



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

Dear Mayor Tory,

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.

Main Office

2 Carlton Street, Suite 1001, Toronto, ON M5B 1J3
T: 416.351.0095 F: 416.351.0107

Community Offices

ANC - Mount Dennis: 1336B Weston Road, Toronto, ON M6M 4R8 T: 416.242.7031
Etobicoke: The Shaver Homestead, 450 The West Mall, Suite 205, Toronto, ON M9C 1E9 T: 416.231.5499
York/West Toronto: 1652 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M6M 3W3 T: 416.652.0772

