

**Shelter and Housing Justice Network**  
*Shelter Rights, Housing Rights, Human Rights*

**Open Letter to Mayor John Tory and Members of Toronto City Council**

Thursday, December 20, 2018

Mayor John Tory and Toronto City Councillors,

We are writing to introduce you to the newly-established Shelter and Housing Justice Network (SHJN)—a collective of homelessness and housing advocates, shelter providers, healthcare professionals, faith leaders, legal workers, and researchers who have come together to declare homelessness a disaster, and to address the crisis on a local, provincial and national level.

The Shelter and Housing Justice Network's mandate includes ensuring safety, dignity and autonomy for those experiencing homelessness; ensuring access to housing for all; advocating for the re-establishment of a national social housing program; and enhancing access to critical services and supports for individuals and families experiencing homelessness as well as those at-risk of becoming homeless.

For many years we have raised concerns about the suffering that homelessness inflicts upon our city's most vulnerable residents, and for far too long we have heard our political leaders acknowledge that we must do better in responding to the issue. And yet, despite this recognition, the crisis continues to worsen, with the impacts becoming more widespread and severe.

In a city as wealthy and prosperous as Toronto, it is both shocking and heartbreaking to witness how terrible the situation has become for homeless individuals in our city. On a nightly basis, women and men are warehoused in crowded, unsafe environments with no privacy or dignity; due to a lack of available shelter space, homeless children and their families are forced to sleep in precarious circumstances throughout the city; and with each passing year, more and more people are becoming trapped in the emergency shelter system for extended periods of time with no access to affordable housing or the supports they require to move forward.

The data on homelessness in Toronto is similarly bleak. Currently, there are over 6,600 individuals and family members in the emergency shelter system each night, and another 800 to 900 individuals in emergency overflow and respite sites, which now operate year-round in response to the crisis. Meanwhile, the waiting list for social housing in Toronto has grown to over 98,000 households, leaving both the homeless and those living in poverty with practically no opportunity for affordable accommodations. And perhaps most startling, last year 100 individuals died homeless in Toronto, and each month more names are added to the Toronto Homeless Memorial in our city. As we've said, this is a disaster, and after decades of inadequate responses we have now reached a point where we can no longer continue with the status quo when it comes to addressing homelessness in our city.

The Shelter and Housing Justice Network has launched with a list of upfront demands, the first of which is that the City of Toronto declares a state of emergency as it relates to the homelessness crisis. SHJN's six demands, in their entirety, read as follows:

- 1) That the City of Toronto call a state of emergency as it relates the homelessness crisis in the city.
- 2) That, due to its impact on people who are homeless, and the rising number of overdoses and overdose deaths in and out of the shelter system, that the City of Toronto call a state of emergency as it relates to the opioid crisis, and seek Provincial and Federal assistance in the fast tracking and funding of Overdose Prevention Sites and other overdose prevention initiatives.
- 3) That the City of Toronto immediately open all four Sprung Instant Structures, and any other available spaces to ensure there is adequate access to shelter during this current emergency, including safe spaces for women, children, LGBT individuals, as well as harm reduction and low barrier options.
- 4) That the City of Toronto open an additional 1,000 shelter beds in 2019 (this, in addition to the beds already scheduled to open), in order to respond to the dangerously overcrowded occupancy levels currently being experienced in all sectors of the city's shelter system.
- 5) That the City of Toronto commit to investing in the creation of 100,000 rent-geared-to-income housing units over the next 5 years (20,000 units per year).
- 6) That all levels of government, including the City of Toronto, immediately commit to investing an additional 1% of their total existing budget to solving the housing and homelessness crisis at the municipal, provincial and national level.

In order to make the fundamental changes required to effectively address homelessness, it will require courage, compassion and political will from you and your colleagues at Toronto City Council. Today, we are calling on you to be those leaders—we are imploring you to take a stand, to act with courage, and to lead with compassion. Unless and until you do, this humanitarian disaster will continue to plague our city's most vulnerable residents, and ultimately Toronto as a whole will be made to suffer the consequences of your inaction and indifference. We must do better, and we need to start now.

Sincerely,

Representatives from the Shelter and Housing Justice Network:

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Michaela Beder, MD FRCPC  
Health Providers against Poverty

Greg Cook  
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Cathy Crowe  
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