

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

February 9th, 2024

Dear Mayor Guthrie and Members of Council,

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy, the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and Toward Common Ground are writing in response to the proposed Public Space Use Bylaw, 2024-76 tabled for discussion at the February 14th Council meeting. We have grave concerns related to the proposed bylaw and the potential impacts on unhoused 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 who are visibly struggling. 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. Through the mechanisms available to the City of Guelph, it is critical that immediate needs of unhoused individuals are met and that longer-term solutions, including permanent housing and health supports, are actioned with the same sense of urgency.

This Council has made a significant commitment by adopting a Human Rights approach to housing¹, including a Housing First philosophy, to align with the National Housing Strategy. It is imperative that these commitments extend to how the City and its services respond to encampments and more broadly, the issue of homelessness.

We are concerned about the unintended consequences that may emerge should this bylaw be passed, including criminalization of homelessness², increased stigma and the potential health implications that may arise from increased instability and isolation for unhoused community members. We oppose this bylaw and urge you to reconsider this approach.

[The National Working Group on Homelessness Encampments](#) report provides comprehensive guidance for municipalities. It 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 experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness, with subsequent declines in health. This experience is compounded for community members who have complex needs and a lack of supports. Individuals living rough, including in encampments, often do so

¹ Further information and key principles of a [Human Rights Approach to Housing can be found within A 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 bylaws that are applied mainly for unhoused individuals using public spaces, fines, surveillance by police, or other punitive approaches. Harms of criminalization may include challenges gaining employment, accessing health and social services and increased financial difficulties. Additionally, criminalization of homelessness, mental health and substance use disproportionately impact racialized communities, furthering social inequities.

because shelter, drop-in spaces and long-term housing options are unavailable or do not provide adequate protections or support their specific needs. For some, encampments are the only option.

The proposed bylaw will exacerbate challenges currently experienced by unhoused residents in Guelph. Evidence suggests that implementing bylaws of this nature can criminalize community members who are already struggling and lead to further health and social harms. The proposed bylaw will contribute to further displacement and social isolation, causing interruptions in health care, creating challenges for outreach teams and additional burden to the health care system. Additionally, research indicates that unhoused individuals are at a significantly higher risk of drug poisonings³. This is especially concerning given the increase in drug poisoning deaths in our region. In 2023, Guelph had the highest number of deaths due to drug poisoning on record.

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. Criminalization and enforcement-focused responses to people who live in encampments are not a solution to these complex issues and will only serve to further marginalize, isolate, and stigmatize unhoused residents in our city. It is possible to resolve encampments without enforcement⁴.

We urge you to work collaboratively to meet community needs. We recommend:

- 1) That Council ensure decisions and actions align with a Human Rights approach to housing and a Housing First philosophy to advance permanent housing solutions and protect the dignity and rights of community members.
- 2) That the City build on existing efforts by prioritizing working with the County of Wellington, health and housing service providers and individuals with lived experience to support an integrated, housing focused and complex capable team to best respond to unsheltered homelessness in Guelph.
- 3) That the City engage meaningfully with community members who are unhoused and direct service providers so that approaches meet immediate needs and support root cause solutions, including permanent housing and health supports.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We strongly urge you to consider the impacts and unintended consequences this proposed bylaw will have on unhoused members of our community and recommit to leading with a Human Rights and Housing First 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 discussions from the Health and Housing Symposium to support collaborative solutions-focused action so that all members of our community are supported, safe, and thriving within Guelph.

Sincerely,



Jean Hopkins
Manager, Wellington Guelph
Drug Strategy



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



Caroline Folkman
Manager, Toward Common
Ground

³ [Overdose and Homelessness – Why We Need to Talk About Housing](#)

⁴ An example for consideration: [Bright Spot: How Fort McMurray resolved an encampment without enforcement](#)