



## **A Win for 'A Path Forward': Impacts of Advocacy on the City of Toronto's Homelessness Solutions Service Plan**

Today, the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration (SSHA) released its **Homelessness Solutions Service Plan**, intended to guide the homelessness service system in Toronto over the next three years. While a plan and its implementation can often be very different beasts, many aspects of the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan are, in our opinion, a step in the right direction by the City of Toronto. Indeed: it is clear to us, as providers of services to unhoused people, that **A Path Forward**, a set of recommendations we co-authored advising a human rights-compliant approach, has had a deep impact on SSHA's Plan. Overall, the Plan achieves some significant wins for unhoused people, including naming human rights as an underpinning ideology, and it represents the first steps toward the realization of A Path Forward.

What did A Path Forward influence in the Plan, or where are there synergies?

### **The Shelter System**

Because SSHA's purview is the shelter system, most of the synergies between A Path Forward and the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan are related to shelters. And there are many synergies, albeit with shortcomings, addressed below.

#### **1. Shelter and Respite Standards**

SSHA's Plan calls for on-going internal reviews and assessments of the Shelter and Respite Standards and its implementation, with a focus on "[strengthening] health and safety provisions with a focus on equity and inclusion." This was a direct ask of A Path Forward, now included in SSHA's Service Plan. However, independent and external audits of shelter operations are not included. They should be, as this would provide an unbiased accountability mechanism.

#### **2. Meaningful Engagement of Shelter Residents**

The Homelessness Solutions Service Plan also proposes the development of on-going mechanisms for the "meaningful engagement of people with lived experience of homelessness and service users, including expanding advisory groups, service user satisfaction surveys and user feedback." A Path Forward emphasized the need to establish an advisory group of current and former shelter residents to have meaningful input into shelter services, which is listened to and acted upon. SSHA's Service Plan is less explicit, but names 'advisory groups' as a key component of their engagement strategy. We will be vigilant to ensure that such a group or groups are created and have control over shelter services.

#### **3. Service Restrictions**

The Plan commits to a review of approaches to service restrictions, with an emphasis on exploring transformative justice approaches. The latter should become the default approach, understanding that service restrictions place people at extreme risk of harm, and even death. Unfortunately, SSHA's Plan does not include a central review process;



this was advocated for in A Path Forward to ensure accountability and transparency across the shelter system when service restrictions are given. The shelter system *must* reduce subjectivity on the part of an individual service provider or even an individual staff by centralizing reviews of all service restrictions.

#### **4. IPAC**

Importantly, the Plan emphasizes that it will enhance and maintain Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) measures across the shelter system. This is a win: even post-COVID, ensuring IPAC measures means a reduction in overall communicable disease transmission in the shelter system.

#### **5. Harm Reduction**

Given the high levels of drug poisoning and overdose-related death in the shelter system, the Plan details the implementation of additional harm reduction and overdose prevention measures, including supervised consumption sites, at shelters across the city. The Plan stops short of stating “at every shelter location,” which is a major caveat. As well, the Plan fails to name safe supply as a harm reduction intervention it will undertake; this was advocated for in A Path Forward.

#### **6. Accessible Services**

SSHA’s Plan emphasizes collaboration with other sectors to strengthen supports for people living with mental health barriers and developmental disabilities. The Plan hopes to “increase service pathways for people to receive equitable access to the services that they require and that lead to successful housing outcomes.” This is imperative to realizing a human rights-compliant approach, but what’s missing – and glaringly – is a commitment to creating accessible services and physical spaces for people living with physical disabilities and/or mobility issues. This major caveat regarding disability rights is an untenable roadblock to the realization of human rights more broadly.

#### **7. Inclusion and Equity**

SSHA’s Plan includes many detailed and laudable commitments to anti-Black racism, reconciliation, and equity for youth, seniors, and 2SLGBTQ+ service users, with an emphasis on promoting safety and access for trans and non-binary people. What’s missing is a specific commitment to creating spaces appropriate to people’s identities, such as shelter spaces for trans and non-binary people that are fully separate from women’s services. However, such spaces could be created through recommendations made to City Council during the budget period, as informed by the needs of service users. We will not take this as an omission, as there is enough in the Plan to make such spaces possible in the future.

#### **8. Shelter Capacity**

A Path Forward advocated that shelter capacity must not exceed 90%, understanding that the shelter system is an emergency system that absolutely must maintain room for those who need it. While SSHA’s Plan does not explicitly set a capacity limit, what it does is enhance the monitoring of data on shelter flow to better understand the real need of the system to accommodate everyone. This in-itself isn’t enough, but the



Plan also intends to use this data to advocate for appropriate budget increases from the City of Toronto to create more space, according to need. This is a partial win, and we understand that SSHA requires investments from the city to expand shelter capacity; thus, their strategy is to capture the data needed to do so.

## 9. A Transition Plan

A Path Forward demanded the creation of a transition plan detailing next steps pending the expiry of shelter-hotel leases. We demanded this in October; SSHA's Plan asks for a transition plan, but with no set date. The recognition of a need for such a plan is good; however, it must be delivered expediently, understanding that shelter-hotel leases are set to expire in April 2022.

## Encampments

While SSHA has control over outreach services delivered to encampments through the Streets to Homes program, it does not have control over the broader approach to encampments by the City of Toronto. The encampment portfolio remains in the hands of the City's Office of Emergency Management, and has not been given back to the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration, as per A Path Forward's recommendations. As such, SSHA cannot end the deployment of police to encampments, or end encampment evictions. However, the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan does begin to make commitments compliant with the approach urged by A Path Forward.

### 1. Human Rights

SSHA's Plan aims to "increase and enhance outreach services to meet the unique needs of people sleeping outdoors, based on a human-rights approach, meaningful engagement and choice." This is a clear nod to the advocacy of A Path Forward, as well as groups like The Shift and the Encampment Support Network, and represents an important shift in respecting the agency and autonomy of people living in encampments. This must be considered a win.

Importantly, and outside of the Plan, Streets to Homes are now engaging encampment residents in Dufferin Grove Park using a human rights-compliant approach. Specifically, residents are given time and information to make free and informed decisions around accessing shelter space and, laudably, housing. Streets to Homes are also providing supports like I.D. clinics in order to complete housing applications for residents, and residents are not being forced to move.

### 2. Provision of Resources

A Path Forward asked for the city to uphold the recommendations of **The Faulkner Inquest**, including the provision of resources and supports to encampment residents where they are located. The latter, as noted above, is happening. However, the provision of water continues to be insufficient for most people's needs, and hot meals are not distributed. As well, fire-safe camping equipment and tents – as per the Faulkner Inquest – are also not distributed. Thus, we recognize that SSHA and Streets to Homes are improving their service delivery to encampments, but supports can still be further enhanced.



## What's Missing?

To reiterate, the Homelessness Solutions Service Plan takes laudable steps in the right direction to ensuring a safer, healthier shelter system responsive to the real needs of unhoused people, and a human rights-compliant approach to encampments. However, there are some glaring omissions that must be addressed, and that we will continue to advocate for:

- Transparency around outbreaks of COVID-19, but also tuberculosis, Streptococcus A, and other communicable diseases through public updates;
- Enhanced eviction prevention supports for people entering housing, including support to build and maintain an eviction prevention plan for six months to one year;
- Ensuring that clients are able to meet with a housing and health care worker within the first week of arrival to understand their needs and develop a housing and health care plan – anecdotally, we know this does not always happen.

As well, specific asks in A Path Forward regarding service delivery to shelter residents are not addressed. These include the following:

- Ensuring the safety and security of people's belongings, including their tents and sleeping bags;
- Ensuring that clients are able to sleep and have privacy by reviewing and providing guidance on how to conduct "bed-checks" in a manner that respects client dignity and privacy while ensuring effective shelter operations;
- Providing supports to ensure nutritious meals are available for clients, as per their specific dietary needs and restrictions;
- Affirming and ensuring that the City's policy to not permit strangers to be placed in a shared room together in shelter hotels and that clients have eligible possessions put in storage is adhered to and communicated to relevant stakeholders.

Regarding the above, many of these asks are currently addressed in the Shelter and Respite Standards. However, the issue has been that the Standards have not been upheld. While the Homelessness Solutions Support Plan entails on-going reviews and assessments of the Standards and their implementation, we still believe that the best means to do this and ensure compliance is to hold independent audits of shelter services (as per point 1 of this document under 'The Shelter System').

## Conclusion

A Path Forward was never going to be realized in one day, but we are now seeing steps from the City of Toronto, and specifically from the Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration, to realize a human rights-compliant approach to supporting unhoused people. This cannot be taken lightly. We must emphasize that these steps mean that our advocacy and your collective support have made a difference. We cannot stop now: A Path Forward remains the only way forward to achieving a city that is safe and welcoming for everyone, regardless of their income or living situation.