DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE & SAFE 2SLGBTQ+ HOUSING MODELS

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AND REVIEW

THE 519

HOMES FIRST



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ABOUT THE 519

The 519 has been built by Toronto's 2SLGBTQ+ communities as a space where people come together to celebrate, organize, and create community. A City of Toronto agency and registered charity located in the Church and Wellesley Village, The 519 responds to the needs of local and 2SLGBTQ+ communities across Toronto and beyond.

For decades, The 519 has imagined, and reimagined, itself, always remaining focused on how we can make a real difference in the lives of our communities. From essential on-the-ground supports and programming to virtual services, what has always stayed the same is our commitment to making sure that no one is left behind

BACKGROUND

In early 2022, The 519 and Homes First came together to develop and facilitate meaningful community engagement and collaboration strategies to shape a program and service delivery model for 2SLGBTQ+ adults experiencing homelessness at a shelter site on Bloor Street in Toronto.

The four-floor site will accommodate approximately 15 residents, with upper floors that include open concept sleeping areas, washrooms, showering facilities, and flexible space. The main floor includes a kitchen and allows for congregate dining and the basement level has programming space and staff offices.There are laundry facilities onsite as well as a large private patio at the rear of the facility. Currently, the site is not wheelchair accessible.

The development of a 2SLGBTQ+ shelter for adults is the first of its kind inToronto and an important initial step towards creating safe and supportive spaces for 2-Spirit, queer, trans andnon-binary communities experiencing homelessness in Toronto.

CONTEXT

2SLGBTQ+ communities are one of the most prominent demographics experiencing homelessness in Canada. While there is limited data collected on homelessness among adult populations across the country, we know that 2SLGBTQ+ youth make up a large and disproportionate percentage of the homeless youth population. Homeless Hub states that up to 40 % of homeless youth in Canada identify as 2SLGBTQ+, compared to only 5% of the overall youth population.

In Toronto, there are currently no designated emergency or transitional shelters that meet the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ adults. The most recent Street Needs Assessment estimates that 12% of the homeless population in Toronto are 2SLGBTQ+ (this number climbs to 26% of 2SLGBTQ+ youth) and 3.1% identify as trans and non-binary.

While there are two designated 2SLGBTQ+ youth shelters offering 50+ beds of transitional housing, there are only 5 emergency shelter beds that meet the immediate needs of 2SLGBTQ+ homeless youth. To put that in other terms, of the 7000+ shelter beds in Toronto, less then 1% are designated for 2SLGBTQ+ communities experiencing homelessness. None are for 2SLGBTQ communities over the age of 29.

It is likely that the number of 2SLGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness is higher than those numbers captured by the Street Needs Assessment due to factors including a reluctance to disclose sexual orientation and gender identity to people with whom they do not have a trusted relationship.



The lack of information about the number of 2SLGBTQ+ residents within Toronto shelters is also difficult to determine given that this information is not collected as part of the intake process.

The common client intake system (Shelter Management Information System [SMIS]) used by the City and its contracted homelessness service providers does not accommodate diverse gender identities, limiting intake categories under gender to man/woman (and on some forms man/woman/transgender) with no further information collected on gender identity or sexual orientation. Within the SMIS system pronouns that clients use is also not currently collected.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

Nothing for us without us.



In early 2022, The 519 developed a Consultation Framework that included:

- The facilitation of focus groups for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals who are experiencing, or have experienced, homelessness
- Key informant interviews with organizations and community leaders working with 2SLGBTQ+ communities experiencing homelessness
- A review of current literature and best practices related to 2SLGBTQ+ homelessness

As the consultation lead, The 519 convened an internal working group representing a cross-section of staff, including peers, that work directly with 2SLGBTQ+ communities experiencing homelessness. The group also included representation from Senior Leadership as well as our Partnership, Organizational Development, and Education and Training teams.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

Focus Groups

The 519 worked with our internal staff and peer teams to develop a strategy to engage 2SLGBTQ+ community members who have experienced homelessness. This included the development of a Facilitation Guide (Appendix A) and dedicated training for facilitators to ensure the consistent and full participation of community members on subject matter that can be difficult and emotional. Each focus group included two facilitators, a notetaker, and someone to provide specific crisis and referral support as needed.

In total, 121 individuals participated in this process with representation from the following communities:

- 2SLGBTQ+ communities experiencing homelessness (general)
- Trans and Non-Binary (general)
- Trans People of Colour
- Individuals who engage in sex work
- Trans Youth
- Indigenous/2-Spirit Communities
- LGBTQ+ Refugee Communities
- Voices From the Street (organization)
- Sistering (organization)



All of the focus groups took place at The 519 in accessible meeting rooms. Focus groups were 2.5 hours in length and each participant received $75 (in cash/gift cards) for their participation. There was food and coffee/tea available for each focus group and participants were given opportunities to provide feedback both as part of the facilitated session as well as in feedback forms that were distributed at the conclusion of each session.



CONSULTATION PROCESS

Key Informant Interviews

The 519 developed a set of key informant questions (Appendix B) for internal staff, organized based in 2SLGBTQ+ communities, as well as those that serve 2SLGBTQ+ clients. Interviews were conducted virtually, and respondents were provided the questions in advance. All interviews were facilitated by staff of The 519 with a notetaker present and interviewees were encouraged to provide any insights in addition to the questions provided.

In total, we interviewed 15 key informants that included 519 staff across a variety of programs, Homes First, as well as external stakeholders representing a wide expertise, including 2-Spirt People of the First Nations, BlackCAP, Sistering, LOFT, Fred Victor Centre and Sprott House (YMCA).

Environmental Scan

The 519 undertook an environmental scan of existing academic, grey, and popular resources and reports focused on the development and implementation of safe and affirming shelter spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ adults.

We placed a particular emphasis on previous reports developed for the City of Toronto throughout the years, from the 2002 report 'Creating a Space where All are Welcome', to existing Toronto Shelter Standards.

MAIN THEMES

It is important to note that communities experiencing homelessness, including 2SLGBTQ+ communities, have been engaged frequently about their experiences and have grown weary of consultations given the lack of tangible change within the homeless serving sector. In fact, through our environmental scan we found city-led consultations on this very issue stretching as far back as 2002.

When engaging around experiences that are traumatic, personal, and intimate in nature consultations are by their nature complex spaces. On the one hand, every person interviewed is a unique individual and their outlook and preferences can be understood by looking at the particularities of their individual life. On the other hand, and this we know, the social and political context of that individual life lends itself to patterns and shared experiences of collective life. Individuals have needs, but perhaps more importantly, so do groups.

Summarizing the wide array of life experiences of the dozens of respondents in the focus groups we conducted is a difficult proposition. Reports tend to objectify human beings, converting life into statistics and stories into footnotes. That said, this report seeks to make some fundamental proposals about an urgent crises, where responses have been limited by time, space and a housing crisis that puts many members of our community into a life and death struggle every day of their lives.

These abstractions of the personal stories shared will be made in so far as they aid in establishing clear recommendations as part of this report.



Generally speaking, the respondents across the various focus groups fall into two categories: street-involved 2SLGBTQ+ people (who have lived in the city for the majority of their life) and LGBTQ+ newcomers (displaced by violence as refugees from areas in the world where being queer and trans invites ostracization, violence and death). There is a great deal of overlap between these two groups, both in terms of economic conditions and in social life.

We will begin with what is common and then continue on to understanding the distinct conditions that produce different needs for different 2SLGTQ+ communities who access the shelter and housing systems.

MAIN THEMES

Queer Strength



Who could spend any amount of time talking with a group of 2SLGBTQ+ people and not be struck by their stories of resilience and community? Largely in defense and defiance against systemic violence and neglect, of which treatment in housing services is but one example, queers have found ways to stay alive and even live well through the cultivation of queer space and community. Add to this the displacement that many 2SLGBTQ+ people undergo, from family or jobs or hometowns, when they chose to live their life in a open and principled way. It becomes apparent just how uncertain and challenging life can be for queer people. Yes, even here, even now.

As a result, queer community is not just a nice idea, it is a necessity. Helping one another navigate systems, sharing resources and information, congregating in spaces in order to lay claim to them, these and many other daily aspects of queer life require collectivity. Without it, isolation grows and supports shrink.

When talking about shelter, even on a temporary basis, 2SLGBTQ+ respondents across focus groups said they wanted it to be a home, and not just a facility. Even when faced with the reality of constant turnover, people coming in and out, transitioning into “normal” housed life, or sometimes returning to the street or couch-surfing because that is advantageous in the moment, queers want spaces in which to be found and where they know they can find each other.

MAIN THEMES

Queer Vulnerability

As resilient as 2SLGBTQ+ people are, many are made vulnerable. From being outcast from home life, unemployed, poor, living/working on the street, with mental health challenges, using drugs or in recovery, the causes of vulnerability are many and overlapping. They are over-burdened and exhausted just seeking out the necessities of life in this city. The housing crisis, now acknowledged across all sectors of society, is making stability more out of reach and life steadily more difficult. Every day that passes without the necessary political leadership and a sufficient allocation of resources to solve the housing crisis is a day that makes life harder for 2SLGBTQ+ people.

When asked about their experience with safety while accessing shelters, and what factors were most important, respondents without exception spoke about the staff. The extent to which shelter residents are at the mercy of the staff was a theme that played out through every discussion.

From intake to transition out, how the staff treated them was the number one answer to "what makes you feel safe/unsafe?" More than one respondent went so far as to compare shelters to prisons, qualifying that prisons are often cleaner and better managed. They complained of staff treating them with disdain at intake, barely looking up to see their face, certainly not welcoming them in any sincere way. They spoke about staff being hurried and uncaring, rough and insensitive. Even within the formality of a consultative discussion, these stories moved people to sadness and to anger.

For 2SLGBTQ+ people accessing shelters, the vulnerability to poor treatment from staff is even more profound. They must deal with the stress of intake: being misgendered, having no ID or an old ID showing only their dead (former) name, being judged for how they look or don't look, and run-of-the-mill homophobia and transphobia somehow excused because it takes place in an institution of last resort.

Each respondent shared how important a warm welcome by a competent and sensitive person is when they first arrive seeking assistance and shelter. Respondents talked about wanting to be spoken to as a human being.

A common thread discussed was how staff handle, or more accurately, don't handle transphobic and homophobic violence from other residents against 2SLGBTQ+ people. Lateral violence experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ residents in general shelters is, according to many, ever-present.

Violence comes in the form of theft, verbal slurs and attacks, group bullying, sexual assault, and physical assault. Many respondents talked about not being able to sleep because of the need to stay vigilant against inevitable violence. Staff were described as oblivious, neglectful, or otherwise unwilling to intervene.



MAIN THEMES

Queer Vulnerability

There was a broad consensus that trans women in the shelter system face a particular and terrible violence that is quantitatively more common and qualitatively more egregious.

We heard repeatedly that this is true to such an extent that trans women often avoid shelters altogether.

One respondent stated it is impossible for a trans woman to safely access a general shelter, and so they rarely do. There was unanimous agreement in every room that urgent intervention is needed to remedy the violence, from the system, from institutions, and from individuals that trans women face regularly.

The most urgent intervention in this regard is to improve their basic conditions of life, in a way that centers their experiences and needs, dispenses with hand-wringing and platitudes, and instead focuses on resourcing efforts for housing, employment and health care. In a small way, this shelter site was seen as a beginning. No doubt, said one key informant, that trans people are at the mercy of the worst of the shelter system, with little to no protection.

MAIN THEMES

Physical Design

There was much discussion about the entrance to the shelter and the immediate surroundings and the question of whether to identify the shelter as 2SLGBTQ+ with exterior signage. There was consensus that such a sign was not necessary, and some felt would be a deterrent to potential residents. Respondents suggested two things instead: one, attention be given to the neighbouring businesses in order that any homophobia or transphobia be dealt with pro-actively and respectful relationships be formed. Respondents also readily agreed that signage, decoration, artwork, and murals that identified the space as 2SLGBTQ+ should be a major feature inside the shelter. One respondent said it pointedly: one can decorate their house however they want, but homeowners are not obligated to announce on the outside who lives inside. Why should a shelter?

The main and unavoidable physical feature in this shelter is the two large dormitory-style sleeping quarters, as opposed to the private rooms people interviewed would prefer. Given the overwhelming findings of this consultation an intentional and considerate focus on the needs of trans women (part and parcel of an overall 2SLGBTQ+ focus) is necessary, the non-sleeping spaces in the shelter need to be thoughtfully designed to provide for maximum privacy, dignity and security for residents who need time to dress and undress, or tend to the after-effects of medical procedures etc.

These considerations should minimally include: private and ample showers, locked private lockers and bed trunks, dressing rooms with well-organized clothing donations, common spaces for mingling and relaxing, and private meetings rooms for visits with doctors, nurses, and mental health counsellors.



There was significant discussion about shelter accessibility and concern for community members who use mobility devices.

If capital improvements can be made in future to make the facility more accessible, they should be prioritized.

MAIN THEMES

Thoughtful Protocols

The single biggest point of unity among respondents and key informants alike regarding shelter protocols was about the abysmal state of Central Intake.

Respondents describe unbearably long holds, sudden disconnections on the phone that result in losing one's place in the cue, lack of information, and rude and uncaring treatment from front line workers. Worse still, they reported, is after managing to finally navigate the system, finding out that there's no shelter space for them or shelter space is only available on the outskirts of the city.

This report therefore recommends that the new shelter operate on a direct referral system housed and administered through community partnership(s). This direct referral system will be designed for ultimate efficiency. Several key informants from 2SLGBTQ+ organizations spoke about referral efficiency as critical. One key informant put it this way: housing people quickly is key to housing people at all.

Following from this is the question of intake at the location. Shelter intake acts both as a welcome to the resident as well as an important data collection point for the shelter itself. As such the focus group discussion on this topic was two-fold: what kinds of intake questions are necessary and what should the process itself be like?

Respondents shared their negative prior experiences with intake. One story told was of coming into a shelter cold and disorientated and asking to use the restroom, desperately needing food and drink, and being made to sit through an intake interview first rather than after. Residents want to be welcomed to the space that will be their home, even if it is temporary. This requires sensitive and attentive treatment by front line shelter workers as well as standard questionnaires that are clear and affirming on questions of gender identity, proper name, pronouns, etc.

Many respondents talked about how a welcoming and personal conversation should be part of intake, not just a routine questionnaire. Everyone wants and deserves to be treated like a whole person. This was unanimous.

On the question of rules and conduct by residents, there was significant agreement that rules should be in the form of "agreements" and that restorative justice should be the model of enforcement. Punitive models, respondents shared, did not benefit anyone concerned, resulting in discretionary bans by shelter staff, which can bend processes towards favouritism and unconscious bias. This type of enforcement model also tends toward under-reporting of lateral violence.

Respondents wondered whether shelter residents could be involved in the creation and enforcement of shelter rules and what kind of process might accommodate this. Certainly, such a suggestion echoed the overall recurring theme that a 2SLGBTQ+ shelter should operate as a collective home.



MAIN THEMES

Staffing

Respondents also unanimously agreed that the staff working within the shelter should be members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community or strong allies for the community. The also advocated for peer positions and working to create opportunities for former residents to come back and support the work of shelter as paid staff. There was also consensus that staff need to be trauma-informed and aware of harm reduction best practices to effectively work with the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

There was also discussion about the importance of cultural competence and awareness of the unique experiences of Indigenous and 2-Spirit, and BIPOC communities who find themselves overrepresented and underserved by the existing system

MAIN THEMES

Programming

What else can a shelter be? This question was discussed by focus groups and key informants alike. If this is to be a transitional shelter, and the approach taken toward residents is in fact wholistic, then what services and programs should be developed at this new shelter? Some respondents pointed to the fact that this kind of program development is particularly important if this shelter is to be an example for the next one. One key informant put it this way- This should be a role model project. Then the city can open its eyes and see the benefit and need.

At the top of everyone's list for a necessary service, and a much neglected one, is mental health counselling. Respondents spoke of the need for counselling and other mental health supports and of positive experiences some had with receiving them. One key informant gave special mention to the great success seen with peer mentorship programs, something echoed in the experience of some respondents.

Having a medical doctor and/or nurse practitioner on site was believed to be necessary by many respondents, generally to deal with poor overall health of residents and specifically to support people transitioning and managing addiction and recovery.



Many respondents across all focus groups, as well as key informants, talked about the importance of food and food preparation, for the joint purposes of self-sufficiency, cultural relevance, and community building. The recommendation is that the shelter consider food from a programming angle and not simply as service provision.

Additionally, respondents discussed several ideas for services and programs concerned with the future goals of residents: skills training, employment counselling, computer literacy.



MAIN THEMES

Key Areas of Disagreement

There were three key disagreements among groups that we engaged with:

Safe Consumption and Harm Reduction: by and large newcomer respondents want a shelter where drug use is limited or prohibited. Respondents from other groups tended toward a safe-use and explicit harm reduction model.

Curfew: Many of the groups discussed the problem with curfews, particularly for people who work or go out at night. Having said that, many newcomers indicated that they would prefer a shelter with an enforced curfew. They were less concerned than other groups with overnight work and needing to be able to access the shelter in/out at all hours of the day and were more concerned about getting a good night sleep so they could look for or engage in employment.

Use of common spaces: though all respondents felt strongly that common spaces should be designed well and made available for residents, newcomers were more likely to want to use the space for employment counselling, skills training and quiet computer lab space as opposed to recreational uses.

These contradicting needs are important. As one key informant explained based on their experience: there has to be focus to serve a particular need, or else it won't serve anyone's needs at all.

MAIN THEMES: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Respect - Compassion - Understanding
Diligence - Care - Kindness
Dignity - Conscientiousness - Listening

What was beautiful and noteworthy, for the purposes of this report and the operation of the shelter, are the ways in which respondents described the treatment they, and any shelter resident, deserve. They come in need of shelter and food but what they really need is to be treated like a human being: unequivocally an equal, if not economically or socially, then essentially.

A cruelty of life is that one of the world's most diverse cities is one of its most expensive and is rife with material inequality and continue discrimination. The treatment one receives in the place they will call home should be something different, a respite from daily hardship and cruelty.

The "hierarchy of needs pyramid" exercise that was part of the consultation (detailed in Appendix B) invariably included the nine words above. Though few and far between, respondents had stories about shelter staff who indeed treated them with compassion and respect and the immense difference it made. It is not entirely clear why staff behave poorly toward residents, particularly 2SLGBTQ+ residents. Some respondents offered that it likely has to do with two solvable problems: lack of staff and lack of staff training. Lack of staff leads to burnout and lack of time to work with each resident properly. This is essentially a matter of funding and recruitment. Lack of training can be remedied with determined effort.

For the purposes of this report, the main recommendation is to provide 2SLGBTQ+ training to all staff that is on-going and responsive to the needs of clients and challenges inherent to the shelter system. Trainers would come from the 2SLGBTQ+ community and its trusted, established organizations. Training would be ongoing and include regular surveying of shelter residents to gauge results.





MAIN THEMES

Emerging Questions

The Bloor Street shelter was discussed in many different ways that expressed the idea that community is a necessity of queer and trans life. Some respondents spoke about the shelter as a community centre, raising questions about related policies:

1. Can residents entertain visitors?
2. Can elders (whether from indigenous communities or the trans/queer community at large) have access and make visits to the shelter?
3. Can the shelter stay open during the day so people are able to use the space for rest and/or programming?
4. Can the common spaces be used to their maximum capacity, e.g. computer bank, entertainment room, dressing room with clothing donations?
5. Can the residents put on special events showcasing their talents and interests?
6. Can art space and supplies be made available?
7. Can the space be decorated in aesthetically and culturally relevant ways?
8. Can the kitchen area be open for meal times as is common but also have food available 24/7, especially for residents who work at night?
9. Can the food program allow for residents to do some of their own cooking and have opportunities to share their prepared meals with others?
10. Can the patio be used for a smoking area so residents do not have to stand outside on Bloor Street?



RECOMMENDATIONS

Dedicated Shelter

The idea of a shelter exclusively dedicated to adult trans and queer people was an obvious and unanimous position held by every respondent in every focus group as well as every key informant. This then forms the basis of this project. If we know we need one, the question then becomes how do we make one? Or more accurately, if we know we need many shelters, how best to design the first one and to whom will it best be assigned?

The recommendation emerging from this report is to dedicate the shelter to newcomer LGBTQ+ people, with a priority focus on the needs of trans women.

This focus achieves two important objectives from the outset: it provides housing to a group that desperately requires it and has next to no other reasonable options, and it allows the service provider and partner organizations to "build out" the necessary infrastructure to run a 2SLGBTQ+ shelter from already existing programs and practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Dedicated Shelter

The main theme that trans and queer people need to build a collective home and not just be housed is echoed throughout the entire consultation process. The key difference with newcomers, however, is that unlike other groups they have nowhere to begin in this new country, having fled for their lives arriving with less than nothing. Although many arrive in cohorts, the circumstances of refugee life typically means that people are eventually dispersed. Some leave the city in search of housing or work, others stay with very few options.

One newcomer respondent shared an anecdote about arriving with dozens of others and a short time later having no connection left with anyone. Newcomers speak of intense depression, loneliness, disorientation, and despondency. They fled for their life but have found no life here

Imagine the difference it would make if The 519, or any organization working with LGBTQ+ refugees, had a direct and rationalized link to this shelter space. Not only does the material provision of 2SLGBTQ+ shelter offer safety and security, but also the chance to have some ground, however temporary, to build the home that focus groups participants talked about so desperately needing. It would allow newcomers to actually "settle" and prepare to take next steps in building their life here. Without the grounding of certain shelter, how could anyone be expected to work through the trauma of displacement, make plans, and build a sustainable future?

Assigning shelter space to newcomers does not negate the hardship and great need that exists among all 2SLGBTQ+ homeless people. Rather, it is a way of acknowledging the material facts about where the greatest impact can be made immediately. Additionally, assigning this shelter to newcomers does not mean that others would be categorically excluded. It means only that trans and queer refugees coming through intake would be given first access.

That is all to say that reducing this consultation to a final "choice" to serve one component of the communities needs over another is really no choice at all. In fact, the very notion creating tension amidst a community over the insufficient resources that are made available is the very antitheses of queerness and the world it imagines.

The clearest unity among key informants was that this new shelter must be the beginning of something that will grow. Every community leader and service provider with whom we consulted expressed that from their core population alone could fill the beds many times over. As one leader said, "I could send you 15 people every single day". They shared a concern that the limited capacity of this shelter, coupled with the great and pressing need for it, would create division in the community. Once again, one leader explained, we must fight the regressive idea of the "deserving poor" and have the political will to provide housing and shelter for every single person who needs it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Bloor St.

1. Open Bloor Street as a shelter space dedicated to adult 2SLGBTQ+ communities with priority access LGBTQ+ refugees
2. Develop a direct referral arrangement through community partnership outside of the Central Intake process
3. Dedicate one of the two dormitory spaces for trans women exclusively
4. Ensure washroom and shower facilities allow for privacy and create as much privacy as possible within congregate sleeping spaces
5. Ensure each resident has access to private lockable space to store their personal effects safely and securely
6. Develop a welcoming intake process that understands the unique needs of each resident and introduces them into the home with care and respect
7. Develop all common spaces except for the front office into usable space for residents
8. Allow residents to decorate the home with their personal items, photographs, and images and art that represent them
9. Hire staff who share some of the same lived experiences of residents, including 2SLGBTQ+ identified staff, staff who have experienced homelessness, and/or newcomers and refugees
10. Create paid opportunities for shelter residents to engage in shelter operations, including peer work
11. Develop meaningful partnerships with organizations to facilitate onsite programming that meets the legal, mental health, primary healthcare, social, and income support needs of residents
12. Provide management, front line workers, and all contract staff with mandatory 2SLGBTQ+ training prior to opening and at regular intervals (no less than monthly) on paid time for the first year of operation. Evaluate training outcomes at the end of year one and determine the next necessary course of training.
13. Produce a one-year report on the successes and challenges in the operation of the Bloor Street shelter that includes the perspectives of residents and staff.
14. Work and engage the local geographic community to ensure it is safe and welcoming for shelter residents.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Most importantly, We are obligated to do two things at once: design and operate the **Bloor Street** shelter and, at the same time, start making headway on opening the next 2SLGBTQ+ shelter.

There is overwhelming need for a shelter dedicated to 2-Spirit people. A new shelter of this kind would likely share features with the **Bloor Street** project and would also require its own considerations, design and operation.

We must consciously build the first shelter with an eye to the second and third. That we need to house human beings in temporary shelters despite the abundant wealth in this society is, to borrow the word of one key informant, unforgivable. But this is the situation we find ourselves in, and this is the task we have taken up, let us do it well.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY

Building Broader Shelter Capacity

The addition of Bloor Street as designated shelter to better meet the diverse needs of 2SLGBTQ+ communities is a positive step forward. Having said that, an additional 15 beds will do little to address the challenges experienced by queer, trans, and gender diverse experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Given the experiences of participants as outlined in this report in additional to a large body of literature to substantiate the need more must be done to build the capacity of the existing shelter system in addition to further investments to create discreet housing options including permanent deeply affordable housing for 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

Training

The City of Toronto shelter standards state that: "It is expected that all shelters be accessible to transgender/transsexual/two-spirited (TS/TG/2-S) residents in their self-defined gender, and that shelters will work toward improving access to this group. Shelters will support the choices of TG/TS/2-S residents to gain access to services in the gender they identify will best preserve their safety."Specifically, the standards advise that all staff must be training on 2SLGBTQ+ Cultural Compotency, 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Inclusion of Trans Awareness Training within 6 months of hire."

While the Toronto Hostel Training Centre has offered courses that meet the requirements of the Shelter Standards many of which have been designed and facilitated by The 519's Education and Training staff, it is offered infrequently and often cancelled due to a lack of registration and interest.

The Toronto Shelter Network released the report Two Spirited, Trans, Nonbinary and Gender Diverse Safety in Shelters Project which substantiated what we already know anecdotally, which is that many shelter staff have never received training to support their competency when working with queer, trans, and gender diverse communities. Where training has occurred, it often lacks relevant context or real-life scenarios that help in the application of learning. The report also makes the following key recommendations related to training and awareness:

- Ensure that all staff, including temporary staff receive training in gender inclusion and anti-racism prior to starting employment.
- Ensure that people who work with clients but who may not be directly employed by the shelter (i.e., security, cleaners, and caterers) receive training on gender inclusion and anti-racism.
- Create and deliver workshops on gender inclusion, led by gender diverse facilitators, for clients.
- Review and update all educational materials and resources.
- Distribute and display more inclusive and gender affirming resources and posters.
- Have pronoun pins/stickers available for clients and staff to wear.
- Invest in conflict de-escalation, harm reduction, and transformative justice training for staff and management.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY

Building Broader Shelter Capacity

Intake Processes and Forms

The privilege of being referred to accurately by your name and pronouns is a practice that can be easily taken for granted. When forms and intake processes do not contemplate how to accurately document and communicate someone's preferred name and pronoun trans and gender diverse people are too often erased. Bureaucratic processes that lack an option to input an individual's pronouns and preferred name, if different than their legal name, as well as an inclusive gender section are one of the ways that trans and gender diverse people experience harm often at the very beginning of a service relationship.

An important starting place in ensuring more inclusive service for 2SLGBTQ+ communities must start with a review of the common client intake system (SMIS) used by the City and its contracted homelessness service providers to ensure it can appropriately capture 2-Spirit, non-binary, and gender diverse identities.

Shelter providers should be required to update policies and forms to ensure that they are aligned to best practice in working with diverse 2SLGBTQ+ communities keeping in mind that the disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity should always be optional. The more options that queer, trans, and gender diverse communities are given to provide this information in environments that are safe and affirming, the more likely that individuals will feel comfortable to do so over time.



Intersectional Analysis

It is important that strategies that seek to address the barriers and discrimination that 2SLGBTQ+ communities face in accessing services understand the interconnections of poverty, ethnicity, racism, substance use, mental health, sexual violence, and physical ill health in the experiences of queer, trans and gender diverse communities. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality clarifies how 2SLGBTQ+ individual experiences of different and multiple oppressions in response to their different identities compounds negative health and social outcomes. To develop strategies for 2SLGBTQ+ communities without a deep and meaningful understanding of intersecting identities will only serve to push marginalized people even further toward the margins.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY

Building Broader Shelter Capacity

Anti -Violence Initiatives

One of the most significant concerns raised by 2SLGBTQ+ communities, particularly trans communities, who have used the shelter system is the issue of safety. Many focus group participants recounted instances of physical and sexual violence within shelters and revealed that they often had to change in private or shower away from the facility out of fear of people finding out that they were trans. Many echoed the concern that shower facilities were a particularly unsafe space for them. Many others talked about shelters where staff expressed cultural and religious views "against" queer and trans identities and acted in ways that people described as "punishing" and "withholding" when attempts were made to access shelter resources.

It is unacceptable for anyone accessing shelters to experience violence and it is imperative for the City and shelter providers to commit to working towards policies and processes that can better respond to violence and work more decisively to make spaces safe for all residents. Encouraging 2SLGBTQ+ residents to hide their identities, to refrain from asking questions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and to ask residents to use outside facilities to shower and change are not acceptable anti-violence strategies even if they are intended to limit the risk to an individual.

Additional thought and resource must be invested in developing interventions, strategies, and tools to respond to violence targeting queer and trans people in shelters, including more thoughtful design considerations that are not so explicitly gendered. This must be extended to staffing, with the development of zero tolerance policies for discrimination or abuse towards shelter residents for any reason, including sexual orientation and gender identity.





FINAL THOUGHTS

The Time for Action has Always Been NOW.

While system change and organizational culture shifts takes a significant amount of planning and are generally long-term processes, there are several immediate steps that could be taken by The City to ensure that 2SLGBTQ+ communities are better served within the existing shelter and housing system as detailed in the recommendations above.

The last two decades have been punctuated by countless reports, deputations, advisory bodies, and research that all generally say the very same things contained within this document. We do not need to start again, nor do we need to design another consultation to engage 2SLGBTQ+ people on the question(s) of what they need. We have already asked; they have already answered.

The burden rests with those who are funded to deliver services on the ground, and the institutions that fund them, to set a much higher bar. The conditions of poverty are indeed multifaceted and complex. The lack of affordable, safe, and accessible housing In Toronto will continue to fuel the homelessness crisis in our City for the foreseeable future. Having said that, the expectation of safety, dignity, and respect for every person in need of shelter services should not be a stretch.

Our collective capacity to learn and understand the different ways that the existing models are failing queer and trans communities should not be so challenging to grasp. The will to do better must be the starting place from which we action and resource bold new models that inspire meaningful and lasting change. Queer and trans people have been leading the way in this regard for generations – we would all do well to take notice.

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Thank you for your ongoing leadership and dedication to 2SLBGTQ+ communities and for the many ways in which you show up for the communities we serve.



APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consultation Framework
Appendix B: Facilitation Guide
Appendix C: Key Informant Interview Guide
Appendix D: Best Practice Research Review


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