

Submission from Dr. A.J. Withers



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:

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to bring this issue to you today.

The Shelter and Housing Justice Network (SHJN) is a collective of homelessness and housing advocates, shelter providers, healthcare professionals, faith leaders, legal workers, and researchers.

The report currently before you from SSHA is inadequate in an emergency and substantively more and urgent action is needed from this Committee.

We support the report's finding that the shelter system is not meeting the need of many of the people who request shelter beds. This parallels the experiences of many of our members and what we have reported to City Council in the past. This report is the first time that SSHA has admitted that there can be insufficient space in the shelter system at times. SSHA reports an average of 38 people turned away from the shelter system a day. We find this number both unsurprising and unacceptable.

It is urgent that this Committee take meaningful action today because of the three crises facing people in encampments: the housing crisis, the opioid poisoning and overdose crisis and the global pandemic.

We support the actions of SSHA to open shelter-hotel beds and many people find these and acceptable. New understandings of COVID-19, however, indicate that congregate sites run by SSHA¹ are unsafe during this pandemic. There must be many more

shelter-hotel sites opened quickly to meet the needs of encampment residents and the many people who are newly homeless.

The forcible eviction of people from encampments puts people's health at risk; this is why it is against the recommendations of the CDC.² Forced decampment also violates basic decency and international human rights law.³

We are calling on you to pass motions today:

1. Enact 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.

This Committee, and City Council later this month, can act to save lives. These three provisions will save lives.

Thank you

Shelter & Housing Justice Network

Cc: Mayor John Tory

Notes:

1. Boisvert, Nick. (2020, December 2). Shared dorms in Toronto shelters put users at risk of airborne COVID-19 transmission, critics warn. *CBC News*.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-homeless-shelters-airborne-risk-1.5823896>
2. Centers for Disease Control. (2018, August 6). *People Experiencing Homelessness*.
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>
3. Farha, L., & Schwan, K. (2020). *A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada*.
<https://www.make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-National-Protocol-for-Homeless-Encampments-in-Canada.pdf>