

PETITION FEBRUARY 20, 2020

Mayor Tory and City Council: Declare Homelessness An Emergency To Prevent More Deaths And Suffering

This past month there have been eight reported homeless deaths in the City of Toronto. The City has failed to shelter the most vulnerable. All seven Respite Centres are full, the two 24-hour women's drop-ins and the Out of the Cold program are overcapacity on many nights. The Assessment and Referral Centre on Peter Street is unable to operate as a referral centre as there are insufficient beds in the system. Instead, fifty people sleep in chairs there each night. They are the lucky ones. Hundreds upon hundreds of people are forced to sleep outside due to failed shelter and housing policies. They are in grave danger. Their precarious situation has been exacerbated by the onslaught of an early winter leaving them completely exposed and vulnerable. A walk through the city confirms what front-line workers are telling us: there have never been this many people sleeping in our streets and parks before. The number of beds the City plans to bring on-line will not be sufficient to accommodate those in need. Furthermore, during an Extreme Cold Weather Alert there is only one Warming Centre that sleeps 50 people for the entire City. In order to prevent more deaths and suffering we request that you enact the City of Toronto Emergency Plan immediately.

WHY THE CITY OF TORONTO EMERGENCY PLAN IS THE ONLY RESPONSE

The aim of the City of Toronto Emergency Plan is to provide the framework for extraordinary arrangements and measures that can be taken to protect the health, safety and welfare of the inhabitants of the City of Toronto. It would allow the Mayor to:

1. Make a formal statement declaring that homelessness and the social housing situation are an emergency necessitating immediate action.
2. Request help from the Federal and Provincial governments for funding and resources necessary to deal with this deadly crisis.
3. Establish an Emergency Task Force from relevant departments at the City, including Public Health; Shelter, Support and Housing Administration; Emergency Management; Real Estate; Parks, Forestry and Recreation; for the purpose of resolving issues related to the crisis.
4. Create a Building Team from all three levels of government that would identify vacant buildings owned by the City, Federal and Provincial governments that can be used to immediately shelter the hundreds who are homeless.
5. Redeploy staff from various City departments to implement the decisions of the Emergency Task Force and to provide support at respite sites, warming centres, and overnight drop-ins.
6. Invite the Red Cross to assist with emergency respite and warming centre operations, as they did in the winter of 2017-2018.
7. Move the only Warming Centre that currently operates in a hallway at Metro Hall, to a more accessible and spacious site.

8. Create four to six additional Warming Centres throughout Toronto that would allow people to easily access them.
9. Improve the safety and health outcomes in all Respite Centres that have 100 or more people staying in them by reducing capacity by one third.
10. Fast track a 4th Sprung Structure.
11. Implement the recommendations of the Faulkner Inquest, including the distribution of survival equipment and supplies (sleeping bags, fire retardant blankets, safe heat sources) to people who are living outside. Tents must be added to this list. Fund additional outreach teams to distribute these items.
12. Impose a moratorium on evictions of people living in all public spaces, including parks, ravines, and encampments.
13. Impose a moratorium on the removal of all encampments.
14. Create an emergency rent supplement program to prioritize the housing of vulnerable people including seniors and those with disabilities.
15. Allow the Building Team to devise and implement a strategy for the creation of 2,000 permanent shelter beds.
16. Allow the Building Team to devise and implement a five-year strategy for the building of transitional, supportive and rent-geared-to-income (RGI) social housing.
17. Expropriate buildings, left unused and vacant by owners, for immediate conversion to RGI social housing such as single room dwellings or transitional housing.
18. Extend the timeframe of all emergency shelters and Respite Centres so they operate year-round.
19. Create one hundred beds to replace those lost when the Out of the Cold program shuts down in April.

Background:

- According to Toronto Public Health statistics there are approximately two homeless deaths a week in the City of Toronto. This number is considered low, as hospitals do not participate in the information gathering.
- Eight deaths were recorded over a four-week period October-November, 2019.
- Currently there are hundreds and hundreds of people who are forced to sleep outside. Front-line workers have never seen the situation so severe.
- Tent communities are now popping up in places where they have never been seen before.
- The City has a seasonal response to homelessness. Beginning in November it expands the emergency component of the shelter system, and then contracts it in the spring. This response does not acknowledge that homelessness is 365 days a year, and leaves people on the streets for seven months of the year.
- The City's response avoids creating real solutions to homelessness such as building transitional, supportive, RGI and social housing, and permanent shelters.
- Over 7,000 men, women and children remain in crowded emergency shelters and overflow motel programs. They are full.
- Between 700 and 1,000 people are forced to sleep year-round in Respite Centres and two overnight drop-ins for women. They are full.

- In winter the faith-based and volunteer run Out of the Cold program provides additional relief with 700 spaces per week. They are full.
- Only one 24-hr warming centre (50 cots), located in a hallway at Metro Hall, opens during Extreme Cold Alerts for the entire city.
- Respite Centres and the Out of the Cold program do not comply with shelter standards. People sleep inches apart in overcrowded facilities. These conditions lead to frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases, lice and bedbugs. The poor conditions, extreme stress and chronic exhaustion experienced in these facilities are causing illness.
- The City's Assessment and Referral Centre on Peter Street has had fifty people a night sleeping in chairs and has turned people away because the system is full.
- The City is issuing eviction notices to people who are visibly squatting outside.
- Over 100,000 households are on Toronto's Centralized Waiting List for social housing. The waiting list ranges from two to fourteen years depending on unit size. Another 14,000 people await supportive housing.
- "Renovictions" rise as landlords take advantage of a 1.1 per cent rental vacancy rate.
- Research shows that 2,000 new shelter beds are required to bring shelter capacity to 90% and to end the reliance on overnight drop-ins and respites for basic shelter.

This is a human social welfare disaster.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL EMERGENCY RESPONSES

The Province of Ontario Emergency Response Plan defines an emergency as "... a situation, or impending situation that constitutes a danger of major proportions that could result in serious harm to persons or substantial damage to property or other health risk". It goes on to say that "These situations could threaten public safety, public health, the environment, property, critical infrastructure and economic stability." It is clear to us that Toronto's homelessness situation meets several of these criteria

The Government of Canada's Emergency Management Act states, "A government institution may not respond to a provincial emergency unless the government of the province requests assistance or there is an agreement with the province that requires or permits the assistance."

THE SHELTER AND HOUSING JUSTICE NETWORK

The Shelter and Housing Justice Network (SHJN) is an experienced group of frontline workers, health providers, faith groups, advocates, community leaders and organizations.

We believe that homelessness needs to be declared as a state of emergency in the City of Toronto. We have witnessed homelessness increase in recent years and the municipal response has proved to be totally inadequate. Lives are at stake.

SHJN can be reached at:
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