

Shelter and Housing Justice Network

Shelter Rights, Housing Rights, Human Rights

March 15, 2020 Sent by email

Dear Mayor Tory and Councillors,

While members of the Shelter and Housing Justice Network (SHJN) have had meetings with senior staff in SSHA and TPH, we remain acutely alarmed at the disorganized and slow response to protect homeless people, workers and volunteers during this pandemic. This includes people in homeless shelters, Violence Against Women shelters, 24-hr respites, two 24-hr overnight drop-ins for women, the Warming Centre, the Out of the Cold program, those who cannot access shelters and are living outside or in encampments, as well as all who use Toronto drop-ins and meal programs. That is well over 10,000 people.

Remember that we have declared the homeless situation an [emergency](#) pre COVID-19.

We have received only vague assurances and comments that plans include obtaining buildings that will be used for additional shelter, shifting people from one site to another, protection of seniors, obtaining motel rooms for isolation, and creating a pot of money for additional cleaning. There have been no specifics or timeline.

There has been insufficient information or guidelines apart from a brief memo from SSHA and a 3-page TPH document titled 'Interim Guidelines for Homelessness Service Setting Providers' (attached). In Toronto Public Health media briefings we do not hear the word homeless. There are no directives for social distancing in this sector: to reduce crowding in shelters (perhaps by 20%), to enforce the 6' rule between beds/cots/mats, to stagger meals etc.

Instead we are told resources are tight, personal protective equipment is limited, we must not create panic.

Yesterday, we heard that shelters had begun to send people to emergency departments to get an 'all clear' that they were healthy enough to enter the shelter.

Two days ago, in the absence of city leadership, nine (now ten) Out of the Cold programs announced their closure in order to protect their volunteers and guests. (Those specifically were in Councillors Pasternak, Matlow, Robinson, Layton, Holyday and Grimes wards.) Others were cancelling or reducing their numbers allowed to sleep or enter for a meal.

Several days ago, both St. Andrew's daytime OOTC and The Stop Community Food Centre cancelled their main meal programs, diverting their energies to provide bag lunches or emergency food provision.

I am fully aware how hard some of you are working on this, in particular Board of Health Chair Councillor Cressy, and of course city staff.

We are trying to prevent a further crisis with our recommendations (attached).

I have communicated to the provincial and federal Medical Officers of Health the urgent need to include 'homelessness' in the COVID-19 Case Definition, to include long-term care, to help prioritize funding, prevention, screening, testing and an overall heightened response. In the meantime we need the city to do so and thus provide leadership to the country.

Cathy Crowe, on behalf of the Shelter and Housing Justice Network