

TO: Economic and Community Development Committee

DATE: October 21, 2021



**RE: EC25.6 2022 Shelter Infrastructure Plan, Community Engagement Review and Amendments to Contracts and Purchase Orders to Support Shelter Services**

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Sonja Nerad. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Toronto Shelter Network, more commonly known as the TSN and I am here today in support of the recommendations in today's Staff Report for Item EC25.6. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The TSN represents 35 organizations that collectively deliver Toronto's 24 hour emergency homelessness services, including shelters, respite centres, 24-hour drop-ins and the COVID-19 shelter hotels. We have a dual mandate. We enhance the collective capacity of homelessness service providers in Toronto to deliver the highest quality services possible and champion access to housing that enables people experiencing homelessness to live with dignity. We have been deeply involved in initiatives that will move our system to one that is client centered and housing focused, most recently the development of the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan.

A year ago, in our deputation to the Planning and Housing Committee we endorsed the Housing and People Action Plan and the COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy as frameworks for the City's work on housing and homelessness because we believed that these will help us to leverage our experience with COVID-19 and make the shift from sheltering people to helping people secure and retain housing that is affordable and dignified.

Looking back, the scope of the transformation undertaken by the emergency homelessness sector is staggering with more than 48 new social distancing programs opened to keep people safe, and many of these are operated in shelter hotels. For more than 19 months emergency homelessness service providers have been working tirelessly to implement this rapid and significant emergency response to protect and shelter people experiencing homelessness. During this time we have witnessed the promise of shelter hotels and single occupancy shelter programming. For the most part, people who have moved to the hotels are exceedingly grateful for what they refer to as their new homes, a place where they have their own washroom and privacy. Earlier this year TSN undertook a study called Meeting Crisis with Opportunity to document the impact of the pandemic on emergency homelessness service users and service providers. We consulted with 240 shelter users who identified the transition to single occupancy rooms as the most significant positive outcome of the pandemic. We encourage the City to take the measures necessary to ensure that no one moves back from hotel to shelter.

We do believe the recommendations presented in the Staff Report will provide necessary service continuity during this period of continued crisis and a strong emergency response to meet the needs of those who require shelter. Further, putting in place a plan for service continuity will enable us to be intentional in our COVID-19

Transition and Relocation planning. As spelled out in the Staff Report the timelines to transition the COVID-19 response programs will depend on the availability of new affordable and supportive housing developments, ongoing demand for shelter services and future changes to physical distancing public health guidance for congregate living settings. Approving the recommendations in the Staff Report will ensure that that in the immediate term people who need shelter will have that support.

Further, by taking this step, we will be in a better position to build back better. We will have time, stability and most importantly leadership – these are critical success factors for complex and large scale change needed to move towards the goals laid out in the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan, the Housing and People Action Plan and the COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy. And on the ground, appropriate timelines will be available to support shelter residents to achieve the best possible housing outcomes.

In considering these recommendations we would like to emphasize our belief that all people should live with dignity. We believe that we need to lift up the successes and gains achieved during the pandemic, that we are obliged to look internally to the data and evidence about homelessness in our City and externally to the learnings of other jurisdictions to deliver on our promise at TSN and the promises spelled out in the City's vision of ending homelessness.

As the Street Needs Assessment data shows, people who experience homelessness are incredibly diverse. As we move forward to operate current services and develop new strategies, we urge the City to continue addressing anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism and the unique needs of youth, women, seniors, LGBTQ2+ community members and refugees. Doing so will help us to implement services and recovery plans that are appropriate, relevant and safe. Doing so will also be important as we begin to repurpose shelters and facilities that may no longer be viable in the context of COVID-19 to create a robust housing continuum that provides a range of options and flexible service models for all people.

To achieve ultimate success here, we cannot stress enough how essential it is that SSHA work in true collaboration with those who deliver services on the ground and with those who use services. When we look at jurisdictions, such as Chicago, where prior to COVID-19, homelessness had dropped to its lowest point in more than a decade, true progress towards ending homelessness was made because diverse stakeholder groups came together across competing personal or organizational interests in pursuit of a singular and shared goal. We are encouraged by the partnership that we developed with SSHA during the pandemic. We are asking to be considered equal partners, working collaboratively with the City and other colleagues to develop and operationalize the Transition and Relocation Plan.

In closing the TSN looks forward to having a seat at the table and being a part of the solution. Thank you for hearing us today.



Sonja Nerad  
Interim Executive Director,

Toronto Shelter Network