

Take time for an independent review of Toronto's homeless shelters and services

A submission by the Wellesley Institute to Toronto City Council's Community Development and Recreation Committee

18 March 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to make these comments on Toronto's emergency shelter services on behalf of the Wellesley Institute. The Wellesley Institute is an independent and non-partisan research and policy institute dedicated to advancing population health.

In this submission, we recommend that this committee adopt an independent review of the city's homeless shelters and services to collect and publish as much evidence as possible on the availability and adequacy of the city's emergency shelter services; engage people who are currently homeless and those who have previously experienced homelessness; engage city staff, independent shelter operators, community agencies, advocates, community leaders and others; review good practices from other communities; and report back to this committee.

Good public policy and effective practices are based on solid evidence and analysis. Toronto urgently requires a better evidence base to continue to improve its homeless services.

In our submission, we are recommending that this committee create an independent review of Toronto's homeless shelters and services. Toronto City Council has secured positive benefits from similar reviews in the past. One year ago, as the future of Toronto Community Housing Corporation was caught in a whirlpool of confusing numbers and conflicting claims, a special working group under the leadership of Councillor Ana Bailao was created to assist TCHC to navigate to a better future. Cllr Bailao's working group, which benefitted from the active engagement of TCHC tenants, housing experts, community leaders and others, put forward a practical series of options. One of these measures is a refinancing package to be considered by Executive Committee next week that includes incremental financing of \$94 million.

We would respectfully suggest that the independent review of the city's homeless shelters and services should have several specific goals:

First, to **collect and publish as much evidence as possible** on the availability and adequacy of the city's emergency shelter services in meeting the needs of the people of Toronto.

Second, to **engage people who are currently homeless** (sheltered, unsheltered and hidden) and those who have previously experienced homelessness. People with a direct experience of homelessness are well placed to provide evidence, analyze evidence and provide expert analysis on options and solutions.

Third, to **engage the dedicated and professional staff at the City of Toronto who work in homeless services, independent shelter operators, community agencies that provide supports and services, advocates, community leaders and others** in the independent review.

Fourth, to **review good practices from other communities** in the effective delivery of homeless services.

Fifth, to report back to this committee on the adequacy and capacity of Toronto's homeless shelters and services to meet the **immediate and emergency needs** of the city's homeless population and also to assess the adequacy and capacity of Toronto's homeless shelters and services to support people who are homeless in **making the transition** to safe, healthy, affordable and permanent housing.

Toronto is already required under the terms of the Ontario government's Housing Policy Statement to create a comprehensive housing and homelessness plan for the city by January 1, 2014. The city has other initiatives under way, including other items on the agenda of today's committee meeting. This proposal for an independent review would help support existing and ongoing processes at the city level.

Social, economic, human and health costs of homelessness

In our research and policy work at the Wellesley Institute, including our collaboration with Street Health in 2007 to produce the Street Health report on the health status of homeless people, we know that people who are homeless suffer a heavy burden of poor health and premature death. The women, men, children and seniors directly involved pay a heavy cost to their personal health, and there is a significant social and economic cost to the entire community.

A good home is the best way to prevent and end homelessness

The most humane and cost-effective response is to ensure good quality, safe, healthy and affordable housing for everyone. In our research and policy work, we have noted that federal and provincial investments in affordable housing have been eroding over the past two decades. The 2013 municipal budget for the City of Toronto includes a 50% cut in funding for new affordable housing due to federal and provincial cuts, including the federal-provincial housing stimulus funding of 2009, and more cuts are on the horizon.

One stark indicator of the crisis in affordable housing in Toronto is the affordable housing wait list maintained by the Toronto Housing Connections on behalf of the City of Toronto. As of the end of January, there were 87,303 households on the wait list - that's 161,266 women, men, seniors and children. The January 2013 figure is up 5.7% from January of 2012.

Evidence on adequacy and effectiveness of homeless services

The staff report at today's meeting includes important evidence on service utilization in Toronto's homeless shelter system. Recent enhancements to information management in the city's shelter system allow Toronto to develop a much better understanding of the changing occupancy levels

in homeless shelters. While today's report provides an overall snapshot for January and February, and a sectoral breakdown for one day (February 19, 2013), the city has a significant amount of shelter utilization numbers that have not been publicly released that include daily breakdowns over an extended period of time, geographic breakdown of shelter occupancy rates and sectoral breakdown of occupancy over an extended period. An independent review would assist in broadening the evidence base.

A more detailed analysis of the city's service utilization numbers is necessary to determine the overall adequacy of the city's emergency homeless services to meet the needs of various homeless subpopulations. The fact that there may be a handful of beds for single men available on a given night is of limited practical assistance to a single woman facing zero or near-zero occupancy in that sector of the shelter system.

Service utilization numbers are important not only to determine the adequacy of the system to meet the real shelter needs of the people of Toronto, but these numbers help to determine whether the current annual cap on shelter bednights is set at an appropriate level.

There were 1,416,766 occupied shelter bednights in Toronto in 2012, according to Shelter, Support and Housing Administration's 2013 Operating Budget Analyst Notes. That's an increase of 4.5% over the 1,355,276 bednights actually occupied in 2011. Occupied bednights increase because of a combination of new people seeking shelter in the homeless system, and people who are already in homeless shelters staying longer. Even though actual occupied bednights rose by 61,190 from 2011 to 2012, Toronto City Council's 2013 operating budget calls for a service level cut of 41,172 occupied bednights in 2013.

It is worth noting that the 2013 budget notes include a 24% cut in family shelter bednights - which today's staff report notes is running at 100% occupancy. The 2013 budget also includes a 9.7% cut to women's shelter bednights - today's staff report notes is running at 99% occupancy. The 2013 Toronto budget also includes cuts to meals, snacks and food allowances for children and adults in the shelter system, housing and employment supports and fewer central intakes and reduced professional training for shelter staff. The 2013 budget also anticipated reduced costs due to fewer complaints about the shelter system.

In addition to a more transparent, long-term and robust analysis of shelter utilization numbers, Toronto needs other evidence to better assess the adequacy and capacity of the homeless shelter system. Among the basic evidence that is required:

- better evidence on the number of people turned away from shelters because they were full. A short survey of 15 shelters by Social Planning Toronto reported that every shelter had to turn away people at least once during the previous month because they were full. Evidence on the number of people turned away from Toronto's shelter system is a crucial piece of evidence.
- better evidence on what happens to people who are turned away from homeless shelters. Do they end up in other shelters, on the streets, spend the night at the referral centre, spend the night in an all-night coffee shop, couch-surf with family or friends?

Toronto also needs better evidence on the actual experiences of homeless people as they attempt to access a bed in the shelter system. The report in front of today's committee reports that the city received 11 formal complaints in 2012 about access to beds. That is useful information, but it is likely that many people who have been turned away from shelters are not aware of the formal complaint process, or they are unable or unwilling to complain.

The city's periodic street needs assessment is a periodic attempt to directly assess the needs of homeless people, but this assessment happens too infrequently, and there are no questions that related to being turned away from shelters.

A participatory action research process, similar to the methodology successfully used in the Street Health report, is scientifically rigorous and also yields powerful insights.

Summary: independent review needed to move beyond swirl of claims

Toronto Shelter, Support and Administration staff are attempting to do a professional, thorough and humane job of meeting the emergency shelter and service needs of the city's homeless and precariously housed population with severely limited resources.

The flatlining of the homeless funding in the 2013 budget at a time of growing need and costs has added a further challenge to an already difficult task. And the looming possibility of the termination of the federal homelessness initiative in less than a year is another uncertainty that frustrates effective planning and service delivery.

We respectfully recommend that the best way forward is to hit the 'pause' button on the swirling series of claims and counter-claims in the vital homeless services sector.

Toronto urgently needs a fair and independent review of the evidence and practices in the shelter system - a review that fully engages people who are homeless, shelter and service providers, advocates, academic experts and others.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Respectfully submitted by:

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