

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

Date: October 24, 2023

Re: EC7.7 - 2024 Shelter Infrastructure Plan and the Homelessness Services Capital Infrastructure Strategy (HSCIS)

Greetings Economic and Community Development Committee:

Street Haven is a multi-service women's agency that has the distinction of having established Canada's first women's shelter in 1968 when our founder Emergency Room Nurse Peggy Ann Walpole noticed that vulnerable women were being ignored by the social welfare system. Fast forward nearly 60 years, the marginalization of vulnerable women continues and the homeless and housing affordability crises are forcing many to turn to women's shelters for support.

Street Haven's base shelter and shelter hotel programs have been operating at capacity for some time, and we have seen demand for our services dramatically rise because of the homeless refugee crisis playing out in the streets of Toronto. In the space of just 4 months, we have turned away over 500 women since mid-June, this is equal the total number of women we served last year.

As mentioned last year we served only 500 women; this is a decrease of 50% from the previous year, even though we were at 100% occupancy. This is because women are not able to move from shelters into their own homes due to the absence of affordable rental units and adequate levels of COHB. This deputation is in support of the 10-year capital infrastructure plan. Our agency has experienced significant barriers and challenges in trying to introduce affordable and deeply affordable supportive housing for homeless women in Toronto. We do not anticipate the ability to introduce new supportive housing for homeless women in the foreseeable future given the absence of government funds that would allow us to do so, even though we have several properties that we can develop. This means that the demand for our shelter services will continue.

The strategy's intention to migrate from temporary shelter hotels towards purpose-built permanent shelters and to grow the permanent shelter bed stock is proactive and good. However, for Street Haven, when the shelter hotel closes, Street Haven's bed capacity will decrease by 45% compared to pre-pandemic levels. Our ability to support more women will be drastically reduced.

We urge the City to invest significantly in increasing the number of women's-only shelter beds as part of this plan. The demand among women has increased even in the space of a year and given the unmet needs that we have seen at Street Haven's shelter doors, there are clear signals to the city that it must agree to increase women's-only shelter beds as part of the 10-year plan. The 10-year plan needs to commit to ensuring that at least 25% of all shelter beds are women-only on an annual basis. For women's shelter agencies such as Street Haven, we must operate the same level of shelter beds if not more, when the shelter hotels close.

Shelter-using women have unique needs and experiences that are gender-based. The majority of Street Haven's clients have experienced gender-based violence and other forms of intimate partner violence. This includes our current client cohort of African refugees and claimants, all of whom are fleeing their countries of origin due to safety concerns and persecution because of who they are and who they care about. There is significant trauma associated with our clients. As a result, the concerns and a sense of safety from physical, sexual and psychological violence are crucial to why they need a woman's-only shelter bed.

The sense of trust among these women are low, and shelter workers operate using a gendered lens that offers the necessary empathy and dignity to help build trust bridges. The emotional support from staff and from other

shelter clients is an aspect of the benefits of women's only shelters. Street haven shelter clients rely on each other for social support.

Women's only shelters provide vital time and supports for women to consider personal goals that are the necessary first step towards greater independence and feelings of control. This includes family reunification, the legal system, education, employment, immigration, income security and housing security.

Women's shelters offer supports in helping shelter users to navigate the healthcare system and to make referrals in a respectful manner that ensures their privacy and gendered nature of healthcare and medical issues.

Lastly, we ask that the strategy's outline on the State of Good Repair include a commitment to enhancing access to capital for repairs for women's shelters like Street Haven to ensure that we can maintain our site. Our current funding does not include capital repair supports. We are anticipating nearly ¼ - ½ million dollars in building repairs that is unfunded. This threatens our base shelter's viability.

Thank you for your attention. The Ten year plan outlines important recommendations and considerations, and Street Haven asks that an explicit commitment be made in the strategy towards increasing the number of women's only beds such that it at minimum represents 25% of total shelter beds, that women's shelters such as Street haven do not lose their overall bed capacity as the temporary shelters close, and that there is greater ease of accessing capital funds to address the need for critical repairs in our base shelter programs.

Sincerely,

Dr. Siu Mee Cheng, PhD

Executive Director

Street Haven