

# **Ombudsman Toronto Report: An Investigation into the City's Response to a Vital Services Outage in a Multi-Tenant Home**

**Date:** May 13, 2025

**To:** City Council

**From:** Kwame Addo, Ombudsman

## **SUMMARY**

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On June 5, 2024, I notified the City of my intention to investigate whether Municipal Licensing & Standards' response to an Urgent Service Request at a multi-tenant home was fair and consistent with a human rights-based approach to housing.

During this investigation, it was subsequently identified that the Housing Secretariat played a role in the City's response to the concerns of tenants living at this multi-tenant home. As a result, on March 4, 2025, I provided further notice to the City that this investigation would also examine the role of the Housing Secretariat's Eviction Prevention in the Community program with respect to the tenants at this property.

This report makes 27 recommendations which are set out below. The City's administration has agreed to implement these recommendations.

I am submitting my report, dated May 13, 2025, to City Council for consideration at its May 21-23, 2025, meeting.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Ombudsman recommends that:

1. City Council direct City staff to implement the Ombudsman's recommendations from his investigation report, An Investigation into the City's Response to a Vital Services Outage in a Multi-Tenant Home (May 13, 2025):

**Recommendation 1:** Municipal Licensing & Standards ("MLS") should develop guidance for staff on the types of situations where it may be acceptable to make an exception to the requirement that bylaw officers attend a Priority 1 service request within 48 hours, and that bylaw officers issue an Order within 48 hours of

their attendance, as well as factors that should weigh against making exceptions. This guidance should be incorporated into the Priority Response Standard Operating Procedure ("SOP").

**Recommendation 2:** MLS should incorporate guidelines into its General Investigations SOP for when decisions and reasons should be communicated to complainants in writing, considering factors such as the complexity and urgency of the matter and the vulnerabilities of the affected parties. These guidelines should require MLS to outline the results of the investigation and any relevant factors that informed the decision as set out in the SOPs and the bylaws. As part of this written communication, MLS should include information about how to make a complaint.

**Recommendation 3:** MLS should update the General Investigations SOP, the Notebooks and Case Management SOP, the Priority Response SOP, and the Vital Services SOP to make specific reference to the Bylaw Compliance & Enforcement Policy when enforcement action is contemplated and/or when officers may be expected to exercise discretion.

**Recommendation 4:** In consultation with the Housing Secretariat, and as required by the Toronto Housing Charter, MLS should revise its SOPs relevant to rental housing standards enforcement to consider impacts on the right to adequate housing, including preserving affordable housing under the HousingTO Action Plan. This revision process should include the Bylaw Compliance & Enforcement Policy, General Investigations SOP, Priority Response SOP, Remedial Action SOP, and Vital Services SOP.

**Recommendation 5:** MLS should develop a process in the Vital Services SOP for responding to scenarios which fall under the exceptions in Municipal Code chapters § 629-32 and § 835-8. This revision should include guidelines on how to interpret these provisions, and outline the steps a bylaw officer should take to: 1) accurately determine the minimum time necessary to conduct repairs, 2) communicate deadlines for completing repairs to the landlord, including reminders and follow-ups, 3) reassess whether a bylaw breach exists if the landlord has not met deadlines, and 4) provide tenants with referrals to housing supports in the interim while the landlord is doing repairs.

**Recommendation 6:** MLS should develop a process for responding to vital service shutoffs ordered by utility providers and incorporate that process into the Vital Services SOP.

**Recommendation 7:** The processes referred to in Recommendations 5 and 6 should reiterate the need for a "proportionate and risk-based response" under the Bylaw Compliance & Enforcement Policy and explicitly state that evidence of impact on tenants should inform the level of urgency of MLS' response.

**Recommendation 8:** The processes referred to in Recommendations 5 and 6 should take the human right to adequate housing into account by prioritizing

security of tenure, preservation of affordable housing units, and minimizing impacts on tenants.

**Recommendation 9:** In consultation with Toronto's major utility providers, MLS should identify a liaison within each organization whom staff can directly contact for information about vital service shutoffs and to troubleshoot complex cases. The Vital Services SOP should be updated to set out the role of these liaisons and when MLS staff should contact them. MLS should assign a staff position to be responsible for regularly reviewing and updating this contact information to ensure it is up to date.

**Recommendation 10:** MLS should develop a file closure checklist for Priority 1 Service Requests to be completed by supervisors, to ensure that bylaw officers have followed SOPs, adhered to all applicable timelines, exercised discretion appropriately, and met all case management expectations. This checklist should be created and implemented by March 31, 2026.

**Recommendation 11:** In consultation with supervisors and management, MLS should revise its process for automatically generated reports and identify what information is necessary for supervisors to receive on a weekly basis, and how to present that information in a way that is useful for supervisors.

**Recommendation 12:** MLS should develop a written procedure for conducting monthly one-on-one check-ins between bylaw officers and supervisors, including expectations for what will be reviewed, how the check-in will be documented, and the process for addressing performance concerns. Supervisors should be trained on this procedure, and staff should be made aware of the check-in process.

**Recommendation 13:** MLS should develop and implement a training plan to ensure that all bylaw officers working in rental housing standards receive training on the vital services bylaws. MLS should ensure that all bylaw officers working in rental housing standards receive this training by December 31, 2025.

**Recommendation 14:** MLS should organize their policy database so that bylaw officers can easily access the policies and SOPs most relevant to their unit. This should be completed by December 31, 2025.

**Recommendation 15:** MLS should ensure that the revisions made to the Bylaw Compliance & Enforcement Policy, General Investigations SOP, Notebooks and Case Management SOP, Priority Response SOP, Remedial Action SOP, and Vital Services SOP under Recommendations 1–12 are incorporated into training materials for its frontline staff and management working in rental housing enforcement. Bylaw officers working in rental housing enforcement should receive refresher trainings which address these revisions.

**Recommendation 16:** The City, in its delivery of training on the human right to adequate housing, should ensure that all MLS frontline staff and management who work in rental standards enforcement are trained on the Toronto Housing Charter and the human right to adequate housing by December 31, 2025.

**Recommendation 17:** Eviction Prevention in the Community ("EPIC") should develop a procedure for the services it delivers through Toronto Emergency Management's ("TEM") emergency response protocol. These procedures should define which EPIC services are available, eligibility criteria, response times, and guidelines for the use of discretion.

**Recommendation 18:** The EPIC Program Model should be updated to include the services EPIC provides under the TEM's emergency response protocol and refer to the relevant policies and procedures which guide the delivery of those services.

**Recommendation 19:** The City should, in its upcoming revision of TEM's Emergency Human Services Policy, formalize EPIC's role in delivering services. This revision should include information about when EPIC will become involved, eligibility criteria and referral information.

**Recommendation 20:** The City should publish on its website basic information about EPIC's role in supporting tenants under TEM's emergency response protocol.

**Recommendation 21:** The Housing Secretariat should consult with Ombudsman Toronto in its upcoming review and revision of EPIC's policy framework to ensure consistency with the principles of administrative fairness and the right to adequate housing.

**Recommendation 22:** EPIC should establish their own service standards for response times to service requests, in order to account for the urgency of EPIC's work.

**Recommendation 23:** The Housing Secretariat should develop guidelines on exercising discretion in the delivery of EPIC services, including requirements for documenting discretionary decisions.

**Recommendation 24:** The Housing Secretariat should ensure that all EPIC staff are trained on the Toronto Housing Charter and the human right to adequate housing by December 31, 2025.

**Recommendation 25:** The Housing Secretariat should fulfil City Council's direction in CC2.1 – 2023 Housing Action Plan to provide recommendations to support multi-tenant home tenants in the event of unexpected closures, including any necessary requests for funding, bylaw changes, or the creation of new programs by December 31, 2025. The Housing Secretariat should consult with MLS in the development of these recommendations.

**Recommendation 26:** In implementing Recommendation 25, the City should consider whether to update or replace the Rooming House Emergency Response Plan.

**Recommendation 27:** The City should provide a status update on the implementation of all these recommendations by November 1, 2025, and quarterly thereafter.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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This report has no financial impact.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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This report has not been previously considered by City Council.

## **COMMENTS**

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This investigation was conducted under section 171(1) of COTA, which empowers the Ombudsman to independently and impartially investigate any decision, recommendation, act or omission in the course of the administration of the City or many of its agencies, corporations or adjudicative bodies. This function is conferred and exercised independently of Toronto City Council and of the City administration.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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Kwame Addo  
Ombudsman

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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