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Toronto

Listening. Investigating. Improving City Services.

Enquiry into City of Toronto Winter Respite Services 2017-2018 Season

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Presentation to Toronto City Council
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Winter Respite Services

- 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.
- They are different from shelters. According to the City, they are “designed to engage and provide service to people with more complex needs who may otherwise not access traditional shelter beds.”



Background

2017 Enquiry

- Last winter, in response to public concern, Ombudsman Toronto reviewed the City's "24 Hour Cold Weather Drop-Ins".
- We recommended that the City:
 - Establish a reasonable maximum capacity for each site, and formalize over-capacity protocols
 - Communicate with the public in response to concerns that there was inadequate space for people experiencing homelessness to get out of the cold
 - Work with researchers conducting a study of one site.
- Our May, 2017 [Enquiry Report](#) is available at ombudsmantoronto.ca/Investigative-Work/Investigative-Reports/Enquiry-Reports



Winter 2017-2018

- We monitored the City's implementation of our recommendations and its planning for this winter season.
- The City's plans included:
 - Extending the season: November 15, 2017 to April 15, 2018
 - Opening 5 sites instead of 3, increasing overall capacity from 160 to 250
 - A new name (Winter Respite Services)
 - Improved communication



Public Concern

- Over the holidays, winter struck hard. Toronto Public Health issued an Extreme Cold Weather Alert which lasted from December 25, 2017, to January 8, 2018.
- Media reported that City staff wrongly told members of the public by phone that Winter Respite sites had no available spaces.
- As temperatures reached record lows, public concern about how the City was providing services to the homeless mounted.



Ombudsman Toronto Enquiry

- We announced our Enquiry on January 2, 2018. It focused on two areas:
- 1) Communication about Winter Respite services
 - What happened during the four reported phone calls where members of the public said the City gave them incorrect information?
 - Was the City's internal and public-facing communication about Winter Respite sites adequate?
- 2) Conditions at Winter Respite sites
 - Was the City fulfilling its stated commitment to provide a "warm, welcoming and safe place" for people experiencing homelessness?



What We Did

- Numerous interviews:
 - SSHA staff
 - Community agency staff at Winter Respite sites
 - People who use Winter Respite services
 - Concerned members of the public
 - Professionals who work with people experiencing homelessness and/or who work on homelessness policy
- Extensive review of policies, protocols, operating agreements, reports from various sources
- Visits to nine Winter Respite sites



Findings: Communication

- Communication about Winter Respite sites was inadequate.
 - 311 did not have accurate information. Neither did the Central Intake call centre.
 - At least three times, staff wrongly told the public there was no space.
 - The City's terminology is inconsistent and confusing. We found at least 12 different names it uses for these services.
 - The roles of the City departments providing information and referral are unclear and they are not co-ordinated.
 - The City's website is unclear about what people should do if they need to use a shelter or Winter Respite site, or want information.



Findings: Site Conditions

- There was vast inconsistency in the service provided at different Winter Respite sites. Conditions at some were unacceptable.
- Examples:
 - Some sites had no showers, while others had between one and five.
 - Most had no ramps, elevators, or accessible toilet facilities.
 - None had beds or cots to accommodate people with mobility challenges.
 - At one site, the indoor temperature was unacceptably low (11 degrees C).



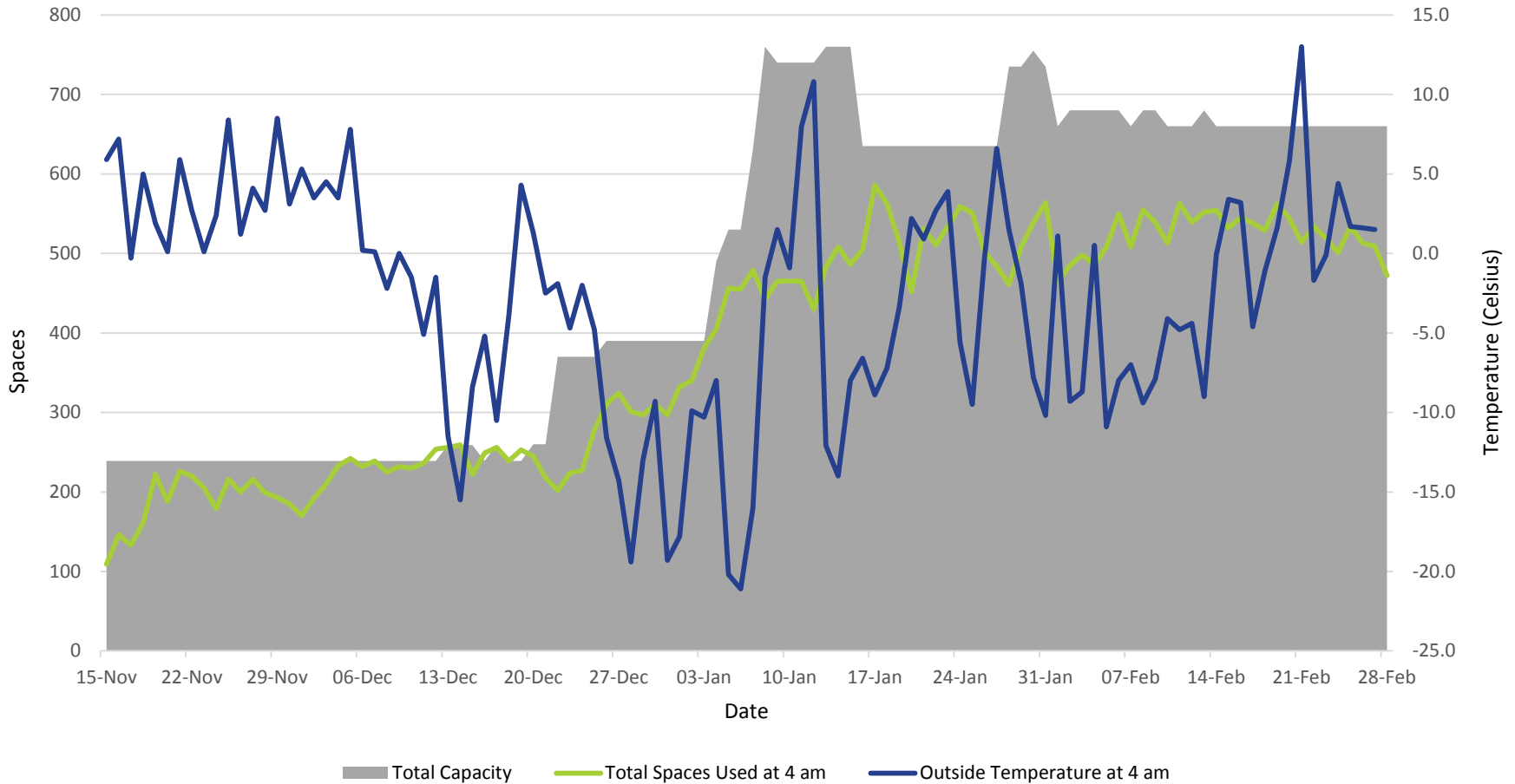
Capacity and Usage Increased Dramatically and Quickly

- Over this winter season, the City expanded Winter Respite capacity from 239 spaces when the season began on November 15 to a maximum of 740 between January 7 and January 15.
- As detailed in Appendix B of the report, the City opened and closed sites many times throughout the winter. The season began with five sites and went as high as ten.
- Capacity as of today at eight sites is 660; occupancy as of 4am was 533.



Winter Respite Usage

November 15, 2017 to February 28, 2018



Immediate Recommendations and Improvements

- Given the urgency of the situation, we made nine recommendations while our Enquiry was still underway.
- The City accepted all of these recommendations and implemented them immediately.
- They included that the City:
 - Correct 311's information
 - Publicly report detailed site occupancy numbers daily
 - Ensure a reasonable minimum temperature and implement regular, ongoing temperature checks at all Winter Respite sites
 - Perform needed repairs and establish an ongoing checklist for housekeeping, electrical, fire safety, and washrooms to be used until the City establishes formal Winter Respite site standards.



Further Recommendations

- Our report contains nine additional recommendations to address our findings.
- They include that the City:
 - Require all staff to use the same terminology
 - Clarify the roles of 311, Central Intake and SHARC (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, as well as with agencies, professionals working on behalf of the homeless and other stakeholders on how to improve the quality of Winter Respite services.



City Administration's Response

- The City has accepted all of our recommendations and has committed to implementing them.
- The General Manager of the Shelter Support, Housing and Administration Division (SSHA) and the Director of 311 Toronto responded as follows:

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.



Follow Up

- Our March 19, 2018 [Enquiry Report](https://ombudsmantoronto.ca/Investigative-Work/Investigative-Reports/Enquiry-Reports) can be accessed at ombudsmantoronto.ca/Investigative-Work/Investigative-Reports/Enquiry-Reports
- From now to March 2019, SSHA will update Ombudsman Toronto on a quarterly basis on all steps the City takes to improve its communications about Winter Respite services and site conditions.



The Broader Context

- The causes of homelessness in Toronto are complex and interrelated. It is a challenge requiring a response from all 3 levels of government. We urge the City to lead this.
- In the meantime, Winter Respite services appear to have become a significant component of the City's response. There is clearly great demand for services of this type.
- As the City works to design minimum standards and ensure that these services meet the needs of some of Toronto's most vulnerable residents, it is critical that people experiencing homelessness, front line workers, community agencies and other interested stakeholders all have a voice.



Acknowledgements

- City staff and management, who:
 - With their community partners, worked extremely hard all winter to provide these important services
 - Provided excellent co-operation throughout the Enquiry
 - Responded immediately to our interim findings and recommendations, and made immediate improvements
 - Accept, support and are in the process of implementing all of our recommendations
- The many other people who provided valuable information for our Enquiry, including people using Winter Respite services, site staff, and professionals working with and on behalf of people experiencing homelessness.



The Ombudsman Toronto Team

- The small Ombudsman Toronto team did top quality work on this Enquiry, in record time.
- This required virtually every member to put aside other things they were working on and dedicate themselves to this project.
- I sincerely thank them - on my own behalf, on Council's behalf and most importantly on behalf of the public - for their dedication and hard work.



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