

Dear Cambridge City Council,

I am a resident of Ward 6 and am writing in support of the motion moving Council to direct staff to report back on the prevention of displacing unsheltered people during extreme weather events. This is a timely and important move that the City of Cambridge can take to uphold unhoused people's section 7 *Charter* rights to life, liberty, and security of the person, and ultimately save the lives of our unhoused neighbours.

I recognize that efforts to respond effectively to homelessness in Cambridge, and specifically encampments, have been challenging and contentious. This is no doubt because homelessness has reached crisis levels in communities across Canadaⁱ as there is not enough safe, permanent, and affordable housing for people in needⁱⁱ and not enough resources to meet the different needs people have, with more families, youth, newcomers, and older adults than ever experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ The homelessness crisis affects everyone it touches – most importantly people who are homeless themselves – but also their friends, families, businesses, and the broader community. This is why we must focus on effective responses to homelessness that support our entire community to thrive.

At the same time as the decades-long homelessness crisis grows, so too is the climate crisis, with extreme weather events increasing in frequency and duration.^{iv} Unhoused people are at higher risk from these events because of their circumstances. Extreme heat puts unhoused people at risk of dehydration, heat exhaustion, and heatstroke, while extreme cold puts them at risk for hypothermia and frostbite.^v These are serious health risks, especially considering that unhoused people are much more likely than the general public to suffer from physical health challenges^{vi} and have a life expectancy rate half that of housed people.^{vii}

Given the risks of extreme weather events on unhoused people, it might seem counterintuitive to prevent displacement during these times. But it is not for 3 reasons.

1. No one should have to resort to sleeping outside or in an encampment, during an extreme weather event or ever. As the former UN Special Rapporteur on Housing wrote, “Encampments are thus instances of both human rights *violations* of those who are forced to rely on them for their homes, as well as human rights *claims*, advanced in response to violations of the right to housing” [emphasis in original].^{viii} Ideally, all unhoused people would be able and willing to access indoor space during extreme weather events. But this simply isn't the case. As a recent article in *The Record* noted, when generously counting for all the emergency shelter beds across the region, including ones not available yet, *and* room for 70 people in winter warming stations to come in Winter 2025, at the peak of the region's capacity, there are a total of 674 shelter spaces for the 2,371 people experiencing homelessness in the region, 1,009 of whom live outside.^{ix} **This means that even if everyone living in an encampment in Cambridge were to take up social services' offer to come in from the heat or cold, we would only have a fraction of the space available to**

accommodate them. At our best, at least a third of unhoused people would be left outside, likely more in Cambridge specifically.

2. People living outside are resourceful and find ways to survive in extreme conditions. This includes finding spaces that are out of public view and shaded, putting up tarps to keep out the sun, putting a tent on pallets to avoid being soaked, and using sleeping bags and blankets to keep warm, to name a few strategies. When encampments are displaced, it is very common that people lose some or all of their belongings.^x Losing these belongings during extreme weather events can be a matter of life and death.
3. There is significant evidence to show that when unhoused people are displaced, they lose access to life saving resources.^{xi} Outreach workers and health care providers cannot find individuals who they previously supported in an encampment, which can have a serious negative impact on their health, including cutting off access to medication and treatment plans, essentials such as bottled water, food, and warm socks, and providing continuity of care around accessing housing. Research also shows that when people are displaced, 91% remain unsheltered and 79% stay in the same neighbourhood following a move along order. This means that displacement does not effectively respond to local concerns, including those of businesses.^{xii}

For these reasons, it is unnecessarily risky to displace unhoused people during extreme weather events and puts their lives in greater risk than ever. That said, I recognize the multi-institutional nature of encampment responses in the City of Cambridge and the complexity of moving forward with such an initiative. As such, I ask Councillors to vote in favour of a **staff report**, where these issues can be explored in depth so that you can make informed decisions on how to move forward.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erin Dej', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Erin Dej, resident of Ward 6

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- ⁱ Infrastructure Canada. (2024). *Everyone Counts 2020-2022: Results from the Third Nationally Coordinated Point-in-Time Counts of Homelessness in Canada*. Infrastructure Canada. <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/alt-format/pdf/homelessness-sans-abri/reports-rapports/pit-counts-dp-2020-2022-results-resultats-en.pdf>
- ⁱⁱ Whitzman, C. (2024). *Home Truths: Fixing Canada's Housing Crisis*. On Point Press.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Forchuk, C., Russell, G., Richardson, J., Perreault, C., Hassan, H., Lucyk, B., & Gyamfi, S. (2022). Family matters in Canada: understanding and addressing family homelessness in Ontario. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), Article 614. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13028-9>; Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Kidd, S. A., & Schwan, K. (2016). *Without a home: The national youth homelessness survey*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press; Forchuk C, Russell G, Richardson J, et al. (2021). Family matters in Ontario: Understanding and addressing homelessness among newcomer families in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*. 54(1), 27-39. doi:[10.1177/0844562121998206](https://doi.org/10.1177/0844562121998206); Burns, V. F., & Sussman, T. (2019). Homeless for the first time in later life: Uncovering more than one pathway. *The Gerontologist*, 59(2), 251–259.
- ^{iv} World Meteorological Organization, <https://wmo.int/topics/extreme-weather>
- ^v Region of Waterloo, <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/health-and-wellness/extreme-heat.aspx>
- ^{vi} Onapa, H., Sharpley, C. F., Bitsika, V., McMillan, M. E., MacLure, K., Smith, L., & Agnew, L. L. (2022). The physical and mental health effects of housing homeless people: A systematic review. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(2), 448–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13486>
- ^{vii} Stergiopoulos, V., Hwang, S. W., Gozdzik, A., Nisenbaum, R., Latimer, E., Rabouin, D., Adair, C. E., Bourque, J., Connelly, J., Frankish, J., Katz, L. Y., Mason, K., Misir, V., O'Brien, K., Sareen, J., Schütz, C. G., Singer, A., Streiner, D. L., Vasiliadis, H.-M., ... for the At Home/Chez Soi Investigators. (2015). Effect of Scattered-Site Housing Using Rent Supplements and Intensive Case Management on Housing Stability Among Homeless Adults With Mental Illness: A Randomized Trial. *JAMA*, 313(9), 905–915.
- ^{viii} Farha, L., & Schwan, K. (2020). *A National Protocol for Homeless Encampments in Canada*. UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing. <https://www.make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-National-Protocol-for-Homeless-Encampments-in-Canada.pdf> at 2.
- ^{ix} D'Amato, L. (8 September 2025). Winter's coming and we have 2 people living on the street for every 1 in a shelter bed. *The Record*. Online at: https://www.therecord.com/opinion/columnists/winters-coming-and-we-have-2-people-living-on-the-street-for-every-1-in/article_bdcbc632-9163-5675-93f9-053f55f34605.html
- ^x Belongings Matter: Possessions of Precariously Housed People, <https://belongingsmatter.ca/>
- ^{xi} Boucher, L. M., Dodd, Z., Young, S., Shahid, A., Bayoumi, A., Firestone, M., & Kendall, C. E. (2022). “They Have Their Security, We Have Our Community”: Mutual Support Among People Experiencing Homelessness in Encampments in Toronto During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *SSM-Qualitative Research in Health*, 2, 100163; Herring, C., Yarbrough, D., & Marie Alatorre, L. (2020). Pervasive Penalty: How the Criminalization of Poverty Perpetuates Homelessness. *Social Problems*, 67(1), 131–149; *The Regional Municipality of Waterloo v. Persons Unknown and to be Ascertained*, 2023 ONSC 670 at para. 54-56.
- ^{xii} Herring, C. (2019). Complaint-Oriented Policing: Regulating Homelessness in Public Space. *American Sociological Review*, 84(5), 769–800. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419872671>