



# Barrie Homelessness & Housing Justice Network

## Who We Are:

The Barrie Homelessness & Housing Justice Network (BHHJN) is a multidisciplinary network of homelessness and housing advocates who have come together to advocate for the right to housing and the elimination of chronic homelessness in Barrie. BHHJN seeks immediate action and long-term sustainable solutions to address the predictable yet premature and preventable deaths resulting from the inadequacies and injustices in the shelter and housing sectors. Responding to the homelessness crisis, we are demanding change as it relates to emergency shelter, social housing, and the protection of human rights.

## Background:

Municipalities have international human rights obligations, just like all other orders of government in Canada. These obligations stand even when a municipality declines to acknowledge them. Municipalities remain accountable.

The Government of Canada has ratified the right to housing in the *National Housing Strategy Act* (2019). The *National Housing Strategy Act* states, "It is declared to be the housing policy of the Government of Canada to recognize that the right to adequate housing is a fundamental human right affirmed in international law." Barrie receives funding, through the County of Simcoe, from the National Housing Strategy grounded in these human rights standards.

Furthermore, as a [Built For Zero Community](#), the County of Simcoe has committed to ending chronic homelessness by December 31, 2024.

The right to housing does not mean a government must end homelessness overnight. But it does mean moving towards solutions progressively and ensuring that people living in homelessness do not experience further violations of their human rights.

We acknowledge and are grateful that the County of Simcoe has taken some steps to increase affordable and supportive housing options within Barrie, and that some Barrie Bylaw Enforcement Officers and Barrie Police Officers have taken a compassionate approach in some of their interactions with people living in tents. The fact remains that the affordable and supportive housing supply does not meet the demand, that shelter beds are not always available and/or a suitable option, and that interactions with enforcement

officers have not been consistent and should not be reliant on the individual officers' mood and/or personal beliefs about people who are unhoused.

Everyone deserves a place to call home. In the meantime, and in alignment with the [Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness \(SCATEH\) Position Paper on Encampments](#) and [A National Protocol For Homeless Encampments in Canada](#), it is our position that:

- those experiencing homelessness are victims of a system that is violating their human rights;
- those living in encampments in the absence of affordable housing options are not camping, they have established alternate housing;
- that an offer of a shelter bed is not the same as an offer of housing;
- that the right to housing, including alternate housing such as tents, takes precedence over the discomfort of housed people who do not like to witness visible poverty;
- that with shelters at capacity and no housing to offer, the safest and most humane option is to allow people who have set up alternate housing on public property to remain there.

### **Our Demands:**

1. City of Barrie to pause enforcement of the “no camping” by-law in cases where individuals have set up alternate housing in the form of tents or other structures as a survival response to the lack of affordable housing options.
2. Barrie Fire to distribute fire safety supplies and provide fire safety training as needed in encampments.
3. City of Barrie to issue an inclement weather alert when necessary and City of Barrie/County of Simcoe to fund/open inclement weather sites during alerts.
4. City of Barrie to work progressively toward 24/7/365 public washroom and drinking water access.
5. County of Simcoe to conduct an external audit of all funded homelessness services and supports, including shelter providers, with input from people with lived/living experience and/or shelter users.
6. County of Simcoe to use the results of the audit to review and update the [Emergency Shelter Standards from 2003](#), to include harm reduction measures as the standard within the shelter system, and in consultation with shelter providers, shelter users, and other community homelessness and housing stakeholders, and conduct ongoing external audits as needed to ensure standards are being met.
7. County of Simcoe to immediately increase rent supplements, rent-geared-to-income, and affordable housing options, and fast-track an

overhaul of rent supplement and Housing Retention Fund process, so applicants get proof of entitlement to a specific amount before they start their housing search.

8. County of Simcoe to identify partners and funding to develop and implement a street health program.

### **Our Demands in More Detail:**

- 1. City of Barrie to pause enforcement of the “no camping” by-law in cases where individuals have set up alternate housing in the form of tents or other structures as a result of the lack of affordable housing options.**

While the City of Barrie has stated they are focusing their eviction efforts on safety concerns, we continue to see evictions taking place due to the visibility of homelessness, and the discomfort of housed residents, who in some cases go out of their way to find hidden encampments. This goes against our international commitment to housing as a human right, as well as the City of Barrie’s stated objective of public safety. It also violates Indigenous Peoples’ sovereign rights to land stolen through practices of genocide and colonization, and continues to dispossess Indigenous Peoples.

In order to ensure the evictions that are being done to protect public safety and not make homelessness invisible, we are requesting an oversight committee be established to review the eviction decisions retroactively. This will help to ensure the human right to housing is being upheld, while balancing the need for public safety. The oversight committee must contain housing advocates and outreach workers, in addition to other city-appointed officials to ensure balanced representation.

There is also a need to create a mechanism of appeal specific to encampment evictions and subsequent fines related to “camping”/setting up alternative housing. This will provide an additional layer of accountability and oversight.

To help support people who are camping as a form of alternative housing, we are requesting that the current work being done to mitigate garbage concerns continue.

- 2. Barrie Fire to distribute fire safety supplies and provide fire safety training as needed in encampments.**

This includes but is not limited to buckets of sand, fire extinguishers, and fire blankets. This can be done by making funds available for outreach agencies while making funding allocations transparent and public.

**3. City of Barrie to issue an inclement weather alert when necessary and City of Barrie/County of Simcoe to fund/open inclement weather sites during alerts.**

a. Issue an inclement weather alert when Environment Canada forecasts for the City of Barrie:

- Cold: A temperature of -5°C or colder, or a temperature above -5°C with a windchill -10°C or below.
- Freezing rain: When freezing rain is expected to pose a hazard to transportation or property or when freezing rain is expected for at least two hours.
- Snowfall: When 15 cm or more of snow falls within 12 hours or less.
- Rainfall in winter: When 25 mm or more of rain is expected within 24 hours.
- Severe thunderstorm and/or tornado: When conditions are favourable for the development of severe thunderstorms and/or tornados with one or more of the following conditions:
  - Wind gusts of 90 km/h or greater, which could cause structural wind damage;
  - Hail of two centimetres (cm) or larger in diameter; or
  - Heavy rainfall, as per rainfall criteria (below), excluding those for winter and during thaw (see above).
- Rainfall in summer: When 50 mm or more of rain is expected within 24 hours or when 75 mm or more of rain is expected within 48 hours.
- Heat: Issued when two or more consecutive days of daytime maximum temperatures are expected to reach  $\geq 31^{\circ}\text{C}$  and nighttime minimum temperatures are expected to be  $\geq 20^{\circ}\text{C}$  or when two or more consecutive days of humidex values are expected to reach  $\geq 40^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

b. Require City and/or County funded facilities to do the following during inclement weather alerts:

- Drop-in centers be appropriately funded to take as many clients as possible within Public Health and Barrie Fire Occupancy standards, including public health standards specific to pandemics, epidemics, and outbreaks.
- Anyone in need of a place to go can walk into a sector-appropriate shelter without undergoing typical intake and eligibility procedures for the night in question.
- Clients can access any sector-appropriate shelter, not just their assigned shelter for the night in question. If accessing another site in emergency weather, the client's registered original bed must still be held but can be used for emergency needs while the client is staying elsewhere during the alert.

- Fully staff and equip emergency warming centres and emergency shelters. This includes but is not limited to, harm reduction services and supplies, hot meal service, wi-fi, as well as connection to rapid housing and housing workers. Housing workers shall assist people wanting to be housed and those living in improperly heated or otherwise inadequate housing who need tenant's rights, legal, or other housing assistance.
- No shelter or inclement weather site bans. No shelter or inclement weather site bans, suspensions, restrictions, or sanctions can be carried out during extreme cold weather alerts. Any clients who have been sanctioned/suspended/restricted/banned can return to the shelter during these periods, if necessary. Where an individual may have an incident-related restriction from a shelter or inclement weather sites, the shelter system will work together to ensure that a space is provided for the individual, with transportation supported if necessary.
- Create an Inclement Weather Emergency Staffing and Transportation Fund. Make this fund available to drop-ins and shelter system operators to allow them to place 1-2 additional staff on shifts during cold/inclement weather alerts to address increased needs adequately, work on referrals, and ensure safety because of increased capacity, etc, and/or to have outreach staff attend at a city-run facility to support, if a space were to be opened by the city.

**4. City of Barrie to work progressively toward 24/7/365 public washroom and drinking water access.**

This is captured in the new Official Plan, but with no timelines. We are asking Barrie City Council to request a staff report to inform realistic budget allocations and timelines, with improvements made each year to meet this goal downtown by 2024 and in other areas of the city by 2026. The staff report should include temporary solutions that could be put in place immediately until the more permanent solutions can be implemented.

**5. County of Simcoe to conduct an external audit of all funded homelessness services and supports, including shelter providers, with input from people with lived/living experience and/or shelter users.**

Shelter users are the experts on whether the shelter system is safe and meets their needs. Advocacy on encampments must be done in tandem with advocacy for shelter safety because many in encampments choose living outdoors instead of

staying in the shelter system because it does not meet their needs, they do not qualify for services, or they do not feel safe there.

Common reasons given by those choosing tents over the shelter constituting barriers that need to be addressed include not feeling safe, temporary restrictions/bans, not being able to stay with a partner, not being able to stay with pets, and not being able to bring belongings with them.

In addition, shelters are often places of violence for people who are not cisgender. This is experienced in many ways, including through the classification of “male” or “female” beds, administratively erasing nonbinary people. While some shelters have taken steps to address this within their programming, it can still impact the individual treatment people receive, both from staff and other residents, resulting in a lack in these spaces.

- 6. County of Simcoe to use the results of the audit to review and update the [Emergency Shelter Standards from 2003](#), to include harm reduction measures as the standard within the shelter system, in consultation with shelter providers, shelter users, and other community homelessness and housing stakeholders. Ongoing external audits are needed.**

The Shelter Standards were written in 2003, updated in 2006, and do not include any harm reduction measures. Given the shelter providers' own reported statistics on overdoses and drug toxicity deaths in the last two years, this is unacceptable. Advocates within the shelter system have brought forward concerns about the constraints of the outdated standards and the negative impacts this has had on their ability to implement harm reduction practices within their programming.

Establish an advisory committee of current and past participants of shelter programs, respite programs, as well as current and past encampment residents, to provide advice on how to improve shelter operations and appropriate housing options. This would involve collaborating with shelter residents and respite guests who use drugs to determine and help implement what harm services and strategies are needed within these settings. There is also a need to collaborate with shelter residents and respite guests who have disabilities to determine and implement ways to make these settings accessible.

- 7. County of Simcoe to immediately increase rent supplements, rent-geared-to-income, and affordable housing options, and fast-track an overhaul of rent supplement and Housing Retention Fund process, so applicants get proof of entitlement to a specific amount before they start their housing search.**

Our waitlists for housing are too long. We have people aging into chronic homelessness within our shelter system. The longer people are homeless, the more time and resources it takes to help them recover. We need a significant increase in meaningfully affordable (and supportive, where warranted) options for people to improve the outflow from our shelter system. We also need to increase and improve our homelessness prevention programming. The Housing Retention Fund needs to be reviewed, and there must be flexibility within the use of housing retention funds to support retention of existing housing. Advocates have long called for a pre-approval process so that individuals can act quickly to put an offer on a unit that becomes available. When they need to wait for approval, they are likely to lose out on the unit to someone who is able to make the offer on the spot. Support for relocation to choice communities should also be provided when requested, but should not be used as a way to reduce strain on current resource capacity.

There is also a need to redefine what “affordable housing” is within our community. While recognizing that the provincial government sets the official definition of “affordable housing” we are requesting the County of Simcoe define and adopt a definition of “deeply affordable housing” that makes housing affordable to people who are on social assistance programs, including but not limited to Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, and Canadian Pension Plan. This new definition should then be applied to all city projects in which affordable housing is a consideration by January 1, 2023.

**8. County of Simcoe to identify partners and funding to develop and implement a health care program for unhoused people.**

In other cities in Ontario, the Community Health Centres run “street health” programs to provide health care to people who are unhoused or precariously housed. These take the form of walk-in clinics and/or mobile outreach programs. We do not have any low-barrier and culturally appropriate health care options for people who are unhoused or precariously housed in Barrie, which further exacerbates the harm to those who are unhoused or precariously housed in our city.

*With appreciation to the Shelter and Housing Justice Network in Toronto and the Forgotten 519 in London, ON, for the inspiration from the documents they have made publicly available.*

## **Endorsements** (as of Sept 15, 2022)

### **Organizations**

Barrie Chapter of SCATEH

Busby Centre

Collier Street United Church Social Action Task Force

Elizabeth Fry Society

Engage Barrie

Gilbert Centre

Grace United Church

John Howard Simcoe Muskoka

Oahas

Redwood Park Communities

Ryan's Hope

Simcoe-Barrie Bethune Club

### **Individuals**

Endorsed by 99 individuals