

Ombudsman Toronto Enquiry Report

Cold Weather Drop-In Services City of Toronto 2016-17 Winter Season

May 12, 2017

Introduction

1. On December 19, 2016, the CBC radio program, “Metro Morning” featured an interview with a well-known social activist and street nurse about Toronto’s cold weather response for people who are homeless. Specific concerns raised included:
 - Insufficient emergency shelter spaces, leaving homeless people outside in the cold;
 - The need for the City to ask the federal government to open the armouries in order to meet the need for more spaces.
2. As a result of this and other media coverage, Ombudsman Toronto decided on our own initiative to conduct an Enquiry.
3. This report summarizes our Enquiry findings and recommendations.

Definitions

4. In order to assist readers of this report, we provide the following definitions

"Emergency shelter"

(sometimes referred to simply as shelter)

Temporary accommodation accessible by an individual or family experiencing homelessness with or without a referral, generally intended for short-term use and providing support services to help move clients into housing.

"Drop-in"

According to the Toronto Drop-In Network, all drop-ins provide an informal social setting, respond to some basic needs, and offer some sort of programming. They vary in their individual mandates and the services they offer. Generally, drop-ins offer a flexible service model that is meant to respond to a need in a particular community.

"Cold weather drop-in"

(also referred to in City materials as an extreme cold weather drop-in)
A specific drop-in service delivered by the City during cold weather in order to provide additional opportunity for people who are homeless to come inside out of the cold.

The City's Cold Weather Drop-Ins

5. The City's Shelter Support and Housing Administration Division ("SSHA") is responsible for shelters and drop-ins.
6. SSHA's Cold Weather Response Plan for 2016-17 included establishing two 24-hour cold weather drop-in locations operated by community partners under contract with the City:
 - Margaret's at 323 Dundas Street East
 - St. Felix at 25 Augusta Avenue
7. SSHA also established a third overnight (9 pm to 9 am) cold weather drop-in at the St. Lawrence Community Centre. It was introduced in 2016-17 because of high use of the two 24-hour cold weather drop-ins the previous winter. The St. Lawrence location (also operated by Margaret's) was set up to be accessed primarily through referral when the two main drop-in sites were at or near capacity. City staff explained that when either Margaret's or St. Felix was unable to accommodate additional overnight guests, the protocol was for drop-in staff to offer taxi service, paid for by the City, to the St. Lawrence location.
8. The cold weather drop-ins operated continuously during the cold weather season.¹ The cold weather drop-ins were set up to operate only on extreme cold weather alert days² for one month before and one month after the cold weather season.³

¹ The City declared this to be from December 15 to March 15.

² The Medical Officer of Health issues an extreme cold weather alert when Environment Canada has forecast a temperature of -15 degrees Celsius or colder or wind chill of -20 degrees Celsius or colder in the next 24-hours. According to the City's Cold Weather Response Plan, the Medical Officer of Health also considers other factors that could increase the impact of cold weather on health, including: precipitation, low daytime temperatures, multiple days/nights of continuous cold weather, and sudden cold weather.

³ In mid-March, the City decided to extend its continuous cold weather drop-in service to April 15, 2017. This was done on the City's own initiative and was communicated through a City of Toronto Media Relations News Release on March 14, 2017.

9. The cold weather drop-ins offered clients meals and snacks, showers and laundry, clothing banks, harm reduction supplies, some recreational activities, and sleeping mats. The two main drop-ins had housing workers available and drop-in staff also offered referrals to other services.

Other Relevant City Services

10. The City provides street outreach through the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre ("SHARC"), which also has an overnight respite program. SHARC's respite program does not provide sleeping mats, but offers an indoor space open 24 hours a day where people can either sit or stand.
11. During the 2016-2017 winter season, SSHA also tried to increase existing emergency shelter spaces, as well as contracting for hotel and motel beds to be used as additional shelter options, mainly for families.

The Out of the Cold Program

12. Sixteen Toronto synagogues, churches and other faith communities together ran the Out of the Cold program ("OOTC") on a volunteer basis. The 16 OOTC host sites offered meals and sleeping space, with a rotation so that up to 4 locations could be open on any given night. The City contracted with a community agency for the coordination of these volunteer services.
13. During the course of our Enquiry, a number of the organizations operating OOTC sites expressed concern about high use of their sites, which they set out in an open letter to the Mayor dated February 14, 2017.

The Enquiry Process

Site Visits

14. The Ombudsman and an Ombudsman Toronto investigator visited the three cold weather drop-ins, on three separate occasions: two winter evenings and one early morning. There, we had detailed discussion with staff including Executive Directors and operational staff. We also spoke at some length with drop-in clients, who told us about their experiences and shared their opinions about the cold weather drop-in service.
15. On a different winter evening, we visited the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre, where we reviewed intake and referral, street outreach and respite procedures.
16. To provide context for our review, we also visited and spoke at length with staff and clients at Toronto's largest emergency shelter for men, Seaton House.

Interviews and Document Review

17. We gathered detailed information from SSHA on an ongoing basis from late December into April. SSHA leaders welcomed our Enquiry, and co-operated fully with us. They provided many documents for our review. We also obtained and reviewed relevant documents and materials from other sources, including staff reports and City Council Minutes.
18. We reviewed information from advocates for people who are homeless, some of which was provided directly to our Office, and some of which we obtained through ongoing review of relevant media coverage. We met with an advocate concerned about the adequacy of the City's services to homeless people.

Research and Data Review

19. Ombudsman Toronto staff undertook independent research and reviewed relevant historical information regarding the City's emergency shelter services, as well as past decisions to open the armouries and other large facilities under previous City administrations.
20. We performed ongoing review of statistics that SSHA tracks and monitors of occupancy at each of the cold weather drop-ins (staff records occupancy twice each night). We also followed ongoing reporting of emergency shelter statistics, which are tracked through the City's Shelter Management Information System and reported daily on the City's website.
21. Ombudsman Toronto staff also met with the head researcher on an ongoing longitudinal study from the Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions at St. Michael's Hospital that is following Margaret's drop-in service (which operates two of the cold weather drop-ins). The study is funded by a provincial grant under Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. When we met with the researcher, he and his team had not yet had any direct contact with City staff.

The Issue for the Enquiry

22. Ombudsman Toronto focussed on the question of whether SSHA had acted reasonably in its consideration of available information and making decisions about cold weather drop-in capacity for the 2016-2017 winter season. Our goal was to explore any areas in which we might recommend improvements to the delivery of these important services to vulnerable people in Toronto.

Enquiry Focus

23. We feel it is important to acknowledge here the challenges we experienced in maintaining the scope and focus of our Enquiry. The topic of homelessness services is very complex. It is difficult to talk about the adequacy of specific additional services offered during cold weather without also talking about a number of related important issues, including but certainly not limited to: the

current capacity and ongoing year-round high use of the City's emergency shelters; the severely limited availability of social housing in the City and of affordable housing more generally; poverty, and access to health care, including mental health and addiction supports.

Analysis

The Broader Context: Complex Issues with Public Policy Implications

24. In the process of our Enquiry we learned that SSHA had identified a number of challenging and complex issues, which it was examining and on which it planned to report to Council in the coming months. They have significant public policy implications for the City's response to homelessness.

25. These issues include the following, among others:

1. There is a broad consensus that emergency shelters are unsuitable for a significant proportion of drop-in users. This is either because these people do not wish to comply with shelter rules, or because they are unable to do so for a variety of reasons, which may include past trauma, mental illness or addiction. The low-barrier drop-in model appears to accommodate a group of clients who are uncomfortable in or unable to access traditional emergency shelters.
2. SSHA often faces significant resistance when it tries to open a new emergency shelter or drop-in site, from some people living or working in the neighbourhood where the proposed facility is to be located. This presents a real challenge to the City in providing these important services.
3. Negotiating and renewing leases for emergency shelter and drop-in space is difficult in a competitive real estate development environment.
4. Many community agencies are reluctant to take on the significant challenges of operating a continuous 24-hour drop-in service, in terms of added stress placed on buildings and physical infrastructure as well as on staff.
5. There is a policy tension between using limited public funds to expand emergency shelter and drop-in services on one hand, and investing in longer-term affordable housing on the other.
6. Many refugees are currently seeking service from Toronto's emergency shelters, adding to the pressure on those services.
7. Issues of homelessness involve an intersection among federal, provincial and municipal responsibilities related to housing, health care and other services.

Specific and Targeted Issues

26. Our Enquiry identified two issues within the scope of our review:

Cold Weather Drop-In Capacity and Contingency Planning

27. As noted above, some homelessness advocates in Toronto publicly expressed the view that the City was providing inadequate cold weather services for homeless people. SSHA told us that the City was committed to ensuring that every person in Toronto who was homeless and wished to come inside on a cold night would have a place to do so. It expressed confidence that with all the contingencies available, it had enough capacity in the cold weather drop-ins to ensure this. It was not within the scope of our review to make any finding with respect to this issue.
28. In light of this, we assumed that there must be a maximum number of people that could be safely and properly served at each facility. But based on our discussions with City staff and drop-in operators, and our visits to the drop-ins, it was unclear what the maximum capacity at each of the existing drop-in sites actually was. Operators running the drop-ins expressed the wish to accommodate as many clients as possible, but also discussed the practical difficulties that arise for staff and client well-being and safety as the numbers increase.
29. SSHA provided us with two different sets of maximum capacity numbers for each of the three cold weather drop-in sites at different times during our Enquiry. It provided one set of numbers in our initial discussions and then a different, higher set of maximum capacity numbers later in the season as the use of the cold weather drop-ins increased.
30. As our Enquiry progressed, it became clear that SSHA and the cold weather drop-in operators had not defined or agreed upon a maximum capacity for either of the two 24 hour sites, although they had agreed on a maximum capacity for the St. Lawrence site.
31. We determined that before anyone could properly assess the question of whether there was adequate overall cold weather drop-in capacity, the first step must be for the City, in consultation with the existing site operators, to clearly set out the maximum capacity of each one.
32. Further, it was unclear what contingency plans were in place for situations where maximum cold weather drop-in capacity was exceeded on any given night, and how they would be put into operation. SSHA told us about other resources that could be brought online if needed, on an *ad hoc* basis, but there was no concrete, clearly communicated step-by-step contingency plan. We believed it was essential that this too be clearly spelled out between SSHA and the cold weather drop-in operators.

Communication

33. Our Enquiry also revealed that SSHA had not provided a clear response to the concern raised in media and elsewhere about there not being enough spaces for people experiencing homelessness who want to come inside on a cold night. There had been repeated public expressions of concern about the adequacy of services, and although SSHA contended that they were unwarranted, it had, in our view, taken insufficient steps to communicate with the public about the issue.

Ombudsman Toronto Recommendations

34. Therefore, in consideration of the information gathered through this Enquiry:

1. We recommended that SSHA, in consultation with the cold weather drop-in operators, determine a reasonable, healthy, dignified, safe and firm maximum capacity for each cold weather drop-in site, and formalize contingencies in place and protocols to be followed should those numbers be exceeded.
2. We recommended that SSHA directly communicate with the public in response to the concerns raised in the public sphere that there was not enough space for individuals who are homeless to come inside on a cold night.
3. We recommended that SSHA management engage with the research team at St. Michael's Hospital that is undertaking an ongoing longitudinal study of Margaret's drop-in service.

SSHA Response to the Recommendations

35. We met with the General Manager and senior staff at SSHA to review our recommendations. They accepted the recommendations and committed to implementing them.

Follow-Up

36. We continued to review the nightly drop-in statistics and to monitor SSHA's implementation of our recommendations until the cold weather drop-ins stopped operating on April 15, 2017.
37. In response to our first and second recommendations, SSHA added information to the Q&A page on its website about Toronto's cold weather drop-ins, including a section entitled "What is the capacity and what happens when this is reached?" SSHA also created a client journey map and posted it on the division's website. The client journey map provided a high-level overview of the steps engaged when a client came to a cold weather drop-in.

38. We will continue to follow-up with SSHA to monitor the implementation of recommendation 3.

39. We will follow SSHA's planning for the 2017-2018 cold weather season.

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