

Responding to Homelessness in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic

Being homeless means you are more vulnerable to the spread of infectious disease than are people with housing. The rigours of life on the streets mean that people experiencing homelessness have compromised health and are vulnerable to the spread of infectious disease. Our institutional response to homelessness that largely relies on emergency services such as shelters and day programs compounds the problem by forcing people into congregate settings that are often overcrowded, lack private spaces and do not have adequate resources to enhance and protect personal hygiene. Many people experiencing homelessness are also forced to spend much or all of their time in public spaces.

All of this suggests that we need extraordinary measures to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

- ▶ **First and foremost**, we must acknowledge the limitations of the crisis response to homelessness, and take a human rights-based approach to ensure that all people have access to housing. Emergency shelters and the streets are not a reasonable alternative.
- ▶ **Second**, health care resources must be made available to people experiencing homelessness, including access to health practitioners, medication and respite care.
- ▶ **Third**, in situations where governments impose mandatory quarantine or “stay at home” orders that people experiencing homelessness are not forced into unsafe congregate living situations.
- ▶ **Fourth**, in times of crisis, people are often willing to trade off rights for personal safety. Often this means the rights of others. Governments must do everything they can to ensure people experiencing homelessness are not scapegoated and extraordinary policing measures imposed that compromise their human rights.
- ▶ **Fifth**, we have to ensure that the homelessness problem doesn't become greater as the pandemic crisis worsens. This means focusing on the prevention of homelessness through guaranteeing that: a) no one experiences eviction for any reason and by any housing provider during and after the pandemic, and that b) people who lose their housing for other reasons such as family breakdown or destruction of property have immediate access to housing that is safe and affordable.

Protecting the rights of people who experience homelessness is important during a pandemic, and will at the same time contribute to the containment of the spread of infection and disease.

“Housing has become the frontline defence against coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation.” Leilani Farha, UN Rapporteur on the Right to Housing

Stephen Gaetz