

To: Homes First Society Board of Directors
From: Patricia Mueller, HFS Chief Executive Officer
Subject: HFS Shelter, Housing, and Client Service Standards Update
Date: December 1, 2020

Recommendation:

That this report be received for information.

Background:

This report constitutes an annual review and update of existing standards with respect to shelters, assisted housing, and client services.

Comments:

At Homes First Society we have been working to improve the quality of services to our tenants and residents by adhering to or exceeding established standards. Those standards that directly relate to housing and shelters are:

- Toronto Shelter Standards
- *Housing Services Act*
- *The Residential Tenancy Act*
- *The Building Code Act*
- The Ontario Fire Code
- Toronto Public Health
- The Rooming House Chapter (Toronto Municipal Codes)
- Technical Standards and Safety Authority
- *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)*

ENTIRE ORGANIZATION:

Many of the codes and standards relate to all of Homes First Society's buildings, but many have specific impacts and as such, are addressed under the specific headings of shelters and housing. Two areas that apply to the full portfolio are the Ontario Fire Code (2016) and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*.

The recent changes to the Ontario Fire Code includes the additional requirement that all buildings that require fire safety plans must have the plans reviewed and/or updated and approved at least every five years by the local Fire Prevention Office. These changes do not prevent the owner or landlord from updating their fire safety plans as staff or building changes take place at the specific sites.

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* outlines five standards which must be met by all organizations and businesses by 2025: customer service, employment, information and communications, transportation, and design of public spaces. Homes First has been affected organization-wide with these standards and as a non-profit organization, Homes First must file regular accessibility compliance reports. In anticipation of meeting AODA standards, Homes First has provided increased training to staff on working with people with disabilities. Despite the requirement that these five AODA standards must be put in place by Homes First by 2025, any new buildings that Homes First acquires must be in full compliance prior to opening, such as our new shelter at 4117 Lawrence Avenue East. Throughout the rest of our portfolio we are making incremental changes towards meeting the standards by 2025 (accessible entrances, improved signage, etc.).

SHELTERS:

We describe our quality improvement programs using terms relevant to our funders, potential accreditation sources, and specific program design. For example, the City of Toronto Shelter Services Division uses the term “Quality Assurance” to designate its instituted measurement of compliance with Hostel Standards.

The City of Toronto revamped and updated the Shelter Standards in 2016. Some of the Shelter Standards changes related to property standards, and I am happy to report that we are in full compliance. For example, all of our mattresses are pest resistant and fire retardant. We also provide janitorial services 7-days-a-week as per the Shelter Standards.

Another alteration to the Standards relates to Health and Safety training. This is another example of where Homes First has been ahead of the curve. However, the City has now become much more prescriptive, for example, now all staff must be recertified in WHMIS every five years. The Shelter Standards also speaks to the training requirements of Board members; however, work is being done on what is deemed to be equivalent to training, which will be reported when available.

In 2017, Homes First began using Pirouette, a web-based case management program which ensures consistency with the intake and case management services provided across all HFS shelter sites. This program helps us deliver our programs in a way which keeps us in compliance with the case management and documentation requirements set forth in Toronto Shelter Standards. Homes First has also introduced Intensive Case Management Workers at each shelter site, whose role is to work closely with each resident to develop and implement service plans with clients.

Our Case Management system is designed to support clients in meeting their goals with the assistance of our staff. Two of our shelters – the Kennedy and Bathurst-Lake Shore Shelters – are now using a new intake and assessment tool called “STARRS”, which Homes First helped develop. The intention is to use this tool as the standard throughout the City in order to have a consistent measure of evaluating client needs.

The kitchens of our shelters are considered to be commercial, and as such, are subject to the same standards as any restaurant’s kitchen. The Toronto Public Health Food Premises Inspectors regularly visit and inspect our kitchens, and we have always received a “pass”.

Kennedy Women’s Shelter is only one of three women’s shelters across Toronto with an elevator and as such, we have a large number of referrals from hospitals for residents with mobility and/or

complex health issues which are able to be accommodated. However, more recently, the Toronto Fire Department has limited the number of residents with mobility issues that restrict them from exiting the building by way of stairs in an emergency.

One of our newer programs – the Willowdale Welcome Centre – is located in the former North York Hydro complex at 5800 Yonge Street. As those buildings were not designed for residential use remediation work has been done on the fire systems to bring them up to code.

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING:

The quality of housing provided to our residents is directly affected by the legislation that sets out standards, such as the *Housing Services Act*, the *Residential Tenancy Act*, the *Building Code Act*, the Ontario Fire Code, Toronto Public Health, and, in some cases, the Rooming House Chapter (Toronto Municipal Codes), and the Technical Standards and Safety Authority.

The *Housing Services Act* sets out the duties of social housing providers relating to the amount of capital reserves, insurance coverage participation, and the process for most renewal and occupancy standards. Homes First Society is in full compliance.

The *Housing Services Act* provides a great deal of flexibility to the local service manager (the municipality). Two areas that could possibly impact Homes First relate to the requirement that all local service managers must develop local housing and homelessness plans and to have the flexibility to develop local rules.

One interesting aspect of the *Housing Services Act* relates to triggering events and remedies for projects in difficulty. The *Housing Services Act* gives service managers power in determining whether a housing provider has incurred a substantial and excessive expenditure, or accumulated deficit, or failed to operate a housing project properly. Under the *Housing Services Act* the test is simply “in the opinion of the service manager.” It is very fortunate that our days of being a project in difficulty are in our distant past.

The *Residential Tenancy Act* outlines the responsibilities of both landlords and tenants. Key responsibilities for landlords include the rules governing entering units with or without notice; the responsibility to complete repairs; and responsibilities relating to services (such as water and heat). The *Act* also establishes regulations relating to what landlords cannot do, i.e., restrict a resident from having pets, and demanding a key or damage deposit. In addition to the tenant’s obligation to pay rent, the *Act* also establishes the tenant’s responsibilities, i.e., ordinary cleanliness of the unit, for damage caused by wilful or negligent conduct, and that a tenant cannot change a lock without the landlord’s consent.

The selection of buildings to be inspected by City of Toronto’s Municipal Licensing and Standards Division (MLS) is random, and the list of ordered changes is usually quite extensive.

The *Building Code Act* sets out detailed lists of standards that must be met or exceeded in all new buildings, repairs, and renovations. All landlords of buildings with three or more storeys and that have 10 or more apartment units are required to register with “Rent Safe” and to have their buildings licensed by the City of Toronto and inspected by MLS. This program will ensure that all landlords are providing safe and clean housing. All HFS buildings have been registered and have been inspected.

Some of our buildings are classified as rooming houses, and as such, we must comply with the standards set out in the Rooming House Toronto Municipal Code. HFS is currently in compliance. The City is conducting a two-phase review of rooming houses to address issues relating to the regulation and condition of multi-tenant houses which may result in additional legislation.

Toronto Public Health has declared bed bugs to be a health hazard and is now providing supports to landlords to help them maintain buildings free from bed bugs, as well as that of another health hazard, cockroaches.

The Toronto Public Health division is also responsible for investigating complaints relating to the prohibition of smoking or vaping in common areas. HFS is compliant with regulations relating to signage.

Supportive housing for individuals considered to be the hardest-to-house is funded to provide case management services that primarily relate to eviction prevention. Homes First has trained all staff in interview techniques which help support clients in goal attainment.

We continue to measure the number of supports that have been put in place to aid the client in reaching their goals. Very often, the support is a brokerage duty in that we connect the individual with the external service provider relating to their goal(s).

COVID-19 RESPONSE:

Because of the pandemic, organizational-wide Homes First instituted a number of important protocols, following the lead and direction of Toronto Public Health and the City of Toronto's Shelter, Housing and Support department mandates. These included purchasing and distributing extensive PPE to all shelter and housing sites; distributing masks to all staff and residents and making the wearing of them mandatory for staff; increased cleaning regimens; having staff and outside agencies coming on to sites complete a COVID Screening Form, and every shelter resident is screened for symptoms with this form at least once per day; posting occupancy limits in all offices; placing social distancing markers on the floor two metres apart, etc. Tenants were also provided with information on best practices around isolation and quarantining in the event of a positive result, including advice for those residing in a congregate setting.

The most significant impact perhaps of the pandemic operationally was the requirement to reduce capacity in our dorm-style shelters to increase social distancing. Beds were removed at St. Clair, Kennedy, and Bathurst-Lakes Shore, and Savards was forced to relocate completely. And as part of Toronto's Covid Emergency Response, Homes First was asked to operate two new hotel programs – the Strathcona at York Street, and the Delta at Kennedy and the 401. Together they provide rooms for nearly 400 single adults and couples. And although these programs allow for social distancing, other challenges did arise. For example, due to the private nature of the accommodations enhanced Harm Reduction protocols (regular wellness checks and in-house peer programs) were implemented.