

Statement on Shelter Occupancy

September 6 2022



The Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH) and the Toronto Shelter Network (TSN) are deeply concerned about the current occupancy pressures across the 24-hour emergency homelessness system and their impacts on thousands of people who are not able to access emergency and housing supports. We are at a breaking point in what has already been an emergency for some time now.

Background

A review of the [City of Toronto system flow data](#) indicates that the shelter system is strained. Between June 2021 and June 2022, the shelter using population increased from 8,072 to 9,752, an increase of 18%. The increase during this time is driven primarily by the following groups of shelter clients:

- The number of refugees increased by 150% from 998 to 2,499;
- The number of family users increased by 40% from 1,276 to 2,218; and
- Youth and Indigenous populations both increased by 19%.

Flow out of the system has not kept pace. Since January 2022, 4,711 people entered the system while 3,848 left the system. Consistently there are 20% more people entering the system than leaving it. The 8,000 beds in our system are 100% occupied each night, and [Central Intake data](#) indicates that in June a **hundred** people each day are not able to access emergency shelter. It is not surprising then that more people are living on the streets, that there are still many encampments across the city, and that an increasing number of individual tents are being set up.

Lost Opportunities

The impact of the pandemic, coupled with a long history of patchwork approaches to addressing homelessness by successive City governments, has resulted in many lost opportunities for addressing system capacity and occupancy pressures, including:

- Access to the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB), meant to allow shelter clients cover their rental costs in the private market, is not maximized. Numerous concerns have been expressed about the significant digital access and data literacy ~~are~~ required to apply and maintain the benefit. As a result, many shelter users face significant barriers accessing and utilizing the program and their movement out of the shelter system is delayed or not possible. At the same time, maintenance of the program places increased strain on housing support teams.
- Advanced planning to be ready for the re-opening of international borders when the pandemic waned did not happen. Therefore, the current state of the shelter system mirrors the situation before the onset of the pandemic, when 30% of the shelter population was comprised of refugee claimants. To date, one new hotel program, comprised of 260 beds dedicated for refugees has been

approved. Unfortunately, with 26% of shelter beds occupied by refugees, this will do little to address system wide capacity issues.

- Evidence-based practice in creating successful pathways from homelessness to housing has not been prioritized:
 - Current budget allocations to the City's and community providers' Streets to Homes programs are not enough to maintain fidelity to the proven Housing First model.
 - The recent [Toronto Auditor's Report](#) identifies the lack of clear and consistent approaches for providing case management and housing supports.
 - Income supports such as rent supplements are not deep enough and there are not enough available to allow the majority of people currently in shelters who only need income support to end their homelessness.
 - The laudable development of a data strategy, with its By Name List, to support Coordinated Access to housing by the Shelter, Supports and Housing Administration (SSHA) is not funded deeply enough to achieve its maximum impact.

An example of the impact of not embracing and investing in best practices such as these is seen in the number of families experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Family programs are operating at 100% occupancy and the number of service users has increased by 89% in the past year.

- The enhanced new shelter model with its focus on housing, and its complimentary shelter and health framework, first announced at least five years ago, has not yet been rolled out across the sector. Consequently, the promise of an equitably and properly funded service sector remains unfulfilled.
- The welcomed establishment of the Housing Secretariat and its increased responsibilities for housing has not been resourced well enough by Council to address the urgent housing needs in what is North America's fifth largest city.

Service providers are turning people away from shelter night after night. In response they have taken steps to increase occupancy where they can. Many providers have reconfigured their spaces to add beds, and in some instances storage spaces without ventilation are being used in what is still an ongoing pandemic. Certainly, we can and must do better than this.

Bold and Strategic Leadership

The shelter system has long faced occupancy pressures - driven in large part by the increasing lack of affordable housing; the divestment of housing to the municipal level without taxation powers, and the federal governments negation of responsibility for refugees displaced by global crisis. Historically, we have responded by building more and more emergency responses - emergency shelters, respites, 24-hour drop-ins, refugee hotels and with the pandemic, more hotel programs. History has shown these responses do not reduce homelessness and are not effective strategies for ending a person's homelessness.

TSN and TAEH believe that doing better means that we cannot do what we have done in the past. City Council acknowledged this with its strategic shift of direction in 2020 ([Item EC16.1](#)) to repurpose funds committed to more shelter beds into permanent housing options. We must now seize every

opportunity to build on this important shift. The recent acquisition of the Bond Hotel by the City and its plan to turn it into a mix of deeply affordable and supportive housing is an excellent step in this direction. The TAEH and TSN welcomed this opportunity in a [statement](#) released in late August.

At the same time, the Hotel Transition Report, meant to be released in July has been pushed to September. Given the absence of clear and transparent communications, there is some concern that the report will eventually send the shelter system back to high density, low service provision, congregate settings. This is not doing better; this is a rejection of all the lessons we learned during the pandemic.

Over the past year, both TSN and TAEH have appeared before multiple City of Toronto committees to advocate for more assertive action in creating an effective homelessness to housing continuum. This means reducing our reliance on emergency/band-aid solutions and investing our resources in prevention and diversion strategies, and housing and housing supports to right size the shelter system creating flow into housing. Current shelters must be resourced to deliver best practice during these changes, and new resources must be allocated to housing solutions.

We know that all orders of government must step up and do their part. The province's lack of investment in affordable housing and support services is beyond negligible, as is funding only 100 COHBs per month in Toronto which serves the majority of Ontario's homeless population. The federal government must work with the City on a proper refugee integration strategy and start investing in support services for people experiencing homelessness in order to maximize the impact of the new homes developed through their Rapid Housing Initiative.

There is also more we can do here. The City Council approved [Homelessness Solutions Service Plan](#) and the [2020-2030 Housing TO Action Plan](#) lay out sound strategic actions, but they must be properly resourced through the City's annual budget in order to meet its promise. Prioritizing City funds, and drawing on the capacity of City staff and community partners, can make important inroads by:

- Developing a real prevention and diversion strategy, and properly resourcing it;
- Implementing the new shelter service model and health services framework system-wide and continuously monitoring its alignment with evidence-based practices;
- Increasing income and rental supports with City funds;
- Investing more deeply into Streets to Homes and community agency capacity to deliver an intense, client-focused Housing First outreach model to people living outside;
- Developing a made-in-Toronto supportive housing service model;
- Equalizing funding allocations ensuring per diem and salary parity for purchase of service shelters so that they can be effectively resourced to deliver client and housing focused services;
- Fast tracking rapid housing initiatives, committing to evidence based, outside the box strategies; and
- Increasing the pressure on the provincial and federal governments to invest in supportive and affordable housing at the municipal level.

After more than two years of battling Covid-19 and the opioid crisis, and facing unprecedented staffing shortages and deficits, providers are being forced to deny individuals access to shelter daily. Service workers and agencies have reached the tipping point.

The TSN and TAEH, are willing and able to bring together our resources and expertise from across Toronto's shelter services and supportive housing sectors to immediately take on the challenges of better service delivery in collaboration with our city partners. The stronger relationships between our community networks and the Shelter, Supports and Housing Administration (SSHA) and the Housing Secretariat forged by responding to the pandemic together can be leveraged now to do even more.

We reiterate here our call for a joint *City and Community Emergency Task Force*, made repeatedly over the last Council term, and adopted by Council in December 2020 ([Item PH19.11](#)). By bringing government and community experts in rapid re-housing and other coordinated approaches together in a strategically focused way, such a task force can maximize current approaches to create more immediate and sustained success. Together we can quickly move people out of shelter and into permanent housing and identify best practice to inform a modern service system that actually starts to meet our shared goals of making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring.

People experiencing homelessness cannot wait any longer; our city cannot wait any longer.

TAEH Steering Committee and TSN Board of Director Organizations

Canadian Mental Health Association, Toronto -- Community Living Toronto -- COTA -- Covenant House Toronto
Dixon Hall Neighbourhood Services -- Eva's Initiatives -- Fife House -- Fred Victor Centre -- Homes First Society
Houselink & Mainstay Community Housing -- John Howard Society, Toronto -- Loft Community Services
Salvation Army -- StreetHaven -- Sojourn House -- The Access Point -- Toronto Developmental Services Alliance
United Way of Greater Toronto -- Wellesley Institute -- WoodGreen Community Services