

To Members of the Economic and Community Development Committee,

In my eight years working with unhoused people, never have I seen so many people surviving outdoors: people in encampments, people sleeping on grates, people living on the sidewalk – including outside of 129 Peter St.

At this moment, we don't know how many people are sleeping rough, let alone how many more are unhoused. The 2021 Street Needs Assessment is out of date; and so, for the purposes of this letter, we do not have an accurate sense of what the need is in the City of Toronto. We only know that it is overwhelming.

For the past four years, the City has not given us a Winter Services Plan that even remotely addresses the crisis of unsheltered homelessness in Toronto. From 2019 to last year, we saw seasonal indoor space in the Winter Services Plan [dwindle from 514 spaces](#) – 464 across seven 24/7 respite centres and one warming centre with a capacity of 50 – to 2022's [60 warming centre spaces and zero 24/7 respite spaces](#). This was a decrease in seasonal space of 88%, despite a continued and mostly unmeasured growth in homelessness.

However, this year marks a shift: for the first time since 2020, the Winter Services Plan includes a walk-in access, 24/7 respite with a capacity of 40 people. This is a good start. We also have 170 spaces across four warming centres, as well as a surge site of unknown capacity. Warming centres will now open at a threshold of -5°C, versus previous years, in which they opened at the far-too-extreme threshold of -15°C – a testament to the advocacy of both activists and health professionals who called for this change last winter.

In combination, the Plan features some marked improvements in offering winter-specific space, but it is ultimately not enough: these ≈210 spaces still do not match the 514 spaces available in 2019, and specifically the amount of 24/7 respite space open at all times, despite a marked growth in homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

I recognize that the City of Toronto is under extreme financial constraints, including the constraints laid out by our former Mayor John Tory in his tightly controlled 2023 budget. Therefore, I recognize that whatever suggestions I may lay out in this letter ultimately come with strings attached as to how they may be financed – and by whom.

That said, more space is vitally needed – it is needed to save lives. **Given the budgetary constraints, I posit two potential solutions:**

- **The restoration of funding to Margaret's 323 Dundas St. E. 24-7 drop-in;**
- **The potential opening of the federal armouries.**

On the first suggestion, Margaret's 323 Dundas St. E. 24/7 drop-in experienced multiple rounds of funding cuts within the last two years, which effectively cut their hours by 66% (they currently operate between 7 am and 4 pm). The infrastructure and lease are already in place, meaning operating this site

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to seasonal space, I do recognize changes to permanent space embedded in the Plan. This includes the Plan's 275 housing units – a modest but needed addition. However, the creation of 180 shelter spaces through the reduction of space between beds to 75 centimetres is unsafe in terms of disease transmission, assault, and theft. However, without a substantial increase in funding to the shelter system, I recognize that the choice is either no new shelter beds or else these incredibly risky shelter beds – an impossible choice. That said, if this goes forward in the short-term, we should not normalize this minute distance between shelter beds.

around the clock would entail no capital costs; all that would be required is an increase in program funding i.e., for staffing and meal provision, which would make this a cost-effective solution as 24/7 space.

On the latter suggestion and given the Federal government's absentee response to the crisis of unsheltered refugees, opening federal armoury space could circumvent municipal costs by enshrining the current situation of homelessness as a partial federal responsibility. And it should be a responsibility shared with the federal government: the number of encampments across the country have grown by 50% since 2019, and the current crisis of unsheltered refugees represents a failure by the federal government to provide adequate and equitable supports to newcomers seeking safe asylum.

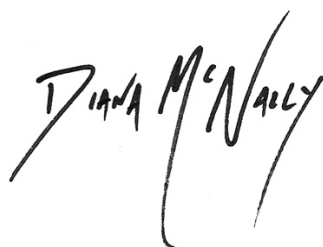
While the 2024 budget cycle will present new opportunities for financing homelessness services and supports, the reality is that for the next three months, the City is limited in what it can do. Any increase in funding to the Winter Plan would require a cut to another vital service – and Toronto's services are starved. As much as I am aware that any ask of any other order of government is never a guarantee – and I am generally critical of such approaches without adequate municipal solutions – I strongly suggest that the City:

- **Advocate to the federal government to:**
  - **Open armoury space as seasonal shelter until April 2024, including covering the costs of operationalizing this space;**
  - **Allocate funding for the 2023/24 Winter Plan to operationalize current and additional warming centre and 24/7 respite space in the City of Toronto.**
- **Advocate to the province to:**
  - **Enact a provincial a homeless strategy, including an employment strategy to address chronic workforce shortages and inadequate wages, understanding that any increase in seasonal or permanent shelter, respite, warming centre, and drop-in space requires adequate and appropriate staffing.**

Again, this is not to say that the City is off the hook. **If the City can operationalize additional seasonal space on its own, it must** – including potentially Margaret's 323 Dundas St. E. location. **It must also augment robust outreach solutions that are structured to preserve life, meaning a full commitment to the recommendations of the Grant Faulkner Inquest.** Moreover, during the 2024 budget cycle, the City must strongly consider the urgent and growing situation of homelessness in Toronto – a situation that City Council has acknowledged as a crisis – and commit the resources accordingly.

Expect to hear from me then.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diana Chan McNally". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

*Diana Chan McNally  
October 23, 2023*