

DEPUTATION ON 18.6

YUULA BENIVOLSKI

Hi,

Thanks to the Chair and the Committee for having me here today.

I'm part of the encampment support network also known as ESN.

Like many others in ESN I am an artist who is currently out of work. In a normal year despite working full time hours I make under 20,000 a year. Considering Toronto's housing situation this makes living in this city nearly impossible. I'm part of a large arts community in Toronto and many of us are a paycheck away from losing our home.

On Friday we published an Artists' letter against encampment evictions. The letter was signed by over 800 artists and writers, including Michael Snow, Atom Egoyan and Margaret Atwood.

As the letter was being published, on a freezing and rainy Friday afternoon, myself and 2 other volunteers walked through the mud of Alexandra Park, delivering hot drinks and food to people in tents. It was too cold for people to exit their tents, so we walked tent to tent delivering supplies. No park workers or city housing workers were in the park that day. In fact, we've been to the park every single day in the past six months and have only seen city housing workers from Streets 2 Homes a handful of times, and most of those times were in the past 8 weeks, when the weather got colder and people more desperate. This lack of presence of Streets to Homes workers this summer, for weeks at a time, sharpened the lack of trust between encampment residents and S2H, since many people in the encampments waited to be placed in proper indoor situations and expressed feeling abandoned by the city.

Many people don't want to accept the congregate living facility that Streets to Homes currently have on offer for a number of reasons and all of them have to do with their own physical and mental survival.

A few weeks ago I met a parks supervisor who said to me "the city isn't doing enough when they deliver 3 warm meals a day?" I was surprised to hear this misinformation from a city worker because I've never heard of one of them delivering a meal to the parks. Currently people who live in encampments rely on the work and donations of various volunteers for their survival.

This summer I befriended a man in the park who is my father's age. He left a shelter because it wasn't COVID safe and now he lives in a tent. When I asked him how he found himself in this situation he told me about getting really sick and losing his job, losing his family, and home and living in his car for months until it was taken away too. He's never camped before in his life but camping feels safer to him than the shelters right now. We got him a phone and helped him reconnect to his family. I text with him all day. We helped him get a tiny shelter and he said this is the most control he's had over his life in the past 5 years since he became homeless. That's how people respond to the tiny shelters. It means a lock on the door and a space that's entirely yours. When I came home that night after meeting him for the first time I saw that Mayor John Tory posted a photo on his twitter account. In the photo he lays in his cozy bed wearing his famous Raptors jacket and smiles in his sleep. The caption says "As promised, slept in the jacket to provide maximum support to our team tonight." I immediately thought of my new friend sleeping on the cold ground in the park, with shame and anger, over how a man my father's age is being treated in his most vulnerable moment by our city's leaders, whose concerns are completely removed from reality.

We desperately need affordable housing. None of us want to keep having to give people tiny foam tubes to sleep in but we'll keep doing it if there's no other option. It is within your power to declare a moratorium on all evictions and especially encampment evictions. It's a crucial step to take so that those outside who have no other viable options can be supported to survive the winter. You need to either provide people with enough hotel beds immediately or start providing survival gear so that people like me don't have to do this. I spent much of the past 6 months frantically engaged in harm reduction activities as the gap created by the city refusing to support encampments is massive and hard to fill. It is not my job to do this but I can't allow my neighbours to starve or freeze to death.

I'm speaking today because I support the following demands:  
a moratorium on encampment evictions  
2,000 shelter-hotel beds available immediately for the rest of winter  
and survival supplies handed by the city to those who need them.

I call on the Committee to pass motions to ensure these demands are met.

Thank you.