

## Toronto's Economic and Community Development Committee meeting

Monday December 7th, 2020

Dear committee members;

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

My name is Kyrsten Howat, I am a social worker at a downtown health clinic.

Thank you for taking the time to listen.

For six years, I've been calling central intake on behalf of clients, and the system is broken. I will be told there are no beds available and to call back in an hour, only to be told again that there are no beds available. Sometimes I'll go on hold for half an hour before anyone gets around to telling me there are no beds available.

- Often when I suggest calling central intake my clients laugh and tell me they'd rather sleep outside than wait for hours to be assigned a mat on a floor somewhere halfway across town. Many of them know people who have died outside in the winter. They know the risks. I am asking you to consider how bad the system must be for them to prefer to take that risk then to deal with the inadequate shelter system
- These challenges are exasperated by the fact, many clients don't have phones to call back and this is more pronounced by the limited number of drop-in spaces available due to the pandemic. It is somewhat absurd that our system for sheltering the homeless requires them to pay phone bills.
- There used to be some assurance that at the very least, I could give them a token to get warm and wait for a bed at 129 Peter St, the referral center, but the city removed this option at the start of the pandemic
- Having to continuously call, and wait on hold for a warm place to sleep while completing the intake every single time; before even being told a bed is available is a dehumanizing, defeating experience. Recently, a client with severe mental health challenges became so frustrated by the experience of calling and not getting a bed he just ended up sleeping in stairwells through the city for a number of nights
- And all this occurs while people from the city's communication department pretend there are no problems and gaslight activists on twitter with inaccurate

messaging. The people trying to save lives are being intentionally thwarted by comms people at the city.

I am asking that the city reopen the assessment and referral center immediately and 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, 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 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.

As things currently stand, people are going to die in our streets. These deaths are preventable and will only occur as a result of choices council makes. If you fail to act then no one here has the standing to feign surprise or sympathy when we start losing community members this winter. You are choosing whether people live or die. Make the right choice. Open the assessment and referral center. Open the beds. Keep people safe. This year, do not wait until we are mourning to take action. We need safe, compassionate, dignified spaces for people to stay now.

Thank you.