

December 4, 2020

Item [EC18.6](#) –Central Intake Shelter Access Data Indicators and Trends

To: Councillor Thompson, Chair and Economic and Community Development Committee

Hello Councillors, thank you for this opportunity to speak today. I am a long-time Street Nurse and a Public Affiliate in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University.

Councillor Thompson, I recall a few years back when we sat on the Board of Health together. Bedbugs were a horrific, emerging public health crisis. Community workers did not feel the city was taking the issue seriously so when they came to give deputations to us they brought some bedbugs in a jar to pass around to us. That made the situation seem a bit more real.

Bedbugs, while a horror, pale in comparison to the homelessness disaster amidst this COVID19 pandemic.

For many years city council committees have heard the evidence in our deputations that there are simply not enough shelter beds. City officials always reply – the beds are there. This report shows the error in that statement.

Sadly, we highly skilled professionals who work front line have not been heard and we have had to resort to various means of literally ‘showing you’ as per the bedbug example.

That has included professional photographers and filmmakers shooting footage of:

- a Metro Hall hallway Warming Centre where people seek shelter during an Extreme Cold Alert because shelters are full. Cots are not spaced well. There are no hot meals.

- several 24-hr respites sites that slept 100 people in a congregate setting, again because shelters are full. Crowded cots, noise, lack of privacy can be seen and heard. It shouldn't have taken COVID or the [legal coalition lawsuit](#) against the city to get this capacity down to 43.

- another respite site where people slept on the floor on mats. A photograph shows no doors on the toilets. The Toronto Ombudsman's thermometer recorded a temperature 14C INSIDE and this led to an [Enquiry](#).

- film footage and TV coverage of calls to Central Intake over several years – always with the voice on the other end of the call saying the official outcome ‘no beds available’.

- screenshots of tweets by nurses, social workers and outreach workers who for up to 4 years have shared their frustration with Central Intake's ‘no beds available’ – all sent to the Toronto Ombudsman. Here are some samples:

"I made 14 calls to Central Intake for him over 14.5 hours and he was finally offered one at 4:56 am. It was at Yonge and Steeles."

"A man discharged from the COVID recovery hotel in Etobicoke ended up sleeping on the street, unable to access a shelter bed via Central Intake."

"Couldn't get a woman a safe space today, everything is full."

The situation today is:

- there are over 40 encampments in the city
- over 400 tents
- an estimated 1000-1500 people outside in encampments and not in encampments

Let me be perfectly clear. In a pandemic the only assured safety is one person per room. The 100-bed congregate shelter site at the Better Living Centre is not considered safe by homeless people or by me. Especially, with recognition by public health authorities on aerosolized transmission.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-homeless-shelters-airborne-risk-1.5823896>

Like it or not the encampments are not going anywhere without extraordinary efforts on your behalf.

I support the recommendations of the Shelter and Housing Justice Network.

1. An immediate moratorium on forced evictions of encampment residents and temporary shelters from public spaces.
2. Open at least 2,000 new shelter-hotel rooms in the next four months. This is the only way people will have a safe alternative to living outside in encampments, given that shelters are currently full. For these sites to be successful and truly safe for people: All sites must have overdose prevention services and support on-site that is provided by experienced harm-reduction staff. Half of the sites must be located in the downtown core, to ensure people aren't disconnected from critical services and their communities.
3. Provide services to people in encampments.
Provide \$1 million to community agencies to distribute survival supplies and fire safety equipment to encamped individuals. Ensure people have access to indoor facilities twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week including access to winterized bathrooms and showers for encampments adjacent to City sites.

Sincerely,

Cathy Crowe
cathyacrowe@gmail.com