

Deputation to Executive Committee, City of Toronto. October 21, 2020

Re: **Executive Committee on Item EX17.1 - (Towards Recovery and Building a Renewed Toronto)**

By Madelyn Webb, Member and Volunteer, CREW Toronto (Community Resilience to Extreme Weather) [www.crewtoronto.ca](http://www.crewtoronto.ca)

Good morning, and thank you for this opportunity to speak.

What would have happened differently, after pandemic lockdown, if a rental high rise in the City had already set up a resident team prepared to help themselves and their neighbours during emergencies?

This is not a rhetorical question. In fact, this did happen, and I would like to share the details of how it came about, the difference it made, and is continuing to make, which neighbourhood was involved and how this might be expanded to other buildings in neighbourhoods.

First of all, the location - St. James Town – is a neighbourhood with the low-income, high rise profile identified in Toronto’s Resilience Strategy as housing the most vulnerable in our City.

After working with the community through 2017 to 2019, CREW Toronto (Community Resilience to Extreme Weather) decided, to focus on one building – 77 Howard Avenue, one block south of Bloor Street East, west of Parliament.

We had met already engaged some of the residents who became our core team, and, with the permission of the private landlord, we began to promote the idea of ‘neighbour helping neighbour’ by setting up in the lobby of the building with a banner asking: “What will you do in the next emergency, such as fire, power outage, or evacuation. “

As several buildings in St James Town had already recently been affected by these types of disasters, such as the fire at 650 Parliament, days long power outages at 240 Wellesley due to a burst pipe, residents were quite receptive and curious as to how they could keep themselves and their families safe.

Long story short, over three months, we were able to recruit 14 volunteers from different floors to become 'floor captains', with the commitment to get to know their neighbours (some already did) and to ask "Would you like us to check on you in case of emergency?" We held a training session on February 1, explaining the project in more detail, what was expected of volunteers, and what resources should be placed in an Emergency Kit. Everyone got to know their fellow residents a bit better. We appreciated that Staff from the Toronto Office of Emergency Management were able to attend, to lend greater credibility to our cause and to hand out some emergency swag.

Once the pandemic and lockdown were declared, we asked ourselves "are we out of business now as everyone knows what an emergency is". Little did we, along with everyone else, realize how much work would go into sustaining a vulnerable community during the difficult months to follow. An almost immediate request came from one of the agencies "Can CREW identify people who need food?" Having set up What's App networks with our volunteers and steering committee we spread the word. A volunteer at 77 Howard to put up posters with our phone number. In 24 hours we identified 40 individuals who needed food. In the next week, we were able to distribute another 40 boxes to hungry people. Our volunteers were 'on the spot' to help with the physical distribution, door to door. During the food outreach, we identified a number of very isolated seniors, some in their nineties, some taking care of disabled spouses whose rehab programs have been cancelled. Realizing the toll of social isolation, we applied for and got funding to purchase tablets, and internet access, to provide seniors with the means to connect electronically with a conversation leader and be part of the Zoom revolution to connect with family and friends.

Here is my message. Emergency Preparedness at the community level is not only doable but essential in these precarious times. Nothing CREW has done was not in the literature about how to help communities prepare for an emergency. Setting up and training volunteers as they do in San Francisco, having electronic networks – such as they have in Sarnia Ontario, are all doable and the cost is modest. We have been astonished at how much such a small amount of preparation as we accomplished with 77 Howard has made such a difference.

I recommend that social service agencies be connected directly with community leaders in our vulnerable communities so that they can 'go where people are' when offices are closed – and provide continuing services to our vulnerable citizens.

CREW's goal is to see a resident led 'neighbour helping neighbour' network set up in every one of the rental high rises in Toronto. We have received amazing support from private foundations to move forward with our work. We hope the City of Toronto will join us to expand these useful networks and build the relationships known as social capital that experts are saying is the real capital needed to survive a pandemic or other emergency.

Thank you for listening.