

Public Information Session for Fatima House (1059 College St)

Meeting Summary

Thursday, October 29, 2020, 6:30pm to 8:30pm

Overview

On Thursday October 29, 2020, The City's Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA) Division hosted an online session to share information and answer questions about the relocation of Fred Victor's shelter for women from 86 Lombard St. to 1059 College Street (Fatima House). The session was advertised by the City through a flyer which was mailed out to residents and businesses within a 500m radius of Fatima House. The session was also promoted on the project website and through the local Councillor's office. 55 people joined online and/or called in by phone over the course of the public information session using the WebEx platform.

Jane Farrow and Leah Birnbaum of the Dept of Words & Deeds facilitated the information session and prepared this summary. The summary is not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript. The session was recorded and is available online with closed captioning for the public to access at www.toronto.ca/ShelterExpansionSites (click on "Fatima House").

If you have questions, comments or feedback about Fatima House or if you want to join the Community Liaison Committee, contact the facilitation team by email at clc.1059college@gmail.com or leave us a voicemail at (437) 522-9510.

Project website: www.toronto.ca/ShelterExpansionSites; click on "Fatima House"

Shelter operator: www.fredvictor.org/what-we-do/housing/shelters/

Meeting Agenda:

- Ana Bailão, Deputy Mayor and City Councillor for Davenport welcomed people to the session.
- Brad Boucher, Manager, Operations and Support Services, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration gave a presentation on the City of Toronto's shelter services.
- Keith Hambly, CEO of Fred Victor gave a presentation about Fatima House. Denise Knee, Senior Manager of Fatima House, also attended the session to answer questions about the program.
- Jane Farrow, Community Engagement Facilitator gave a short presentation on the community engagement process and opened the floor to questions and comments.
- During the Q&A session, the City shared a video that Fred Victor had prepared to tell people about the Fatima House program and give them a view inside the shelter. The video is available here: www.fredvictor.org/what-we-do/housing/shelters/

Q&A Session Summary

Topics:

1. Expressions of support
2. About choosing this site
3. About programs and operations within Fatima House
4. About safety, security and public health
5. About the design of the building
6. About other nearby services
7. About volunteering and connecting the shelter with the community

Expressions of support:

During the meeting several people expressed support for the shelter. Fred Victor has already received many offers of support including an offer to prepare welcome baskets of essential items for the residents when they arrive. Examples of expressions of support at the meeting included:

- “I’m really happy that this shelter is moving into the neighborhood. I live a couple blocks away, and I think it can be a really great important addition to the neighborhood.”
- “We’re delighted to have Fatima House in the neighborhood and want to say welcome.”
- “As a neighbour, I am delighted that a women's shelter is part of the neighbourhood. We want to welcome you to this vibrant neighbourhood.”
- “Welcome to the women and staff of Fatima House. Happy to have you as part of our neighbourhood.”

About choosing this site:

People had questions about how this site was chosen for Fatima House and about the status of the City approvals for the building.

Q: How was the site chosen and what is the ownership arrangement?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: We needed to move the service from the Lombard Street site and we have worked with this landlord/developer in the past. We asked him to look for a site for us that would work for him and also meet all the criteria that the City has for shelters. Then we chose to lease rather than buy as a more efficient way of doing the work. It did require extensive renovation inside to make it suitable; not only for the women who are going to stay there, but also meet the shelter standards set by the City. The building is owned by Mike Ahmadi who also undertook all the renovations. Fred Victor has a 5 year renewable lease on the site.

Q: Why does the shelter need to go to the Committee of Adjustment and why was it built before the minor variance was issued?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: What we need is a minor variance to the floor space index so we can use the full space on the third floor. The existing shape and size of the building won't change – we will just get full permission to use the third floor if the variance is granted. Our landlord was under the impression that we just needed a building permit for the renovations and could do that

without a variance but in meetings with the City, we learned that we needed to get the variance. The landlord has made an application to the Committee of Adjustment.. For further clarity, the use of the site as a shelter is already permitted under the zoning, and is not part of this minor variance request.

About programs and operations within Fatima House:

The majority of the questions during the Information Session had to do with the programming inside Fatima House, how it operates, and what life will be like for shelter residents.

Q: How are women selected to be in the program and are children allowed?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: We don't pick and choose the women who can come into our shelter as we are an emergency shelter. If a person identifies as female they are welcome if we have a space available, as long as they are over 16 years of age. Children are not allowed in the shelter. It is for adult women who are 16 years of age or older.

Q: Do residents have to leave the shelter during the day and do they need to be back at a certain time? Will it be noisy at night?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: There is no requirement to leave the shelter at all. In fact we encourage people to stay because of COVID and there will be a lot of programming happening onsite. However, people may need to come and go as they have other things to do in their lives such as appointments or to see potential housing. We currently have a curfew of 11:00 pm and that is not going to change when we move to our new site. So residents are expected to be in by 11:00pm and staff do rounds during their shift to make sure that everything is good and everything is safe. Staff will be able to respond to deal with any after-hours or obtrusive noise.

Q: Where does the name Fatima House come from?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: The owner of the property is Mike Ahmadi who purchased and renovated it. He wanted to help Fred Victor create a safe welcoming space for women who are homeless and in need of support. He decided to name it after his mother, Fatima, who passed away recently.

Q: Will the residents have access to computers or tablets to participate in online programs; especially during COVID?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: Yes. There is a common computer that residents can use. We will also work with donors to see if we can access other devices for people to use. We were able to secure this type of donation at another site.

Q: Will you have culturally sensitive mental health counsellors for non-English speaking residents?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: Yes, we will. We have a large variety of programs within Fred Victor and we are an email or a phone call away from finding support for language and culture interpretation. We often get multiple responses and offers of help, both in-person and by phone.

We cross multiple cultures and are able to reach out and say we're looking for this specific support.

Q: Will there be a safe injection site at this shelter? Wouldn't it be safer if they were allowed to use onsite and not have to find somewhere else to go.

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: No, there is no safe injection site at this shelter. Drug use is not permitted at the site at all. Residents and staff worked together to make this decision a number of years ago. We haven't had a long history of substance users onsite. That's something we can talk with the City about if we need to but right now the decision stands no use on site. We do provide harm reduction supplies and we will assist people in getting to a safe injection site if they need to. If they're late for curfew because of that we'll work with them and make sure they're safe.

Q: How long will people live at the shelter and where will they go after?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: We usually start with a stay of 90 days. In that 90 days residents would meet with a case manager one on one and create a plan. Housing is the primary goal but we also look at employment or funding and mental health or addiction support. Residents meet with support workers at least one a month; usually more often. No one is kicked out. Affordable housing is at a premium and hard to find. For some that means staying with us for 6 months or 9 months.

Q: Does Fred Victor have a religious mandate and are the staff unionized?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: No. Though Fred Victor has some association with the United Church, we do not take a religious stand and we work with all folks and all people. Yes, staff have been unionized for the last seven years. We also have management on-site and access to agency staff to fill shifts as needed.

Q: How do your current clients feel about having to move?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: They are very excited. There has been talk of a move of a new location for quite some time so now that it's happening we are all extremely excited. We've been having conversations daily to let them know what's going on. They're excited to have space that they could potentially call their own for a little while. So we are coming from dorm-style settings to everyone having their own room to start, because we're starting up at a smaller scale.

About safety, security and public health:

Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, people shared concerns about how public health guidelines will be implemented at the shelter. They also asked about security protocols.

Q: What COVID precautions do you have in place for residents considering that the risk of outbreaks is high in shelters?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: We have a health screening that takes place at the front entrance. All residents are screened daily and anytime they come and go. We also require residents to wear masks while they're inside and to maintain proper physical distance.

Q: What happens when someone doesn't pass the health screening?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: We will arrange for the person to go and get tested for COVID and we'll arrange for transportation to a testing center. Then they will stay in an isolation centre until they have their results and we will hold their bed during that time. So far every single result that we've had this year has been negative and then they can come back. If the test result is positive, they would stay in the isolation center and be cared for there. We would not hold their bed for that length of time. However, they could be referred back to us if we have a bed available, or to another shelter, where there is a space available for them once they are ready to return.

Q: What sort of security is being provided for women fleeing violence?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: It is a 24/7 facility and staff are trained in issues of violence, domestic violence and trauma. We have security cameras onsite as well. That said, we are not a Violence Against Women shelter and we will make referrals to one of those shelters when needed as they have heightened security and a closer connection to the police and enhanced trauma support. The City also requires controlled access to all shelter locations. The front door is always locked and people have to buzz to get in. At Fatima House, once someone comes inside they are then in a locked vestibule where they can speak to staff, be assessed and then they can come into the house.

Q: I'm concerned about discarded needles.

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: We take safety very seriously and that includes collecting discarded needles if they do appear. We also do a walk-through with each resident and have them sign a Community Relations Contract to be sure they understand what the expectations are for being part of the community. We want people to be a part of the community and that means respecting the community and our neighbours as well.

About the design of the building:

Some people who attended the meeting had questions about the design of the building and the property itself.

Q: Why is there a big fence around the property? It is quite elaborate and dominates the corner.

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: This was a decision made by the landlord and we're happy to take feedback about it. It is perhaps a bit high, but it's permeable - you can see through it. Some of it is to offer a bit of privacy and I think there may be an opportunity to soften it a bit with some planting to make it less obtrusive. The fence is built inside the property line and we can re-visit its configuration if it becomes an issue with neighbouring private properties.

Q: Is there any outdoor space for the residents?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: Yes, there is a small outdoor space on the side of the building that can be used as a smoking area. There is also a 3rd floor deck space for community meals and a seating area.

Q: How big are the rooms and are they accessible?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: Yes, the rooms are small but that is an improvement over our current location and it's certainly our desire to offer more livable situations. Some rooms are meant for two people with shared bathrooms and we also have a number of single rooms with their own bathroom. There's a tremendous dignity that goes with having one's own bathroom. The building is fully accessible with a ramp out front, an elevator inside, and several rooms with fully accessible showers and fixtures.

About other nearby services:

The question of how Fatima House will interact with other similar services was brought up; as was the question of what will happen to the existing shelter that is moving.

Q: How will Fatima House interact with Sistering on Bloor?

A – Denise Knee, Fred Victor: We have collaborated with Sistering on a few projects and we have a track record of coordinating services with the women's drop-in downtown on Adelaide Street. We will often have the same women using the services and plan to work closely together. The Manager at Fatima House will be reaching out to them to see what we can do together. That service is a drop-in; not a shelter and so our services are different. A representative from Sistering has been invited to sit on the Community Liaison Committee.

Q: Can the Lombard Street site be used as shelter space over the winter given that shelters are all at capacity?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: Our long-term plan for the Lombard Street site is to provide permanent affordable housing. We may have an opportunity to make that happen at that site and that is part of the motivation for locating the program elsewhere. In the short term, there is a need for emergency shelter space in the winter. We are open to working with the City and making that space available if that is required.

About volunteering and connecting the shelter with the community:

Q: Will there be a role for individuals to support Fatima House as volunteers?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: Yes. Volunteer opportunities will be organized through the Community Liaison Committee and once that is up and running we'll have a contact number and contact details for people who want to volunteer.

Q: How can this facility help the community? Can neighbours engage with the space?

A – Keith Hambly, Fred Victor: This is a good question for the Community Liaison Committee to work on. We have a meeting room space on the 3rd floor. We anticipate working with the neighborhood around access. We're not sure what that looks like at this point and are very open to figuring out what is helpful for the community and the shelter.