

January 16, 2018

Open Letter to Members of City Council,

In late December 2017, Toronto faced historic freezing temperatures, as a polar vortex pummeled through the eastern part of North America. Reports of shelters bursting at the seams from front line staff, volunteers and activists revealed critical issues within the shelter system. Dedicated city staff worked feverishly around the clock in response to the demand on the shelter system, to keep street-involved and homeless people fed, safe and sheltered. This period has stretched both clients and staff emotionally and psychologically.

Additional emergency respite centres have been opened to respond to the demand, and each have filled up as quickly as they opened. The shelter system is straining under the incredible demand for service. Reports from front-line workers and service providers for the past 4 years have indicated that shelters are at capacity every night, regardless of the weather. It has become clear that more is needed to respond to the incredible demand in the city.

Homelessness is on the rise and Toronto and Ontario must concurrently build sufficient new shelter beds and transitional housing beds to accommodate this growth and to meet the 90% occupancy cap rate set out by City Council in 1999 and reconfirmed in 2001, 2002 and 2013. Currently and for many years, occupancy levels regularly reach 97-100%, meaning those who need beds risk not being able to find them. Ideally, the widest range of affordable housing would exist for those who need it and no one would ever find themselves homeless in Toronto.

However the stark reality facing those without adequate homes is a multi-year wait for supportive housing and 181,000 people on the waitlist for affordable housing. Due to the number of homeless deaths, it is not feasible or humane to wait until enough affordable housing is available rather than build new shelter space.

The strains on and growing costs of the shelter system have been revealed as capacity levels have continued to climb. With over 1500 hotel beds under contract and approximately 650-700 individuals sleeping rough each night in Out of the Cold facilities, winter respite and warming centres, it is evident that the City cannot avail itself of a proper remedy to the issue without a significant increase in new and permanent shelter beds, alongside provincially funded transitional housing. Respite centres have been a means for the City to respond quickly to the incredible demand in this cold weather, but do not have the same standards or supports that should exist within a permanent shelter.

Given this, it would be prudent for City Council to take appropriate action to ensure that our shelter system is meeting the needs of Toronto's homeless. It is essential to create a strategy to ensure that the City is not responding after the fact every winter.

It cannot be overstated that, embedded in the shelter issue, is also the critical need for health care support from the Province - including mental health, harm reduction and other primary care supports in all shelters, drop-ins, respite centres, Out of the Cold programs, and warming centres.

The community agencies striving to support this vulnerable population with complex needs are chronically under-resourced. Untreated health issues include trauma, chronic disease, developmental disabilities, mental health needs, substance use and acquired brain injuries. The

need for better response and ongoing supports from the Province is increasing with a growing complexity of health needs.

Substantive funding allocations are needed to enable mobile full primary care, harm reduction and mental health services so that street-involved individuals can access supports where they are located, be it in an emergency shelter or a drop-in. This work will require cooperation, coordination and additional funding from the Ministry of Health and Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network (LHIN).

New shelters must be opened with adequate wrap-around community supports. Existing shelters must include enhanced social and health services to dramatically improve the quality of care for vulnerable individuals. City Council needs to centralize “support and housing”, recognizing the long-term goal to create fully resourced supportive housing to create a permanent solution to homelessness.

It is critical that the Ministry of Health and the LHINS act urgently to improve the quality of care for vulnerable residents. Clear political leadership and urgent action on these matters is expected from Toronto residents and this is exactly what the Province and City Council must deliver now.

We believe the following actions should be undertaken to address the pressures in our shelter system:

1. Reaffirm the City's 90% shelter occupancy cap in shelters across all sectors.
2. Retain operations of the necessary respite centres, warming centres, and drop-in programs beyond the scheduled April 15, 2018 timeline to respond to the overcrowding in the shelter system.
3. Work with the operators of the Out of the Cold programs with the aim of keeping the program running beyond the scheduled April 15, 2018 timeline to respond to the overcrowding in the shelter system.
4. Immediately begin preparations for the 2018-2019 Winter season, including consultation with all interested parties in these preparations.
5. Ensure necessary budget adjustments are made for 2018 and subsequent years.
6. The Ministry of Health and the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network immediately develop, in consultation with service providers, a comprehensive and funded plan to provide adequate health services, including mental health supports, throughout the shelter system, including within shelters, winter respite centres, warming centres, drop-in centres and Out of the Cold programs.
7. A review of the following:
 - a) Implementing 1000+ new permanent shelter beds in the system;
 - b) Number of current permanent shelter beds in the City of Toronto;
 - c) Number of motel and hotel beds used as shelter beds in the City of Toronto;

- d) Number of emergency spaces (mats, cots or chairs), including those at winter respite centres and 24-hour drop-ins, available in the City of Toronto;
- e) Breakdown of replacement shelter beds vs. actual new shelter beds planned for 2018 and 2019;
- f) Number of permanent shelter beds required today in order to meet our 90% occupancy target;
- g) Total shelter budget approved in each of the last 10 years;
- h) Number of health, mental health, and harm reduction workers employed by the City currently working within the shelter system;
- i) Number of frontline health and harm reduction staff funded by the Province working with the shelter system;
- j) Number of transitional housing beds currently funded by the Province of Ontario in the City of Toronto;
- k) Current waiting list for transitional housing beds in the City of Toronto;
- l) Details of the current Province of Ontario imposed cap on shelter funding for the City of Toronto;
- m) Details of the current Government of Canada funding allocations to support shelter services in Toronto;
- n) A funding and capacity comparison of provincial investments in shelters, including permanent and transitional shelter beds and respite centres, made to Toronto and other GTA municipalities, and an evaluation of those investments relative to the numbers of homeless individuals in Toronto and GTA municipalities.

Sincerely,

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam
Ward 27
Toronto Centre-Rosedale

Councillor Joe Cressy
Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina

Councillor Paula Fletcher
Ward 30, Toronto-Danforth

Mayor John Tory

Councillor Gary Crawford
Chair, Budget Committee

Councillor James Pasternak
Chair, Community
Development and Recreation
Committee

Councillor Joe Mihevc
Poverty Reduction Advocate

Councillor Ana Bailao
Chair, Affordable Housing
Committee