

From:
17 Paton Road TRSS and TTHAP Focus Group 2020
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To:
Toronto Planning and Housing Committee
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Acronyms:

AMR	Average Market Rent
BG	Bridging Grant
COHB	Canada-Ontario-Housing Benefit
FB	Furniture Bank
FUS	Follow-up Supports
HA	Housing Allowance
MCSS	Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
MLTSD	Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
ODSP	Ontario Disability Support Program
OW	Ontario Works
SSHA	Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
TRSS	Toronto Relocation Support Services
TTHAP	Toronto Transitional Housing Allowance Program
VT	Voluntary Trusteeship

Re: **Review of Toronto housing allowance programs**

Dear Deputy Mayor and Councillor Bailão, Chair of Planning and Housing Committee,
Dear Councillors Bradford, Fletcher, Nunziata, Perks and Wong-Tam,

We are concerned by what is happening with the review of housing allowances. We are writing to urge you towards a critical lens and action.

We are four of the twenty former residents of 17 Paton Road who had to relocate upon an unexpected order from the City to evacuate our building in March 2020, in spite of the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. Most of us went through extreme stress with our housing searches and the cumbersome

TTHAP application process as we struggled to vacate the building by September 1, 2020. It is on the basis of this trauma, at the time extensively shared with and heard by our Deputy Mayor Bailão, that the review was triggered. Since then, we have negotiated a written Shared Understanding with SSHA, participated in a focus group (January 2021) to outline our experience in an effort to provide a clear impression of the reality of the TTHAP application process, and offered a model for a deep but simple overhaul of all housing allowance programs which we made sure was justified, supported, and endorsed by front-line organizations around us.

At this point, we feel that the review is on a track that might not lead to timely and significant changes. We have exhausted our volunteering resources on this topic and have been dealing with a series of side-effects of our relocation, but we want to offer the humble few following thoughts for your critical lens.

Timing

We understand that the long-time City consultant Joy Connelly who is hired for the review has until mid-November 2021 to hand in her final report. This is past the moment when this City usually releases its winter shelter plan and it breaks our hearts that we could go through a second winter since the review was triggered. Of course, we recognize that housing allowances can keep some housed and save some lives, but, nearly everything governing these allowances, from their eligibility criteria, to their application and renewal process is opaque, too complicated and ultimately disempowering for clients. Their potential is barely used and they offer no long-term housing security. Is this how you want another winter?

Lived experience behind the review

The motion that you passed to trigger the review asks that it focuses on clients' experience. It turns out that we four TTHAP recipients will be the only clients that this review will have heard. All other contributions from lived experienced will come from 3 reports from 2018 and 2019 (see 1 below) and they will be limited to a total 36 individuals (see 2), 21 of them originally houseless, one a refugee, mother of four children, and 14 relocated tenants from redeveloped residential hotels. Given that SSHA budgeted for 7,100 housing allowances for 2021, with the goal to offer 1,1440 more, this seems of very limited scope, both in number and experience.

Some important voices will be missing, including those of encampment and shelter residents whom the City has approached for new housing, and those of participants in the new EPIC program. Also, the current target populations of allowances is most probably very different from the ones in 2017 and 2018. Will this review discuss if and how the rule that required homeless people to be "chronically homeless" (ie. homeless for 6 months) still applies in the current housing crisis and sociopolitical climate? And if not, will it discuss how it should evolve?

Social assistance

What will be sorely missing as well is specific contributions by social assistance recipients. As a reminder, OW recipients are provided with \$733/month and ODSP recipients \$1,169/month, which does not even cover Toronto's AMR for bachelors. When recipients earn money, half of their earnings are clawed back by OW and ODSP past the low threshold of \$200. Every rent raise is felt like a double raise.

Social assistance is currently taking a sharp turn under a tight collaboration between MCSS and MLTSD and so-called co-design with departments of municipalities responsible for social assistance and employment services delivery (please note that no voices from lived experience are included). The OW Act has been changed so that recipients will be “prescribed” to participate in “life stabilization” activities and services meant to make them more employable. Recipients will be monitored for their progress and, possibly threatened to lose their benefits. SSHA managers and General Manager Tom Azouz might be co-designing regulations at this very moment. Since social assistance rates are not raised and this City has been extremely shy to ask for raises, even in its most recent motion, while housing is one of the most pressing issues among recipients, we are going towards a new type of pressing context for all housing supports. To address this new context with meaningful changes of our allowance programs and of COHB, you would need data and focus groups of recipients willing to analyze their experience and the barriers they encounter. Especially, we would need a focus on how eligibility criteria and the process to apply for housing allowances currently are barriers in themselves.

Concept and application process as barrier

Little space is given in the 3 reports on how the concept and application process for housing allowances are fraught and counter-productive, probably because the goals set for these studies were wider and in a context with more housing vacancy and, according to our reading of participants quotes, with less burnt out housing workers and with landlords way more prone to trust government programs.

The counter-productivity of the application process has, however, been our expressed focus and, thus, we feel a heavy responsibility.

Up until recently we were in regular collaboration with SSHA as specified in our Shared Understanding with them. We took this very seriously and felt happy to stand up to our responsibility. Lately however, for reasons unknown to us (and that we hope have nothing to do with the silencing of the agency of lived experience), SSHA mistakenly did not respect their promise to give us the opportunity to review Joy Connelly's draft report on our focus group and they refused our request that she integrates the edits we volunteered. This type of significant disconnect is something that the displaced tenants of 17 Paton Road already experienced with the Building Department during our relocation.

We thus turn to you:

Please understand that “[Recommendations from 17 Paton Road on the Toronto Housing Allowance Program](#)”, by Joy Connelly and Jamilla Mohamud does not faithfully represent our model for change.

Please consult:

- our one pager of recommendations (attached)
- [our review of Joe Connelly's report](#).

We hope that this letter will inspire you and trigger action on your side.

Thank you for your attention and thank you for all your work,
Claude Wittmann, on behalf of the 17 Paton Road Focus Group

1) Writings on which Joy Connelly's final review will be extracted:

[Recommendations from 17 Paton Road on the Toronto Housing Allowance Program](#) (2021)
by Joy Connelly and Jamilla Mohamud (2021)

[Review of this report by the 17 Paton Road Focus group](#) (attachment to Joe's report)

[Coordinated Access to Housing and Supports Evaluation: Final Evaluation Report](#)
by Joy Connelly and Emily Paradis (2019)

[Tenant Relocation Support Services Program: Final Evaluation Report](#)
by Emily Paradis and Joy Connelly (2018)

[A Pathway Out of Poverty: The City of Toronto's Housing Allowance Program - A Review](#)
by SHS Consulting (2018)

2) Lived experience informing Joy Connelly's review:

4 artists **relocated** from 17 Paton Road between March 10, 2021 and September 1, 2021. 2 found their housing on their own and Woodgreen Community Services helped them get the Bridging Grant and TTHAP. One at serious risk of homelessness by July was offered a market-rent unit in a TCHC building and TTHAP. The offer came from SSHA and Woodgreen Community Services facilitated TTHAP. The last tenant abandoned the TTHAP process out of stress and went to live with family. These artists are the 17 Paton Road Focus Group which met with Joe Connelly on January 24, 2021.

19 clients of the CAHS pilot project. This project ran from Jan 2017 to Oct 2018 to support households to **exit homelessness** through coordinated access to HA, BG, FUS, FB and VT. 5000 referrals were made to more than 3,500 households.

3 recipients of HAs in 2017, interviewed in a focus group facilitated by SHS Consulting. SHS's work covered more than 4,089 recipients of TTHAP at the time + 448 recipients of a smaller program of HA funded by the Social Infrastructure Fund. For their data collection, they called more than 3,000 recipients and spoke to 206 of them, but this data as they explain on page 218 of their report left serious gaps and it is only during the focus groups with staff and individuals with lived experience that they could address participants' experience of the application and renewal process for housing allowances. The interviewees were: one from **homeless** population with disability, one who had been **homeless** for 20 years before receiving the HA, the last a refugee and mother of 4 children.

14 tenants relocated from 4 redeveloped residential hotels by TRSS in 2017. This study focused on **rooming house tenants** only.

17 Paton Road Focus Group one-pager of its 8 recommendations about housing allowances and benefits

- 1) Applicants get their final *entitlement* for a specified amount of allowance/benefit before they start looking for a place. The entitlement then serves as proof of income for landlords. In process, this means that applicants are tested on identity and income, but they do not need an address, do not need to know what their future rent will be, do not need the signature of a landlord for their application to be fully processed. No test on rent. No rent cut-off.
- 2) The programs are conceived and funded so that the allowance/benefit amounts secure housing without compromising food and basic needs security.
- 3) Applicants are supported to budget their choice of housing independently from their applications for the allowance/benefit. Because housing allowance/benefit programs push people into tenancies that they can't afford, applicants should be offered support to assess risk and budget their future. That support however cannot come in the guise of rent cut-offs that limit eligibility. It comes as clear support, in a second phase, when applicants know how much allowance/benefit they are entitled to.
- 4) Housing allowance/benefit programs do not replace the building of more social housing stock.
- 5) The rules of access to the programs and our local priority rules of urgent access to social housing are revised to increase access and avoid homelessness.
- 6) Housing allowance/benefit programs secure responsive and long-term housing as bridges towards social housing.
 - a) If income decreases, allowance/benefit amount increases.
 - b) Yearly reviews are conceived with housing security as top priority.
 - c) Recipients are promised an RGI unit for when their program will end.
 - d) COHB recipients are not taken off the Centralized Waiting List.
- 7) Decision making is local, closer to the reality of applicants, and is significantly streamlined.
 - a) The City reclaims full decision authority from the Province.
 - b) The City considers hiring staff to process all applications directly.
 - c) Proof of Canadian Status is relaxed to include a guarantor's signature, OHIP and ON ID cards
 - d) Individuals are given the option to give consent that their Canada Revenue Agency account be consulted to check their income instead of filing their tax return and providing proof of income.
- 8) The programs are bi-annually reviewed from the client's experience and data is shared with the public.

Link to original 8–pager rationale and reality check (October 2020):

http://claudewittmann.ca/FIRE/attachments%20FIRE/CW_Requests%20for%20SSHA_2020.pdf

Link to list of endorsements (updated very regularly)

<http://claudewittmann.ca/FIRE/attachments%20FIRE/Endorsements.pdf>

Link to comparative research (February 2021):

<http://claudewittmann.ca/FIRE/TTHAP5.html>

This comparative research was done in collaboration with consultant Simon Beck, with the goal to see if housing allowance and benefit programs can be accepted as the future of social housing in Toronto. The conclusion is that these programs are only pale and misleading shadows of the rent-gear-to-income housing that our City built at a speed of 3,900 units/year between 1965 and 1995. We need social housing again and until then, we need housing allowances and benefits to function as a stop-gap measure that actually serves their clients.