

Thursday, September 10, 2020.

City of Hamilton
71 Main Street West, 1st Floor
Hamilton, Ontario, L8P 4Y5

To Chair and Members of Emergency and Community Services Committee,

We as frontline staff in the emergency housing services sector are calling for the City of Hamilton to drop the challenge of the court injunction on the encampments. The legal system is not the best way to address this issue and won't resolve the underlying causes of the encampments. As frontline workers, we are aware of some of the many systemic barriers that have contributed to the rise of encampments, barriers that leave people with very few options. We would like to share with you our knowledge of these barriers today in hopes of collectively working together.

One narrative from the city is that there is shelter space available, but most shelters are at capacity and as a result the city funds overflow spaces. Overflow beds are less than dignified mats on the floor in a congregate setting. One of the women's overflow spaces sees between 15-25 people a night. Even when there is space, some individuals are ineligible to access services due to service restrictions. Couples face a unique challenge because there is only one family shelter in the city, but it is regularly at capacity and prioritizes families with children. Couples are encouraged to go into separate shelters, meaning they are forced to choose between leaving their closest support at their most vulnerable moments and having a place to sleep at night. Most shelters have congregated living spaces where residents are required to share their space with strangers, this has been especially difficult in the midst of a pandemic due to the fear of contracting COVID-19. Many individuals in need of shelter have experienced trauma, so being in close quarters with strangers can be re-traumatizing and individuals are more susceptible to theft and violence.

Shelters have restrictive rules and regulations, which are particularly challenging for individuals living with significant and persistent mental health and addiction issues. For example, all shelters have curfews, limit family visits, and no pets allowed. Pets provide therapeutic value and are often the only family someone has. Also, the shelter system does not adequately support people living with mental illness, who often have difficulty adhering to the rules. As a result, residents are often service restricted due to disruptive behaviour and substance use. Many residents are discharged from shelters for a prolonged refusal to engage in finding housing, although it is difficult to secure an address in a housing crisis due to low income and lack of affordable units. These are not ideal conditions to successfully obtain safe and affordable housing. We must acknowledge and understand that the repercussions of this are directly connected to the encampments.

There have also been major changes to Housing First programs that further limit supportive housing options for individuals with high needs. For instance, assessment tools required by the city determine client's eligibility for what type of housing they can access. As a result, clients with higher needs are no longer suitable for transitional housing programs. Transitional living is a great short-term option for those who need a little more time to stabilize their income, create community connections, and develop life skills. This program change has forced individuals with high acuity to utilize the private market, which is often marginalizing and discriminatory for those who identify as needing supportive housing. The lack of viable housing

options means many people will cycle through the shelter system again and again. The markers of high vulnerability include: multiple evictions, poverty, and chronic and episodic homelessness are precisely the criteria that omit people from the private housing market that we rely on to address homelessness.

Frontline workers are eager to be heard on the issue of encampments. We are the backbone of the social service system and play a critical role in supporting people to navigate complex systems, secure housing, and utilize the tools to maintain housing. We are disappointed that community organizations voices are silenced by competition over a scarcity of funds. Also, we are deeply troubled by the lack of planning to address these issues that have been created by decades of under-funding and lack of resources. We recognize that the funding provided by the city is intrinsically linked to the statistics we collect for the city. We work tirelessly to meet the high demands and housing targets required by our employers and enforced from the city. This puts us into compromised situations where we make difficult decisions that impact people's lives. The pressure to meet these targets translates into frontline workers constantly negotiating between what we know is ethical and social justice focused and what we are told is financially feasible.

We are required to move people through the system as quickly as possible. The lack of investment in our work and expertise results in frontline workers discharging clients from their caseload before they are ready. As a result, our most vulnerable clients who expected ongoing support for up to two years are struggling to maintain their housing and more often than not end up back in the shelter system. We need to be given the necessary time, autonomy, and resources to adequately support our most vulnerable populations. The pressure the city is putting on agencies, which is in turn passed down to us as frontline workers, is exacerbating everything we have described above. We need to be calmly trying to look for ways to alleviate those pressures, the goal is housing people.

As frontline workers, we have successfully housed people in all of the districts across the City of Hamilton. They are your neighbours, friends, and constituents. We are calling for a human rights-based approach to the encampments in the City of Hamilton. We are asking you to treat individuals of encampments with the utmost dignity and respect. We need you to take into consideration that shelters are unable to meet the complex needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and we strongly encourage you to have an open dialogue with frontline workers, advocates, and residents of encampments to discuss the housing crisis that is decades in the making. We are advocating for the city to drop the challenge to the court injunction on the encampments, and to reallocate these resources towards working collaboratively with the frontline and outreach workers, the health and mental health professionals, and the people living in the encampments to find solutions to the housing crisis collectively. We urge you not to displace the residents of the encampments. Come to the table and work with us.

Sincerely,

Taylor Chinn
Frontline Workers Coalition

