

Joe Cressy, Chair
Board of Health
City of Toronto



January 17th, 2022

Dear Dr. Eileen de Villa and members of the Board of Health

Re: HL33.3 Response to COVID-19

I am a Street Nurse who has been working full-time with people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic and have seen firsthand how the City's response to COVID-19 has affected people living in shelters and in encampments.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many front-line workers have been concerned about how COVID-19 would impact the shelter system and the resources that many unhoused people rely on. We know that people who are homeless are more likely to become infected, become hospitalized and subsequently die from COVID-19. Now with the increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant, it is crucial that the City provide more support to the homelessness sector.

Many people who are unhoused often live with chronic health conditions as a result of inadequate housing options and difficult access to healthcare and social supports. Furthermore, there has been an unprecedented amount of deaths of shelter residents this year and an increase in fatal overdoses made worse by the pandemic. Despite this grim reality, we have also continued to see people violently displaced from encampments causing further harm and instability in people's lives when more support is needed.

Many of the unhoused clients I work with have informed me that they do not feel safe living in a congregate setting. They tell me that mask policies are not properly enforced, vaccine clinics are difficult to access, if told about them at all, confirmed or suspected COVID-19 positive cases are not moved to an isolation space and that mass, onsite testing is not being done to ensure that more people are not infected with COVID-19. As well, it has been very difficult trying to access a shelter bed, which is especially dire now that the cold weather is here. People calling to find a shelter bed are often on hold for over an hour only to be told that there is no bed available.

I acknowledge that the City recently announced that they are going to provide N95 masks to shelter residents, increase access to rapid antigen tests and will open two more emergency respite sites to provide additional space for people who need a bed indoors. However, with 50 shelters currently in outbreak, and 401 active COVID-19 cases among shelter residents and staff, we need more safety measures.

We need to ensure that there are enough recovery spaces with health supports as needed for everyone who needs to isolate from COVID-19 while extending the leases on the existing shelter-hotels. We need to ensure that all shelters have high quality air filters in place for proper ventilation. We need to expand overdose prevention programs, training and response within shelters. We need to ensure that shelters have access to timely, onsite PCR testing when an outbreak is suspected and have more transparency on protocols when a shelter is in outbreak. We need more clear information and more support for unhoused people to access vaccine clinics in the community. We need an immediate moratorium on encampment evictions by repealing the "no camping" bylaw. And we need to implement the 2022 Winter Plan as laid out by Shelter and Housing Justice Network.

We are in a crisis and need to act quickly, lives depend on it.

-Roxie Danielson, RN, Street Nurse