

# What We Heard:

## 2025-2030 Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness

Stakeholder Engagement Report  
Executive Summary



Prepared by SN Management for Toronto Shelter & Support Services

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

The City of Toronto (City) is developing a five-year Strategic Plan that will be led by the Toronto Shelter and Support Services Division (TSSS). TSSS is the City's shelter system manager, directly operating and funding community agencies that deliver:

- Emergency shelter, 24-hour respite and day-time drop-in programs,
- Wrap-around support services, and
- Street outreach.

The 2025-2030 Strategic Plan will serve as a roadmap to support people experiencing homelessness through strategies and measures that:

- Improve homelessness prevention and shelter diversion,
- Increase pathways to housing, and
- Ensure comprehensive supports for people who are in the homelessness service system.

To address the complex factors that contribute to and sustain homelessness, the 2025-2030 Strategic Plan will have a City-wide focus, propose new interdivisional, multi-sectoral and intergovernmental strategies and provide a multi-year actionable blueprint for strategic decisions and investments around homelessness that will have lasting impact.

A key part of the process of developing the Strategic Plan is engagement with staff, partners, and other key stakeholders. TSSS contracted with SN Management in September 2024 to help plan, facilitate, and report on a stakeholder engagement process. This report summarizes and presents the analysis, key findings, and themes from the engagement. The report will inform the development of the Strategic Plan which will be presented to Toronto's City Council for approval in 2025.

## Stakeholder Engagement Methodology

Between September 2024 and December 2024, SN Management, together with TSSS staff, planned and facilitated 20 consultations reaching approximately 400 people. A consultation guide was used to ensure a consistent approach across all sessions and small group discussions. The guide asked participants to:

- Identify key homelessness issues in Toronto,
- Describe actions/strategies for homelessness prevention and shelter diversion,
- Describe limitations and opportunities for improving homelessness services and supports,
- Describe actions/strategies for transitioning people from homelessness to stable, permanent and supportive housing, and
- Identify five-year outcomes and indicators of success for the homelessness service system.

In addition, 176 people responded to the *Stakeholder Consultation Survey: Priorities for Addressing Homelessness in Toronto*, which was administered by TSSS between October and November 2024, and a literature review summarizing relevant reports helped to provide additional context to the consultations and the analysis of results. Two theoretical frameworks were drawn upon to organize the recommendations provided by the engagement participants into those that TSSS can directly be in control of implementing and those which it can help to influence through collaboration and advocacy.

## **Findings**

### *Key Homelessness Issues in Toronto Today*

Engagement participants described many factors that are contributing to homelessness and/or creating a demand for shelter that cannot be met. Many of these are complex, systemic, and intersecting in nature (i.e., immigration trends), while others are very specific to TSSS programming.

- There are growing income disparities, and the cost of living is increasing.
- There is a serious shortage of affordable and deeply affordable housing.
- Tenants lack eviction prevention supports and protections.
- Homelessness is increasingly stigmatized with many people strongly opposed to having shelters and homelessness supports in their neighbourhoods.
- Human services systems, such as the child welfare, justice and health/mental health systems, do not proactively address housing needs, and many people are left to transition from institutional settings into homelessness and shelter.

- The province has not increased the number of violence against women (VAW) shelters to match the rising demand due to increased family/gender based/intimate partner violence (GBV/IPV), particularly since the pandemic.
- The increasing numbers of homeless refugees and families fleeing violence are impacting shelter occupancy pressures.
- There is a dearth of addiction treatment, harm reduction and mental health services in the community to support people whose mental health or substance use puts their tenancy at risk, as well as a lack preventative supports.
- TSSS lacks dedicated homelessness strategies for preventing or addressing homelessness among youth and older adults.
- Shelter sector policies, processes, approaches and/or shelter environments reinforce a dependency on shelters and are not sufficiently driving staff or clients to be outcome/housing focussed.
- TSSS' Shelter Management Information System (SMIS) does not sufficiently enable interdivisional or intersectoral coordination and information sharing. As such interdivisional supports and services are not as coordinated as they could be or fully maximized to divert people from shelter or quickly transition them to community.
- TSSS' Central Intake is under-resourced and does not have the capacity to systematically match clients to homelessness/shelter programs that align with their needs.

### *Recommendations for Homelessness Prevention and Shelter Diversion<sup>1</sup>*

TSSS' mandate does not extend to homelessness prevention in a significant way, and primarily falls under the scope of the Housing Secretariat who oversees the *HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan*<sup>2</sup>. However, the current demand for shelter beds and pressures being placed on staff and the homelessness system to respond to pressures is not sustainable. To this end, the engagement participants recommended that the Division:

1. Develop and roll out a comprehensive homelessness prevention plan, which includes a focus on shelter diversion, in recognition that, over

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<sup>1</sup> Homelessness prevention and shelter diversion both aim to stop people from becoming homeless. In this report, "homelessness prevention" refers to broader strategies that can help individuals at risk of losing their housing before they reach a crisis point. "Shelter diversion" is once such homelessness prevention strategy which involves working with people at the point of contact with the shelter system to find them alternative housing options instead of entering the shelter system.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/94f0-housing-to-2020-2030-action-plan-housing-secretariat.pdf>

the long term, an upstream approach will relieve pressure on shelters and the homelessness service system overall.

2. Develop and roll out a dedicated plan for addressing youth homelessness as a critical component for preventing adult homelessness. Within the youth plan, prioritize youth homelessness prevention and diverting youth from shelters. In addition to TSSS-led initiatives, this includes engagement with other orders of government, such as the provincial Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and other human services sectors, including child welfare, youth justice, education and youth employment, to promote policies and programs that identify and support youth at risk of homelessness.
3. Develop and roll out a comprehensive series of actions to divert older adults from the shelter system to alternative options in the community. In addition to programs that TSSS can advance, this requires significant engagement and collaboration with the long-term care and home care sectors.
4. Work collaboratively with the Housing Secretariat to:
  - Influence and support efforts to expand housing benefits, financial assistance programs and rent geared to income (RGI) or subsidized housing.
  - Advocate for more supportive housing and develop coordinated pathways into supportive housing, in collaboration with other supportive housing providers across all sectors/funding programs.
  - Enhance programs such as Eviction Prevention in the Community (EPIC) and Toronto Rent Bank to help prevent evictions.
  - Engage with Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), the Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation and other non-profit seniors housing providers to strengthen supports for tenants at risk of eviction.
5. Work collaboratively with health and mental health partners and correctional facilities to ensure that no one is discharged to the community without a housing plan.
6. Work collaboratively with other City divisions to advocate for stronger municipal controls, requirements, by-laws or incentives aimed at maintaining the current supply of affordable housing, promoting the development of new affordable housing stock, and protecting tenants from evictions.
7. Advocate to provincial and federal levels of government:
  - To secure funding and implement long term solutions that will address the significant pressure on the shelter system resulting from the increasing number of homeless refugees and collaborate

- with the immigrant and refugee serving sectors to establish referral pathways and culturally appropriate programming.
- For increased provincial VAW shelter beds and program support to address the unmet needs of people fleeing IBV/GBV.
  - For stronger rent control policy.
  - For policy and programming that will alleviate poverty and promote income security, including increases to Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) rates and the minimum wage.

### *Homelessness Services and Supports*

To enhance homeless services and supports, which TSSS is directly responsible for planning, delivering, and managing, participants suggested TSSS should:

- Ground policy and programming in core values and principles, including compassionate, client-centered and need based care, equity, anti-racism, and cultural competency, and introduce a disability lens.
- Establish an accountability framework which defines goals, activities, short, medium, and long-term outcomes, and metrics, and includes mechanisms for capturing data that will enable performance to be monitored, evaluated, and reported.
- Establish a process at Central Intake to assess and match people to the most suitable shelter program, and in parallel improve, SMIS and information sharing to support needs based and client-centered care and service coordination among all homelessness providers, other City divisions and key community providers.
- Strengthen processes that reinforce client rights, responsibilities, and engagement in service delivery.
- Address wage disparities across the sector, promote safe work environments, invest in staff training and development, and create pathways to employment in homelessness serving organizations for people with lived experience of homelessness.
- Develop purpose-built shelters with a maximum capacity of 100 beds, with a built design that meets the specific needs of diverse populations, particularly families with children.
- Build the capacity of the homelessness services system as a whole to deliver culturally competent services and supports for diverse populations, ensuring cross sector Anti-Black racism strategies. At the same time, continue to provide dedicated programs, spaces or

- shelters for populations who are best served in a population-specific setting, including youth, families, older adults, 2SLGBTQ+ clients and refugees.
- Continue to work with Indigenous partners to advance commitments to Reconciliation and create Indigenous specific shelters and homelessness services.
  - Enhance the amount and quality of on-site shelter programming, including client intake and orientation, case management, harm reduction, group programming, employment and life skills development and peer programming.
  - Increase access to transitional shelter programs, in particular for youth, older adults, refugees and people who require additional supports to live independently due to challenges related to mental health or substance use.
  - Work collaboratively with Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) and Social Development and Finance Administration (SDFA) initiatives such as FOCUS and SPIDER to coordinate service delivery to shared clients, enabled by information sharing processes and policies.
  - Increase access to on-site health supports and improve referral pathways to health service providers by strengthening partnerships with primary care, mental health, addiction and harm reduction, disability, seniors support and home care, and hospitals.
  - Work collaboratively with the settlement and employment sectors to improve on-site access to programs and to strengthen referral pathways and supports for clients.

### *Transitions from Homelessness*

TSSS can pursue the following strategies, some of which can be activated by TSSS alone, and others through interdivisional, intersectoral and intergovernmental collaboration and advocacy, to facilitate transitions from homelessness to housing:

1. Clarify expectations and accountability for achieving housing outcomes with clients and with homelessness staff/providers.
2. Proactively connect clients who are outdoors, in encampments or in shelters to community supports and resources, before and after they leave the encampment/shelter to build confidence and sense of belonging.
3. Further build-up life-skills and connections to community supports so that clients can transition to housing safely and successfully.



4. Work collaboratively with the Housing Secretariat to:
  - Embed follow-up supports across the sector through funding allocations, service standards, targets and performance monitoring.
  - Strengthen engagement with private and public sector landlords to increase housing options for clients.
  - Build public understanding of homelessness and support for shelters through strategic and targeted community engagement, education and awareness.
  - Advocate for more supportive housing<sup>3</sup>.
5. Work collaboratively with other City divisions including the Housing Secretariat and TESS to link clients to housing access and stabilization supports, including the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB)/housing benefits, and to advocate for RGI and/or subsidized housing and rapid housing initiatives.
6. Advocate to other orders of government for investments in affordable housing and income security.

### *Five Year Outcomes and Indicators of Success*

Overall, engagement participants believe that, with strategic and outcome focused investments, homelessness in the City can be transformed over the coming five years. Participants envisioned the following changes for policies, processes, and programs:

- TSSS will have clear performance outcomes for the Strategic Plan and will routinely measure and report its performance to stakeholders.
- TSSS will have established a Homelessness Prevention Strategy which includes shelter diversion targets to help manage shelter flow.
- Central Intake and SMIS will be improved to drive needs based and client-centered service planning and delivery, intersectoral information sharing and coordinated client care.
- Referral partnerships with cross-sector supportive and affordable housing providers will be in place and there will be streamlined and timely pathways to appropriate housing options.
- All shelters will have sufficient numbers of qualified staff, in particular, housing workers, case managers and follow-up workers. Shelters will provide integrated health services, including on-site primary care,

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<sup>3</sup> In this report, affordable housing refers to housing that is financial affordable to people. Supportive housing is affordable and also includes the provision of support services to help people live independently and retain their tenancy.

mental health, addiction treatment and harm reduction services and/or referral to these supports in the community.

- There will be enough shelter beds in the system to meet the demand for shelter.
- Transitional shelter programs will be available to clients who require additional time and/or support to transition successfully to housing.
- There will be more affordable housing, including more RGI and subsidized housing units and there will also be more supportive housing in the City.

In addition to changes in policy, process and programming, participants envision the following impacts for clients and people experiencing homelessness.

- Clients will have timely access to Central Intake and an emergency shelter bed when they need it.
- Clients will receive compassionate and culturally competent care from a multi-disciplinary team of staff, and supports that are tailored, needs based and comprehensive.
- Clients will leave shelter with the supports and skills they need to secure and retain their housing/tenancy.
- Less people will be using the shelter system, and in particular, there will be fewer youth, refugees, families and older adults requiring shelter.
- People's stay in shelter and experience with homelessness will be shorter.
- Fewer people will return to shelter after transitioning to housing.
- There will be no homeless encampments.
- Far fewer people will experience homelessness.
- Stigma associated with homelessness will be reduced and the public will have a greater understanding of homelessness issues.

## **Conclusion**

Close to 600 people provided input to TSSS' upcoming Strategic Plan through stakeholder engagement activities. While many different issues were identified and many actions recommended, there are some that were consistently put forward. Fundamentally, homelessness services must be grounded in values that center the client through compassionate, needs based, culturally competent and trauma informed care that reflects commitments to equity, anti-racism and Reconciliation.

To position itself for sustainability and impact, TSSS needs to establish measurable performance indicators for the Strategic Plan and monitor and report these to its stakeholders. Central Intake should be enhanced so that clients are matched to programs that meet their needs, and the Division's SMIS/information management systems should be improved to better facilitate cross shelter and interdivisional information sharing and service coordination.

Without doubt, there is a role for population specific spaces and/or shelters, in particular for youth, families with children and older adults. TSSS should continue to work with Indigenous partners to advance Indigenous led homelessness solutions and it should strengthen intergovernmental efforts to address refugee homelessness. However, in the context of limited resources, it is critical that the homelessness services system as a whole build capacity and competency for effectively working with diverse populations. There is significant expertise and innovation among service providers that can be leveraged to strengthen service delivery and avoid "cookie cutter" approaches.

To create pathways from homelessness to housing that do not result in returns to homelessness, TSSS should increase transitional shelter programming and collaborate with interdivisional and intersectoral partners to deliver initiatives that build up client's health, mental health, life skills and employment prospects and improve access to supportive and/or appropriate housing. Ultimately to reduce homelessness and flow into shelters, and facilitate successful housing outcomes, TSSS must prioritize homelessness prevention, including shelter diversion. This will require significant interdivisional work and advocacy to other orders of government for policies and programs that create more and affordable housing, protect tenants and increase people's economic security.

There is an opportunity for TSSS to draw upon the collective expertise shared through the consultations and prioritize actionable recommendations that can realize immediate and longer-term impacts on homelessness.