

January 17, 2023

Dear General Issues Committee,

I am writing to you as a person who lives in Hamilton and also as a psychiatrist working primarily with individuals experiencing psychosis who also use substances. I have worked both within the hospital systems as well as with community organizations, and most of my current practice is in an outreach-based model. Many of the individuals I work with are struggling immensely to find housing or to remain housed due to the housing crisis.

I wish to highlight that I do not speak for people living in encampments. Further, I recognize that people end up living in encampments for complex and diverse reasons and no one person's story is the same. I am speaking from my own experiences in working directly with those living in encampments as well as working within different health systems within the city. I also wish to make it clear that I do not think people remaining in tents indefinitely is a solution. However, ***until an adequate alternative is available, to devote substantial resources to forcibly remove people from encampments is unconscionable.***

The individuals living in encampments that I have had the privilege to meet are incredible, beautiful people. Not a single person has told me they want to be living outside. In fact, most express their absolute desperation at how much they wish to be inside. I can tell you from my professional experience in trying to help find people somewhere to stay, the largest barrier to people finding a place inside is a complete lack of available, dignified indoor options. I can attest that in my own efforts to find people somewhere to stay in the city, there are simply no spaces for people to go. This is particularly true of women and couples, and people with pets. Additionally, many of the people I work with also have complex mental and physical health conditions that have resulted in their being service restricted from, or refused access to, shelters in the city. This means that even if there are spots available, they are turned away. And sadly, even if shelter beds are available, people are often back on the street within days because of restrictive shelter policies and a complete lack of more permanent housing options in the city.

The individuals I have worked with have bravely shared with me some of the most difficult parts of their lives. Every single person I have met has suffered unthinkable trauma. And they have suffered it not once, but a hundred times over. They are scared and they are suffering, and many have said to me they feel like absolutely no one cares about them. Hospitals feel unsafe, shelters feel unsafe, and the street feels unsafe because of the many troubling experiences they have had. They are simply trying to survive, and encampments are the only option available to them.

When people are staying in one place, it is an opportunity for health and social services to begin to meet them where they are at and work with them to address their health and social needs. This often takes time, for many reasons. Many people living in encampments have significant physical and mental health conditions that are completely unaddressed and because of the outreach of health workers in our



community, those conditions can begin to be treated. Housing workers can begin to build a relationship with people and suitable housing options can be explored. When someone is evicted from an encampment, all of the work that has gone into building relationships, treating health conditions, exploring housing options, and showing individuals that the community cares about them is completely lost. All of those connections with community supports have been severed because no one knows where the person has gone. This inevitably results in worsening of their health conditions and some people will die. It decreases the likelihood of helping people to obtain housing because any efforts that had begun will have to start all over again, if they are able to be started at all. As a health professional and someone who cares deeply about the people I work with, I simply cannot continue to watch this happen. ***I can tell you with certainty that increasing enforcement efforts for encampment evictions will absolutely harm people that live outside in this city and will do nothing to address the root causes.*** This will simply result in tents being moved around the city, rather than getting people inside. Some of our residents living outside will likely die. Adding police officers and bylaw enforcement officers is not only illogical, it is violent. It suggests that our approach to the most vulnerable in our community is to punish them further, rather than provide actual solutions.

There is a disturbing discourse happening that serves to “other” people living in encampments and to prioritize the wishes of the so-called taxpayers. This suggests that the rights and dignity of “taxpayers” are more important than our residents without permanent homes. As someone who lives in this city, and happens to be in a position where I am privileged enough to be able to afford to pay taxes, I just want to emphasize that I am a person and they are people, that they are us and we are them.

I recognize that the housing crisis we are facing is not the sole responsibility of the city and reflects longstanding, chronic underfunding and system-wide failures at all levels. I do, however, believe that we have a responsibility as a city to treat our residents with dignity and compassion, and to work together to find solutions to the housing crisis, not to spend increasingly large amounts of money on enforcement, which will only perpetuate harms. I plead with you as you discuss the budget to consider focusing resources on aggressively funding actionable solutions to the housing crisis in our city to keep all of our neighbours safe, and to show them that as a community, they matter to us.

Sincerely,

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