

Councillor Bravo, Chair
Members Economic and Community
Development Committee
Toronto

October 23, 2023

Re: EC7.8
Shelter System Pressures and Responses, including Planning for Winter 2023/2024

I will begin by pointing committee members and all Councillors to the Letter from Cathy Crowe regarding this agenda item. There are few with a longer track record of tireless advocacy, compassionate support, and in-depth understanding of this crisis in our city.

Much of how we respond to the crisis of dehousing (J. D. Hulchanski, 2000) could be altered by reflecting on 1) how deadly it is to live without housing and 2) what it takes to view a life as a grievable life. I want to remind Councillors that there are real people who have died as a direct result of the decisions that get made at City Hall. This is not to play the blame game or to pretend that I have all the answers. Rather it is a humble acknowledgment that we—all of us—have not done enough. When we decide to close a shelter, when we let modular housing units collect dust in storage, when we allow public housing units to remain empty, and when we fail to provide shelter, people die. If we grieve them, if we are truly and deeply affected by their deaths, then surely, we will act courageously, differently.

Further to Cathy Crowe's comments, there are 59 units of modular housing sitting empty. There are Toronto Community Housing units that are vacant. 214-230 Sherbourne sat empty for over a decade before KingSett Capital acquired it—all the while people fighting for affordable housing in this city asked the city to step in. This lack of action has cost lives. Just as the closing of the Friendship Room shelter in 1998 cost lives (James, 1998). The city allowing the School House shelter to fall into disrepair and be closed down cost lives (Grant, 2012) (to my knowledge, Councillor Perks is the only Councillor currently at City Hall to grieve this loss (Spurr, 2012)). On the other hand, when the city decided to open the armouries, lives were saved. And when the city fought for dilapidated rooming house units to be converted into dignified units of affordable housing, lives were saved (D. Hulchanski, 1998).

The Rupert Hotel Coalition Pilot Project (D. Hulchanski, 1998) was an internationally lauded example of a public-private partnership that saved money and provided desperately needed affordable housing. It was coordinated between municipal and provincial levels of government, while directed by citizens like Michael Shapcott who knew the issues intimately. Shapcott ran the project so efficiently that surplus money was returned to the government at the end of the pilot. The provincial government subsequently withdrew from the project, despite its obvious success.

Two things can be learned from the Rupert Hotel Coalition. First the city must never tire of demanding that provincial and federal levels of government do their part—that these are their citizens as well! And second, that the city must listen closely to those who understand

the problems intimately: those who have lived without housing, those who have slept in a shelter or a respite centre, and those who have worked on the ground during this humanitarian crisis—like Cathy Crowe. These are the people who, if you ask, can give you the names of people who have died—the friends who they are grieving animate their calls to action, their outrage, and their political solidarity.

Judith Butler (2003) argues that grief “furnishes a sense of political community” (p. 12) in the sense that it renders us ethically responsible for those in situations of precarity. She warns of the dangerous violence that ignores loss of life—and ignores the precarity that, inevitably, kills people. Let us not descend to the hopeless violence that determines a life as “unreal” (Butler, 2003, p. 22). Rather, may we live as though there are indeed real people—with names, with families, with stories—on our streets who require safe, warm places. And when we attend to the grief that emerges when fellow citizens die without housing, may we be mobilized to say, never again, never again, never again.

Sincerely,

timothy martin
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