

Hamilton Encampment Support Network

Project: Investigating Hamilton's COVID-19 shelter hotel program

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About the Organization:

(From the community partner): HESN is a grassroots organization led by predominantly housed community members. We recognize that unhoused people are not represented in municipal and provincial decision making when it comes to developing housing and homeless strategies, instead they have decisions made for them. As a result, people are forced into shelter spaces that don't meet their needs. At the same time they are punished with fines for breaking municipal bylaws and provincial trespass laws when they encamp in public parks. The city's encampment enforcement protocol has created a shift over the past two years in what encampments look like. People need to be less visible in order to avoid municipal law enforcement (MLE), and this has resulted in increased precarity. Despite the decrease in visibility, encampment evictions are very much still occurring. HESN is concerned with evictions, especially when the city is not fulfilling its promise to provide viable alternatives (housing).

Background:

1. The role of shelters in City housing policy

Currently the city connects people with housing supports through the shelters – those evicted from encampments are funneled into the shelter system and then connected with a housing worker. Encampment residents have told us they are not being provided housing when they go to these shelters and that, for many reasons, the shelters are not safe spaces.

2. How the pandemic changed things

The City's shelter and housing policy changed significantly because of the pandemic. The city modified existing congregate shelters in accordance with public health guidelines and it created contracts with hotels to provide additional shelter space.

Some of the things we've been told about shelters during the pandemic:

- People left congregate shelters because there wasn't social distancing.
- People were kicked out of shelters and returned to living in encampments.
- People left shelters because of lack of harm reduction support and interactions with staff.
- Some shelter residents were visited by housing workers and asked to provide personal information, but were never housed.
- Many people who stayed in the shelters were not connected with housing supports.

Our top priority is to respect and center the perspectives of unhoused people. In order to understand how the City is taking these perspectives into consideration (or not) we need more information about how the shelters are run, and how effective they have been at connecting people with permanent housing.

Research Question:

The guiding question for this project is: *What are the details of the relationship between the city, the shelter hotel program, and shelter and housing service providers during the shelter system operation between January 1, 2020 to January 1, 2023?*

The following sub-questions will be used as a starting point to structure the investigation:

1. What data is collected on the shelter hotel program, how is it collected, and where is it stored/tracked?
 - a. Variables of interest: number of people accessing the hotel shelter program; number of people accessing housing supports via the shelter hotel program

2. Which hotels did the City of Hamilton enter into shelter contracts with between Jan. 1, 2020 and Jan. 1, 2023? Of those hotels:
 - a. Which are still operational?
 - i. Of those that closed, when did they close?
 - b. Who, if at all, provides/provided housing support services?
 - c. What types of beds are/were available in the hotel (e.g., individual, couple, gender-specific, youth, 2SLGBTQIAA+)? How many of these beds are/were allocated to each category in the hotel?
 - d. How many people accessed the shelter hotel between Jan. 1, 2020 to Jan. 1, 2023?
 - e. How long is/was the average stay in the hotel?
 - f. How many clients are/were housed or transitioned to another shelter or supportive housing program?

3. What are the transition plans, if any, for the shelter hotel program?
 - a. Is the program slated to end? If so, when?
 - b. Will the program be transitioned into a different kind of program (e.g., congregate; small, shared quarters (dormitory style); private rooms; transitional housing)?

Research Activities:

Information on the shelter hotel program, and the shelter system in general, is scattered and fragmented. Data will thus be collected through multiple sources, including:

- Searching for public facing documents, including reports to Hamilton’s City Council, reviews and summaries of service provision from City of Hamilton’s Housing Services Division
- Searching public facing documents from shelter providers: Good Shephard, Mission Services, YWCA and YMCA
- Contacting key stakeholders at City Housing Hamilton and the City of Hamilton (a list of three people, at minimum, will be provided)

Audience:

This data, together with testimonials HESN has collected, will be used by the group and their partners to better understand the scale and effectiveness of the shelter hotel system. This information will also help them advocate for municipal strategies to better support unhoused people.

Deliverable:

Plain language report of the investigation with the context, methods, and findings.

Timeline:

January to end of April, 2023.

Community Partner Role:

The community partner will actively partner with the Research Shop team to:

- develop and clarify the scope of the work,
- develop a workplan to structure the team’s weekly activities,
- meet regularly to discuss progress,
- review all project deliverables (including but not limited to the final project report)

- support access to participants for interviews, if necessary

Interest for Students:

This project will interest students who are interested in the topics of homelessness and grassroots responses, housing policy, and municipal political advocacy and activism.