

May 11, 2020

Dear Downtown East Churches and Interfaith Leaders:

Thank you for your letter to the Mayor of Toronto on May 6, 2020, on behalf of Interfaith Leaders in Toronto's Downtown East.

The wellbeing and safety of vulnerable individuals experiencing and at risk of homelessness is one of the most pressing priorities of the City's response to COVID-19. We share many of your concerns about the severity of the situation and assure you that our actions and decisions are guided by our shared goal of keeping vulnerable Torontonians healthy and safe during this pandemic.

For these reasons, the City has taken swift and decisive action to mobilize an unprecedented response to protect people who are experiencing homelessness. I would like to share with you some actions that have been, and are being taken to respond to the needs of vulnerable individuals.

Since the start of the pandemic, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) has been working tirelessly with Toronto Public Health (TPH), other City Divisions, provincial and federal governments and the community non-profit sector on strategies and solutions to help our homeless population as quickly and effectively as possible.

The initial objective was prevention, with the goal of keeping COVID-19 out of our shelter system for as long as possible. This work included providing guidance, training and resources to all our service providers on Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) measures to protect staff and shelter clients. It also included providing more than \$1.2 million to our community shelter and drop-in partners for access to cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline shelter workers. We have also advocated to other levels of government for the provision of these critical supplies for the homelessness sector as an essential service during this emergency. This week, the City obtained a supply of PPE for frontline shelter and respite workers and these additional supplies are being distributed to all City operated and community partner provider sites to support daily use of masks by all frontline shelter staff across the shelter system.

Our goal is that everyone using the shelter system has access to spaces that meet physical distancing guidelines, by using a mixture community space, hotel rooms, and permanent and interim housing.

In an effort to increase physical distancing in the system, the City has opened 13 temporary respite sites, expanded facilities for physical distancing, and activated 12 hotel locations. In total we have moved close to 2,000 clients to these new spaces.

In addition, we launched an Interim Housing Program to support people who are sleeping outdoors. Access to up to 125 units are prioritized for clients living in encampments that present health and safety concerns and are identified as higher risk to COVID-19 related harms. To date, more than 80 people have been housed from encampments into the interim housing program.

We know that regardless of the pandemic, housing is the best solution to homelessness and we are exploring all opportunities to prioritize long-term housing stabilization for people experiencing homelessness. That is why we are working with Toronto Community Housing (TCHC) and other housing providers on a Rapid Housing Access Initiative, to prioritize people who are in shelters for vacant TCHC units. Through this program and by using housing allowances and rent-geared-to-income housing, we have moved 675 people into permanent housing since mid-March. The City is also requesting the federal and provincial governments establish dedicated funding that will enable us to purchase properties and land that are suitable for permanent affordable rental homes.

In addition to our relocation efforts for physical distancing, SSHA is making every effort to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 for shelter clients. We have implemented processes for screening and transportation to testing facilities and established isolation and recovery programs to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the system. We have also strongly advocated to the provincial government that testing be prioritized for shelter clients so that we can respond quickly to new infections. SSHA and TPH have partnered with the health care sector and continue to implement mobile testing at shelter locations as part of our outbreak management strategies. We are following all provincial public health testing guidance for congregate settings.

In response to a recent increase in the number and size of encampments and concerns about the safety and well-being of people living outdoors, as well as the impact on the local community, the City and community partners are taking immediate steps to support those sleeping outdoors by mobilizing a COVID-19 response strategy for outreach and encampments that includes three key components: Access to safe indoor space, shelter and housing; Targeted strategies for outreach, engagement, education and prevention;

and Harm reduction and encampment health and safety. The City is operating eleven facilities with showers, washrooms, and drinking water and eight locations with portable toilets for all individuals in need of these services.

Many of the City's response initiatives have been successful because of partnerships with community partners, including non-profit organizations, drop-in services, healthcare providers, Indigenous partners and others. Given the staffing pressures that we at the City as well as our non-profit partners are under to implement this significantly expanded shelter system response while maintaining our existing essential services, these partnerships are critical for us to be able to collectively respond to this health crisis in the most effective way possible.

As you can see from the significant response measures we have implemented to date, the City has taken a leadership role in mobilizing the response to the pandemic. The scale of our response has far surpassed the funding allocations provided to date by the federal and provincial governments because we could not wait for intergovernmental responsibilities to be determined before acting.

Thank you for your concern and support. We look forward to continuing to work together with you to support our city's most vulnerable residents through this emergency and to build a stronger and more resilient City for all as we look forward as well to recovery and rebuilding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MAB', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Mary-Anne Bédard
General Manager for Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
City of Toronto