

# Finding a new response to Toronto's encampments of people experiencing homelessness:



## **The Right to Housing, Housing First and working together**

### **Introduction**

The Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH) is committed to realizing the right to housing in Toronto. It is from this starting point that we support a stay on clearing Toronto's encampments where people experiencing homelessness are living. Homelessness is a violation of the right to housing. All responses to homelessness must be grounded in a human rights approach and contribute to the progressive fulfillment of this right for all Torontonians, including those living in encampments.

As part of the solution, we also call for a recommitment to Housing First models of supporting people to find and sustain housing, and for additional housing allowances for people experiencing homelessness. These must be sufficiently deep enough to create immediate access to rental housing for people experiencing homelessness, coupled with strategies to make that housing available in an urgent manner.

We understand the scope of our city's current homelessness crisis and how the pandemic has exacerbated it. It is highly likely that homelessness will only increase as the longer-term effects of job loss are realized. Gathering together in encampments is one way that people cope during this crisis. They can find community and a measure of personal safety.

We also acknowledge that the City has created more housing with supports for people experiencing homelessness in the last year than in many years combined before 2020. The shelter system has responded to Covid-19 as well: safe, social distancing accommodation is now the norm, and new, responsive, hotel programs have opened. Overall, the system delivers a range of low-barrier accommodations and harm-reduction services. Agencies and front-line staff – both in the community and at the City – have worked tirelessly to serve people experiencing homelessness during this pandemic, adapting to many challenges along the way.

But it is clearly not enough. Although [Toronto's 2018 Street Needs Assessment](#) shows that the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness want housing, it is clear that a number of people living outdoors are not willing to accept any of the housing or shelter options the City is currently offering them. Until all options have been exhausted, grounded in human rights-based engagement with the people in encampments, no more evictions can take place.

### **Homelessness is a human rights violation**

Encampments are a stark reminder that the right of every person in Canada to safe, adequate, and appropriate housing has been unrealized for decades – a legacy all orders of government and society must contend with. Resources must be prioritized to support the realization of people experiencing homelessness' right to housing.

The TAEH is guided here by [the framework championed by Right to Housing Toronto](#), Right to Housing Canada and the recent [National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada](#), written by former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing Leilani Farha. We appreciate that SSHA is also working within this framework and has consistently brought it into negotiations with the other City departments that, collectively, are responsible for responses to the encampments. Key points of the human rights approach to homelessness and encampments include:

- Closing down or clearing encampments is considered a violation of the human rights of the people living in them. This includes removing or destroying personal property, even if the camp is deemed illegal or on public land.
- The encampments in and of themselves represent the right to housing claims, and other human rights claims, of the people living in them. Therefore, even though it is not a human right to camp, the response to encampments must prioritize addressing the violation of the human rights that they embody.
- In addition, principles and practices that ensure that a human rights approach is upheld must be practiced in all steps of the process in responding to encampments.
- There is an over-representation of Indigenous peoples, people of colour, women, LGBTQ2S in all communities of people experiencing homelessness. It is critical, therefore, that the response to encampments does not further traumatize people or exacerbate their homelessness.
- Evicting people is not the answer. People should not be punished for creating encampments as a way of coping with society's failure to uphold their right to housing.

Governments have an obligation to keep people safe, including in these encampments. Beyond the human rights' issues, public health authorities agree that clearing encampments is counterproductive to health. [Public Health Ontario's recent summary of responses to homelessness](#), concludes "...evacuations pose safety and ethical issues for those living there, including considerations for autonomy and self-determination, and are not generally considered a health protection measure."

Instead of shutting encampments down, therefore, additional steps to ensure the health and safety of people living there must be taken – for example washroom facilities and 24/7 support services and staff - even as the work is stepped up to create positive housing outcomes for people.

### **Housing First**

Around the world Housing First approaches have proven effective. When fully practiced it is a rights-based, person-centred approach that emphasizes choice in terms of housing and supports. It recognizes that housing is the foundation for a person's journey to stability and health. Housing First focuses on individualized and person-driven supports and creating opportunities for social and community integration. While the emphasis is on securing housing first and quickly, it also requires meaningful relationship building with each person and ensuring that they have the information they need to make informed choices.



We encourage the City to invest in the Shelter, Support and Housing Division (SSHA)'s, the Housing Secretariat's, and community providers' ability to deliver meaningful Housing First services that result in successful outcomes for those even with the most complicated challenges.

### **Housing Allowances**

Sufficiently deep enough housing allowances make more, otherwise unaffordable, rental units attainable for people living on little or low income, increasing in turn the options available to support reasonable choice and successful housing experiences. Very few apartments are available at the lower rent levels in Toronto today. When they are, they are often in neighbourhoods people have no community or supports in, and/or are far off any public transit lines.

Finally, new, deeper housing allowances must also be combined with a focused strategy to identify the new rental accommodations made affordable by them and to match people experiencing homelessness to them with the full Housing First approach noted above.

### **Conclusion**

We believe that there are other ways to discuss the approach to encampments in Toronto than the one we are having right now. Housing is one of the rare areas where we, collectively, have the opportunity to make real change and improve our city for everyone, not least of which includes its most marginalized and vulnerable people. It is time to take a breath, learn from the challenges of Covid-19 that the housing and homelessness sector continues to contend with, and apply it to designing a future system that avoids these challenges in the first place.

All of us – the people living in encampments, housing and service providers, community conveners, park enthusiasts, concerned citizens, governments, and the range of interested activists, academics, and philanthropists – have a rare chance here to listen to each other, recognize our common goal, and work together to imagine and build a healthier, more diverse, and responsive housing ecosystem in Toronto.

The TAEH came together to support collective action to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Toronto's City Council has embraced this as their own vision in the Housing TO Action Plan. Encampments are clearly the opposite of this vision, but we can choose now to better respond to them, addressing the overall issues and each person's homelessness, in ways that get us all closer to it.

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The Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness (TAEH) is a collective impact initiative to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring in Toronto. Our 100+ partners/participants include most of the city's shelters, housing, and supportive housing providers, as well as people with lived experience, health and research organizations and fellow sector advocates. Our focus is on systems change, creating solutions to prevent and end homelessness.

