

July 22, 2024

To: Mayor Chow and Toronto City Council
From: Diane Chester, Niagara Neighbours for Community Safety
Subject: 2024.EX16.30 – Community Safety and Well-being and Schools

The City-School Boards Advisory Committee, the TDSB, and the TCDSB are doing everything possible, within the limits of current resources, to collaborate on the prevention of violence within the school system. They are responding to the 2022 Implementation under the 10-year SafeTO Plan which City Council unanimously approved in July 2021.

But where are the actions needed to prevent violence and to protect children and residents outside of school property? What actions are envisaged between now and 2032 to protect the safety and well-being of our communities and of our children? How is the City advancing the ten-year SafeTO plan? What measures is it considering? How is it consulting with the community to assess their needs?

Urgent attention is needed by all concerned stakeholders to build on the promise of SafeTO. There needs to be a plan for proactive prevention of violence in the communities that surround our schools.

The Status Quo needs to change. The City of Toronto is directly implicated because they currently site 24x7 emergency shelters near schools without consultation, transparency or proper assessments. Chaos and violence are being brought into communities and students are being put at risk. Not only does this practice counter the principles and goals of SafeTO (which is all about protecting the safety and well-being of communities) but it could also be seen as a form of reckless endangerment within the context of the current public health/housing crisis.

The Risk needs to be acknowledged: Everyone knows that a significant percentage of the unhoused population is made up of individuals with serious and often untreated mental health conditions, untreated drug addictions, and anger management issues. Shelters have become crisis care facilities because of the complex needs of their guests. Shelter staff are not equipped or able to meet these complex needs so they spill out into the community. It is no surprise that recent data reveals that shelters are dangerous places for both staff and guests (and by extension dangerous places for adults and children who live and attend school in the vicinity).

The Solutions need to be realistic: Asking schools to lock their doors and erect 12-foot metal fences is not the answer. Where public safety is concerned, efforts need to be made to reduce risks rather than to increase risks. Shelters should NEVER be sited without an open, fair, and thorough risk-assessment that directly involves both school boards and residential communities. Incorporating safe distancing provisions in land use by-laws is one solution that other municipalities are considering and enacting. Toronto needs to reconsider this approach.

The Violence needs to be addressed: SafeTO's focus on gun-violence seems oddly out of step with the reality on our streets in the City's core. Knives and other sharp edged-weapons (often improvised) proliferate in both shelters and encampments with deadly consequences. Toronto Police Services issues media advisories on a daily basis. These document assaults and crimes in the downtown core committed by persons of no-fixed-address who are invariably in violation of probation or other public safety orders.

The Reality needs to be faced: When the 2022 SafeTO Implementation Plan went to City Council, there were communications from several BIAs which highlighted "...the multifaceted mental illness, addiction, violence, overdose and homelessness crisis" which was then revealing itself as "open drug use, erratic and aggressive behaviours, shootings, assaults on retail and security staff in the area as well as the victimization of extremely vulnerable people who are on-street because of these same social challenges."

The Research needs to be considered: There is a wealth of evidence-based research on early childhood development emphasizing the critical role of safe neighbourhoods. Ignoring this research, especially in the context of our neighbourhood, is irresponsible. The risks to children growing up in communities plagued by violence and drugs are profound, leading to poor mental health and a multitude of other health and social issues.

According to a study from the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the quality of the neighbourhood where a child grows up significantly influences their behavioural outcomes during elementary and teenage years (source: <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2017/a-neighborhoods-quality-influences-childrens-behaviors-through-teens-study-suggests>). Researchers found that children aged seven to twelve exhibited more serious behaviour problems when living in neighbourhoods rated as 'poor' for raising children compared to those in 'excellent' neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood social disorder, as witnessed daily near Queen and Bathurst Streets, has been documented to seriously undermine children's sense of well-being. Placing a 24-hour emergency shelter just two blocks from a supervised consumption site, with an elementary school in between and another school one block away where children live and go to school, is an appalling policy decision.

629 Adelaide Street West: The City of Toronto plans to establish a 24-hour emergency shelter at 629 Adelaide Street West which is just two blocks from the Parkdale Queen West CHC supervised consumption site (SCS) at 168 Bathurst Street (north-west corner of Bathurst and Richmond). 629 Adelaide Street West is located at the back of Portugal Square, behind St. Mary's Catholic Church, and within a residential neighbourhood surrounded by a network of hidden laneways and dead-ends. It is directly adjacent to St. Mary's Catholic Elementary School and one block from Niagara Street Public School. The route that clients will take from the SCS to the shelter (and back) runs directly through the school ground and adjacent parking lots and back lanes.

Given the current social chaos that we see each day at the safe consumption site, including open-air drug-dealing, public drug use (injection and inhalation), mental health crises, destruction of property and violence (both verbal and physical), there are real fears that these problems will spread and intensify if the shelter opens. Portugal Square will cease to be the peaceful community space it currently is and our children will be put in great danger. The community strongly opposes this plan, as it seems that neither municipal, provincial, nor federal governments are equipped to manage the existing challenges or control the chaos.

The City of Toronto's decision to lease 629 Adelaide Street West was a desperate measure, prompted by a failed lease negotiation at 65 Bellwoods Avenue due to neighbourhood public safety concerns, the latter being half the size and half the cost. This entire process has demonstrated a clear lack of transparency, accountability, project management, evidence-based decision-making, and financial oversight. Originally planned to open in November 2023, this multimillion-dollar, 50-bed facility remains closed.

Niagara Neighbours for Community Safety (NNCS): Members of NNCS have undertaken research, requested documents, submitted freedom of information requests to the City of Toronto, sent hundreds of letters, undertaken a legal challenge, tried to participate in the highly-flawed "community engagement" exercise, submitted communications, and deputed at Economic and Community Development and Board of Health. We have been forced to do this because our Councillor has repeatedly ignored our requests for a meeting and has effectively abandoned us.

Since September 2023, when our community first learned about the facility through a rumour, NNCS has provided a substantial dossier of objective and valid reasons why the site selection should be revoked and are on public record opposing the opening of this shelter.

We call on the City of Toronto to revisit SafeTO and take action to protect the safety and well-being of our neighbourhood, including our children. 12 foot fences on school grounds do not build safe, resilient and well-planned neighbourhoods.

CANCEL THE SHELTER AT 629 ADELAIDE STREET WEST.

Thank you,

Diane Chester
Niagara Neighbours for Community Safety