



April 30, 2024

Councillor Alejandra Bravo

Chair of the Economic and Community Development Committee

**Re: Item EC12.13 Multi-Methods Study on Shelter Safety**

Madame Chair and Committee Members,

The Toronto Shelter Network (TSN) represents more than 34 organizations that collectively deliver Toronto's 24-hour homelessness services, including shelters, respite centres, 24-hour women's drop-ins, transitional housing and the COVID-19 shelter hotels. We enhance the collective capacity of homelessness service providers in Toronto through knowledge sharing and learning, collaborative planning, research and advocacy, and champion access to housing with dignity for people experiencing homelessness.

The pressure on Toronto's shelter system is tremendous with almost eleven thousand people in shelters, bridging hotels and other emergency shelter programs every night; over 200 encampments; the closing of many shelter hotels; the complexity of shelter users' needs made more complex with the huge influx of refugees and asylum seekers; the continued impact of COVID-19 and the opioid crisis; crowding; insufficient mental health and substance use supports; and a dire lack of affordable and supportive housing. The demand is getting higher by the day and is expected to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Safety in shelters for staff and service users has increasingly dominated conversations at TSN's and other sector tables. Responding to demand, TSN has recently held an all-members meeting on safety in shelters and a workshop on the Creation of a Psychologically Safe Workplace.

The release of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)'s The Shelter Safety Study – An examination of violence and service restrictions in Toronto's Shelter System, has come at a crucial time for the sector – critical incidents and service restrictions have

gone up significantly between 2011 and 2021 and both staff and shelter users increasingly feel unsafe.

TSN is expressing its support for the recommendations in this report which include: intensive, more team based mental health supports; around the clock supports for those using substances; developing a specialized program for those with extensive histories of violence and service restrictions; more supports for shelter staff following critical incidents and workplace violence; expanding the inclusion of people with lived experience of homelessness in TSSS's committee and decision-making processes; and collecting and analyzing data on the role of race and ethnicity in service restrictions.

While these recommendations will no doubt result in a safer shelter system for shelter users and staff, we must continue to emphasize the funding and service disparities that currently exist in the sector and could potentially be further exacerbated. Parity in funding will ensure homelessness services are consistent across the sector.

We also urge the City to collaborate with the homelessness services providers, community partners such as TSN, the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH) and people with lived and living experience of homelessness in their planning and strategy to carry out the recommendations of the report.

We know that the ultimate solution to homelessness is housing, and we recognize the urgency of supporting people in the immediate term. We need to ensure that there are safe shelter spaces for shelter users and staff. The recommendations in this report help to move us towards this goal.

Thank you,



Leslie Gash

Executive Director

Toronto Shelter Network

cc. David Reycraft, Dixon Hall, Chair of TSN

Alban Joxhe, Friends of Ruby, Vice Chair of TSN