

A Plan for a Resilient Recovery in Toronto

May 6, 2020

To: Mayor Tory and the Members of Council

As we emerge from the COVID-19 shutdown, and the challenging work the City has done to manage it, we are beginning to face decisions about how to rebuild. But, hopefully, the recovery will not be simply a return to “normal.” As we look ahead, we have an opportunity to draw on what we have learned during the pandemic, address the inequities the pandemic has highlighted, capitalize on the exceptional efforts the City and others have just made, and leave Toronto better prepared for the next crisis. We are writing to you today to ask that the City incorporate nine commitments into recovery plans to ensure that we not only recover from this crisis, but also become more resilient in the face of the next one.

1) Equity issues are at the centre of the crisis and need to be a priority in the transition

The starkest learning from this crisis is the extent to which we have not built systems that adequately support vulnerable people. People in homeless shelters and substandard housing, frail seniors in long-term care, women and children experiencing domestic violence, children and adults with disabilities, people with mental health and addiction challenges, and people living on low incomes were far more susceptible to the crisis than others. Although local data on impacts by race and status are only now being collected, we can see internationally that Black, Indigenous, and racialized people faced deeper consequences from the pandemic. We can't go into the next crisis with equity issues as poorly addressed and vulnerabilities as under-supported as they were at the beginning of this pandemic. We have an obligation to build a recovery that creates far greater resilience where it is needed most: among the vulnerable and marginalized people in our city.

The City, and all levels of government, should make equity a central goal of the recovery, and initiate actions that reduce inequity immediately, and prepare for the future using a rights-based, intersectional gender and equity lens in its planning and actions.

2) Housing can and should be addressed now by immediately acquiring underused units and working with the nonprofit sector to develop more affordable and supportive housing

One of our greatest equity issues is housing, and we have shown we can, and should, address it now with the tools that we used during the crisis. Toronto alone created thousands of new homes for vulnerable people during the crisis, an important step for the 100,000 households on the waitlist for affordable housing and the waitlist for supportive housing which has grown from 700 in 2009 to over 18,000 now. Thousands more units of housing are readily available in underutilized hotels, unused Airbnb units, and residential buildings now in financial crisis. These can be left to revert to their former uses, or be snapped up by bargain hunting investors and REITs to exacerbate the housing market problems that existed before the crisis. Or the public sector can step in to ensure that the current opportunities are employed to address the housing crisis and make the city more equitable and resilient.

The City should acquire underused hotels and low priced residential units, work with nonprofits to operate them as affordable and supportive housing, ask other orders of government to do the same, and regulate vigorously against the return of ghost hotels and other residential units held vacant.

3) The nonprofit sector should have the stable, flexible support it needs to withstand this crisis and survive future pandemics

Where they had resources, nonprofits were able to play a critical role in supporting vulnerable people in the recovery. That was made possible by repurposing funding to address emerging needs in real time, in some cases at considerable risk to their organizations.

The City should work with its own funding models and its funding partners to ensure that nonprofits have access to global funding that is adequate, flexible and applicable to emerging needs, and ensure nonprofits have sufficiently stable funding to ensure that they are resilient as this crisis ends and before the next one arrives.

4) The City should capitalize on opportunities to develop full partnerships with nonprofits

Nonprofits played key roles in planning and coordinating responses to the pandemic. Nonprofits like 211, the Red Cross, Daily Bread Food Bank, and Volunteer Toronto were core components of the response. Nonprofits and nonprofit networks like Agincourt Community Services Association, the Toronto Drop-In Network, The Neighbourhood Group, the Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness, The Toronto Shelter Network and the Toronto Neighbourhood Centres helped to identify issues early, before they were on the City's radar, and worked to help resolve them. Hundreds of nonprofits participated in daily and weekly planning sessions to ensure effective coordination. These partnerships are recommended in the City's early work on the Public Benefit Sector. Now is the time to implement them.

After the pandemic, the City should continue to engage nonprofits as full partners in planning and implementation of services.

5) We need to work together to support the systems that support our communities

While the City may not have the jurisdiction or resources to affect all policies, it is serving a critical role in the pandemic, which gives it moral authority to help shape responses across governments, specifically:

- Income supports for people on OW and ODSP were roughly half what they were for people receiving the CERB. That left the most vulnerable people behind and deepened the pressure on foodbanks, drop-ins, and other stretched services. The City should seek a more viable income support level that is more universally applied.
- Our transit systems, child care services, long-term care system, and home care services were stretched to the brink, and face serious fiscal crises in the coming months. These systems operate as if they were ordinary commercial businesses rather than critical public services. These services run largely on a fee-for-services basis and are challenged when that model comes under pressure. They need coherent planning, adequate core funding, and a commitment to services design and delivery that reflects public goals rather than commercial considerations.
- The City itself is subject to the same challenges. The City stepped up in the crisis, increased its investments in public health, housing, homeless services, community supports, and food security. But it does not have a fiscal framework that supports those capacities adequately. If the City is going to be resilient, it needs a new fiscal framework and a new financial relationship with the other levels of government.

These are big asks and the City will need support in pressing them. The City should engage the public in its efforts to negotiate better funding, planning, and partnerships with other levels of government.

- The City should advocate with other levels of government to ensure that we have adequate income supports for all residents, stable core funding for transit and childcare, and a long-term care and home care system that is capable of managing the real needs of patients.
- The City should seek a new fiscal relationship with the other levels of government.
- The City should implement the progressive revenue tools it has at its disposal.
- The City should engage the public in its efforts to promote these policies.

6) The City should make sustainable choices now to reduce future crisis

Climate change is happening. Its impacts have led to record floods, fires, and extreme weather events. Vulnerable populations face more drastic impacts and have less access to resources to manage through these events. There are steps we can and should take to minimize the risk that the next crisis is the result of our own actions deepening climate change. As we recover from this pandemic, we have choices about where we invest, what we support, and how we rebuild. Preventing a deeper climate crisis should be a core strategy in those choices. Climate impacts should be a fundamental consideration in all strategies.

The City should make a green recovery a core goal in its planning.

7) Become more resilient against any future crisis by making equitable choices in this one

Inequality is a key factor in our vulnerability to the next pandemic. Tackling the inequality in economic opportunities, supporting marginalized workers, and ensuring decent work will have an impact on our resilience now and in the face of the next crisis. Investments in the recovery should support that goal. Community benefits, equitable access to employment, and decent jobs with paid sick leave and appropriate benefits should guide reinvestment in the economy. As we rebuild, we have an obligation to build an economy we all share in, equitably.

The City should require its recovery investments to address its own community benefits, decent work, anti-black racism, and equity commitments, and gather the disaggregated data needed to track progress.

8) Ensure recovery advances reconciliation and decolonization

We have a fresh start and we shouldn't miss the opportunity to use it to address Canada's oldest and longest-standing injustice. The treatment of Indigenous people is an issue that needs urgent attention and the recovery plan is an opportunity to make progress on reconciliation and decolonization.

The City should require recovery processes to address reconciliation, decolonization and our obligations as treaty people, and make that a consistent component of the rebuilding work.

9) Work in partnership with the community

This is a big job. Managing the pandemic was a strain on every system we have. It became more manageable because nonprofits, community groups, and neighbours worked together to tackle the challenge. Volunteerism skyrocketed. Community groups and organizations reorganized and repurposed to help. "Caremongering", neighbourhood pods, and other informal community supports were critical to sustaining communities through the crisis. Recovery will be the same. We need to engage the public in rebuilding, and the public has a right to be equally engaged in planning our recovery.

The City should create an open, engaged, transparent process to guide the recovery on an ongoing basis and engage the broader community in its planning, as it did with the housing plan a year ago.

The City has done exceptional work in supporting communities during the pandemic. As we begin to look to the future, community groups, nonprofits and the public are ready and willing to support the City in the recovery as they have in the pandemic, with an inclusive partnership that builds a resilient recovery that works for everyone and prepares us for the future.

Sincerely,

*Agincourt Community Services Association
Alliance for Healthier Communities
Campaign 2000
Canadian Mental Health Association: Toronto
Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation
ConveneToronto
Daily Bread Food Bank
Family Service Toronto
FindHelp
Fred Victor
Income Security Advocacy Centre
Ontario Coalition of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre*

*Scarborough Civic Action Network
Social Justice & Advocacy Committee of the
Diocese of Toronto (Anglican)
The Neighbourhood Group
Toronto Environmental Alliance
Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
TTCriders
West Neighbourhood House
West Scarborough Neighbourhood
Community Centre
Working for Change
Working Women Community Centre
YWCA Toronto*

