



TO: Planning and Housing Committee

DATE: September 22, 2020

RE: PH16.8 - Addressing Housing and Homelessness Issues in Toronto through Intergovernmental Partnerships

Good morning, My name is Sonja Nerad. I am the Interim Executive Director of the Toronto Shelter Network, more commonly known as the TSN. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

For those who are unfamiliar with the Toronto Shelter Network, we represent more than 35 organizations that collectively deliver Toronto's 24 hour homelessness services, including traditional shelters, respite centres, 24-hour drop-ins and now the COVID-19 hotels. Our members include organizations such as the Fred Victor Centre, Homes First Society, Dixon Hall, The Salvation Army, Sojourn House, Streethaven, Covenant House, Eva's, and many others. We enhance the collective capacity of homelessness service providers in Toronto through knowledge sharing and learning, collaborative planning, research and advocacy and championing access to housing with dignity for people experiencing homelessness. This past summer we participated on the Shelter Recovery Task Force, and had an opportunity to contribute to the Strategy being recommended today for preventing and ending homelessness in Toronto.

Just over a year ago, in our deputation to the Executive Committee regarding the city's "Housing Now" initiative, we maintained that the expansion of the shelter system, as it was rolling out at that time, could not continue. We argued that continuously investing in emergency shelter, while not addressing the fact that shelter providers have no affordable housing referral options for their clients, will not contribute to reducing homelessness in this City. We urged the City to begin redirecting a substantial portion of the millions of dollars earmarked for increasing shelter beds towards other parts of our housing continuum, including more transitional and supportive housing, portable housing allowances and rent supplements, and towards building new affordable and deeply affordable housing.

We are back today to express our support for the recommendations being put forward by the Executive Director of the Housing Secretariat and the General Manager of the Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, which I will refer to as SSHA. We are here today because we now know that the strategy for managing COVID-19 and the strategy for reducing homelessness are the same. We believe that we have a unique and perhaps once in a lifetime opportunity in Toronto to leverage our experience with COVID-19 and make the shift from sheltering people to helping people secure and retain housing that is affordable and dignified.

Since the onset of the pandemic in March, homelessness service providers have been working tirelessly to implement a rapid and significant emergency response to protect people experiencing homelessness

and the staff who serve them. Not six months ago, there were about 72 shelters, respites and 24-hour women's drop-ins providing shelter and support to about 7,000 people daily. When COVID-19 began to creep across the globe, we knew that people experiencing homelessness in Toronto would be at heightened risk for the virus as many experience complex health and mental health issues or are immune-compromised. Homelessness providers, in collaboration with the SSHA, Toronto Public Health and our health sector partners, responded to the threat of COVID-19 by implementing a number of guidelines, tools, and practices. One of the most complex responses to COVID-19 has been the roll out of an extensive hotel program, whereby more than 1,500 people residing in shelters, respites, and 24 hour drop-ins were relocated to approximately 35 hotel programs to promote greater physical distancing. As a result, thousands of homeless people, many of whom have spent years in congregate shelter settings are now living in dignified and safe spaces where they can self-isolate, practice precautionary hygiene, and receive the service and supports they require during these challenging times. The gratitude expressed by those who have moved to the hotels has been overwhelming. They are exceedingly grateful for what they refer to as their new homes, a place where they have their own washroom and some new found privacy. While most of us take these things for granted, for thousands of people in this city, something as seemingly insignificant as taking an uninterrupted shower is in fact a luxury.

In addition to the hotel program, more than 1,500 people were moved from the shelter system into permanent housing. For shelter providers, COVID-19, while incredibly challenging, provided us with the impetus we needed to start shifting shelters towards housing and we believe that moving forward on the recommendations presented by the Housing Secretariat and SSHA can help to make sure our pandemic response is enduring.

The Task Force report states that the average cost of operating a supportive housing unit is \$24,000 annually. On the other hand, the cost of operating a single shelter bed is variable, as much as \$40,000 annually, pre-COVID. These past six months have shown that providing housing for people experiencing homelessness save lives. Further, providing housing also makes economic sense.

As such, we support the recommendations put forward by the Housing Secretariat and SSHA, namely

- That City Council endorse the Housing and People Action Plan and the COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy as the framework for prioritization of the City's Intergovernmental advocacy work on housing and homelessness over the next 24 months, and to complement the City's HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan.
- That City Council urgently request that the Federal and Provincial governments support the City's 24-month plan to deliver 3,000 affordable rental and supportive homes comprised of:
 - 1,000 permanent modular homes
 - 1,000 new homes through acquisitions, renovations and "shovel ready" projects;
 - 1,000 additional new portable and flexible Canada-Ontario Housing Benefits to help households secure housing available for rent in Toronto and across the region.
- That City Council request the Provincial and Federal Governments to urgently allocate funding for additional mental health care, and a continuum of substance use treatment and overdose

prevention supports delivered by health and community partners, as part of an integrated enhanced service model to meet the increasingly complex needs of individuals that are currently experiencing homelessness to help transition them into permanent housing.

In considering these recommendations there are some points that we would like to emphasize. First, we are tremendously excited by the inter-governmental and sectoral relationships that enabled us to activate our response during COVID-19, specifically with our colleagues in the health sector. We also appreciate the multi-pronged approach reflected in the recommendations put forward jointly by the Housing Secretariat and SSHA. Clearly, a unified solution to homelessness for the City of Toronto should be activated through bold, visionary and cross sectoral collaboration.

At the same time, we are concerned that the recommendations put forward by the Housing Secretariat and SSHA rely heavily on other orders of government. TSN agencies have demonstrated their ability to pivot during this pandemic, and there is a lot of capacity, history and commitment to leverage so as to capitalize on the momentum that has been generated these past six months. Therefore we are asking to be considered equal partners, working collaboratively with the City and our colleagues at the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness to operationalize the Shelter Recovery Strategy. We believe this will help to maximize what we can do municipally if other orders of government do not come through. We are especially interested in identifying actionable priorities that will continue to move us towards a housing focused system over the coming 12 months.

Many people have made significant progress towards their personal goals and towards establishing stability in their housing during the pandemic. However, many others have struggled because they lack access to wraparound services and supports, including primary care and mental health and addictions treatments. We emphasize the recommendation of immediately establishing a robust service model across the housing continuum for people, especially those with complex needs so that we have the capacity to foster health and well-being and enable people to secure and retain housing that is dignified.

People who experience homelessness are incredibly diverse. TSN member agencies work with people of all ages, with the first people of Turtle Island, with refugees who have come to Toronto from all corners of the world, with people who are racialized and with those who identify as LGBTQ2S. Each person has a unique story, valuable abilities and strengths and distinct needs and limitations. As such, there is no – one – size fits all solution to housing. While some people thrive in housing with supports, others may require fewer supports; some people may do best in housing that is located downtown or in large apartment complexes while others do best in the suburbs or smaller communities. As we move forward to deliver affordable and supportive housing we urge the City to continue taking its guidance from the Black and Indigenous communities. We also ask that the unique needs of youth, women, seniors, LGBTQ2+ community members and refugees. Doing so will help us to implement short term recovery plans that are appropriate, relevant and safe. Doing so will also be an important change management activity as we begin to repurpose shelters and facilities that may no longer be viable in the context of COVID-19 to create a robust housing continuum that provides a range of options and flexible service models for all people.

In closing the TSN looks forward to having a seat at the implementation table and to helping facilitate this much desired transformation. Thank you for hearing us today.



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