

April 25 2023

Economic and Community Development Committee
Toronto City Council
Sent via email - ecdc@toronto.ca



RE: EC3.13 - Review of policies and procedures related to Warming Centres

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

I am writing today to express the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness' (TAEH) support for the recommendations in the staff report for Item EC3.13 - Review of policies and procedures related to Warming Centres. We also take this opportunity to urge swift action by this Committee and City Council to ensure that the resources are available to City divisions and community service providers to both act on, and enhance, these recommendations.

As you know, part of the Alliance's mandate as your non-Indigenous Community Advisory Board, is to provide advice on housing and homelessness issues. Our 100+ partners include the community service agencies delivering winter relief, drop-in, respite, and shelter services. We are united in our commitment to housing solutions to end homelessness, and in creating an effective continuum of housing-focused services to support people experiencing homelessness at any point in their path back to housing.

A comprehensive winter services strategy is one of the components of this continuum. Updating the threshold of when Warming Centres and other parts of the strategy come into effect to -5 degrees Celsius, and including other indicators of dangerous outdoor conditions, is a welcomed change. As the report details, providing safe and warm spaces for people at this point will ensure that more people's health is protected. This is a critical outcome that can prevent people from falling even further into chronic homelessness and their housing goals.

Staff also note the importance of enhancing the quality of services available at Warming Centres, including increased support in finding housing. The TAEH strongly encourages this approach and draws your attention to the significant learning in the report (from the Metro Hall pilot in early 2023) that a more consistent, 24/7 service model allows the most effective, and efficient, outcomes.

Therefore, we recommend that SSHA staff be supported in exploring and planning to re-open the existing respites in Toronto to walk-ins. This will create year-round, 24/7, low-barrier places that people living outside can find protection from the elements – cold or hot - and better housing support than is possible in temporary Warming Centres.

Of course, the conditions of success for using existing respite facilities in this way, do not exist in a vacuum. As the report reminds us, currently, most of the respites are at capacity with most people staying for a year or longer. What is critical to creating flow here, and thereby allowing respite centres to also be a central part of Toronto's winter services strategy, is permanent housing. The ultimate solution always comes back to housing.

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The Alliance is well aware of the significant fiscal challenges the City of Toronto faces. We continue to advocate to the other orders of government and will be sending this report with our calls for action on their part too. We also acknowledge that the City is building more homes for people experiencing homelessness right now than in the past many decades. But, as this report also lays bare, every month in Toronto at least twice as many people become homeless, then exit the system back into housing.

Therefore, the TAEH must again point out that you and your fellow Councillors can also direct more City resources to creating more deeply affordable, including supportive, housing options for people experiencing homelessness. The TAEH Election Pledge calls for City Council to create a new, Toronto-funded, revenue source to address homelessness. We reiterate this call now, and our identification of the new Vacant Home Tax revenue as one source worth exploring.

It is worth underscoring what the report makes clear: a sound winter services strategy only works within the context of a stronger housing-focused shelter and respite services system that is creating consistent flow out of homelessness. This is how we end homelessness, and not just manage it better with temporary solutions.

Finally, the other critical contextual challenge to both staff and the TAEH recommendations in this letter, is the dire lack of resources in the community-based service sector tasked with opening, running, and closing down again current Warming Centres. Not to mention this same crisis in the base shelter system and respites. TAEH's community agency partners agree that keeping facilities open on an ongoing basis is far more cost-effective and administratively efficient than opening and closing them on a pop-up basis. But, to properly deliver the services they are being asked to do, and want to deliver, requires a greater investment by City Council in upcoming budgets. Again, increasing housing flow out of shelters and respites depends on a properly resourced sector of service providers. We encourage you to also consider these pressing needs as one use for a new, dedicated revenue source to address homelessness as noted above.

In conclusion, the Alliance congratulates all those that contributed to the recommendation to increase the temperature threshold – the community voices, Councillors, staff. We appreciate the advice in today's staff report that ongoing winter services are better models than opening and closing sites over and over again.

With this Committee's, and Council's, leadership in ensuring that the resources are sufficiently available to deliver the recommendations before you today, and our continued shared advocacy to the provincial and federal governments, we have a fighting chance to deliver more effective winter services next year *and* getting that much closer to a city where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Sincerely,



Kira Heineck, Executive Director
Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness