

Wednesday, March 6, 2013

## **Open Letter Urging Toronto City Council to Take Immediate Action to Save the Lives of People Who are Homeless by Opening Emergency Shelter Space**

Sadly, Luana Rizzo was the most recent person to have her name added to Toronto's Homeless Memorial, marking more than 700 people that we know of to die in our city as a result of homelessness since 1985. Thirty-four homeless people died in Toronto in 2012, representing the highest number in five years. Another eight people have died this year alone. People are crowded into Toronto's emergency shelter system with the City's own statistics showing 96% average occupancy, and many reports of people being unable to find a shelter bed. As well, in recent years annual shelter occupancy rates for women's, men's and co-ed shelters have ranged from 92-99%. In February, at the Streets to Homes Assessment and Referral Centre on Peter Street, media photos show people sleeping in chairs. Beds are full in this facility that was never intended to be an emergency shelter.

Overcrowding in shelters presents serious health risks, including transfer of communicable diseases. It undermines safety and security, and contributes to stress and conflict. More people will inevitably opt for sleeping in parks, ravines and other hidden corners of the city rather than face the risks of overcrowded shelters.

Ultimately, we need all orders of government to invest in a national long-term affordable housing strategy that ensures access to safe, decent and affordable housing for all. But today we are far from that goal, and require urgent action to respond to the critical needs of people who are homeless in our city.

While some Councillors have expressed great concern and a desire to respond, City Council as a whole has yet to recognize an urgency to act.

It wasn't always this way. In 1999, facing a crisis of overcrowding in the emergency shelter system, Toronto City Council unanimously 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%, as recommended by City staff. City Council recognized that shelter users would be living in stressful, overcrowded conditions at occupancy levels above 90%, and that the emergency shelter system required a degree of flexibility to respond to critical need. In response to overcrowding, Council opened a temporary shelter in Metro Hall, and then in the Fort York Armoury.

In 2001, City Council "reaffirm(ed) its commitment to maintaining a maximum 90 percent occupancy rate in the emergency shelter system as established by City Council in June 1999". In 2002, Council reiterated its 90% occupancy goal in the Multi-Year Shelter Strategy for the City of Toronto. Over a decade ago, City Council had the wisdom to set this direction so that the shelter system could be responsive to the critical needs of people who are homeless.

It is time for City Council to return to its commitment to maintaining shelter occupancy at 90%. There is an urgent need to open additional shelter space to reduce the pressure on the system, improve its

responsiveness, and ensure that no one is left out in the cold. It will be important for Council to understand all populations that are in need, such as women, men, youth and families, and to recognize the unique needs of these groups in providing shelter. We urge City Council to call an emergency meeting and take action to provide this basic survival support for our neighbours in need.

Signed by:

Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO)  
 Agincourt Community Services Association  
 Alliance for a Poverty-Free Toronto  
 Canadian Pensioners Concerned  
 Community Action Resource Centre  
 CUPE 79  
 Eglinton St. George's United Church  
 Elizabeth Fry Society  
 Evangel Hall  
 Fred Victor  
 Housing Action Now  
 Human Rights Centre of Turkmenistan-Iran  
 (Turkmen Sahra) in Canada  
 LAMP Community Health Centre  
 Metropolitan United Church  
 MultiFaith Alliance to End Homelessness  
 Public Interest  
 SKETCH  
 Sistering

Social Planning Toronto  
 Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Toronto Central  
 Council (Amelie House, Elisa House, Mary's  
 Home, St. Clare's Residence)  
 SPACE Coalition  
 St. Stephen's Community House  
 Street Health  
 Tenants for Social Housing  
 The 519  
 The Parkdale Activity – Recreation Centre (PARC)  
 Toronto HIV/AIDS Network  
 Toronto Drop-In Network  
 Toronto Raging Grannies  
 Universal Union of Canadian Turkmen Community  
 Centre  
 VHA Home HealthCare  
 Warden Woods Community Centre  
 Youthlink  
 YWCA Toronto

Media Contacts:

- **Sarah Blackstock**  
 Director of Advocacy and Communications  
 YWCA Toronto  
 Tel: (416) 961-8101 x350  
 Cell: (416) 892-6845  
[sblackstock@ywcatoronto.org](mailto:sblackstock@ywcatoronto.org)

- **Mark Aston**  
 Executive Director  
 Fred Victor  
 Tel: (416) 364-8228 x310  
[maston@fredvictor.org](mailto:maston@fredvictor.org)

- **Lindsey MacPhee**  
 Manager  
 Toronto Drop-In Network  
 Cell: (416) 824-4172  
[tdin@ststephenshouse.com](mailto:tdin@ststephenshouse.com)

- **Beth Wilson**  
 Senior Researcher  
 Social Planning Toronto  
 Tel: (416) 351-0095 x257  
[beth@socialplanningtoronto.org](mailto:beth@socialplanningtoronto.org)