

To the members of the Economic and Community Development Committee,

Toronto is a winter city, and warming centres are essential infrastructure for the thousands of unsheltered people who call our city home.

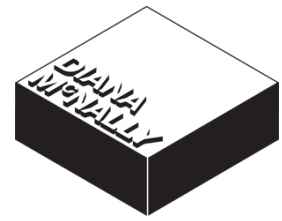
An important acknowledgement of the Review of Policies and Procedures Related to Warming Centres is that -15°C is inadequate as a minimum temperature to trigger the opening of warming centres. Revising the criteria to -5°C is a vast improvement, although medical professionals advised a minimum temperature of 0°C to stave off health concerns such as trench foot. It's also an improvement that dangerous conditions involving winter precipitation, e.g., freezing rain, will trigger the opening of warming centres, although their opening should precede the onset of inclement weather.

Despite recognizing that the criteria to open warming centres must be revised for health reasons, the Review removes warming centres from the purview of Toronto Public Health. This is extremely problematic: emergency weather conditions and their impact on the population health of unhoused Torontonians is absolutely a public health issue, and therefore should not be the sole purview of the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration. If issues arise, these should be discussed by the Board of Health – and not just the impacts of the cold, but of exposure in general.

Indeed, people in our city die of exposure every year. Toronto is a winter city, but it also experiences extreme heat during the summer months: we are a city of temperature extremes that, for people without housing, can have profound, even deadly impacts on their health. For this reason, emphasis must be placed on opening all-year, 24/7 indoor space with drop-in access. While this is briefly mentioned by city staff in the Review, it must be the priority, with warming centres – as well as cooling centres in the summer – maintained as emergency run-off space.

As noted in the Review, the City's seven 24/7 respite centres and two 24/7 women's drop-ins have not been operating as walk-in access since 2020; instead, they have only been accessible to people who have secured a respite cot in these spaces through Central Intake. Given the growing number of people who are becoming homeless in Toronto, these formerly low-barrier spaces have been absorbed into the base shelter system as a result of the sheer need. These spaces must be restored to take the pressure off the TTC, libraries, and coffee shops, all of which have been serving as de facto drop-in space. However, in order to do so safely, more shelter capacity needs to be created. Given that the Review states that 800 people need to be moved from the shelter system every month in order to free up space – this is double the number of people who exit the system currently – doing so will require significant investments and, most likely, additional shelter space.

In terms of investments, what the Review asks for in two of its four recommendations is more money from other levels of government. Given that Toronto is still facing a massive



budgetary shortfall, with no sign of bailout funding from the federal or provincial governments, these recommendations are grossly insufficient. Toronto must be proactive in creating more revenue tools as well as better allocating its funds in order to ensure that our most at-risk people are given the shelter and safety that is their human right. It must also seek solutions that meet the real need, which the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) does not.

Indeed, the third recommendation of the Review is that the City ask the federal and provincial governments for \$20 million to ensure that 1,600 to 2,000 households can receive the COHB. For background, the COHB covers the difference between 30% of a household's income and market rent. Firstly, if 800 people must exit the shelter system per month in order to free up capacity, this constitutes just two-and-a-half months of support maximum. Secondly, the COHB expires in 2029, with no transition plan in place for those who receive the supplement. Thirdly, in order to be eligible for the COHB, an individual must remove themselves from the social housing waitlist, even if this is the actual permanent solution they need. In six years, when the COHB expires, will people simply become unhoused again, and signing up for a social housing waitlist that is over a decade long? As it stands, this is what the COHB is setting many of its recipients up for soon.

In sum, the City of Toronto should:

- Prioritize 24/7 year-round drop-in space, with warming and cooling centres opened as emergency overflow shelter ahead of inclement weather conditions, e.g., freezing rain;
- Ensure that warming centres – and, indeed, all emergency weather response measures for unhoused people – continue to be the purview of Toronto Public Health as well as the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration, understanding that exposure is a serious population health issue for unsheltered Torontonians;
- Be proactive in generating new revenue tools in lieu of relying on other orders of government who, to date, have not provided sufficient fiscal support to the City of Toronto's budgetary shortfall;
- In addition to permanent solutions, i.e. non-market housing, explore stronger and local short-term alternatives to the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit, including by expanding the City of Toronto's Housing Allowance program and increasing the amount of assistance.

Many thanks for your time and consideration,

Diana Chan McNally
April 24, 2023