

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 workers in the emergency housing services sector and advocates are requesting the City of Hamilton to not challenge the court injunction that is preventing the city from taking down the encampments. Court is not the best option to settle this dispute, having conversations with frontline workers, management, shelter users, and those living in encampments is a much more productive way to proceed. Challenging the court injunction will not solve the complex social issues of poverty and homelessness. We need to come together collectively to develop solutions to the housing crisis. The street outreach team has done an astounding job working with people in encampments to develop housing plans followed by securing units, as well as helping those eligible transition into shelter and/or hotel. One of the main reasons this has been such a great success is because people in encampments have not been displaced. By temporarily allowing encampments to stay in place, outreach workers and housing workers are afforded the time to develop a rapport based on trust and empowerment, in addition to concrete housing plans. By displacing encampments, frontline workers are tasked with finding where their clients relocated to and have to rebuild their working relationship.

From a frontline perspective, people experiencing homelessness are struggling more often and more deeply due to the crippling housing crisis. According to a recent article in the Hamilton Spectator, the average price for a one-bedroom apartment has skyrocketed to \$1489/month in 2020 compared to \$578/month in 2001. A single person on Ontario Works receives \$731/month, this is not even half of the average rent price in Hamilton. This demonstrates the financial hardships that individuals on a fixed income endure and the inability to make ends meet. Councilor Farr stated that once encampments are successfully removed, the city will provide assistance and sufficient options for those to find shelter. However, not all people residing in encampments are eligible for shelter services or hotel placement and affordable housing is unattainable in the current housing crisis. The options of shelter and hotel are not long-term solutions. The city and all levels of government need to implement appropriate strategies to address the lack of low-barrier, adequate, safe, and affordable housing in collaboration with frontline and outreach workers and medical and mental health professionals. We all understand that we are in the midst of a housing crisis, so we must acknowledge and understand that the repercussions of the spike in rental costs is directly connected to the encampments.

A common concern that people experiencing homelessness have is living in a congregate setting right now because it increases the risk of contracting COVID-19. People are scared and have resorted to sleeping rough to ensure their health and safety. Other barriers to securing an address include the requirement of positive landlord references, proof of employment, credit checks, and providing first and last month's rent. Individuals experiencing homelessness are often unable to meet the criteria landlords expect, which is often marginalizing and discriminatory and excludes them from securing units in a private housing market. Also, there has been significant

changes to housing first programs, that further limit supportive housing options for individuals who are deemed high acuity based on the VI-SPDAT assessment tool. This assessment tool determines what type of housing people are eligible for. For instance, a score of higher than 8 on the VI-SPDAT, rules out transitional living programs. This is a great temporary option for high acuity individuals that need to learn how to be a good tenant and develop the necessary life skills to stay successfully housed. As a result, many high acuity clients are being housed in market rent units with no supports, meaning they have difficulty staying housed on their own. Many clients end up in the perpetual cycle of homelessness over and over again and are re-housed several times through housing first programs. We have learned through the Canadian University Policy Alliance at McMaster University that there is little to no investment for people with the highest acuity on the VI-SPDAT.

Some barriers to accessing shelter are service restrictions, disruptive behaviour, substance use on site, prolonged refusal to engage, conflict of interest with client/staff, no appropriate beds available, and shelter at capacity. Shelters have restrictive rules and regulations, which are particularly challenging for individuals living with significant and persistent mental health and substance use issues. For example, residents in the men's shelter need to be back for 10pm curfew or their bed will be given away. There is the narrative from the city that there is shelter space available, but most shelters are always at capacity, resulting in the city funding overflow beds. According to the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative and the Social Planning Research Committee shelter staff turn women away on an average of 19 times per night due to lack of bed space. They also reported that women's shelters are operating at 107% capacity as of 2017. An overflow drop-in space for women and gender diverse people has seen almost 300 unique individuals since December 2019 and they see between 15-25 women a night. Staff attempt to secure women shelter space on a daily basis and the women's shelters are consistently at capacity. Many of the women who access the drop-in space are single women, making it even more difficult to secure shelter space as most women's shelters are for domestic violence and for women with children in their care. One women's shelter has had bed availability, but there are strict guidelines in place due to COVID-19 where women are required to self-isolate for two weeks. This has proven to be a huge barrier to accessing shelter space. In addition, this shelter will be closing its doors and the 15 beds have not been re-allocated within the city.

Frontline workers are the backbone of an effective social service system and we play a critical role in effectively supporting people experiencing homelessness with searching for a home and linking them to relevant community resources. We desperately require a greater investment in the important work we do, by offering more training opportunities and ongoing support to best service our clients. Other experiences that frontline workers tolerate is a perpetual turnover rate in the shelter system due to being underfunded and resourced, poor wages, ongoing staff shortage, unsafe working conditions, and heavy caseloads. We often receive pressure from management to meet housing targets due to high expectations from the city. This puts us into compromised situations where we have to make difficult decisions that impact people's lives. For example, once a client is housed through a housing first program, they can receive support from their case manager for up to two years. Whether that be with learning how to budget limited funds, accessing a food bank, obtaining a family doctor, referral to a counselor, etc. We are often pressured to discharge clients before they are ready because we need to house more people to ensure funding for our program continues or we may potentially lose our jobs. As a result, many clients, especially

those of high acuity are unable to maintain their housing without the support of their case manager and end up back in the shelter system again. The job is highly rewarding and gratifying, however we need to be afforded the autonomy and necessary resources to adequately support service users from a housing first model. Moving forward, we encourage the city to include frontline workers in discussions and decision-making that directly impacts the work we do. Our voices and on the ground experience must be heard by decision-makers. This also includes, meaningfully engaging people experiencing homelessness in conversations about housing and how to support them with developing a concrete housing plan in order for them to obtain and successfully maintain housing.

We are hopeful that the city and all levels of government will invest in affordable housing. Ignoring the housing crisis has resulted in the Canadian economy spending billions of dollars on homelessness every year. Addressing the housing problem by developing affordable housing units, chronic and episodic homelessness will evidently decrease. In turn, taxpayer dollars will also decline because operating emergency shelters and providing immediate needs to those in crisis is more costly than low-income housing. According to Homeless Hub, studies have found that the cost of housing someone in jail, hospital, or the shelter system is more expensive when compared to transitional housing and affordable housing with supports. For example, institutionalizing people costs \$66,000 - \$120,000 annually and emergency shelters cost \$13,000 - \$42,000 annually, whereas supportive and transitional housing cost \$13,000 - \$18,000 annually and affordable housing with supports costs \$5000 - \$8000. To summarize, institutionalizing people can cost up to a remarkable \$162,000, while providing people with supportive affordable housing may cost up to \$26,000. Research demonstrates that affordable housing is not only cost-effective, it is also a basic human right.

We as frontline staff are strongly encouraging the city to take a harm reduction approach, by meeting people where they are at in encampments, while treating them with the utmost dignity and respect. We need you to put in the time and effort to ensure that the voices of people in encampments are heard because they are the experts of their housing needs. We are asking for housing plans to be resident led and engaged. By engaging people in encampments, you will better understand their situations and what is best for them moving forward. We all know there is a dire need for additional funding for affordable housing units that individuals with complex needs require to thrive and survive and the emergency shelter system's policies need to be revamped to reflect low-barrier services. We are advocating for the city to not displace residents of encampments temporarily, so that we can continue our hard work with our most vulnerable populations. Our goal is the same as other community advocates, we are calling for a human rights-based approach to encampments in the City of Hamilton. We hope you will reconsider challenging the court injunction and shift your focus to collaborating with frontline workers and professionals who are committed to creating permanent solutions to end the housing crisis.

Sincerely,

Brianne Williams
Frontline workers in the emergency housing services sector