

December 4, 2020

EC18.6.17  
ON BEHALF OF:

# A COALITION OF TEMERTY FACULTY OF MEDICINE STUDENTS

JOHN TORY, MAYOR

ANA BAILÃO, DEPUTY MAYOR

MIKE LAYTON, COUNCILLOR & TORONTO CITY COUNCIL

JANIE ROMOFF, GENERAL MANAGER OF PARKS, FORESTRY AND  
RECREATION

MARY-ANNE BEDARD, GENERAL MANAGER SHELTER SUPPORT HOUSING  
ADMINISTRATION

We are writing this letter as a coalition of medical students from organizations and advocacy groups at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto in solidarity with our unhoused neighbours surviving the pandemic outside, cold and exposed to the elements, in Toronto's encampments. **We are asking you, our city councillors and representatives, to publicly declare a moratorium on encampment evictions.** Furthermore, we ask that you intervene immediately to stop City personnel from seizing basic survival equipment, like Tiny Shelters by Khaleel Seivwright, tents and Foam Doams, and forcibly removing people from public spaces.

Toronto's encampments are a reflection of policy and planning failures to develop affordable housing, compounded by an inadequate and unsafe COVID-19 response strategy for people who are underhoused and homeless. Even before COVID-19, Toronto was in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. A 2018 ACORN Report found that the majority of people living on low-incomes in our city, which include single people living on minimum wage and people receiving the Ontario Disability Support Program Benefit, are paying unaffordable rent (1). Prior to COVID-19, shelters in Toronto operated at close to 100% capacity (2). In the spring and summer of the COVID-19 crisis shelter capacity was substantially reduced (3).

In March 2020, the city created "shelter hotels" as an alternative to crowded congregate shelters where COVID-19 was spreading. However, when shelter hotels or individual rooms are available, they are often located far away from people's support networks and social services, including lifesaving services like safe consumption sites and harm reduction services. As a result, **people are dying in our city's shelter hotels from preventable and reversible overdoses.** A recent report in the Local suggests that at least 5 overdose deaths have occurred in shelter hotels since May, although the city does not keep track of official numbers. Every death is one too many.

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The City's current plans to create new shelter space for the winter does not meet the needs of all those needing shelter. According to the Encampment Support Network, over 1000 people are currently living outside in Toronto. The City's winter plan only creates 560 new beds. The Encampment Support Network as well as the City's own shelter bed tracker suggest that the shelter system is nearly full.

Finding appropriate housing is a priority, and we understand that the City does offer options for people to shelter indoors if they are willing to relocate. However, forced evictions of those who refuse to relocate pose a serious risk to encampment residents' safety and security. People may be forced into congregate settings where they risk contracting COVID-19, or may be stripped of life-saving community and peer support networks. If encampment residents refuse to relocate to a shelter, they may seek out hidden spaces where they are less likely to be evicted, but also less likely to access services, get help in an emergency, and survive safely.

We know already that clearing encampments and depriving people of survival equipment puts them in danger—the City's actions are in direct opposition to the 2018 Ontario Coroner's Inquest into the death of Grant Falkner, and the 2020 UN National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada, both of which recommended that the City allow the provision of survival equipment, supplies, and safety information to people who choose to stay outside instead of accessing City shelter services (4). People living in encampments have a right to choose for themselves where they live and what their 'safest option' is. The City must respect encampment residents' right to self determination as well as their individual needs, circumstances, health supports, social bonds and community of choice.

Forced evictions are also in direct opposition to the advice of public health officials. CDC clearly recommends against the forced clearance of encampments like the ones in the City of Toronto: "Unless individual housing units are available, do not clear encampments during community spread of COVID-19. Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread."

On top of evictions, the City is seizing community-built winter shelters that protect people against the increasingly colder temperatures outside. Tiny Shelters as made by Khaleel Seivwright, foam domes, and tents are life-saving survival gear, and they belong to the encampment residents. Streets to Homes, Park Ambassadors and parks workers should be meaningfully engaging and consulting residents about options that suit their unique needs, not stripping people of their survival gear, shelter and property.

Therefore, we ask you to follow the evidence and recognize the rights of our unhoused neighbours, and declare a moratorium on evictions from encampments until the city has safe shelter options developed in consultation with residents and their advocates. Please demand that City personnel stop all efforts to forcibly remove people from public spaces, destroying their belongings and seizing survival equipment.

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Furthermore, we ask that the funding originally designated to the planned forced removal of residents from encampments be re-allocated towards efforts that will support encampments residents by, for example, providing residents with survival gear, access to sanitation, warm showers, and other supports in consultation with residents. We also ask that the City cease legal actions against organizations created to support encampment residents, such as the Tiny Shelters initiative run by Khaleel Seivwright.

Additionally, we remind you that Toronto is on Dish With One Spoon territory. Many people surviving outside are Indigenous people—a reflection of ongoing colonial violence and oppression. Forcibly displacing Indigenous people from encampments is yet another act of violence and oppression. Indigenous peoples living in Toronto have an inherent right to live on these lands, and to refuse options for re-accommodation that do not meet their needs.

Encampments are a result of the City's failed housing policy and the ongoing neglect of unhoused Toronto residents. Encampments will persist until there is enough adequate, safe, and dignified housing for all Toronto residents.

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### Signed and endorsed by:

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(1) For information on proportion of Toronto residents with affordable housing, see pages 5–6 of the [2018 ACORN report, Affordable for Who?](#)

(2) For information about shelter capacity in Toronto prior to COVID-19, see page 41 of [Chapter 2 of the Toronto Foundation 2019/20 Vital Signs Report](#)

(3) For information about reduction in shelter capacity during COVID-19, see page 29 of [the motion by housing advocacy organizations against the City of Toronto](#)

(4) Correction, December 6th: This sentence originally stated that the 2018 Falkner report recommended that the city provide survival equipment to people in encampments. The [Falkner Report](#) recommends that the City "revise its existing policies to allow the provision of 'survival' equipment and/or supplies (e.g. sleeping bags, fire retardant blankets, safe heat sources) and/or safety information to individuals who stay outside rather than accessing shelter/low-barrier overnight services."

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