

## **Appointment of City of Toronto's First Youth Poet Laureate**

**Date:** September 4, 2024

**To:** Economic and Community Development Committee

**From:** General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, and Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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This report recommends that City Council appoint Shahaddah Jack as the City of Toronto's inaugural Youth Poet Laureate, for a term beginning October 15, 2024, and ending on December 31, 2026. This term may be extended beyond the end of December to allow for the appointment of a successor.

The Youth Poet Laureate Program was initiated at the recommendation of the Toronto Youth Cabinet in November 2023 to recognize and celebrate their 25th Anniversary. The Youth Poet Laureate will serve as a literary ambassador for young people across Toronto, working to elevate the status of poetry, language, and young writers by inspiring and engaging youth to share their stories through written and spoken word.

Shahaddah Jack, a 20-year-old bilingual spoken word poet and activist, uses her poetic lens to explore human rights, the Black experience, and the challenges of adolescence. Shahaddah has performed on over 100 stages, including events such as the Toronto International Festival of Authors and Nuit Blanche, and she recently released both her debut novel and single. She has been recommended for appointment following a competitive process adjudicated by the City's current Poet Laureate, Lillian Allen, and representatives from the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, and the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance, and Administration, recommend that:

1. City Council appoint Shahaddah Jack to the position of City of Toronto Youth Poet Laureate for a term beginning October 15, 2024, until December 31, 2026, or until a successor is appointed.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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The total annual budget for the Youth Poet Laureate program is \$7,500, including \$5,000 for the Laureate's honorarium, and \$2,500 for programming expenses. Funding for the program is included in Economic Development and Culture's 2024 Operating Budget and will be included in future year budget submissions for consideration.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact section.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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At its meeting on November 8 and 9, 2023, City Council directed the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, and the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, to create a Youth Poet Laureate program in consultation with the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.CC12.1>

## **COMMENTS**

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### **Development of the Youth Poet Laureate Program**

The Youth Poet Laureate program was initiated at the recommendation of Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC) in November 2023 to recognize and celebrate the TYC's 25th anniversary. The program is part of TYC's longstanding work to advocate for the inclusion and representation of youth voices and perspectives across the city. It will elevate emerging artists and amplify the perspectives and voices of young writers and poets in Toronto.

The position has been created to honour a young writer or spoken word artist (16 to 27 years old) who has written on themes relevant to the city. They will serve as a literary ambassador for youth in Toronto, and will advocate for poetry, language, and the arts by inspiring and engaging youth to share their stories through written and spoken word.

The Youth Poet Laureate's duties are outlined in the position's Terms of Reference (included as Attachment 1 to this report), which were developed by TYC in consultation with the City's current Poet Laureate, Lillian Allen, and staff in Economic Development and Culture (EDC) and Social Development, Finance, and Administration (SDFA). Key duties include:

- Serving as an advocate and ambassador for youth, poetry, literary arts and elevate the voices of young writers;
- Creating artistic work that reflects the values and identity of Toronto's young people;
- Performing poetry readings during at least one City Council meeting, at least one TYC event and at least one official City of Toronto function;
- Attending a variety of civic events across the City to promote and attract young people to the literary world;
- Collaborating with Toronto Public Library to support and enhance their youth literary arts programs;
- Participating in the literary life of the City to raise the visibility of youth, literacy, poetry and spoken word; and
- Being willing to be mentored by the Poet Laureate during their shared terms.

The City and TYC launched the Youth Poet Laureate program by announcing a call for applications on May 1, 2024, as part of Youth Week, with submissions due on June 24. Applicants were asked to submit a resume, three pieces of original work (including at least one audio or video), two letters of reference, and a letter of intent. The call for applications was advertised widely through the City and TYC's social media channels, and through partner networks including poetry, literary, arts, and youth-serving organizations. A total of 31 applications were received and assessed by a selection panel comprised of the current Poet Laureate and representatives of the TYC using the following selection criteria:

- The candidate demonstrates impactful contributions to poetry and literary arts in Toronto, particularly within youth communities;
- The candidate displays a strong commitment and genuine passion for community engagement, with a well-articulated and impactful plan for involving young people in poetry and literary arts initiatives; and
- The candidate produces poetry with strong artistic merit, showcasing creativity, depth and skill.

## **About Shahaddah Jack**

Shahaddah Jack, a 20-year-old bilingual spoken word poet and human rights activist, draws inspiration from her diverse cultural roots. Shahaddah, a proud graduate of The Remix Project, uses her poetic lens to delve into addressing human rights, the Black experience, and the challenges of adolescence. With an impressive resume, Shahaddah has graced over 100 stages, including the renowned History stage. She gained recognition as BGC Canada's 2022 National Youth of the Year and was honoured as one of Streets of Toronto's most inspirational women in 2022. Shahaddah's artistic journey began at the age of 12, performing at venues like Hot Docs Cinema, TIFF, and the Meridian Arts Centre.

Her spoken word has resonated at prestigious events such as the Toronto International Festival of Authors, Nuit Blanche, TDSBCreates, and RISE in the Parks. Media outlets like CBC Radio-Canada, and City News have featured her works in print, on stage, radio, and film. Committed to mentorship, Shahaddah has conducted workshops on

poetry and human rights in collaboration with organizations like BGC Canada, VIBE Arts, Guelph University, JAYU, TDSB, Peacebuilders Canada, and more. Shahaddah invites you to explore her world through her debut book, "Underrated Royalty". Notably, she recently marked a milestone by releasing her debut single, "My Mother's Daughter".

In her letter of intent, Shahaddah wrote:

"I strongly believe that in this new role, it is imperative to collaborate with other artists, activists, and organizations who share my commitment to youth empowerment and social justice. Working together as opposed to working in silos will enrich the impact of collective youth advocacy within our city. I will continue to use my poetry as a form of "Artivism", recognizing and addressing the intersecting forms of oppression that impact youth in Toronto, especially young Black women, including racism, sexism, and economic inequality. I will continue to use the power of spoken word to advocate for policies and initiatives that promote equity and inclusion in all aspects of society. I will aim to engage with local communities, schools, and organizations such as Prologue Arts, TPL Poetry Saved Our Lives, and TDSB Creates to promote literary arts as tools for self-expression and empowerment."

She also described how she hopes to collaborate with the TYC to engage youth voices in municipal governance through a new program that will invite youth to create poetry, spoken word performances, zines or other artistic projects to reflect on key challenges facing the City. If Shahaddah's appointment is approved by City Council, she will collaborate with the TYC and City staff to develop a work plan for her term as Youth Poet Laureate, including this proposed program and other new initiatives to engage youth in poetry and literary arts.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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Patrick Tobin  
General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Denise Andrea Campbell  
Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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Attachment 1 - Youth Poet Laureate Terms of Reference