

From: Warner, Gary
Sent: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 10:42 AM
To: clerk@hamilton.ca; FBergen@ontariopolice.on.ca
Subject: Statement to General Issues Committee

Date: December 7, 2021

To: Chief Bergen Bergen, HPS
General Issues Committee, City of Hamilton

From: Gary Warner

Re: Recent encampment-related situations involving HPS officers

I am writing as a concerned citizen to echo the community voices calling for dropping all the charges against the young activists arrested in connection with the recent encampment-related events in front of Hamilton Police Station and later at J.C. Beemer Park. The contrast between the humanitarian actions of these young people in providing food and support to encamped people in need and the violent response of HPS officers in response to their unarmed demonstration of support for the homeless is unmistakable and reflects very badly on the police officers involved and the HPS itself.

Surely there are lessons to be learned about how these interactions are framed and what kind of intervention is required. A fundamental guiding principle and value is the worth of every human being, deserving to be treated with dignity. This principle applies to the homeless whose belongings should be treated with respect as well as to the young people, many of them from the Black community, who should not be subjected to unduly violent physical treatment and criminalization in their interaction with the police. A review of police interaction with citizens in these contexts of contestation around social justice issues should be undertaken by HPS. I support the call for a judicial enquiry into how these events were framed and handled by the officers involved and more broadly on the appropriate use and nature of police intervention in such situations.

The encampment crisis is a complex one with competing interests, on the one hand the provision of public space for free, clean and accessible community use, and on the other hand, space of last resort for the shelter needs of homeless people who have no other available shelter spaces where they feel safe. It is also the symptom of a larger social and economic policy failure at different levels of government, resulting in insufficient affordable housing for low-income people and an inadequate supply of shelter space and support for people facing homelessness. Efforts made by City Council to respond to the shelter needs, including through the support provided to community agencies such as the Good Shepherd, Indwell and others, is to be commended. But much more needs to be done to provide adequate housing through all the policy levers and mechanisms available to the City. It is regrettable that the encampment protocol established through a negotiated process in the spirit of democratic participation was terminated unilaterally. A housing first policy and a commitment to collaboration with community partners are key principles to guide ongoing action. Enlightened social policy that prioritizes the greatest good of all, as Gandhi put it, must guide policy decisions. Leaving housing to market forces will inevitably lead to the growth and entrenchment of social inequality, with all its consequences in terms of health, housing, wellbeing and social cohesion.