



Deputation to Budget Committee

Item BV2.1 – Public Presentations on the 2023 Capital and Operating Budgets

January 17, 18th, 2023

Susan Bender, Manager, Toronto Drop in Network

Residents of the City of Toronto learned a lot during the pandemic. We learned that neighbours will come together to help out neighbours – mutual aid pods sprung up everywhere. We learned that many Torontonians have a deep commitment to taking care of each other and defending each other's rights to physical, mental, and social safety as demonstrated by the huge mobilization of people and resources to support our neighbours in tents in encampments.

We also learned that when city staff and politicians sit down with community members, groups and organizations, when you truly listen and respect the on-the-ground information being shared with you and then you mobilize all the resources you can access, truly transformative and life-saving things happen. Remember all the food security initiatives, the success of community based vaccine clinics. Community wellness, social inclusion, and safety were best safeguarded by community efforts in partnership with city staff and funded by all 3 levels of government. People powered these solutions. Not the police.

We need similar commitment and funding to community-based solutions now, or the inequities that also became so glaringly obvious during the pandemic will become even more deeply entrenched.

The most important piece of any budget is adequate funding for the people who are the backbone of all the critical, community services and programs the City funds. The tireless work of staff and managers across the city, in very difficult circumstances, throughout the pandemic, was recognized in part by both the Provincial and SSHA's pandemic pay top-up programs. These programs were short-term. Community

organizations continue to struggle to recruit and to keep staff. And staff continue to struggle to make ends meet: Working multiple jobs; travelling long distances from housing they can afford to their workplaces. Wages have not kept up with the cost of living.

Constant under-valuing of care work and those who do it continues to result in chronic government under-funding. Who is doing this work? In drop-ins, in shelters, as street outreach workers, staff are predominantly Black, people of colour, women, and a growing number are people with lived experience, often referred to as peers.

I am pleased and encouraged to see that the SSHA budget includes funding to work towards wage parity between staff in directly operated shelters and purchase of service shelters operated by community partners. I urge the Committee and Council to request similar plans for the housing and homelessness sector as a whole from SSHA and the Housing Secretariat and to allocate resources to ensure that we can attract and keep staff AND start to address deep inequities in wages and benefits in this sector.

Staff not only run day to day services that help meet people's basic needs, they also build the long-term relationships with individuals that support safety in the program space and in the wider community; relationships that can lead to better health, access to housing options, and integration into work and community. We need good staff and we need them to stay.

I believe that City staff understand this crisis and the urgent need for redress. The recent Open Call for funding by SSHA and the Housing Secretariat encouraged applicants to submit budgets with the **real** cost of their programs, including wages and benefits. However, very few of the organizations that applied and that TDIN surveyed actually received the full amount they requested. Some organizations lost staff, either because of funding cuts or reductions or because of the instability of funding drove staff to find jobs elsewhere. The on-going cycle of recruitment and on-boarding costs organizations a lot of money. The impact on community programs and the people who use them is immeasurable.

The City of Toronto already requires that wages paid to workers on City contracts meet the requirements of the Fair Wage Policy. City budgets should build in a similar approach to raise the floor of wages for staff working in the community organizations that the City relies on to deliver housing and homelessness programs. Take this step now to begin to address the human resources crisis that is threatening the sustainability and the success of community-based programs. It is worth it.

There are different options for establishing a floor for wages in the not-for-profit, community sector. Here are two to begin the discussion:

1. The \$4 / hour pandemic pay top up is a good indication of what is needed to build more equity and to stabilize the housing and homelessness sector. For some staff, this amount represents an increase of more than 20%.
2. TDIN members who were applying for SSHA/HS funding met together to support applications to the Open Call. They agreed that wages and benefits should not fall below the pay rate for an analogous position within the Association of Community Centres.