

PH16.8: Addressing Housing and Homelessness Issues in Toronto through Intergovernmental Partnerships

September 22, 2020: Planning and Housing Committee deputation

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Melissa Goldstein and I'm a concerned resident and affordable housing and homelessness advocate. Before I begin, I wanted to congratulate and thank City staff for raising the bar in Toronto for housing and homelessness plans. A real improvement in terms of content, structure and design. It's solid and impressive work, and I appreciate your effort and the comprehensiveness of all the plans and proposals that you're putting in front of us today.

I wanted to use my time today though to address one specific and urgent issue that exists with this 2-document housing and homelessness roadmap. While it's supposed to provide a roadmap for governments to address housing and homelessness challenges now, it doesn't include a realistic plan to ensure that people in encampments survive the winter.

The COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy lists four things that a human rights approach to serving individuals in encampments and shelter spaces requires, but then proposes a solution that is completely unrealistic. The report proposes having enough modular housing and shovel-ready development completed in time for everyone in encampments to have access to permanent housing by winter. With winter TWO MONTHS away, it's obvious that this is physically impossible. Which leaves people in encampments without a safe alternative, and leaves the City without a plan to ensure their safety and survival this winter.

The main reason that people are in encampments right now is that shelters, respites and shelter hotels are full; it's not simply a matter of people avoiding unsafe conditions anymore. Individuals in encampments need access to housing or shelter, and we basically have two months to figure out how we're going to ensure that people don't experience hypothermia and even death in tents in parks this winter.

We have October, November, and then by December it's literally freezing outside pretty much every day, and definitely every night. That's 8 weeks. We are running out of time.

The City needs to develop an 8-week work-plan to move people into housing and shelter between now and November. That plan needs transparent goals and timelines and accountability to meeting those goals, so that by the end of those 8 weeks, everyone currently in encampments will have access to somewhere warm and safe to be.

From what I can see the City only has 3 options:

Option 1. Use funds intended for new shelter spaces to create a rent subsidy program that pre-approves people in encampments for a rent subsidy of up to \$2,500 per month for the next year.

That's significantly less than the cost of a shelter bed or respite cot. To make the subsidy short-term and consistent with the terms of a 1-year lease agreement, people in receipt of a subsidy should be prioritized for the permanently affordable housing that will hopefully have materialized by the end of next year. Having a guaranteed \$2,500 per month will make it relatively easy for people to find a nice market-rate rental unit on the open market, without having to compete with other low-income people for scarce more affordable units.

Option 2. Repeat what the city achieved over the past few months and secure an additional 2,000 hotel rooms in time for people to move in at the beginning of December.

These sites also need to be low barrier, with on-site harm reduction and overdose prevention services, and they need an effective mechanism for ensuring that resident complaints are taken seriously and acted upon quickly, to ensure these spaces remain safe for residents. With tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people at risk of becoming homeless over the next several months due to unpaid rent (as the Toronto Foundation estimates) 2,000 rooms may end up being a fraction of what's needed, but this would be a start.

Option 3. Help people live successfully in encampments.

This would be the opposite approach to what the City has pursued to date: protecting, rather than penalizing people, as the report says. Helping people live successfully in encampments over the winter would involve:

- Calling off the encampment clearings and the harassment by police, by-law officers, and parks ambassadors, which the City must do anyway if it is serious about adopting a human rights approach.
- Opening park facilities so that people can access electricity to power cell phones, heaters, and electric blankets; and so they can access washrooms and running water.
- Providing access to showers and laundry facilities.
- Providing meal access.
- Providing waste collection services.
- Providing winter survival gear, including winter clothing, sleeping bags, tents, tarps, fire safety gear like fire extinguishers and sand.
- Expanding outreach services so people have regular access to support, including healthcare, harm reduction and housing help.

There is a 4th option, of course, and that is to maintain the status quo and force compassionate community volunteers to spend their winter trying to keep people alive by crowdsourcing the basic necessities of life for people, with no help whatsoever from government, while battling police and parks workers who, instead of trying to help, act as just another threat to people's health and safety.

So again, the 4 options are: a rent subsidy program, securing thousands more shelter hotels rooms, help people live successfully in encampments, or leave people to die and hope that well-meaning community members step up and with no resources, do the government's job and manage to keep Torontonians alive.

While I'm hoping you're compassionate enough and have enough pride in our city to realize how shameful it would be if we as a city decided that that last option is an acceptable one, I do realize that months ago you effectively did just that. It was and is heartbreaking and it set a new low for how we treat people in this city. I'm asking you today, to please not make the same mistake again.

Thank you for your time today,

Melissa Goldstein,
Ward 9 resident