

Office of Mayor John Tory
City Hall, 2nd Floor
100 Queen St. W.
Toronto, ON, M5H 2N2

Tuesday, January 31, 2017

Dear Mayor Tory,

Re: Toronto City Council Must Open an Emergency Shelter Space. Lives are at Stake.

We are writing to express our deep concern and the urgent need for action to protect people who are homeless in Toronto this winter. We must expand shelter capacity in Toronto by the immediate opening of the armouries or facilities of equivalent size.

Between 1985 and 2016 this city has seen the deaths of over 800 individuals as a result of homelessness; in the last two years alone, more than 80 homeless people have died. As the weather intensifies and we experience frigid temperatures, people who are homeless experience an increased risk of dying due to over-exposure to the extreme cold.

As you know, Toronto's emergency shelter system is badly overcrowded, with the average occupancy rate reported recently by the City at 94%. In the case of youth shelters, this number inflates to 97%, while family shelters see a 100% occupancy rate. The current emergency shelter system, simply put, cannot provide enough space to accommodate and protect Toronto's homeless population.

While we all agree that longer-term solutions are necessary, and long overdue, to chronic and episodic homelessness, we cannot let the current lack of enough affordable and supportive housing in our city keep us from action that could save lives this winter. Nor can the fact that we simply do not have enough room in our shelters right now to keep every homeless person or family safe each night.

Current shelter occupancy rates far exceed the recommended maximum occupancy level of 90% as established by the City. In 1999, recognizing a crisis of overcrowding in the emergency shelter system, Toronto City Council adopted the "Status Report on Capacity of the Emergency Shelter System". Through this report, Council established an objective of a monthly shelter occupancy level of no more than 90%. It was recognized that if shelters were to exceed that rate, shelter users would be living in overcrowded conditions that can and do lead to safety and security risks. These include increased stress and conflict, and the transfer of communicable diseases such as the group A strep outbreak that occurred in August of last year.

Ultimately, we need all orders of the government to invest in a national long-term affordable housing strategy, and we support Toronto's role in working to achieve this goal. At the same time, we cannot ignore that there is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed immediately. It is time for City Council to return to fulfill its policy of shelter occupancy levels not exceeding 90%. We all need to recognize the particular severity of this situation in winter and the urgency to act.

Therefore, in order to ensure that no individual is left outside, we urge the City Council to open the armouries, or a similarly large facility, as an emergency shelter to bring in the vast number of people that do not have a space to rest safely. It is important to note that all populations, youth, women, men, and families, need shelter, and that they need it in environments where they are not at risk of communicable diseases and other dangers of overcrowded shelters.

Once again, we urge City Council to open the armouries or a similarly large facility immediately

Signed By:

Church of the Holy Trinity	Queen West – Central Toronto Community
Congregation Darchei Noam Social Justice	Health Centre
Advocacy Committee	Regent Park Community Health Centre
Eva's Initiatives for Homeless Youth	Seeds of Hope Foundation
Evangel Hall Mission	Social Planning Toronto
Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations	South Riverdale CHC
Fred Victor	St. Jude Community Homes
Health Providers Against Poverty	Street Health
Housing Action Now	The Good Neighbours' Club
IMAGINE Clinic, U of T	The Parkdale Activity – Recreation Centre
Inner City Family Health Team	The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
Inner City Health Associates	Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness
Madison Community Services	Toronto Drop-In Network
MultiFaith Alliance to End Homelessness	Toronto HIV/AIDS Network
Parkdale Community Health Centre	Ve'ahavta
Parkdale Community Legal Services	VHA Home HealthCare
	Voices For A Just Society