

Healthcare workers support Khaleel Seivwright's Tiny Shelters

March 9, 2021

Dear Mayor Tory and Toronto City Councillors,

We are writing this letter as a group of concerned healthcare providers. The recent injunction against Khaleel Seivwright and Toronto Tiny Shelters is concerning for several reasons, and we are asking that you withdraw your legal proceedings against Mr. Seivwright and stop clearing the Tiny Shelters. As healthcare providers, we understand that housing has an immense and fundamental impact on health. The city's current efforts to provide shelter spaces to house our most vulnerable have been insufficient during this pandemic. The fact remains that there is simply not enough indoor space for all, and so for some, an outdoor Tiny Shelter is their safest option.

Caring for the city's most vulnerable citizens has become especially challenging during COVID-19. We know that individuals who are recently homeless are over 20 times more likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19, over 10 times more likely to receive intensive care, and over five times more likely to die within 21 days of a positive test.¹ These findings are especially concerning with more COVID-19 outbreaks in Toronto shelters, including the new COVID-19 variants which are thought to be more transmissible.^{2, 3} As such, numerous people are choosing to live outdoors, given the elevated risk of acquiring COVID-19 in a shelter setting. Even when people accept the danger of infection transmission in the shelter system and try to access shelter space, we know that the City's data on shelter occupancy rates can be inaccurate, and often people are turned away as there are no shelter spaces available.⁴ According to a city report from earlier this winter, 35% percent of calls to Central Intake for shelter space requests were categorized as "Shelter Space Unavailable at time of the call".⁵ When encampment residents are successful in finding a shelter space, the rules of the shelter system can present challenges that make them turn back to encampment living. For example, shelter residents are often only allowed to bring two bags of belongings, can't bring pets, and often can't be placed with companions. There may also be visitor restrictions, and individuals may be placed in shelter spaces far from their supports (friends and family, health providers, social services).⁶ The added physical, social and psychological challenges of these restrictions are factors people consider when trying to decide where they will spend the night. Ultimately, these decisions are often well-informed and must be respected by our city leaders, especially in a time of increased vulnerability.

The city noted fire safety concerns as their main rationale for clearing the Tiny Shelters. The city says that there has been a 250% increase in encampment fires since 2019. These stats are misleading, as the City reports the number of calls Toronto Fire responded to regarding fires in encampments rather than citing the number of uncontrolled fires found upon arrival.⁷ In October 2020, Toronto City Council adopted a motion to implement some recommendations of the Faulkner Report to provide survival gear and fire safety equipment to encampment residents, which would help mitigate fire risks.⁸ However, there are no reports from any encampment residents that this safety equipment has in fact been delivered. With regards to fire safety of the Tiny Shelters, the structures are insulated to eliminate the need for an internal heat source. They are also equipped with a fire and carbon

monoxide detector, and fire extinguisher. A credentialed fire inspector has assessed the shelters, and concluded that they surpassed safety standards.⁹ Mr. Seivwright has repeatedly asked the City to do its own inspection and City officials have refused. We believe that the known risks of having individuals remain out in the cold without shelter outweigh the misrepresented risks of increased encampment fires, and that the city should work to improve the safety of individuals living in Tiny Shelters, rather than clear them altogether.

We reiterate a statement from the Faulker inquest: “While finding appropriate housing is always a high priority, there must be enough flexibility to respond to individual needs and circumstances.”¹⁰ Despite the City’s safety concerns, we believe that we must encourage autonomy and the right for people to choose the housing option that they feel is best for them. Testimonials from people living in Mr Seivwright’s Tiny Shelters include statements such as “In a tent I can get killed easily. In here, I’m not worried about my life, for my security and my belongings”. People cite feeling safer in Tiny Shelters - away from the risk of COVID in shelters, and away from the risks of tent living such as frostbite, water damage, theft and assault. If Tiny Shelter residents feel it is their best option for housing, then we encourage them to make the decision that feels right for them. As public servants, it would be the responsibility of our city officials to respect these decisions and respond to these needs.

We reiterate that the end goal is housing for all. However, this solution takes time. We do not have time to wait to protect our city’s most vulnerable, and Mr. Seivwright’s Tiny Shelters have filled a critical gap amidst an unprecedented time, and provided safety for a group of people who so desperately need it. As healthcare providers, we focus on principles such as autonomy, harm reduction, and patient-centered care. With these values in mind, we believe that encampment residents deserve the right to choose the living space that is right for them - including a Tiny Shelter. Tiny shelters are not a long-term solution, but during this time of few options, we see them as an essential and life-saving part of protecting our city’s most vulnerable citizens.

Sincerely,

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