

Leilani Farha  
Global Director, The Shift  
Ottawa, ON  
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Dear Hon. Minister Hussen, Hon. Minister Duclos, and Ms. Bowers,

We are writing regarding the urgent and pressing situation of people living in homelessness across the country as the cold weather is upon us and as COVID-19 infections hit record levels. The reports from those on-the-ground in Toronto, Calgary, Montreal, and elsewhere are alarming. These crises conditions are of national concern and relevance.

Local governments in Canada are on the frontlines of the unprecedented health and housing crises. The life-threatening consequences resulting from the intersection of these crises is of particular concern, as cities appear to lack the necessary capacity to protect the life and dignity of the most vulnerable.

The federal government and CMHC must be centrally involved in addressing these country-wide challenges on an urgent and priority basis. Your leadership and your capacity to act as brokers with different levels of government and diverse stakeholders and drive urgent and novel solutions, are desperately needed.

Our principal concerns are as follows:

1. Homelessness is a prima facie violation of the right to housing under international human rights law and, as such, must be addressed through action as a top priority and on an urgent basis. This is supported by the National Housing Strategy Act which commits the federal government to a housing policy that recognizes adequate housing as a fundamental human right as articulated under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
2. The cold weather and Covid are putting at risk the lives and health of those who are living in homelessness. The right to life and security of the person are cornerstones of human rights protections.
3. A number of cities experiencing cold weather are reporting that shelters are at capacity and people are being turned away.
4. Information received suggests that in response to the cold weather several cities are rounding up those sleeping in public places and compelling them into crowded shelters and other congregate settings. This is an inadequate response especially in light of the rapidly spreading omicron variant, the lack of appropriate PPE for people living in homelessness including N95 masks, and the weakened immune systems and under-vaccination rates of this vulnerable population.
5. Without adequate solutions to homelessness across the country, many homeless people have taken to living in encampments, particularly since the start of the pandemic. They have indicated that they often feel safer living in such informal arrangements than in city-provided and managed congregate settings. Despite this, many cities have either failed to provide basic services to ensure encampments

are resilient to COVID and cold weather, or they have implemented hostile policies towards them, including forced evictions. Under international human rights law, the right to housing prohibits forced evictions.

6. There are currently inadequate self-isolation options for people who are living in homelessness and who test positive for COVID or have symptoms. Without isolation options, community spread of COVID is guaranteed and contributes to the lack of health-safety in Shelters and other congregate settings.

Addressing these concerns is not just a matter of resources, it is a matter of creative thinking to develop immediate and nimble solutions that can overcome interjurisdictional barriers and that are adapted to current needs.

We urge you to convene an emergency intergovernmental meeting immediately with provincial/territorial, city and Indigenous officials as well as with those who might expedite an emergency response (eg: International/Canadian Red Cross, UNHCR, Doctors Without Borders, University Health Network) and other relevant stakeholders. The objective of this convening would be to ensure that local governments and those on the frontlines can carry out human rights oriented solutions that will effectively meet the challenges that result from the intersection of COVID, homelessness and the Canadian winter.

The urgent actions you take will save lives and preserve human dignity.

The Shift would be happy to assist in whatever manner would be appropriate.

We look forward to a timely response to this letter. Please note, in the coming days we may share this letter publicly.

Sincerely,



Leilani Farha  
Global Director, The Shift

Cc: Dylan Marando, Sr. Policy Advisor, PMO;  
Michele Tremblay, CFO and Sr. VP, Corporate Services, CMHC