

December 6, 2020

Deputation to Economic and Community Development Committee Meeting Re: Central Intake Shelter Access Data Indicators and Trends

Thank you Councillor Thompson and committee members for this opportunity to share my thoughts.

I am a musician, an urbanist, and for the last four months have been an outreach volunteer with the Encampment Support Network, building relationships with encampment residents, delivering food, water, survival equipment and other supports based on the needs shared with us. My experience doing outreach has given me some important insights into the brutal realities of life for unhoused people, and the tremendous difficulties people face in getting the housing and supports they need. I'd like to share some of these insights, and how they relate to the Central Intake Access System, in hopes of shedding light on how the City could be better assisting people in need.

I'll begin with one person's story. Let's call him Dave. During outreach shifts, I have lent my phone to Dave to make calls to central intake since he was very eager to find a hotel shelter space. After several unsuccessful calls over the course of weeks, Dave finally received a referral for what he was told was "a hotel-like setting". Given only two hours to arrive and claim his spot, Dave hurriedly packed up his essentials and had to leave the rest of his belongings at the camp because of the shelter's 2-bag policy. He arrived at 76 Church Street to discover that he had actually been assigned a shared room with 3 other people. Not what he expected. This situation did not meet Dave's safety or privacy needs and he returned to his encampment the same day.

This is not an uncommon story. Trying to find adequate shelter is a demoralizing experience for most. How likely would you be to keep calling if you were told repeatedly you can't have the shelter you need? What's more, once outreach volunteers like myself leave the encampment, many residents don't have a phone to keep calling back.

Dave's story points to many of the critical issues with central intake at a macro level, and to the City's response to the homelessness crisis writ-large. A few examples:

- There is a major disconnect between people's shelter needs, and the shelter options available from the city. Congregate settings like the Better Living Centre pose a high risk of COVID transmission, and do not give people a basic level of privacy and dignity they deserve.
- SSHA is not reporting on how many people successfully secure a shelter space each day, only how many are referred to a space. I would think that this is the single most important success indicator for central intake.
- A careful look at the staff report before you reveals that a full 61% of calls made specifically to request shelter do not lead to a shelter referral. (See Table 1 in the Appendix for how I arrived at this figure)

- Of the 39% of calls where a referral is made, many do not result in a successful shelter placement. People may not have arrived in time to claim their spot, or perhaps decided not to take the spot once they realize it doesn't fit their needs.
- ESN volunteers have been logging our calls to central intake through October and November and found that 70% of calls resulted in no referral. Of the 30% of calls where a referral was made, only 28% of those resulted in a successful placement. That means only 9% of our calls were truly successful at securing an adequate space for someone.

In light of these insights, I urge this committee to consider different solutions.

- SSHA must devise better outcome indicators that reflect its actual success rate in finding shelter space for those in need
- People need better information about the conditions at the shelter spaces they are being offered, to make informed decisions about their living situation

But most importantly, I am deputing today in solidarity with the Shelter and Housing Justice Network and many others who are demanding:

1. **An immediate moratorium on encampment evictions & a stop to the seizure of tents, foam domes and tiny shelters.** The crisis we are in means encampments will be a reality for a while. We keep hearing from the city that there are no plans for clearings, so it shouldn't be that hard to enact a moratorium. Until then, encampment residents will have to keep living in constant fear of eviction. Their tents and other structures are the only means they currently have of staying warm, and confiscating them is simply inhumane, yet we know it is happening on the ground.
2. **The creation of 2,000 shelter-hotel beds.** Congregate settings just don't cut it. So many people I've met stress the importance of having privacy, a door they can close, a place to leave their belongings. A safe distance from others to remain COVID-free. Really basic things most of us take for granted.
3. **The provision of survival gear and fire safety supplies in encampments.** Council voted in October to allow the provision of survival gear in encampments, but I have yet to hear of a single Park Ambassador or Streets to Homes worker visiting an encampment with anything material to offer people. The City seems to be so concerned with the fire safety of tiny shelters and foam domes, so why not ensure that safety gear is provided?

Thank you for your time and please don't hesitate to get in touch to discuss these proposals further.

Best regards,
Charles Tilden

APPENDIX: ANALYSIS OF CITY DATA

In its [update report](#), SSHA presents a breakdown of calls made to central intake, averaged over a 2-week period (Nov 3-17). The table below summarizes the numbers they present.

The breakdown shows how 22% of calls resulted in a shelter referral, yet no information is given on how many of those referrals led to a shelter space actually being secured. Between this call data and the City's Shelter Management Information System it should be possible to attain a number of shelter beds secured each day, so why does the City not report on this critical metric?

Table 1: Breakdown of Central Intake Calls

Purpose of Call	% of Total Calls	# of Calls
Shelter Requests	57%	176
Referral made	22%	68
Shelter space unavailable	35%	108
Information & Resources	31%	95
No Connection	12%	37
Totally Daily Coded Calls*	100%	308

*An average of 377 calls were made daily, but only 308 were coded so the purpose of the call is known

57% of calls were made specifically to request shelter. Looking only at these calls (excluding lost connections and calls for other info & resources) sheds better light on the reality for those seeking shelter: 61% of these calls result in being told there is no space available.

Table 2: Breakdown of Calls Made Specifically to Request Shelter

Shelter Requests (57% of all calls)	% of Shelter Requests	# of Calls
Referral Made	39%	68
Shelter space unavailable	61%	108
Total Daily Shelter Requests	100%	176

ANALYSIS OF CALLS MADE BY ESN OUTREACHERS

ESN outreach volunteers logged 23 calls made to central intake on behalf of encampment residents wanting shelter in October and November. This small snapshot confirms that the majority of calls (70%) result in being told there is no space available.

Of the 7 calls where a shelter offer was made, only 2 resulted in a successful shelter placement. Offers are often turned down because a congregate setting (e.g. the Better Living Centre) is the only space offered, and many feel safer at an encampment, can remain in their community, and may have better access to their existing services.

ESN's call log also reveals important anecdotal evidence of the central intake system's flaws:

- An encampment resident asking for a couple's room was denied an available space because his partner was not present to confirm at the time of the call. They had already called central intake multiple times, being denied a spot every time, and did not have a phone to keep making calls on their own.
- Callers spent up to 25 minutes on hold waiting for a definitive answer from a case worker
- One encampment resident was offered a space and went so far as to pack up his two bag allowance, leave his camp and travel to what he was told was a "hotel-like setting" only to find out he would have to share his room with several others. He didn't feel safe and returned to his camp. This is not an uncommon story.

Table 3: Sample of Calls to Central Intake by ESN Volunteers

Result of Call	# of Calls	% of total calls
No shelter space available	16	70%
Shelter offered	7	30%
Successful shelter placement	2	9% (or 28% of offers made)
Total calls	23	100%