

# DEPUTATION REQUEST

REGIONAL COUNCIL

FEBRUARY 23, 2023

**Subject:** Proposed 1% Tax Increase for Homelessness Alleviation

**Spokesperson:** Jeff Schlemmer

**Name of Group or person(s) being represented (if applicable):**

Community Legal Clinic of York Region

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**Brief summary of issue or purpose of deputation:**

We are the free Legal Aid Ontario legal clinic serving York Region. We act for disabled, low-income and tenant residents of York Region. We also operate a Homelessness Prevention Program funded by York Region.

In those roles we see first-hand the continuing rise in homelessness. The causes are many. For example we note that shelter allowances paid to disabled Ontarians are \$522/month when average rents in the Region are about \$2,000. If disabled residents of the Region have to move they can't find anywhere they can afford - and increasingly fall into homelessness.

We believe that York Region's citizens feel that no one in York Region should be homeless. Most will pay a small levy if assured that it will be used to alleviate the homelessness which they increasingly see in their communities. We risk permanent third-world shantytowns, which are not consistent with our view of ourselves as being an advanced society.

We strongly support Chair Emmerson's proposal. It will save untold suffering by York Region's most disadvantaged citizens.

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## **The “One-Percent Solution” – Meaningfully Reducing Homelessness in York Region**

### **Overview:**

Homelessness has become a major crisis. It’s at levels not seen since the Great Depression, and continues to worsen. Yet we are not in a depression. The economy is not doing too badly. Unemployment is low.

Homelessness is at serious risk of becoming structural. We are facing the prospect of permanent third-world shanty towns in our communities. These are filled, however, not with unemployed, but rather with disabled and/or broken former neighbours, friends and family – who formerly worked or were kept housed by adequate social supports. No one wants York Region to become this.

It’s important to recall that thirty years ago there was virtually no homelessness in York Region. Homelessness was not inevitable. The lack of homeless was due to the provision of extensive federal rent-geared-to-income housing and adequate provincial disability benefits and supports. In 1993, as you know, social housing was downloaded by Prime Minister Chretien to the provinces.<sup>1</sup> Premier Mike Harris then downloaded it to municipalities in the late 90s, but never provided the promised support to adequately fund it.<sup>2</sup>

There is no realistic prospect of homelessness declining without increasing funding to the fight. Prime Minister Trudeau and Premier Ford should face this and scale up their responses adequately. They have announced many small or ineffectual programs, such as absurd one-time \$500 federal rent subsidy and unaffordable “affordable” subsidies (for private construction).<sup>3</sup> The outcome of these programs has been that homelessness continues to increase. They are not scaling for the growing immensity of the problem. Bill 23, of course, isn’t helping.

But until Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Ford decide to take adequate steps to tackle the problem, York Region’s homelessness worsens and we live with it. Only York Region’s leaders can arrest this trend. Dedicating a 1% tax increase for homelessness alleviation is an innovative way to demonstrate that leadership, and not only acceptable to, but strongly desired by the majority of York Region residents. They want something effective done about the homelessness crisis they see every day.

## Public's Position:

We can see the problem worsening in our neighbourhoods and we don't like seeing people living on the streets. We understand that efforts need to be ramped up and that this costs money. We don't begrudge money allocated to a dedicated program for homelessness reduction **if it results in a visible reduction in the homelessness we can see.**

## Action Committee:

We would suggest the creation of an Action Committee of staff and community service providers to quickly identify targets and to recommend quickly implementable steps which will persuade the most people to leave the street ('low-hanging fruit'). We must identify housing alternatives to transition those who prefer tents over shelters (often due to mental illness).

For example, Waterloo is in the process of duplicating its successful A Better Tent City.<sup>4</sup> London has had success with private rooms in converted construction trailers.<sup>5</sup> There are many more innovative approaches, which your staff know - given adequate resources.

## Conclusion:

The proposed 1% tax increase dedicated to homelessness reduction in York Region demonstrates the leadership that the majority of residents are looking for. They evidently won't get it from their federal and provincial leaders. Your residents don't like seeing people living on the street. They recognize that current efforts are at best slowing the continuing worsening of the problem. They understand that more resources are needed, and that this costs money. **They are prepared to pay it provided they see a visible decrease in homeless people on their streets.** York Region staff and service providers have innovative ideas on how to accomplish this, and sooner rather than later. Please give them the financial resources to effectively combat this worsening scourge on our communities.

Respectfully submitted,



Jeff Schlemmer  
Executive Director

## Footnotes:

### 1. **A retreat from social housing**

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the federal government expanded the Canadian welfare state, including providing support to provincial governments for public, cooperative, and non-profit housing. However, in the 1980s Mulroney scrapped the support for cooperative housing, and Chrétien followed by withdrawing the federal government from social housing entirely in 1993, making it the responsibility of provincial and municipal governments. But given the additional financial pressures placed on the provinces by the federal government, many responded by cutting their own support for social housing, including in Ontario and Alberta.

Activist and author Cathy Crowe explains that when Canada had a national housing program, 20,000 new units of affordable or social housing were built every year, providing shelter for many low-income people who could not otherwise afford rentals in the private market. Instead, housing costs have soared in the past decade, placing many Canadians in an even more precarious situation as their wages flatline while rent captures an ever-greater share of their income. These material conditions have also forced a growing number of Canadians onto the street, with an estimated 235,000 people living unhoused every year in Canada.

In *The Chrétien Legacy*, University of Ottawa professor Caroline Andrew writes that the cuts to social programs by the Chrétien government, “particularly the elimination of social housing as a federal activity, has been one factor in the increased polarization within Canadian cities and the deterioration of conditions for vulnerable and marginalized groups.” For a long time, the increase in homelessness has been accepted, but as the pandemic hit Canada, it became clear to many more Canadians that having so many people living on the streets is a collective failure.

From: *Jean Chrétien’s austerity made Canada less prepared for COVID-19*, in Canadian Dimension, by Paris Marx, July 7, 2020  
<https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/jean-chretiens-austerity-made-canada-less-prepared-for-covid-19>

**2. *Made-in-Ontario housing crisis***, in Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Technical Paper #12 by Michael Shapcott, May 2001  
<http://www.urbancenter.utoronto.ca/pdfs/curp/ShapcottOntario.pdf>

**3. “Affordable” rents are considerably higher than the shelter allowances of social assistance recipients** <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/rental-construction-financing-cmhc-loans-average-affordable-rent-1.6173487>

**4. 'It has saved lives': Checking in with Kitchener's A Better Tent City one year after move** <https://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/it-has-saved-lives-checking-in-with-kitchener-s-a-better-tent-city-one-year-after-move-1.6134686>

5. **City staff are touting the success of this year's temporary winter shelter for homeless Londoners** <https://globalnews.ca/news/8656922/london-temporary-winter-shelter-homeless-success/>