

# Our Vision for Supportive Housing

## The Dream Team's Submission to the City of Toronto in Response to its Proposed Affordable Housing Strategy, Housing Opportunities Toronto (HOT)

### Who we are

The Dream Team is a group of psychiatric consumer/survivors and their family members who advocate for more supportive housing in Ontario for people living with mental health issues. Our understanding of the challenges of affordable and supportive housing comes from our own personal experiences with mental illness and homelessness. In presentations and workshops we demonstrate the life-altering benefits of supportive housing by telling our stories to politicians, community groups and institutions.

Dream Team members have been recipients of many awards and recognition including the Ontario Non Profit Housing Association's Tenant Achievement Award, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Foundation Courage to Come Back Award and the Community Teaching Award from the University of Toronto. The Dream Team members have been transformed from being homeless to become committed advocates for supportive housing; from psychiatric consumer survivors to educators dispelling the myths of mental illness.

### Our Hopes

Like all people in the City of Toronto, the Dream Team wants the City to be a place to live where we can have pride in the city and in our selves. Decent affordable housing that is appropriate to people's needs is essential if we are going to ensure a high quality of life for all people in the City of Toronto.

We need the Mayor and the Council of the City of Toronto to encourage the politics of hope; to put in place the opportunity for good housing and to end the cycle of poverty by ensuring that all people have decent housing and that everyone has a voice, regardless of how poor or disadvantaged they may be. We need our political leaders to underscore that all people have the right to

secure housing and that attempts to exclude people because they are homeless or have mental health issues are discrimination and a violation of fundamental human rights.

To ensure an atmosphere of hope, we need to help people to get off the street. We need the churches to continue for now to provide emergency programs like Out of the Cold. We also look to the City to continue programs like Streets to Homes, which reach out to people who are homeless and provide supports to get people off the street and into permanent housing. As well, people need access to information; they need to know how to access waiting lists for housing; who to call. And the information needs to be accessible in different languages and to different cultures.

We need more low cost supportive housing; we know that the lack of affordable, safe, secure housing contributes to mental health issues. We need more affordable and supportive housing, where people feel safe and secure in the knowledge that they will not be evicted because they can't pay the rent or because someone else is disturbed by their behaviour.

And, in conjunction with initiatives to build and fund affordable and supportive housing, we need public education. We need the community to know that the City of Toronto believes that everyone has a right to decent affordable housing and that this City is committed to ensuring that everybody has that housing. We need to educate the community about mental illness. We also need to educate the community about the benefits of supportive housing for people that live with mental illness and other disabilities and we need to ensure that people understand that Toronto will not accept discrimination in housing on the basis of those disabilities.

## Dream Team Members' Experience with Homelessness and the Life Altering Benefits of Supportive Housing

*The following is a list of personal responses the Dream Team members made when asked about their experience with homelessness and supportive housing.*

### On the Importance of Supportive Housing

“Lack of affordable, safe, secure housing contributes to mental health issues.”

“Supportive housing is safe, secure and private.”

“Supportive housing helps people to make the transition from homelessness to stability.”

“Supportive housing contributes to recovery.”

“The communities that are built in supportive housing give people a sense of belonging.”

“Socializing that is encouraged in supportive housing helps people to overcome isolation.”

“Supportive housing helps people to build confidence.”

“Supportive housing provides opportunities for education, training and skills development.”

### **Supportive housing encourages people to assume greater responsibility:**

- “Tenants have the ability to choose which supports they will access.”
- “Supports are available as needed.”
- “In some housing tenants are empowered to participate in decision making.”

“Supportive housing helps people to respect their neighbours.”

“Support workers on site contribute to the safety and security of the people that live there.”

“There will always be problems but they can be solved with the help of good workers.”

### **There are two main types of supportive housing:**

1. “In dedicated supportive housing, all of the people receive needed supports.”
2. “Supportive housing can also be individuals living in apartments throughout the community in privately owned housing or in social housing. Rent supplements are provided to make the housing affordable; this is crucial since the income people receive from ODSP is not enough to pay market rents. Support is provided by a community agency not linked to the housing provider.”

### **Supportive housing can provide a continuum:**

- Varying levels of support
- Stepping stones to support transition
- People establish stability
- People demonstrate capacity

“People are able to assume more responsibility”

Supportive Housing is cost effective; Dr Benoit Mulsant, Physician in Chief at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health says that “having a home is a fundamental determinant of health” and at \$60 a day is far less expensive than the \$600 a day that it costs for a hospital bed – “the math is simple!”

### Barriers to Supportive Housing

#### **Lack of adequate funding:**

- “Less than 1% of the National budget is spent on housing.”
- “Support funding is often not available to link with affordable housing funding.”

#### **Prejudice against people with mental illness:**

- “They are not capable.”
- “They are dangerous.”

#### **Misinformation about supportive housing:**

- “Perception that it is a handout.”
- “Unfounded fear of lower property values.”
- “Unfounded fear of increased crime.”

**Discrimination based on this prejudice and misinformation:**

- “Community opposition (NIMBY mentality)”
- “Municipal zoning bylaws that exclude or limit supportive housing.”
- “More onerous municipal planning processes for supportive housing”

**Overcoming Barriers**

**Need for political leadership:**

- “How civilized a country is depends on how well it treats its poorest people”
- “Leadership by elected officials – speaking out against prejudice and in support of human rights”
- “Commitment by all levels of government to make it a priority to provide appropriate housing for all people”

“Governments need to stop pointing a finger at each other and work together for the public good”

**Lack of money:**

- “Need to fund affordable housing, not war”
- “All levels of government need to contribute to make HOT real; commitment is needed from all orders of government.”

**Overcoming Prejudice:**

- “Hearing the voices of consumers (like the Dream Team) telling positive stories”
- “Meetings with neighbours to address their fears and concerns”
- “Education for adults and young people”
- “Advocacy for more supportive housing”
- “Equal treatment/ civil rights”

“Stigma is less likely if supportive housing is mixed into every community”

**Property values:**

- Dream Team research shows there is no negative impact  
Dream Team research shows that supportive housing has a positive impact on community health.

**Dream Team Recommendations on the proposed City of Toronto ’s Affordable Housing Framework**

The Dream Team supports and endorses the goals set out in the HOT Framework, recognizing that achievement of these goals requires the commitment and financial support of the federal and provincial governments.

As people that have experienced homelessness and for whom supportive housing has been a life altering benefit, the Dream Team urges a particular focus on programs and actions which will provide the opportunity for more people who are vulnerable as a result of disabilities to access affordable and supportive housing.

With specific reference to the actions identified in the Affordable Housing Framework Consultation paper, we offer the following comments and recommendations:

**1. Provide Supports to Help Homeless and Vulnerable Individuals and Families Find and Keep Homes**

The Dream Team endorses the proposal to continue and expand the “housing-first” approach to help people living on the street or in shelters find permanent affordable housing; we recognize that people are better able to address other life issues and get their lives back on track when they have a roof over their heads.

At the same time we know from our own experience that ongoing support can be a crucial factor for many people that have experienced homelessness to maintain their housing. This support can be provided by community based agencies to people living in independent housing or by supportive housing providers in dedicated supportive housing projects. While some people prefer a more integrated approach, for many of us the community building that happens in dedicated supportive housing projects has contributed to our recovery.

- **The Dream Team recommends that the City ensure the expansion of both approaches to the provision of support: support provided by community based agencies to people living in independent housing and support provided by supportive housing providers in dedicated supportive housing projects. We recognize that provision of support requires funding action by the provincial government and we urge them as well, to provide ongoing funding.**

We support the call by the City for both the provincial and federal governments to renew and expand initiatives to support the development of supportive housing opportunities, including new funding and increased flexibility in the use of existing funding to address needs identified by the City through such tools as the Street Needs Assessment.

**2. Assist Families and Individuals to Afford Rents**

The Dream Team recognizes the immediate advantages of using housing allowances to access currently available housing, including housing provided by private sector landlords. For some people geared to income housing integrated into private market housing is a desirable choice.

At the same time, our experience with dedicated supportive housing is that it provides an efficient and effective way to help very vulnerable people to access needed supports, overcome isolation and become a part of a supportive community.

- **The Dream Team recommends that the City continue to support the provision of a range of supportive housing environments for people with disabilities and who have experienced**

**homelessness, both integrated into private market rental housing and in dedicated supportive housing developments.**

Whether affordable housing is provided in existing housing or through initiatives to create new housing, it is important that the housing be truly affordable. Housing created under recent “affordable” housing programs has received government support to produce housing at rents at or slightly below market rent levels. These rents are not affordable to many people in the community and are well beyond the reach of people who, due to their disabilities, live on social assistance.

Similarly, programs which provide a fixed amount of rent subsidy may reduce the burden of unaffordable housing to some extent but still force those of us on fixed incomes to use funds intended for food to pay rents.

- **The Dream Team recommends that the Province commit to a new, long-term program to deliver rent-geared-to-income subsidies in new and existing rental housing.**

As indicated above, the amount of money that a person living with disabilities receives is grossly inadequate to provide the necessities of life.

- **The Dream Team recommends that the Province increase social assistance rates to reflect Toronto’s cost of living and to adjust these rates annually to reflect changes.**

**3. Preserve and Fix Rental Housing and Keep it Affordable**

Most Dream Team members live in housing provided by non-profit supportive housing providers and highly appreciate the benefits of decent affordable housing. We agree with the Framework proposal to ensure that these housing providers receive the resources they need to preserve this housing and to continue to provide a high quality supportive living environment.

We endorse, as well, the initiatives of the City and the Toronto Community Housing Corporation to improve the quality of life in existing social housing communities. We are especially supportive of the efforts that are underway within TCHC to enhance the

ability of the Housing Company to address the needs of people with special needs, including people living with mental illness.

#### **4. Create and Renew Mixed, Inclusive, Sustainable Neighbourhoods**

The Dream Team supports, in principle, the actions proposed in the Affordable Housing Framework to ensure that people in all neighbourhoods across the city are able to access a full range of affordable housing to address the wide range of needs. We believe that this must include housing forms and approaches that are particularly suited to the needs of different populations. At the same time, we know that the City’s own bylaws and policies are a barrier to achievement of this objective. For example: rooming houses, which provide the only form of housing that is affordable without subsidies for single people on social assistance, are not permitted in most parts of the City. And the location of some forms of supportive housing is limited by separation distances set out in zoning bylaws.

- **The Dream Team recommends that the City of Toronto revise its zoning bylaws to remove the barriers to access to housing for disabled and vulnerable people, including providing for the location of rooming houses in all parts of the city and elimination of separation distances between forms of housing based on the characteristics of the intended residents.**

This action can be taken immediately without the cooperation of other levels of government.

#### **5. Create New Affordable Rental Housing**

As mentioned above, the Dream Team believes that affordable housing developments should be truly affordable and heartily endorses the proposed actions to ensure that new developments include a large number of highly affordable rent-g geared to-income units.

- **We recommend that the Federal and Provincial governments renew, enhance and improve the existing Affordable Housing Program.**

#### **6. Help Households Buy and Maintain Ownership**

The Dream Team supports the option of assisting

households to attain homeownership provided that it does not use resources that are more appropriately targeted to those who can not access affordable housing.

#### **7. Create Housing Opportunities in All Neighbourhoods**

The Dream Team has experienced the hurtful impact of community consultations in which citizens discriminate against people who are homeless and disabled based on misconceptions about the impact of affordable and supportive housing in the community and their mistaken belief that citizens have a right to decide who will live in the community.

Active efforts by people to exclude others from being housed on the basis of a disability, including mental illness, are a violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code. The City of Toronto has an obligation to prevent this type of discrimination.

*The Dream Team recommends a number of measures that the City can undertake which will prevent discrimination and ensure housing opportunities in all neighbourhoods:*

- **Ensure that the consultation requirements related to specific housing proposals are no greater than required by law and expected of any development.**
- **Where consultations are required, ensure that ground rules are respected and clearly set out in advance of any meetings; the discussion should focus on physical design issues only and not the characteristics of the people that will live in the housing.**
- **Provide professional facilitators for all consultations, skilled in conflict resolution and sure of their responsibility to prevent discriminatory discussion.**

*In addition to these measures focused on specific housing developments, the Dream Team recommends that the City initiate a broad public education campaign to:*

- **Affirm the commitment of the City of Toronto to the right of all citizens to decent affordable housing;**
- **Affirm the City’s commitment to ensuring that**

- everyone has decent affordable housing;
- **Affirm that the City of Toronto will not tolerate discrimination in housing on the basis of mental illness or other disabilities;**
- **Educate the public about mental illness;**
- **Educate the community about the positive benefits of supportive housing as a means to ensure housing stability for people with special needs;**
- **Dispel myths and misconceptions about negative impacts of supportive and affordable housing, drawing on research like that carried out recently by the Dream Team;**
- **Support public education efforts of community based organizations.**

## 8. Work Together with All Governments and the Non-Profit and Private Sectors

The Dream Team appreciates and applauds the leadership of the City of Toronto and its commitment to the development of a long term strategy to address the needs for affordable and supportive housing.

- **We recommend that the City continue to work to engage the provincial and federal government as partners in the strategy.**
- **The Dream Team recommends that the Province of Ontario and the Government of Canada commit to complementary strategies for affordable housing that include long term and sustainable funding and provide the flexibility that will enable communities to address local needs.**

# The Dream Team's Recommendations for the City of Toronto from "We are Neighbours"\*

The Appendix to the Affordable Housing Framework contains additional proposed actions intended to support the key recommendations. The Dream Team applauds these actions, some of which are critical to the success of efforts to ensure adequate housing for people who have experienced homelessness and who live with mental illness.

**The Dream Team recommends that:** *(note Dream Team additions in Italics)*

### 1. Help People Find and Keep Homes

- **The City of Toronto identify future supportive and alternative housing needs for people with mental health and daily living challenges**
- **The Province expand provincial mental health supportive housing options.**

### 2. Assist People to Afford Toronto Rents

- **The Provincial and Federal governments increase minimum wages, social assistance benefit rates, access to Employment Insurance, child benefit programs, benefits to working poor people, and related actions**

- **All orders of government support social enterprise, skills training and "community economic development" to create jobs for social housing tenants and homeless people.**

### 3. Preserve and Fix Rental Housing and Keep it Affordable

- **The City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario strengthen regulations to keep existing private rental stock in place and in good repair, including preventing demolition of rental housing or conversion of rental housing to ownership**
- **Support appropriate non-profit acquisition and renovation of private apartment buildings and residential single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotels to provide sustainable affordable homes**
- **Help homeowners make safe and legal second suites through education, promotion and incentives**
- **Add to the supply of housing available to single persons by encouraging and permitting an increase in legal rooming houses and other forms of housing; including amending City of**

*Toronto zoning bylaws to permit rooming houses as of right in all communities*

- **Help preserve existing rooming house opportunities for singles by providing training and other supports to landlords/operators to assist them to improve and maintain the stock.**

#### 4. Create and Renew Mixed, Inclusive, Sustainable Neighbourhoods

*The City of Toronto ensure that the social housing revitalization plan includes opportunities for supportive and alternative housing in future phases of revitalization in Regent Park and other communities.*

#### 5. Create New Rental Housing

**Secure new opportunities for rental housing by implementing the Official Plan’s existing Large Sites policy (which provides for 20 per cent affordable housing as a priority on sites of five hectares or more) and expand this requirement to require that large sites provide for a full range and mix of affordable housing including supportive and alternative housing**

#### 6. Help People Buy and Stay in Their Own Homes

#### 7. Create Affordable Housing Opportunities in All Neighbourhoods

**Support, through public education and partnerships, community stakeholders working on affordable housing initiatives, including organizations like HomeComing and the Dream Team which work to actively respond to discriminatory community resistance to affordable and supportive housing.**

Current City planning approval practices create regulatory hurdles that make it more difficult for supportive housing projects to move ahead. While planning law requires that proper planning principles consider buildings and physical design only and not the personal characteristics of potential residents, planning practice has often allowed opponents to engage in questions about the economic or health status of future residents.

The cumbersome regulatory process creates unacceptable delays that can, in some cases, defeat plans for new supportive housing.

Supportive housing projects sometimes require approvals from a variety of authorities, in addition to planning approvals.

Toronto’s proposed 10-year housing plan (HOT) sets no specific target for new supportive housing. As part of the Mayor’s Homelessness Action Task Force of 1999, Dr. Anne Golden recommended 1,000 new supportive homes every year. The Wellesley Institute’s Blueprint to End Homelessness in Toronto in 2006 set an annual target of 2,000 supportive homes based on the latest data.

#### **The City of Toronto should:**

**Act on the strong research evidence that shows that supportive housing facilities are not harmful to neighbourhoods, and that they contribute to strong communities. The City should apply “as-of-right” planning rules to supportive housing, and recognize that supportive housing is a necessary part of every neighbourhood by setting targets for all parts of the city.**

**Create a streamlined, “single window” approach that assigns projects to senior city staff who are responsible for securing the necessary approvals.**

**Ensure that all planning and zoning are neighborhood building processes and recognize that housing is a human right for everyone.**

**Establish clear supportive housing targets as part of its 10-year housing strategy.**

In support of these recommendations, the Dream Team report “We Are Neighbours” includes complementary recommendations for action by the Government of Ontario, the Government of Canada, Local Health Integration Networks, Supportive Housing Providers, Community Groups and Supportive Housing Tenants.

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\* **We Are Neighbours:** The Impact of Supportive Housing on Community, Social, Economic and Attitude Changes; Report Prepared by Alice de Wolff, May 2008 - Community University Research Project: The Dream Team and The University of Toronto. Copies of the Report and related documents can be found on-line at [www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com) and [www.thedreamteam.ca](http://www.thedreamteam.ca) or phone 416-516-1422 (263).



Advocating for safe,  
secure, affordable  
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