



February 24, 2021

The Honourable Christine Elliott
Minister of Health
5th Floor, 777 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Re: Prioritization of vaccinations for people experiencing homelessness in Ontario

Dear Minister Elliot,

On behalf of the Toronto Shelter Network (TSN) I am reaching out to you today to request that you prioritize vaccinations for people experiencing homelessness, those staying in shelters, and the homelessness and housing sector staff who support them as a matter of urgent public health protection.

TSN is an umbrella organization, incorporated in 2014 and comprised of more than 35 member organizations that together operate more than 100 emergency shelter, respite, 24 hour drop-in and COVID hotel programs. We champion the best housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, and we enhance the collective capacity diverse homelessness service providers in Toronto through knowledge sharing and learning, collaborative planning, research and advocacy.

At a time when the best public health recommendations available suggest staying at home, limiting all contact with others outside immediate family members, and protecting oneself with masking and sanitizing supplies; not having a home makes it impossible to follow the only known effective strategies for protecting oneself and one's communities. As a direct result, transmission rates of COVID-19 in the homelessness sector have been high across Toronto. Some published evidence has suggested the rate of spread is three times that of the housed population, often spreading quickly once the virus penetrates shelter spaces, despite best efforts to implement public health directives and guidance for enhanced protection of clients and staff. The emergence of variants of concern has intensified the sense of urgency to prioritize and protect homeless populations.

People experiencing homelessness are some of the most vulnerable people in society, living on average over 25 years less than people who are housed while facing deep inequities in access to physical and mental health care, social supports, and affordable housing. Established evidence has demonstrated that people experiencing homelessness who are older than 55 years of age have health profiles and vulnerability similar to seniors older than 70. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, people experiencing homelessness have faced vastly disproportionate infection rates with 20 times more hospitalizations, 10 times more admissions to Intensive Care Units



(ICUs) and five times greater mortality. This is despite major initiatives across the country, including Toronto, that have included specialized testing, tracing, isolation with clinical and social supports and preventive distancing strategies.

In order to protect society's most vulnerable, the province of Ontario needs to prioritize people experiencing homelessness alongside those in long-term care as being at risk by virtue of their congregate living environment, physical risk, and weakened support structures. This includes directing public health units and health planning tables across the province that will be responsible for rolling out the vaccination program to prioritize homeless populations.

More than 8,000 individuals in Toronto, and thousands more across Ontario experience homelessness. With the risk this virus places on them, those who work to support them and the communities they stay in, it is essential we start the process of vaccination of the homeless now. It is imperative that we include the most vulnerable who can benefit most from the protection afforded by COVID vaccination. While we do this, we should also work to ensure that everyone in Ontario is able to realize their right to a home – now enshrined in Canadian law – so that no one needs to experience such vulnerability moving forwards.

Once again, I urge you to prioritize vaccinations for people experiencing homelessness. Thank you for your time, attention and action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sonja Nerad".

Sonja Nerad
Executive Lead
Toronto Shelter Network

cc: The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of the Province of Ontario
General (retired) Rick Hillier, Chair, COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Taskforce
Patricia Mueller, President, Toronto Shelter Network