250 possible sites for either Winter Respite or shelter services. These properties belonged to private-market developers, faith-based organizations, school boards, and other levels of government.
172. Their investigation involved determining whether each site had appropriate zoning and planning permissions and conducting environmental assessments and feasibility studies. When they found a suitable site, they attempted to negotiate a lease or purchase. They then sought authorization

approval from City Council. Since December 2017, however, SSHA has delegated authority to lease a viable site.<sup>19</sup>.

173. SSHA told us that of all the sites they visited, 29% had owners who were reluctant to lease their property for use as a Winter Respite site or shelter. Another 29% did not meet requirements under municipal zoning bylaws. A further 21% became unavailable during the time SSHA took to conduct its due diligence. 13% were deemed unsuitable for use.

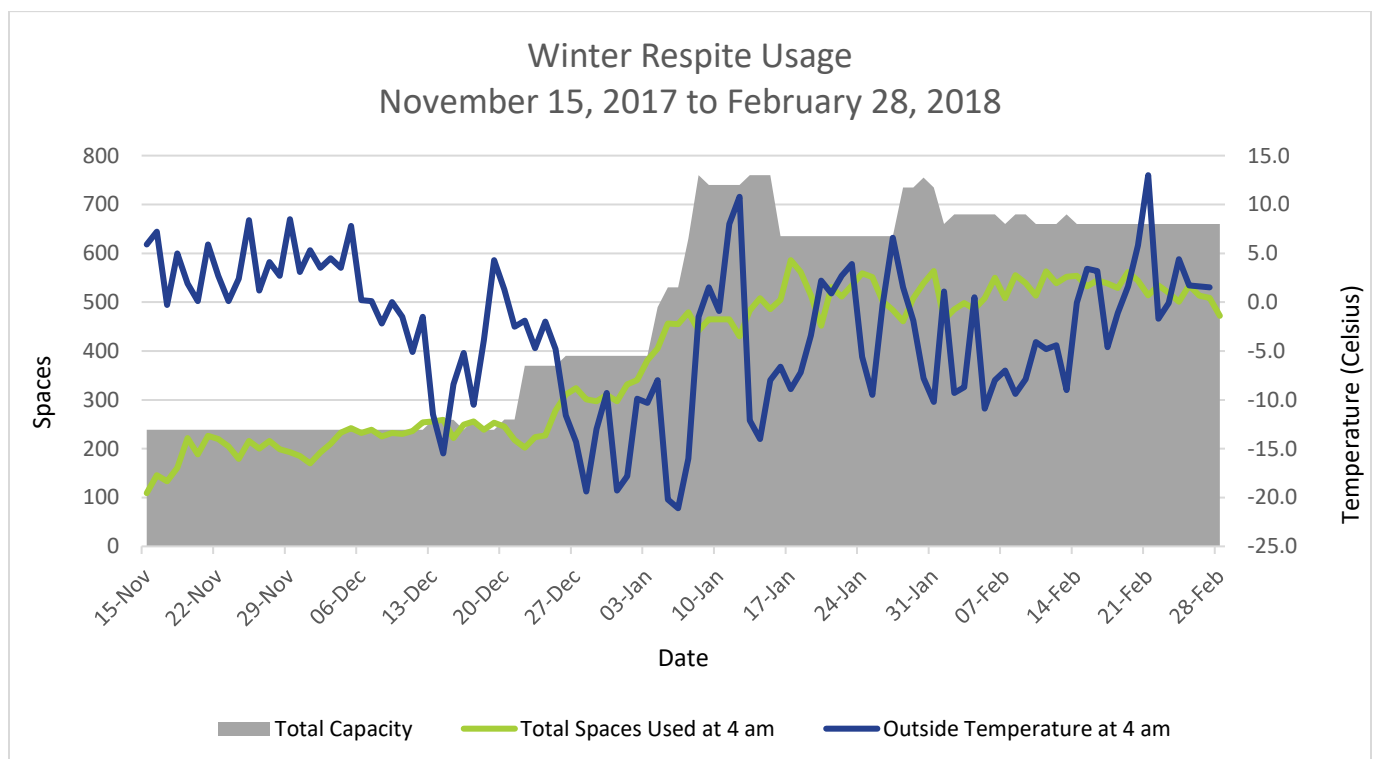
#### *SERVICE AND AMENITIES*

174. Until mid-February, four of the eight Winter Respite sites used cots raised off the floor, while the other four used floor mats. On February 14, 2018, the City delivered cots to three more Winter Respite sites. The City told us that because of day programming requirements, which required the floors to be clear, cots were not suitable for one site.
175. Some Winter Respite sites did not have showers. Others had between one and five showers. Some had laundry facilities on site for staff to wash blankets and towels, and others had to send laundering out. At one, people using the Winter Respite site were able to use the washer and dryer on site to wash their own clothing. Another site had laundry facilities installed for people using the Winter Respite site when we visited in mid-February, but at that time they were not yet operational.
176. The availability of health and housing support services varied among sites. Some scheduled specific times and days during which support workers would come to assist people. Other sites referred people to other facilities for supports.
177. Most locations had some form of security: cameras, a locked front door with a buzzer, or on-site security personnel.
178. Two Winter Respite sites provided locked storage for people's belongings, which could not be accessed without agency staff. The others did not provide locked storage and had different rules about whether people were allowed to keep their belongings by their sleep space. Some allowed people to leave items onsite at their sleep space if they were returning that night, but others required people to take their belongings with them if they were stepping out for more than a moment.

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<sup>19</sup> On December 5, 2017, City Council authorized the Deputy City Manager Cluster A, in consultation with the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, the General Manager, SSHA, the Executive Director, Social Development Finance and Administration, and Director, Real Estate services to approve specific sites.

179. In mid-January, we took temperature readings at one Winter Respite site that was noticeably cold inside. It was approximately -13 degrees Celsius outside. At approximately 7:30 a.m., we measured indoor temperatures at various locations in the site between 11 and 14 degrees Celsius.
180. City staff provided us with statistics about Winter Respite site capacity and use, which we analyzed. Appendix B is a chart showing the Winter Respite sites' opening and closing dates and capacity from November 15, 2017 to February 28, 2018, as reported to SSHA.
181. The graph below shows how overall usage and capacity of Winter Respite sites changed from the beginning of the winter season to February 28, 2018. It also shows daily outside temperatures during that period.



182. There was no clear relationship between temperature and Winter Respite site usage, even during very cold weather.
183. Regardless of the temperature, the graph shows that whenever the City increased Winter Respite site capacity, including through the introduction of new sites, usage increased. In other words, as more spaces were made available, more people used the Winter Respite sites.

## INFORMATION FROM SITE STAFF, PEOPLE USING THE SERVICES AND PROFESSIONALS

184. We asked staff and people using Winter Respite sites about the services and amenities available at each location, as well as their intake practices, protocols, and communication with the City. We asked them about challenges they encountered and how services could be improved.
185. Community agency and City staff told us that the Winter Respite sites are necessary, but are not the solution to housing people experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Most felt the City should provide for more transitional<sup>20</sup> and supportive<sup>21</sup> housing. Some community agencies who met regularly with SSHA told us they felt that the City did not really listen to them or consider their feedback when implementing Winter Respite services.
186. At one Winter Respite site, staff told us in January that the City had not updated signage to reflect its new 24/7 hours. The City also made a last minute decision to change the demographic for one new Winter Respite site to women only. This meant that male staff had already been hired by the community agency running it. Staff there wondered whether the presence of male staff could discourage some women from using the Winter Respite site.
187. At one particular location, community agency staff told us they thought the Winter Respite site was too isolated from public transit and local amenities to properly serve people who might otherwise use it.
188. Almost all staff expressed concern about needing better resources to help people find permanent housing and to respond to their critical health needs. They told us that they wanted more supports available on site: social workers and healthcare professionals, at set hours, to provide the kind of assistance site staff could not.
189. Staff stressed to us that community is important to many people experiencing homelessness, and they want to stay in places that are familiar to them, with the people they know, close to the other community services they access. The people using Winter Respite services told us the same thing.
190. People accessing Winter Respite sites told us that staff were friendly, helpful, and caring. Some had left shelters, or had been barred from them, and found the Winter Respite sites to be a more welcoming service.

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<sup>20</sup> Transitional housing is supportive but temporary accommodation to bridge the gap from homelessness to permanent housing. Supports are provided and the goal is to move towards being permanently housed (elsewhere).

<sup>21</sup> Supportive housing (sometimes "Permanent Supportive Housing") combines housing assistance with support services for people with high needs (disability / substance use etc.).



191. We also met with a number of advocates, as well as health and social work professionals working with people experiencing homelessness.
192. We reviewed reports including Health Providers Against Poverty's *An Evaluation of Toronto's Warming Centres & Winter Response to Homelessness*.<sup>22</sup>
193. We heard repeatedly the view that the conditions at Winter Respite sites were inadequate. Many people asserted that the City should apply its own *Toronto Shelter Standards*<sup>23</sup> to the Winter Respite sites to ensure that they meet people's basic needs.

#### **DEVELOPING STANDARDS FOR WINTER RESPITE SITES**

194. This winter season there were many discussions in the media and public sphere about the need to develop standards for Winter Respite sites.
195. On January 31, 2018, City Council directed SSHA to "immediately develop service and maintenance standards for winter respite drop-ins, 24 hour drop-ins, warming centres and the Out of the Cold programs."
196. By report of February 20, 2018, the Deputy City Manager in consultation with the General Manager of SSHA updated the Community Development and Recreation Committee of City Council (CDRC") on Council's direction to develop standards for Winter Respite sites, 24-hour drop-ins, warming centres and Out of the Cold programs. The report also addressed the feasibility of implementing recommendations in the report from Health Providers Against Poverty.
197. On February 28, 2018, the CDRC moved that, among other things:  
*12. City Council direct the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to utilize the City's existing shelter standards as the basis for the development of the interim standards for 24-hour homeless programs that are not shelters, with an emphasis on ensuring health and safety of service users as the focus of the standards.*  
  
*13. City Council direct the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to develop a communications plan for homeless service providers, drop-ins, service users and the public and make this information public on the City's website by April 30, 2018, with information on the following:*

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<sup>22</sup> Report released January, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Toronto Shelter Standards*, most recent version approved by Toronto City Council in its September 2015 session.

- a. Interim standards for all 24-hour programs that are not a shelter with consideration for programs located in faith-based organizations.*
- b. The consultation process for developing permanent standards for 24-hour homeless programs.*
- c. The transition plan for any respite centre or warming centre spaces that must be relocated and a plan to notify all respite centre users if there are any changes to the services they are currently using.<sup>24</sup>*

198. City Council will consider the February 20, 2018, report and the CDRC's February 28, 2018, motions on March 26, 2018.

## **OMBUDSMAN TORONTO FINDINGS ABOUT CONDITIONS AT WINTER RESPITE SITES**

199. Services offered at Winter Respite sites varied, depending on location, building type, and community agency responsible. This variation is understandable, as Winter Respite services for 2017-18 expanded quickly, in response to demand.
200. The City has not yet established minimum standards for Winter Respites. The absence of carefully considered, appropriate minimum standards raises reasonable concerns about the health, safety, and comfort of people using Winter Respite sites, as well as the health and safety of staff.

### *INCONSISTENCY: LOCATIONS & ACCESSIBILITY, SERVICES OFFERED & STANDARDS*

#### **Winter Respite Site Locations & Accessibility**

201. Only three of the eight Winter Respite sites were accessible for people with mobility challenges. This is unacceptable.
202. Winter Respite site locations were not always close to transit and local amenities. People experiencing homelessness do not only need a warm place to sleep. They need to be connected to their communities and be able to reach the services they need.

#### **Winter Respite Site Services & Standards**

203. The inconsistency of services and amenities available among the Winter Respite sites was immediately obvious. Each of the Winter Respite sites appeared to be doing the best with the resources and funding it had, but the range and quality of services varied greatly.

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<sup>24</sup> Agenda Item History 2018 CD26.5:  
<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2018.CD26.5>.

204. The availability of services for housing and health support differed among the Winter Respite sites. All Winter Respite sites were keen to have the necessary supports, but were not always able to, given their resources.
205. The low barrier nature of Winter Respite sites makes them a more attractive and appropriate option for people who are unable to use traditional shelters. People using Winter Respite sites should be able to access them easily and smoothly, but must still have their basic needs met. SSHA has shelter standards in place for shelter sites, and these standards should be examined for their potential applicability, with necessary modifications, to Winter Respite sites.
206. The Deputy City Manager's February 20, 2018, report to CDRC states that the City will conduct "a comprehensive consultative process over the spring and summer" in developing Winter Respite site standards. The CDRC has requested City Council to direct the Deputy City Manager to make the process public.
207. It is essential that this process include meaningful involvement and input from advocates and professionals working directly with people experiencing homelessness and people using the Winter Respite sites, as well as community partners.
208. As SSHA continues its work on developing this consultation process and the Winter Respite site standards, it should engage, consult, listen to and partner with users and community stakeholders in determining what that process and those standards should be.

#### **STEPS THE CITY TOOK AT OMBUDSMAN TORONTO'S RECOMMENDATION TO IMPROVE WINTER RESPITE SITE CONDITIONS**

##### ***Fixed Temperature***

209. When we informed the City on January 14, 2018, about the unacceptably low temperature we had recorded at one Winter Respite site, it took immediate corrective action in partnership with the site operator. This included providing space heaters, having the boiler repaired and adjusted, inspecting and cleaning all radiators, repairing exterior doors, and recommending further measures to prevent heat loss.
210. To respond to the temperature concern we raised, the City also developed an indoor temperature monitoring protocol for each Winter Respite site. The City provided each site with a thermometer, requiring it to take indoor temperature readings at set times each day. The temperature monitoring form outlines the detrimental effects of low temperatures on health. Under the

new temperature protocol, Winter Respite sites were required to take corrective action if the temperature falls below 18 degrees Celsius.

### ***Improved Amenities***

- 211. At our recommendation, the City also made improvements and repairs to one particular Winter Respite site, in partnership with the site operator. These included plumbing repairs and adding toilet paper dispensers and a second set of washroom doors.
- 212. We also recommended to SSHA staff that they consider steps they could take to immediately improve conditions at each site. The City delivered cots to several Winter Respite sites as a result.

### ***Created Inspection Checklist***

- 213. Also in response to our recommendation for immediate site condition improvement, SSHA developed an inspection checklist in late January 2018 and conducted weekly site visits to ensure Winter Respite sites maintained certain interim standards until more formal standards are in place. The checklist includes general housekeeping concerns, temperature verification, electric issues, fire escape routes, and washroom facility checks.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 214. The end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018 were marked by a tremendous amount of public attention, activity and change in the City's services for people experiencing homelessness.
- 215. City management and staff moved quickly to dramatically expand Winter Respite services to meet a growing demand. This involved a significant commitment and effort by City staff from across the organization, at all levels. We commend them for their work.
- 216. Our Enquiry revealed, however, that the City made a number of serious errors in its internal and public-facing communication of information about these critically important services.
- 217. Further, there was unacceptable inconsistency in the standard of service provided among the various Winter Respite sites. Fairness requires that the City set and maintain a minimum service standard for Winter Respite sites.
- 218. While the quick expansion of service over a short time may help to explain some of these communication errors and site conditions, it does not excuse them. Clear and effective communication of information about Winter Respite

services is the City's responsibility. So is ensuring fair and reasonable conditions at all Winter Respite sites, on a consistent basis.

219. The duty to provide fair service focuses on impact, not effort or good intentions. Besides implementing our recommendations, we urge the City to continue to strive to provide fair service to people experiencing homelessness by continuously seeking to better understand and meet their needs.
220. We would be remiss if we did not comment briefly on the larger context in which the City's Winter Respite services operate. What was originally intended as a "bandaid on a bandaid," in the words of one City Councillor, has become a fixed part of the City's response to homelessness.
221. The steadily increasing number of people accessing services for the homeless in Toronto is a matter of great concern. Many consider the situation to be a crisis. The causes are complex and interrelated, as discussed in our 2017 Enquiry report.
222. Addressing the complex social problem of homelessness is a pressing matter of public policy. As one senior City official put it, "words don't set priorities; funding does."
223. Many voices – of front line workers, advocates, elected officials, people accessing homelessness services and concerned residents – have called for more resources for shelter-related services in Toronto. These include more shelter beds, better conditions and supports at Winter Respite sites, increased staffing and improved systems, policies and procedures.
224. Despite a steady increase in demand for shelter services, SSHA's budget only increased slightly from 2009 to 2017. We are encouraged to see that in 2018, City Council has identified this problem and is taking steps to address it.
225. There is a broad consensus that the City cannot solve homelessness in Toronto alone. Real solutions will require a co-ordinated and integrated response among all three levels of government.
226. We are encouraged by early signs that the City of Toronto is prepared to lead a dialogue and collaborate with the provincial and federal governments, with the goal of reducing and ultimately ending homelessness in Toronto. For this effort to be fair and effective, it is also critical that people experiencing homelessness, front line workers, community agencies and other interested stakeholders all have a voice.

## **OMBUDSMAN TORONTO RECOMMENDATIONS**

227. During the course of our Enquiry, we identified critical service gaps that required immediate correction. Because of their urgent nature, we chose not to wait for the release of our report to make certain recommendations.
228. As detailed above, we made nine recommendations for immediate action by the City to address problems we identified in the areas of communication and Winter Respite site conditions.
229. The City immediately implemented all of these recommendations.
230. In addition to those nine previous recommendations, we add the following:

### ***Clearer Terminology***

1. The City should decide on a clear, descriptive and user-friendly term for each of the different services it provides. It should define each term, and commit to only using these terms. The City should require all staff, as well as its community partners, to use the same language and should do so in all communications.

### ***Defined, Well-Understood Roles***

2. The City should define the roles of 311, SHARC and Central Intake and how they should work together. It should clearly communicate the role of each one to staff, community agencies, stakeholders and the public. The City should develop procedures and staff training to align with these roles.

### ***Information Sharing***

3. The City should develop a system to share up-to-date information with all City organizations that provide information about homelessness services to the public, including 311, SHARC and Central Intake.

### ***Data Collection***

4. The City should improve data collection on Winter Respite site capacity and usage, to make sure it is useful for both operational and future planning purposes. SSHA should assess and address any data gaps preventing staff from making accurate referrals for people experiencing homelessness. They should also assess and address what type of data can best inform future planning to meet the needs of people using these services.

### ***Website Improvement***

5. The City should review and reorganize all homelessness information on its website to meet the needs of all stakeholders requiring this information. It must be updated regularly. All information should either be located in a single, easy to find place, or clearly cross-referenced.

### ***Improving Winter Respite Site Conditions***

6. The City should prioritize its work establishing minimum standards for Winter Respite sites. Until those standards are established, it should continue to assess conditions at each site on an ongoing basis and take steps to work with community partners to improve them in order to best meet users' needs.
7. Once standards are in place, the City should support its community partners who operate Winter Respite sites to ensure they are able to meet them. It should also hold community partners accountable for meeting the standards and develop a mechanism for doing so.

### ***Consulting with Stakeholders***

8. In implementing Recommendations 4, 5, and 6, the City should consult with people using the services, frontline workers, and professionals who work with, and on behalf of, people experiencing homelessness.

### ***Follow up***

9. For a period of one year from the date of this report, SSHA should update the Ombudsman on a quarterly basis regarding all steps taken by the City to improve communications about services for people experiencing homelessness and Winter Respite site conditions.

## **CITY'S RESPONSE TO THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 231. We provided the leaders of SSHA, 311 and the City Manager's Office a confidential draft of this report. We did this to allow them to make representations in response to the draft, as a matter of procedural fairness. We then met with them to receive their comments.
- 232. The City administration accepted all of our findings. They also support and accept our recommendations and have committed to implementing them. They will periodically update us on their progress.
- 233. The City confirmed its acceptance of our findings and recommendations in a March 13, 2018 letter from the General Manager of SSHA and the Director of 311 Toronto to the Ombudsman, attached as Appendix C.

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Susan E. Opler  
Ombudsman



## APPENDIX A: SSHA'S TERMINOLOGY FOR WINTER RESPITE SERVICES

Official Term <sup>25</sup>	Definition According to SSHA	Alternate Terms Used by the City <sup>26</sup>
Winter Respite Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open 24/7 throughout the winter season<sup>27</sup></li> <li>• Clients have access to a mat, cot or chair in a warm place</li> <li>• Clients receive food and drinks</li> <li>• Low barrier</li> <li>• Pet friendly</li> <li>• Services vary depending on location</li> <li>• Don't adhere to shelter standards</li> <li>• Not set-up on SMIS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• winter respite sites</li> <li>• winter service locations</li> <li>• winter respite programs</li> <li>• respite system winter services</li> <li>• cold weather spaces</li> <li>• 24-hour respite drop-ins</li> <li>• 24/7 winter respite service</li> <li>• 24-hour winter respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respite</li> <li>• respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter overnight services</li> </ul>
Shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most are open 24/7</li> <li>• Clients have access to a bed</li> <li>• Clients receive food and drinks</li> <li>• Higher barrier</li> <li>• Generally not pet friendly</li> <li>• Services vary depending on location, but most have case management supports, counsellors and access to housing workers</li> <li>• Must adhere to shelter standards</li> <li>• Set-up on SMIS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emergency shelters</li> <li>• emergency shelter programs</li> <li>• temporary shelter services</li> <li>• shelter services in the permanent system</li> <li>• shelter services</li> </ul>
Warming Centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporary response to emergency situations such as Extreme Cold Weather Alerts coinciding with concern that existing services are insufficient to meet increased demand from homeless people for warm places to go during the day and overnight</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• overnight warming centres</li> <li>• winter respite sites</li> <li>• winter service locations</li> <li>• winter respite programs</li> <li>• respite system winter services</li> <li>• cold weather spaces</li> <li>• 24-hour respite drop-ins</li> <li>• 24/7 winter respite services</li> <li>• 24-hour winter respite drop-ins</li> </ul>

<sup>25</sup> Terms and definitions are from SSHA and refer to the 2017-18 winter season.

<sup>26</sup> These terms were found on the *Homeless Help* webpage, *Daily Overnight and Usage* webpage, the City's Backgrounder on City of Toronto Homelessness Services (February 2, 2018 version), 311 sites (homeless person in need, drop-in centres-winter respite-warming centre-out of the cold) and City of Toronto news releases.

<sup>27</sup> Winter Respite Services were originally planned to be open just for the winter season. On January 31, 2018, City Council directed the Deputy City Manager, SSHA's General Manager, and the Acting Chief Financial Officer to "retain operations of the necessary respite centres, warming centres, and drop-in programs beyond the scheduled April 15, 2018 timeline to respond to the overcrowding in the shelter system."

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to everyone 24/7 for the duration of the response</li> <li>• Provide at the very least, access to a seat in a warm place open overnight</li> <li>• Low barrier</li> <li>• Pet friendly</li> <li>• Services vary depending on circumstances and location</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• winter respites</li> <li>• respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter overnight services</li> </ul>
Drop-ins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warm spaces for people to get out of the cold</li> <li>• Clients have a place to sleep (although not necessarily mats or cots)</li> <li>• Clients receive food and drinks</li> <li>• Pet friendly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24/7 drop-in services for women</li> <li>• drop-in centres</li> <li>• 24/7 Women's drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respite sites</li> <li>• winter service locations</li> <li>• winter respite programs</li> <li>• respite system winter services</li> <li>• cold weather spaces</li> <li>• 24-hour respite drop-ins</li> <li>• 24/7 winter respite services</li> <li>• 24-hour winter respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respites</li> <li>• respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter respite drop-ins</li> <li>• winter overnight services</li> </ul>
Out of the Colds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sites run through a faith-based, volunteer-driven program</li> <li>• Typically operate between November and April</li> <li>• Clients have a place to sleep</li> <li>• Clients receive food and drinks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OOTC overnight</li> <li>• Out of the Cold overnight programs</li> </ul>

**APPENDIX B: WINTER RESPITE SITE CAPACITY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 15, 2017 AND FEBRUARY 28, 2018**

<b>DATE</b>	<b>CHANGE MADE</b>	<b>SITE</b>	<b>CAPACITY</b>	<b>TOTAL CAPACITY</b>
November 15, 2017	Opened	Downtown East	110 (increases to 130 during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts)	<b>239</b>
		Yonge and Bloor	30	
		Scarborough	49	
		Downtown West	50	
December 20, 2017	Opened overnight only	Parkdale Women Only	21	<b>260</b>
December 21, 2017	Opened	Better Living Centre	110	<b>370</b>
December 29, 2017	Opened 24/7	Parkdale Women Only	Still 21 spaces, but now 24/7	<b>370</b>
January 4, 2018	Opened	Regent Park	100	<b>510</b>
	Capacity increased	Better Living Centre	From 110 to 150	
January 6, 2018	Opened	Moss Park Armoury	100	<b>610</b>
January 7, 2018	Capacity increased	Regent Park	From 100 to 180	<b>740</b>
	Capacity increased	Better Living Centre	From 150 to 200	
January 15, 2018	Capacity decreased	Regent Park	From 180 to 75	<b>635</b>
January 27, 2018	Opened	George Street	100	<b>735</b>
January 28, 2018	Opened	Annex	100	<b>735</b>
	Closed	Moss Park Armoury	From 100 to 0	
January 31, 2018	Closed	Regent Park	From 75 to 0	<b>660<sup>28</sup></b>

<sup>28</sup> Note that during Extreme Cold Weather Alerts, Downtown East increases capacity from 110 to 130, which pushes the ongoing capacity up by 20 every time an Extreme Cold Weather Alert is issued. For example, capacity would be listed at 680, rather than 660, during an Extreme Cold Weather Alert.

## APPENDIX C: CITY OF TORONTO'S RESPONSE



Shelter, Support & Housing Administration  
Paul Raftis, General Manager (I)

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Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A9

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March 13, 2018

Ms. Susan Opler  
Ombudsman Toronto  
375 University Avenue, Suite 203  
Toronto, ON M5G 2J5

Dear Ms. Opler:

Thank you for providing both SSHA and 311 Toronto the opportunity to review your draft report headed "*Ombudsman Toronto Enquiry Report on Winter Respite Services: 2017-2018 Season*" and to meet with you to discuss the report in detail.

We appreciate the guidance and assistance provided by Ombudsman Toronto in helping us continue to improve our services for people experiencing homelessness.

We support and accept the findings and recommendations presented in the report and have already started the process of implementing a number of these recommendations.

We look forward to updating your office quarterly as we implement the recommendations and continue our efforts to improve our services.

Thank you again for providing the opportunity to review and provide comments on your draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul Raftis".

Paul Raftis  
General Manager (I)  
Shelter, Support and Housing Administration

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Gary Yorke".

Gary Yorke  
Director, 311 Toronto

