
TO: Economic and Community Development Committee

DATE: March 24, 2022



RE: EC28.9 COVID-19 Shelter Transition and Relocation Plan Update

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Sonja Nerad. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Toronto Shelter Network, the TSN. I am here today in support of the recommendations in today's Staff Report for Item EC28.9. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The TSN represents 34 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.

The recommendations presented in the Staff Report, namely to extend leases and licences for 12 Temporary Shelter Sites will provide necessary shelter and service continuity for more than 3,000 of the city's most marginalized residents. Approval of these extensions and related recommendations means that people who need shelter will have this support, and also ensures that we will not see encampments returning to parks throughout the city. Approving these extensions also gives us time to create rethink our current approaches to homelessness and create client centered and housing focused options for people using the emergency shelter system.

Over the past year, TSN has conducted research and convened planning tables to identify how best to recover and transition from the pandemic. In your consideration of the Transition and Relocation Plan we would like to emphasize what we heard from both shelter residents and from service providers.

First, we cannot move people back to congregate settings. Single occupancy rooms provide people with basic dignity and a sacred space of their own – factors that are fundamental to healing and to moving forward in stabilizing their lives.

But, we do not have to go backward. The City of Toronto has long been a champion of progressive and innovative policy and programming. We support recommendations to continue advocacy efforts with other levels of government. However, we want to see these investments used differently. We are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on emergency shelter programs that, to the best of all our intentions are not moving people out of homelessness. Unless we do things differently the number of people entering and staying in the emergency shelter system will continue to increase as eviction controls, affordable housing come to an end and as our borders fully reopen to refugees.

The same financial investments used today on our emergency shelter system can be reallocated to reduce homelessness. A good number of shelter residents can get back on their feet with some time and support. Shelter providers are eager to train up their staff and redesign their facilities to offer programs that better facilitate resident's access to employment, training, health and housing. And for those people who are chronic users of shelters, people who have experienced deep trauma and violence and live with mental health challenges, addiction and an increasingly toxic drug supply and in a continuous state of poverty, we have an opportunity to design and deliver housing that offer robust primary care, mental health, and harm reduction and addiction treatment services and supports.

Toronto can not only learn from other jurisdictions – we can lead the way by repurposing our shelters and facilities to create a robust housing continuum that provides dignified space, deep supports and services that meet diverse people's needs.

Finally, homelessness is a bigger than anyone of us. We value working collaboratively with service providers, residents, the City and other colleagues towards this vision.

Thank you for hearing us today.

