

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

Date: December 4th, 2020

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

Dear Economic and Community Development Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this urgent issue today.

My name is Les Harper and I am Plains Cree from Saddle Lake First Nation. I was born in Toronto and I have lived here for my entire life. I am a person who has experienced housing insecurity. I work at South Riverdale Community Health Centre as an Indigenous Health Promoter. Since March, I have been doing outreach to the encampments across Toronto, bringing survival supplies and Indigenous medicines to people in the encampments. I have also been working with the Anishnawbe Health COVID testing van, which has been visiting the encampments to provide COVID testing to residents. I would like to note that in my time supporting the Anishnawbe Health COVID testing van, not ONE encampment resident has tested positive. This is proof of the strength and resilience of encampment residents, this is proof that people know what they need, and know how to keep themselves and their communities safe.

I can tell you unequivocally that the COVID pandemic is exacerbating the pre-existing overdose crisis and the ongoing displacement of Indigenous people on Turtle Island. As an Indigenous man who has been fighting for his community his whole life, I tell you that I cannot accept the report presented.

I am writing to say that the report before you is insufficient in an emergency and immediate action is needed. In this report, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration has admitted, for the first time, that people cannot access shelter when they need it. 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.

While many people, weighing their options, find the shelter and shelter-hotel system acceptable, many people experience shelters and shelter-hotels as unsafe. The forcible eviction of people from encampments puts people's health at risk; this is why it is against the [recommendations of the CDC](#). Forced decampment is also a [violation of international human rights law](#).

I am calling on you to pass motions today 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.

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

Miigwetch for this opportunity to speak to the rights of Indigenous Peoples and the obligations of the City of Toronto.

Les Harper, Indigenous Health Promoter
South Riverdale Community Health Centre

Cc: Mayor John Tory