

I am writing this delegation, with the intentions of sharing some of what I know about the housing and support needs of women, and gender diverse people, who experience complex homelessness in Hamilton. It is my hope that some of this information might be useful as the City engages in ongoing negotiations about the matter of encampments in Hamilton.

Over the past ten years, I have worked in emergency shelters and drop-in programs serving women and gender diverse people, who experience homelessness in our city. My experience has always been that women's shelters are routinely operating at, or over capacity, so I am surprised to hear that the City is suggesting there is available emergency shelter space for the many people living in encampments. I also know that many women who experience 'high-acuity', or complex street-level homelessness face barriers to accessing and staying in shelter, because of concerns directly related to symptoms of persistent and significant mental health concerns and/or addiction issues.

I am a Ph.D. candidate at McMaster University, in the School of Social Work. My doctoral research has been funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and investigates models of community-based permanent supportive housing for women, and gender-diverse people, who experience high-acuity chronic homelessness. There are promising practice examples of permanent supportive housing that exist across Canada, that offer gender-based and low-barrier housing, health and social supports. It is my hope that in the coming years, we can work together to make this important part of the housing continuum for women, a reality in our community!

I know that the City of Hamilton's Emergency Community Services and Housing Division is committed to drawing on best practices, and emerging evidence from across Canada and Internationally to inform decision making. And yet, it is evident that, that same commitment has not been used to inform the response to encampments. I would urge councilors to review [the National Protocol for Homelessness Encampments in Canada](#) written by Dr. Kaitlin Schwan and Leilani Farha (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing), that offers a human-rights based protocol to respond to encampments in urban cities across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the coming months, Hamilton can expect to see a spike in homelessness, and current evidence suggests this will disproportionately impact women, gender-diverse people and women-led households. We are beginning to understand the ways that women were uniquely impacted by COVID-19, in relation to greater economic/job loss, higher rates of violence and complex care-giving demands While forcibly removing encampments in the moment may get rid of the visibility of the housing crisis in our City, without thoughtful and intentional policy solutions, people living in encampments will still have nowhere to go.

My experience, through front-line work, community-based research (Principal Investigator of the [in]visible project, in collaboration with Women's Housing Planning Collaborative and Women's College Hospital), academic work and in policy advocacy,

lead me to believe that women and gender diverse people, who experience 'high-acuity' homelessness require access to a housing model, that currently does not exist in Hamilton. There is a need for the rapid development of permanent, supportive, low-barrier housing, that intentionally uses a gendered-lens in its design.

As the City moves forward, in what I would imagine is a shared commitment to meaningfully redressing the homelessness crisis in our community, I am suggesting three possible policy responses:

1. Meaningfully acknowledge that people who are living in encampments, are doing so, because there is a lack of capacity within the current emergency housing services and interventions. There is both a lack of shelter space, and limited capacity to adequately support those with the highest acuity. Rather than further displace those living in encampments, leverage existing resources (including partnerships with allied health and social service organizations who are deeply committed to supporting those living in encampments), to develop ad-hoc low-barrier interventions, that are accessible for people living in encampments. For example: [Kitchener-Waterloo's concept of 'A Better Tent City'](#), involving the rapid development of tiny houses, with on-site supports provided by existing community support services.
2. Immediately begin allocating attention, and resources to the development of permanent and supportive housing models for women and gender diverse people who experience the 'highest acuity' of chronic homelessness in our community. There is no need to re-invent the wheel here, and I would welcome supporting dialogue between our municipality and my colleagues and partners from cities across Canada who have successfully integrated this kind of housing support into their suite of available Housing First interventions. I hope that my doctoral research funded through SSHRC can support local knowledge building around women's housing and support needs, that lead to the development of housing.
3. The City's current commitment to more fully integrating the Residential Care Facility (RCF) sector into housing and homelessness programs and services is an important one. I would suspect that with significant overhaul and stronger community partnerships, the RCF system could be a potential policy lever, to provide the kind of communal setting, and level of care required, to adequately house those experiencing an intersection of complex housing, health and social care. Furthermore, I would urge that a gender and equity lens could help to strengthen this sectors capacity for supporting women and gender diverse people experiencing high acuity homelessness. of complex housing, health and social care needs.

It is my hope that some of what I have shared today may provide ideas for potential ways forward, and lead to an ethical resolution for the women and gender diverse people that I know, who are living in encampments in our city right now.

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