

# EC18.6.5

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

Date: December 4, 2020

Re: Central Intake Shelter Access Data Indicators and Trends EC18.6

Dear Economic and Community Development Committee:

I am a nurse practitioner and have worked in the Dundas and Sherbourne area with people who are homeless for ten years. Many people in the community I work in are unable to access a safe place to stay. Attempts to reduce overcrowding in response to the pandemic have worsened the shortage of shelter spaces and left few places for people to be indoors. Many existing shelters are unsafe as they exist within congregate settings or lack vital harm reduction services. Despite the shortage of suitable shelter and housing options people in encampments are being harassed and threatened with eviction. Displacing encampment residents and destroying survival equipment will put people at risk of cold injury and death.

Unless immediate action is taken many people will be left in the cold this winter. Shelters and hotel programs are often at capacity, many drop-in programs are closed, the information and referral centre will not see walk-ins and even last resort options for warmth such as coffee shops and restaurants are not open. This summer and fall I experienced more difficulty accessing shelter beds for people in need than ever before. I made several calls to central intake and a shelter space was only available once- at Margaret's Respite Centre, which is now closed.

The 560 shelter spaces the City plans to create this winter are unlikely to meet the need. On many nights all shelters and hotel spaces are full and at any time existing shelter beds may become unavailable due to COVID-19 outbreaks. It is estimated that 1000 people are living outdoors in encampments. The new beds will not be enough to shelter encampment residents should they want to move indoors.

The location of many shelters and hotels are not accessible or safe for many people. Spaces located outside the downtown core remove people from their communities and the healthcare, harm reduction and social supports they depend on for survival. Isolation leads to worse health outcomes, especially for people who depend on the support of friends or supervised consumption sites to use drugs safely.

Toronto Public Health currently recommends that people not have guests indoors, yet many shelter spaces continue to be located in congregate settings. There have been 660 confirmed cases of COVID-19 within the shelter system. Staying in a congregate setting during an infectious disease outbreak is not a safe option.

The City is failing to provide enough safe shelter and housing options. Evicting people from encampments and destroying survival equipment is an act of violence that can result in illness and death, especially when suitable shelter is not available. Encampment residents must be supported not criminalized.

I urge you to pass the following motion for/to:

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 4 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,  
Jessica Hales