

ATTN: Mayor Guthrie and Members of Council
Guelph City Hall, 1 Carden Street
Guelph, Ontario
N1H 3A1

November 24th, 2023

Dear Mayor Guthrie and Members of Council,

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy and the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination are writing in response to the proposed motion set to be tabled at the November 28th Council meeting regarding encampments in the downtown core. We have significant concerns related to this motion, and the potential impacts it may have on community members in Guelph.

Like many municipalities across Canada, Guelph is facing complex challenges related to homelessness, mental health and substance use, including an increase in community members visibly struggling within the downtown core. We recognize that no level of government can address these issues alone. A multi-pronged approach is necessary with each level of government resourcing and actioning solutions through the mechanisms available to them. In recent months, Council has made a significant commitment in adopting a Human Rights approach to housing¹, including a Housing First philosophy, to align with the National Housing Strategy. The approach being proposed within this motion is not in alignment with these commitments and will not contribute to solutions to the health, housing and homelessness crisis within Guelph.

We are concerned about the unintended consequences that may emerge from this motion, including criminalization of homelessness², and the implications for community members. We oppose this motion, request that it be reconsidered, and encourage Council to build on the motions that were passed on the October 17th Special Council meeting.

A report recently published by [The National Working Group on Homelessness Encampments](#), provides comprehensive guidance for municipalities. The report notes that encampments are often responses to unmet needs. With a lack of affordable permanent housing options and the loss of affordable rental stock, including in the downtown, people living with low incomes are

¹ Further information and key principles of a [Human Rights Approach to Housing can be found within the National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada: A Human Rights Approach \(2020\)](#).

² Criminalization of homelessness can refer to the ways people who are experiencing homelessness may engage with law enforcement. As examples, this may include ticketing, use of by-laws that are applied mainly for unhoused individuals using public spaces, fines, surveillance by police, or other punitive approaches. Harms of criminalization may include challenges to employment, housing and increased financial difficulties. Additionally, Criminalization of homelessness, mental health and substance use disproportionately impact racialized communities, furthering social inequities.

experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness, with subsequent increase in health harms. This experience is compounded for community members who have complex needs and a lack of supports. Individuals living rough, including in encampments, are often doing so because shelter spaces and long-term housing options are unavailable or do not provide adequate protections, or support specific needs. For some, encampments are the only option.

We recognize the complexity of the issues that Council is currently navigating, including responding to community members and local businesses who have legitimate experiences and concerns. We feel it is important for Council to also recognize that criminalization of people who live in encampments is not a solution to these complex issues and will only serve to further marginalize unhoused residents in our city. Evidence suggests that the creation of bylaws of this nature can criminalize community members who are already struggling, leading to further health and social harms. Additionally, bylaws of this nature could also serve to exacerbate stigma of those living in poverty, mental health and substance use.

We urge you to work collaboratively to meet community needs through advancing permanent housing solutions and supporting social services in Guelph. This includes continuing to build on the motions passed in the October 17th Special Council meeting. We recommend:

- 1) That Council ensure decisions and actions are in alignment with a human rights approach to housing and a housing first philosophy to advance permanent housing solutions and ensure the dignity and rights of community members are respected.
- 2) That the Mayor and Members of Council participate in the upcoming Health and Housing Symposium hosted by the County of Wellington in early 2024. Participating in meaningful opportunities for dialogue and engagement with key players will inform decisions and work towards health and permanent housing solutions.
- 3) That Council resource 12 hour daytime drop-in space. As the weather becomes increasingly colder, and the risk of weather-related injury and health risks escalate, it is essential that drop-in service continue to be available.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We urge you to consider the impacts and unintended consequences this motion may have on some of the most marginalized members of our community and recommit to leading with a human rights-based approach. We recognize that these are complex challenges, however, evidence suggests that punitive approaches to homelessness will not solve challenges related to housing, mental health, and substance use. We urge Council to build on the motions passed on October 17th and ensure there is a collaborative approach so that all members of our community are supported, safe, and thriving within downtown Guelph.

Sincerely,



Jean Hopkins
Manager, Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy



Dominica McPherson
Director, Guelph & Wellington Task Force for
Poverty Elimination