

Letter from Jonathan Robart, Right to Housing in Toronto



March 25, 2021

Economic and Community Development Committee

EC20.3 – Toronto Rent Bank and Eviction Prevention in the Community Programs - Update

Dear Members of the Economic and Community Development Committee

We are writing on behalf of the Right to Housing in Toronto (R2HTO), a coalition of organizations and individuals working to support the implementation of the human right to housing by the City of Toronto.

The City's work on eviction prevention continues to move in the right direction. This work is a key step towards the City's commitment to the progressive realization of the right to housing. We are writing today in support of the proposed program changes to the Toronto Rent Bank program. These changes further align this program with human rights-based principles that demand evictions based on rental arrears not occur without a full exploration of means to resolve outstanding debt including the provision of financial assistance. We are also writing to urge this Committee to recommend that all loans made by the Rent Bank from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic be converted to grants.

As adequate and affordable housing becomes more and more unattainable for residents of Toronto, the risk of evictions has increased and threatens to continue destabilizing the lives of tenants and entire communities across the City. The COVID-19 pandemic has only compounded this risk and, with the lifting of the most recent province-wide eviction moratorium, the urgency for addressing the eviction crisis is mounting and requires continued action from the City. R2HTO echoes the recommendations under consideration today which request the province and federal governments to step up their efforts to address the mounting eviction and unaffordable housing crisis.

With the above in mind, R2HTO has the following recommendations for this Committee.

We urge this Committee and City Council to fully support the EPIC program expansion efforts described in the General Manager, SSHA's update report. R2HTO released an Evictions Rights Review towards the end of 2020.¹ While completing this Review, we had the opportunity to speak directly with frontline community legal workers and tenant advocacy organizations. During these conversations we heard directly from these stakeholders that changes to the EPIC program are needed to make this program more accessible. Specifically, these frontline stakeholders urged the City to make access to the EPIC program more flexible by ending the policy that only permits access through a referral network. In the absence of this change, the City must broaden the referral network for the EPIC program immediately. We also heard that better communication from the City regarding what types of help are available from the EPIC program and who is eligible to receive this help is necessary. Steps can be taken to address the above concern by fully supporting the proposed enhancement to outreach efforts around the EPIC program, as described in the General Manager, SSHA's update report. We also urge the City to prioritize the meaningful engagement of tenants and communities most affected by the eviction crisis when further considering ways to expand outreach and communication efforts.

Eviction from one's home has serious consequences for an individual's dignity, health and well-being and housing stability. As such, eviction is a violation of the human right to housing that should only occur as an absolute last resort and only after a meaningful exploration of all alternatives.

As always, R2HTO is available to the City as is helpful to discuss how best to adapt and expand their eviction prevention efforts and we will monitor progress to ensure these measures are implemented using a human rights-based approach.

Thank you,

On Behalf of the Right to Housing Toronto (R2HTO)

¹ <https://right2housingto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Evictions-Rights-Review-R2HTO.pdf>