



TO: Economic and Community Development Committee

DATE: Thursday, March 24, 2022

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

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH). The TAEH is a network of partners reaching across the city, all united in the vision of homelessness being rare, brief, and non-recurring in Toronto. We also serve as your non-Indigenous Community Advisory Board, and co-chair the Toronto Housing and Homelessness Service Planning Forum with the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration.

As you are all aware, the issue before us today is a critical opportunity to address the increasing emergency that homelessness is in our city. We all know how bad it is, and the staff report for this item correctly identifies the growing complexities involved and the inevitable rise in the number of people at risk of homelessness as the longer-term effects of this pandemic take hold.

You will hear different points of view, stressing different nuances, from deputants working in the housing and homelessness sector today. The one thing we all have in common, however, is a commitment to reducing and ending homelessness. In the absence of enough appropriate and deeply affordable housing and support services, the TAEH agrees that we must keep the shelter hotels open as outlined in today's report.

Ideally the hotel programs will continue to provide services to people until each person is matched to housing and any necessary supports so that we do not send anyone back to even more precarious environments – dormitory-style shelters, encampments, the street.

Extending the hotel leases through April 2023 is a good start. During this time, the City and community housing and service providers can continue to work to increase available housing options, and we can collectively continue to advocate for the additional funding needed from other orders of government to build more housing and create more housing allowances and rent supplements. The news earlier this week that the federal government will extend their Rapid Housing Initiative for an additional year is one opportunity to do so. If we find that we need more time after April 2023 before closing all the hotel programs the TAEH will be back to advocate for keeping what is needed open until every resident finds a good home.

We must also use this time, as is recommended in today's report, to truly dig into what we have learned during COVID-19 to improve and even redesign how we deliver emergency and housing services to people experiencing homelessness. To that end, the TAEH encourages you and your fellow Councillors to note the following key points:

- Any and all actions regarding the hotel programs must uphold the Right to Housing. This is a commitment of the City of Toronto and the Principle of Non-Regression inherent in the human right to housing dictates that any degradation of a person's shelter is a violation of that right.
- It is generally understood that the hotel programs have provided a more dignified and healthy experience for people. Their ability to offer a higher level of integrated on-site supports (health, harm-reduction etc.) has resulted in many people remaining in one place for greater lengths of time than they ever have before. This is a critical lesson of the hotel programs and has created significant stabilization for many people who have experienced chronic homelessness, and/or cycled in and out of various shelters and housing for years and years.
- It is clear from every provider in the sector that people currently living in the hotels are thus – rightly – not going to go back to the overcrowded dormitory style shelters of the pre-pandemic era. Nor do the providers think they should. There is unanimous consent in the sector that the previous shelter model is unacceptable. To that end, the Alliance is pleased to see the recommendations in today's report NOT to do so.

Making sure that this will not happen is one reason why it is important to extend the hotel leases. We all need the time to transition the system first so that people find better environments than before, not degraded ones.

- The call for a more robust City role in funding and delivering additional, deep-enough, income side supports to access housing – made previously by TAEH and others – is again underscored in this report. We simply must have additional housing allowances and rent supplements to allow people in the hotel programs that are ready to afford housing.

We will continue to advocate to the Province and federal government for additional resources, but the City must also do more. Toronto must lead by example, demonstrating in turn that income-side supports work and modelling for other governments the increased return on investment they provide.

In conclusion, the TAEH supports today's report and its recommendations and urges you to pass them. If we do not keep the hotel programs open, 1000s of people will be returning to our parks and streets. Their human right to housing will be further degraded, and they will be at greater risk. We will not have the time to create better shelter environments informed by what works in the hotels and other lessons of the pandemic and grounded in housing-focused services and solutions to homelessness.

Thank you,

Kira Heineck, Executive Director
kira.heineck@taeh.ca