



**Written Submission to the City of Toronto Executive Committee  
October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020**

**RE: Agenda Item: EX 17.1 “Towards Recovery and Building a Renewed Toronto”**

**Introduction**

Community Living Toronto (CLTO) engaged with the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild (TORR) to examine how the disability sector, and more specifically individuals supported by CLTO are managing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Living Toronto has been a source of support for people with developmental disabilities and their families since 1948. We offer a wide range of services including respite, person-directed planning, employment supports, residential programs, and community-based activities. This project employed an engagement plan where interviews were conducted with individuals living with a developmental disability as a means of gaining valuable insights into their experiences. These insights were then shared with TORR.

**What we heard from people who experience disabilities:**

We interviewed 22 people with developmental disabilities and it was reported they felt that more preventative actions could have been taken by the City of Toronto to ensure the wellbeing of its residents during the pandemic, specifically paying greater attention to the cohort with developmental disabilities.

As with the broader population, one of the most prominent themes was related to feelings of isolation and a lack of mental health supports. Without access to their daily routines outside the home, many individuals felt increased levels of loneliness, only complicating their experience further. Many of the narratives shared show that social isolation has been compounded by fear of the virus and anxiety around personal safety.

Housing has been a major issue for the developmental disability's community for decades. The waiting list for provincially funded supportive housing is decades long. In Toronto alone, over 5000 individuals are waiting for a roof over their head. The lack of supportive housing options and the disproportionate poverty rate among this population has contributed to significant over-representation of people with developmental disabilities on the streets and in the shelter system. What was a housing issue has now mutated into a public-health crisis due to the well-documented dangers of housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that the City of Toronto

is actively seized of this matter, including through a partnership with the federal government on unit creation through the National Housing Strategy (NHS). In keeping with commitments in the strategy to create new units for our population, **we recommend that 10% of all resources allocated through the NHS be earmarked specifically to support people with developmental disabilities.**

Participants highlighted their increased levels of food insecurity during these times. For those that would normally travel to get groceries, they no longer feel safe going long distances to access food. Furthermore, the increased stress of lineups and hygiene make the shopping experience more difficult. Those individuals who were reliant on food banks have also had to go without access to this service as some locations have been shut down. As a result, people are paying more out of pocket for a service that they previously relied on. **The individuals would like to see food banks reopened and additional supports to allow for a safe shopping experience.**

For many of the individuals, continued employment and volunteer positions help with their sense of engagement and belonging in the community. Since the start of the pandemic, most have not been able to return to these positions. The sense of purpose that individuals gained from these roles played a large part in their success, and without it many feel increased levels of boredom and isolation. Individuals are eager to return to their roles and would like the city to direct more funds to businesses that employ individuals with developmental disabilities so that they may feel more supported in their safe return to work. **The individuals who are not currently employed prioritized the need for employment opportunities and skills training for both people with developmental disabilities and employers.**

Many of our services have moved to online. The individuals are eager to participate, however have not been provided with adequate access to technology or proper training. **Participants are recommending that the city provide those receiving supports with access to internet, technology, and the corresponding education to increase engagement and online literacy.** This is a valuable skill that many are going without, and therefore individuals are unable to engage with their supports and participate in programming in a way that is important for their wellbeing.

As indoor interactions are not currently allowed, individuals have resorted to outdoor activities and socializing. In many cases, people noted that these spaces were not accessible based on their physical needs. One of our participants and their parent had the following feedback on access to public spaces:

*“Access to unrestricted recreational programs is necessary to maintain one’s physical and mental health and promotes social inclusion. For people with an intellectual disability who are typically struggling with social isolation already pre-COVID, (higher needs, higher rates of poverty, inaccessible transportation etc.) access to community spaces and recreational centres is extremely important.”*

Further to this, a worry among many was that public bathrooms would not be safe for use and that this would be an issue should they wish to spend time in the outdoors. **An additional recommendation from participants was that the City of Toronto should publish a list of outdoor activities and locations that are accessible to all, and that bathrooms should be a high priority to promote safe outdoor social interactions.**

To ease many of these concerns, our participants recommended creating more plain language information to be shared in the community. While some of the individuals are hearing about COVID-19 responses from family members, others are resorting to news outlets and internet publications. Very few of these are delivered in an accessible way, and as a result some of the individuals are experiencing an “information overload.” The following is feedback from one of our participants and their parent on the importance of accessible communication:

*“Moving forward, to allow [my son or daughter] to participate equitably, the City of Toronto should enforce mandatory training for city staff about augmentative communication methods and devices so that [he/she] can access all city services independently and with dignity. Individuals should not have to rely on paid staff, parents, care givers to access city services because of communication barriers. Currently the City of Toronto offers interpretation services (print and language), hard of hearing or Deaf supports etc. but there is very little knowledge and support for people who must use an augmentative communication system such as visuals and Porlogo to access healthcare and other city services.”*

Those that are interested in getting tested for COVID-19 have highlighted the fact that they do not feel comfortable attending hospitals due to the risk of further infection. For some, these testing centres are not within an area that they could reach without support, and as a result they would need to use a form of transportation with which they are uncomfortable. **To solve this issue, we are recommending that the City of Toronto create mobile testing centres for at-risk communities, such as people with developmental disabilities living in congregate care settings and seniors in retirement homes.**

The idea of using public transportation is frightening to many as they feel that the risk of contamination is high in this unmonitored setting. Additionally, individuals who are planning on using transit are weary as a result of their increased levels of anxiety. Some are concerned that TTC personnel are not adequately trained to support individuals should they need assistance, and that therefore they risk having a negative experience. **To solve this issue, the recommendation is to train these employees to better recognize those in crisis to be able to support these individuals should an issue arise.**

Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), specifically masks, has been difficult for some in our community. Not only is it expensive to purchase these on a regular basis, but there is also the issue of wearing these items for those with medical conditions. Though Community Living Toronto has access to training, supported individuals would like further clarity from the city as to when and how they should be using face coverings. **Furthermore, individuals would like to have access to affordable PPE since the city has mandated the use of masks in public spaces.**

One of the individuals shared the following story about her experience that captures a number of the issues mentioned above:

*My sister goes grocery shopping for me. I really miss my volunteer jobs. I miss seeing my family especially a new great niece that I have not met yet. Usually, I try to be active with friends, family, and volunteering, and I miss that the most. I have not been able to access the food bank, so groceries are more costly for us now. I get vitamins and they are expensive. Also, masks are expensive. My family is helpful in terms of shopping and my brother is a doctor, so I understand about COVID-19 and what to do through him.*

*Distancing is the hardest thing, but I have been doing it. It's a challenging time. I experience anxiety and depression especially at night, but my cat helps a lot.*

*I enjoy painting and have been continuing that to keep busy. I also do some online activities.*

*I would appreciate more money to buy masks, food, and vitamins. If the city supplied masks, that would help. I especially want to return to the food bank both for food and volunteering.”*

## **Recommendations:**

1. Accessible Housing: 10% of all resources allocated through the NHS be earmarked specifically to support people with developmental disabilities.
2. Food Security: All food banks reopened and additional supports to allow for a safe experience.
3. Employment: Employment opportunities and skills training for both people with developmental disabilities and employers.
4. Safe Spaces: The City of Toronto should publish a list of outdoor activities and locations that are accessible to all, and that bathrooms should be a high priority to promote safe outdoor social interactions.
5. Accessible Transportation: Train TTC employees to better recognize those in crisis to be able to support these individuals should an issue arise.
6. Access to affordable PPE.
7. Information from the City shared in plan/accessible language.
8. Access to internet, technology, and the corresponding training.

## **Conclusion**

As we know, people with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and will continue to experience these effects even after the pandemic is over. Hearing the experiences of those who are directly impacted will help our governments and community leaders to respond effectively and plan for rebuilding a city that is inclusive of everyone. We fully endorse the recommendations outlined in the **Community Voices Pave a Way to Recovery Report**.

We would like to thank the City of Toronto, Executive Committee and the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild for the opportunity for people with developmental disabilities to contribute to the report by sharing their experiences and providing recommendations. Community Living

Toronto would be pleased to continue this conversation as a partner in rebuild and recovery efforts.

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