

March 29 2023

Toronto City Council

Sent via email - [councilmeeting@toronto.ca](mailto:councilmeeting@toronto.ca)



**RE: CC5.3 - Ombudsman Toronto Report: Investigation into the City's Processes for Clearing Encampments in 2021**

Dear Deputy Mayor and Members of Council,

I am writing today to express the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness' (TAEH) support for the Ombudsman Toronto's report detailing the investigation into the City's approach, including processes for clearing, to encampments of people experiencing homelessness.

The TAEH and our partners, making up most of the housing and homelessness service providers in the city, work collectively towards homelessness being rare, brief, and non-recurring in Toronto. We also serve as your non-Indigenous Community Advisory Board for housing and homelessness issues.

The report is a strong document that resonates with many people and service providers involved in the encampments, both in 2021, and since. It includes many excellent recommendations that the Alliance expects the City to implement. To that end, we are pleased to see the March 15, 2023 letter from the City Manager committing to do so.

This letter highlights what we see as its key recommendations below. Before turning to them, however, it is important to state clearly that the recommendation to suspend future encampment evictions, which we had hoped to see, is missing from this report.

In May 2021, after the first attempt to clear the encampment at Lamport Stadium, the TAEH released a [public statement](#) calling for a stay on evictions and advocating for a person-centered, human rights and housing first response instead. We wrote: "Until all options have been exhausted, grounded in human rights-based engagement with the people in encampments, no more evictions can take place."

We remain committed to this position, believing that the Ombudsman's report only reinforces the serious deficits of encampment evictions and urge you again today to add a stay on evictions to the direction you approve at this Council meeting in regards to Item CC5.3.

Priority recommendations we strongly support in the Ombudsman's report include:

1. **Recommendations 20 – 22 to build on the successes and learnings from the Dufferin Grove Park Model** in order to truly make it the "blueprint" for the City's approach to encampments as described by a senior City official in the report.

Critically, this means allocating the financial resources needed to support the enhanced, housing-first and people-centered approach delivered in Dufferin Grove Park. As part of the Dufferin Grove Encampment Working Group, I was intimately involved in the development and execution of this initiative and saw the difference that investing more in Streets To Homes outreach work and including an on-site resource center, open every day, to coordinate access to all the different types of supports from mental health to tax and identification services that people need made. In many

cases, it was the first time that outreach workers felt they had the time and resources to do their jobs properly, and the time to build trusting relationships with people in the encampments.

During the last city election, many members of Council signed the [TAEH Pledge to End Homelessness](#). One of its commitments is to *increase financial resources to making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring, including increasing City budget allocations to properly fund the City divisions and community agencies responsible for housing and homelessness services to deliver fully on existing and new strategies.*

The story that the Ombudsman's report tells, and the solution it offers in recommending a Dufferin Grove Park based approach, makes it clear that the time for stepping up investments is now. These investments are also needed to ensure that this deeper approach is scaled up across the city, ensuring equitable access to the services, supports and better outcomes it delivers to everyone experiencing homelessness in Toronto.

- 2. Recommendations 1 – 3 to formalize an inter-divisional Encampment Working Group**, drawing from the SPIDER and Dufferin Grove Park models, and that it be led by expertise that is grounded in a human rights approach and in first-hand experience in working with people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity.

The wide range of experiences of people living in encampments, including those that were cleared in 2021, and well-documented in this report, support the City's approach to encampments be moved to this type of leadership. One that can marshal all the City's expertise and resources in delivering services such as housing and mental health supports and increase the coordination, collaboration and information sharing required to understand encampments, and the people living in them, in a holistic, fair way and not simply as an emergency event.

The Alliance strongly supports these recommendations to go forward with an inter-divisional table to create and deliver a new approach, and to implement the recommendations in the Ombudsman's report.

- 3. All recommendations promoting a human-rights based approach.** The City of Toronto must prioritize its commitment to housing as a human right and do what is necessary to progressively realize that right for all people in Toronto.

This is of course directly related to ***Item DM.5 - Review and Consideration for a Housing Commissioner Role or Function at Ombudsman Toronto*** – also before you at this Council meeting. The TAEH strongly urges City Council and staff to implement its actions with intentional care to ensure its ability to support improved outcomes in this area, including:

- Develop a strong mandate for the new Council Advisory Committee focused on a human-rights based approach, as recommended by the City Manager re Item EX34.7 in July, 2022, to support as expansive a role in monitoring and informing the City's progress in realizing the right to housing in, but not limited to, delivering the Housing TO Action Plan, supports and services to people experiencing homelessness and the commitments in Toronto's Housing Charter.
- Ensure that the make-up of this Advisory Committee be of people with lived experience and those with first-hand expertise in working with people experiencing homelessness.

- Be transparent in the process of setting up this Committee and create clear and communicated accountability mechanisms to support its integrity.

In conclusion, the reality that the Ombudsman's report clearly reinforces is a dangerous, unfair one for people experiencing homelessness, a disempowering one for City staff committed to a housing first, supportive approach, and a difficult one for city government to tackle alone as much of the permanent, housing-based solutions to homelessness require increased cooperation and investment from other orders of government.

TAEH recognizes all of this, and will continue to work with the City, and advocate to the provincial and federal governments to fulfil their urgently needed roles as well.

Decisions on how to respond to encampments of Toronto's most vulnerable, at-risk people, however, are fully in your hands as City Councillors. We urge you to use this power to stop evictions, and to invest more deeply in the approaches that eliminate the need for encampments over time through human-rights based, housing and health, including mental health, solutions.

Sincerely,



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#### **TAEH Steering Committee**

Canadian Mental Health Association, Toronto  
Community Living Toronto  
COTA  
Covenant House Toronto  
Dixon Hall Neighbourhood Services  
Fife House  
Fred Victor Centre  
Homes First Society

Houselink & Mainstay Community Housing  
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