

Thursday March 13, 2025

To: Mayor Chow
Mayor's Office, Toronto City Hall
100 Queen St West
Toronto, On
M5H 2N2

Dear Mayor Chow:

Homelessness and the lack of access to shelter and adequate housing have become symptoms of the systemic failure to serve cities and the people who call cities home. In Toronto, inadequate social assistance, insufficient resources and supports for people with vulnerabilities, a profound lack of deeply affordable housing options, and increasing flows of refugees have all placed pressure on a shelter system ill-equipped to meet the complexity of need we now face.

This was demonstrated explicitly in July 2023 when African refugees were unable to access space in the Toronto shelter system. That failure of the system to respond to the rights of these refugees raises a range of issues about how the City sets and implements policies in a shelter emergency. We would suggest that guarding the City's policies and practices with a human rights-based approach could prevent future failures and move the City along a path toward respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to housing for all people in Toronto.

A recent report from the Ombudsman Toronto examined these issues and identified several problems. Among them, and relevant specifically to the mandate of the Housing Rights Advisory Committee, was the fact that the City had failed to comply with its own commitment to the human right to adequate housing, as affirmed in the Toronto Housing Charter. This points to the need for the City to develop a better understanding of its obligations and duties, and how a human rights-based approach should be applied to the policies and practices of the shelter system. The City Manager's decision to describe the right to housing as "aspirational" further underscores this need.

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The right to housing is not an aspiration. It is a set of responsibilities the City has agreed to and for which it is accountable. These obligations are clearly outlined in the Toronto Housing Charter and include a commitment to progressive realization, which means that the City must demonstrate that it is moving forward on its obligations on the right to housing and ensure that policies and practices align with this commitment. It also obligates the City to create a strategy that includes setting targets, measuring progress, ensuring non-discrimination, enabling participation, acting transparently, and being accountable to its outcomes. These are practical and tangible obligations that create a critical path toward realizing the right to housing for everyone in Toronto.

The Housing Rights Advisory Committee is ideally situated to work with the City to a) understand what is meant by a human rights-based approach and how it supports human rights outcomes; and b) apply a human rights-based approach to City policies and practices and thereby support the City in fulfilling its commitment to progressively realize the right to housing for everyone.

We believe that by applying this approach, the City will be better able to meet its obligations and demonstrate leadership, accountability, and compassion.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth McIsaac
Chair, Housing Rights Advisory Committee (HRAC)



Gord Perks
Member, (HRAC)
City Councillor, Ward 4