

The Toronto Drop-in Network (TDIN) represents over 50 drop-ins across Toronto, including drop-ins in the downtown east, such as Margaret's Toronto East Drop-in Centre, Haven, and All Saints. Our members primarily serve Toronto's street-involved and homeless populations, who represent the city's most vulnerable residents.

What is striking about the Downtown East Action Plan is that the vulnerability of street-involved Torontonians is not equitably broached. If the onus of the plan is to promote safety, inclusion, and prosperity among all stakeholders in the Downtown East, this action plan clearly presents biases against those that are street-involved. Ensuring communities where all members thrive means focussing on the safety and well-being of those who face the greatest challenges. However, this plan fails to do so, and instead appears to emphasize responses to "social disorder" at the behest of housed residents and corporate stakeholders who view street-involved people as a liability in the pursuit of economic growth and personal comfort. The concerns of those who have more are grossly imbalanced against those who have less.

In the Downtown East Action Plan, one of the cited Measures of Success for Safe, Inclusive Communities includes increased public awareness of appropriate and available responses for safety issues. On this, the continued, overt fear of people who use drugs, and by extension used harm reduction supplies and paraphernalia, demonstrates a lack of knowledge and the continued stigmatization of drug users within the community. In drop-ins – including ones in which I have personally worked on the front-line – picking up and disposing of used harm reduction supplies is routine, and relatively safe. This plan does not appropriately balance the need for public education and outreach about the real risk of used supplies – including needles – with the co-ordinated efforts of enhanced street-cleaning services. It also continues an "us and them" narrative between people who use drugs and are street-involved and those who are not, and furthermore fosters a disconnect between those who are most vulnerable to overdose, and the inherent value of their lives as human beings and neighbours. Failing to combine rigorous public education as part of the DTE Action Plan exacerbates the 'othering' of those who are greatest risk of death in the overdose crisis – the greatest public health crisis of our time – simply to service those who find drug use 'distasteful'.

The Toronto Drop-in Network also questions the provision of funding to the Downtown Yonge BIA – an organization with the ability to self-fund projects – with \$25,000 to support the Community Engagement Team Pilot. This pilot provides timely responses to incidents of "social disorder" within proximity to the BIA, and to Ryerson University, and acts in participation with both Toronto Police Service's 51 and 52 Division. TDIN questions the value of this pilot in providing active support to street-involved people that does not intersect with the criminal justice system, or support the needs of business over the immediate needs of street-involved people. What is meant by "social disorder"? What "concerns" are responded to, and how? What is the skill set of employees of the pilot? What is their role? Do they move people out of the area? By extension, what are the roles and skill sets of Park Ambassadors? Do they move people from parks? If this is the case, how do these aspects of the DTE plan appropriately create communities that are safe and inclusive for street-involved people? Where is their voice within the action plan, or that of community agencies? It is egregious that the Dundas and Yonge Leadership Table features no input from any community agency – how is this collaborative, or inclusive?

Of course, for TDIN, our work within drop-ins is to create safe, inclusive communities for street-involved Torontonians. Page 10 of the Action Plan states that "safe communities are fostered when individuals are able to access spaces where they feel protected and secure and are able to rely on a



timely, respectful and appropriate response when their safety is compromised.” This is the precise function of drop-ins, and it is enshrined within our best practices. Notably, drop-ins are also an extant service within the Downtown East, as well as within the rest of the city. Indeed, drop-ins like Margaret’s are already there to provide a sanctuary space for people who otherwise are excluded from meaningful participation in any other public spaces – and, by extension, society. Beyond respites and shelters, which function to meet an emergency need – that is, a place to sleep – drop-ins are community-driven spaces in which people choose to go because they feel safe, and where they can build relationships, become connected to services and opportunities, and begin to thrive. We build capacity, as well as increase stability for marginalized people. It is a glaring omission and a disservice to the safety and inclusion of street-involved community members that drop-ins are not a key component of the DTE Action Plan, particularly as resources that are already available and have strong relationships with individual community members, and can and should be expanded upon. If this plan is committed to the livelihood of the street-involved residents of the Downtown East, commit to expanding funding to current drop-ins, to enhancing drop-in staffing and resources, and to opening more drop-in spaces.

The Toronto Drop-in Network itself also has done much to support street-involved folks in the DTE, as well as our members and community partners. This includes developing the Support People on the Streets training module, which was co-developed by – interestingly – the Downtown Yonge BIA, and emphasizes the skills and knowledge necessary to build compassion and relationships between street-involved people and local businesses. We have also developed a guidebook and training on Effectively Supporting People Who Use Crystal Meth. These tools promote positive strategies and build capacity to support people who use drugs without the involvement with the criminal justice system, and emphasize the safety of all parties. It is also a tool that is translated to supporting people with mental health barriers. Finally, TDIN has already taken steps to build partnerships with organizations like the Toronto Public Library to address shared concerns around overdosing, and providing safety, respectful supports, and good responses to street-involved community members. We have already created numerous inroads in the work the DTE Action Plan aims to pursue; yet we are not a key voice in informing the plan.

In summary, the Toronto Drop-in Network deeply questions the commitment of the Downtown East Action Plan to equitably serving area residents, particularly street-involved people who are already subject to scrutiny, biases, and criminalization. This plan effectively does nothing to counteract this, and in fact exacerbates it by promoting the voices of stakeholders like the Downtown Yonge BIA, Ryerson University, and Toronto Police Services. We urge the city to address this imbalance, and in fact commit to increasing funding and resources to drop-ins to build the equity that can and should be inherent to this plan.

Thank you for your time and attention,

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