

June 7 2021

Sent via email - councilmeeting@toronto.ca

Dear Mayor Tory and Toronto City Councillors,

We are writing today to share our recent statement on the encampments (appended to this letter) of people experiencing homelessness in Toronto, and to support the recommendations in the City Manager's Report for Item CC34.1, *COVID-19 Response Update: Protecting People Experiencing Homelessness and Ensuring the Safety of the Shelter System*.

There is no doubt that the encampments represent and pose a complex set of challenges. Homelessness in our city is a serious crisis. Its scope and our collective ability to marshal resources and adequate responses to it are only exacerbated by the pandemic. It is also clear that all Torontonians are weary after 15 months of lockdowns and losses. People with homes near the encampments are understandably looking forward to using the parks this summer; children and families are eager to attend outdoor camps and events. People living in encampments are, well, homeless. They face the toughest challenges coping with COVID-19 with no place to "shelter at home."

Despite all these challenges, what is undeniable however, is that homelessness is a violation of the human right to housing. The encampments embody this violation, and any response the City takes must start with a human rights approach. This is ground zero for the progressive fulfillment of this right for all Torontonians, committed to by Council in the updated Housing Charter and the Housing TO Action Plan.

The TAEH agrees with this report that the encampments are "not a solution to unsheltered homelessness." Only housing is. This is why we strongly urge increased investment by Council into the City's ability to deliver even more comprehensive Housing First options to people living in them. And to be effective in a rapid but also sustainable way, we must have additional deep enough housing allowances to access rental housing in Toronto's market.

In other words, any action in regard to the encampments must be first and foremost a human right and a housing one. The City's overall response to parks must prioritize this, especially during our unprecedented crisis, over landscaping and security ones.

It is important to be clear at this point that the Alliance and our many partners see and appreciate how much more active the City has been in housing solutions to homelessness over the last few years. More new housing has been created, targets for supportive and other housing have been set, and the link between homelessness and housing has been explicitly grounded in the Housing TO Action Plan's vision that homelessness becomes rare, brief, and non-recurring in Toronto.

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We understand that supporting the people living in encampments to achieve successful housing outcomes is not only a City of Toronto responsibility. Over 25 years of successive housing funding cuts by federal and provincial governments, along with their various stepping away from their policy and programming responsibilities have left Council in a serious bind, attempting to face the current need and challenges without enough resources to do so.

Therefore, we support the recommendations in this report to advocate again to the federal and Ontario governments for capital and ongoing operating funding. The Alliance is doing the same. We support the City working with GTA municipalities and Ontario to better coordinate housing and supports to serve communities better. To support these efforts, we suggest also that the inter-governmental Housing Action Table proposed in Item PH19.11 at the December 2020 Council meeting be convened immediately.

Council's leadership on shifting the discussion and City policies, supported of course by forward-thinking City staff, to housing as the solution to homelessness is noted above and in many other TAEH letters and deputations. In order to meet the current challenges with limited resources from other orders of government, now is the time to complement the welcomed redirection of \$47 million in capital funding last year to support the recommendations of the Shelter Recovery Task Force with operational funding and policy change. The TAEH, and of course our partners the Toronto Shelter Network, are eager to assist in any way we can.

Finally, and as expanded upon in our statement, the TAEH believes that there must be another way to have the discussion about encampments across all interested parties. A way that is clear-eyed about why the encampments exist and the human rights violations they represent. A way that does not demonize anyone: not people experiencing homelessness; not people wanting to enjoy the parks during warmer weather; not the City officials or outreach workers nor the advocates for improving our collective responses.

There are ways we can more meaningfully engage with each other, including with the untapped expertise of people with lived experience of homelessness, to create human rights based, Housing First solutions to the encampments. There is a chance here to imagine and build a healthier, more diverse, and responsive housing ecosystem in Toronto - together.

Sincerely,



Kira Heineck, Executive Director

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