

Toronto group pushes for cooling bylaw

Coalition wants rules for maximum temperatures in rentals as heat waves are becoming more common and deadly

FATIMA RAZA

The door to Julia Farquharson's cozy two-bedroom apartment in west Toronto opens to an unwelcoming embrace of hot air that she likens to a burning oven. Inside, her kitten seeks shelter in the shade under her bed. Ms. Farquharson, 74, has been a resident in Etobicoke North for the past 15 years, living in one of more than 2,000 buildings operated by the Toronto Community Housing Corp., or TCHC, a non-profit owned by the City of Toronto that caters to low and moderate-income households. But her apartment, like many others within her building and across the city, does not have central air conditioning. That means she has little relief during the summer, especially during heat waves when the humidity can make it feel like more than 40 C.

"I'm on the side of the building where the sun comes up in the morning and does not come down until night, so it's extremely hot," Ms. Farquharson said, adding that this remains the case all year round.

Tenant and environmental advocacy groups in Toronto have been pushing the city for years to implement a maximum heat bylaw of 26 C that would force landlords to take steps to mitigate the heat, including by installing air conditioning.

The city already has a bylaw that requires landlords to maintain a minimum temperature of 21 C during the winter, but there's no equivalent rule setting a maximum temperature in the summer.

Those calls have been growing louder this year, with the launch in June of the Toronto Heat Safety Coalition. The involved groups are advocating for a maximum temperature bylaw while highlighting the experience of tenants who are living without air conditioning, at a time when the city is experiencing more heat waves as a result of climate change.

The issue is compounded for older adults with health issues who are more vulnerable to heat waves, such as Ms. Farquharson. She has tried to acquire support from a City of Toronto program that subsidizes medical expenses for low-income residents, which can include purchasing air conditioning units or fans.

But her application — which included a letter from her doctor explaining her need to have cooling in her unit — was rejected because, she was told, her old-age pension was deemed too high.

"If you want seniors to live healthily and comfortably in their homes, then you have to at least provide help with paying for their air condition or any other device that they might use," she said.

Jacqueline Wilson, lawyer with the Canadian Environmental Law Association, one of the groups involved in the heat safety coalition, said the issue took on new urgency after a heat wave in B.C. in 2021 killed more than 600 people. Of those deaths, 98 per cent occurred indoors, and most of the deceased were older adults with compromised health who lived alone and without air conditioning, according to the BC Coroners Service.

Ms. Wilson said that, just as heat is seen as a basic necessity in the winter, providing adequate cooling in apartments during heat days is important to ensure tenant safety and well-being.

"It's just the other side of the same coin, but it's equally necessary," she said.

The coalition also includes, among other groups, the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, Toronto Environment Alliance and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

In addition to the heat bylaw, the coalition is also pressing municipalities to provide funding to install heat pumps or air condi-

tioning units, and provide free TTC rides on extreme heat days so people can safely get to places like cooling centres.

In June, 2023, Councillor Shelley Carroll put forward a motion at Toronto City Hall requesting the implementation of an adequate temperature bylaw. Council voted to direct staff to study the issue.

In an interview, she said there was little data on extreme temperatures in rental housing and tenant complaints, but that information is now being collected and could be available by the end of 2024.

This will include research gathered from calls made to city council about temperature bylaws.

"We're engaging the community to figure out how best to proceed," she said. "Hopefully we'll be able to put something in effect in time for the warm weather season next year."

Ariane Robinson, Mayor Olivia Chow's press secretary, said in an e-mail that summer in Toronto are getting hotter and that not having a place to cool down is detrimental for Toronto tenants without air conditioning. She said the city is doing work on the problem.

In the meantime, she noted that a city bylaw requires property managers or landlords to provide information to tenants about air-conditioned locations or cool rooms within the building and other locations on the property.

Shane Gerard, a senior communications co-ordinator for the City of Toronto, said that, although city bylaws do not require all landlords to provide air conditioning to tenants, if a rental unit already has it, the property standards bylaw requires that landlords turn it on between June 2 and Sept. 15 so as to maintain a maximum indoor temperature of 26 C.

Statistics Canada published a report last year that found renters were less likely than people who owned their homes to have air conditioning. That may be because landlords don't provide it because buildings don't allow their use, the agency said.

Nationally, 61 per cent of people in Canada live in a home with air conditioning while 49 per cent of people who don't own their home have AC. In Ontario, the province-wide rate is 86 per cent, but 71 per cent for people who don't own their home.

Meyira Winer, lead organizer at Toronto ACORN, a union of low and moderate-income people, said she is concerned for members, as extreme heat can lead to exacerbated health issues and emergency hospital visits. Ms. Farquharson, for example, has a history with arthritis, asthma, pulmonary lung conditions and blood clots in her legs, and she takes blood thinners everyday to manage her health.

"Eligibility for the program that helped Ms. Farquharson's application seeking cooling in her apartment depends on the cost of a required medical item, as well as the applicant's financial situation and family size, Mr. Gerard said. He noted that unsuccessful applicants have the option to appeal.

Most of the buildings owned by Ms. Farquharson's landlord, the TCHC, were built before air conditioning became common, spokesperson Kimberly Moser wrote in an e-mail. Only 76 TCHC buildings have central air, but the agency is working on upgrades to its properties, including adding air conditioning, she said.

In 2020, the TCHC removed tenant-owned window air-conditioning units that were not located on balconies because of health and safety concerns. In exchange, tenants were given free portable air conditioners, Ms. Moser said.

But Ms. Farquharson said the one she was provided broke down shortly after she received it. And, it wasn't until July of this year — four years later — that she was finally able to get a new one from her building.

"The heat is unbearable, and the people who cannot afford it are the ones really dealing with the dangerous effects of extreme heat illness," she said.

"It's a shame the city is denying me the health care I need to stay safe in this heat."



A Better Tent City in Kitchener, Ont., has 42 tiny cabins that house 50 residents at a time. They've provided home to about 300 people since opening in 2021. LIPA ISLAM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Hamilton looks to improve on encampments, considers tiny houses

MARIYA POSTELNYAK

Hamilton is studying ways to provide sanctioned outdoor housing in the Southern Ontario city to alleviate a worsening homeless crisis that has surpassed the capacity of its shelter system, potentially through legal encampments or by building small cabins or tiny houses.

The city created a protocol last year allowing encampments of limited size on public property, with a rule of five tents per encampment and a minimum distance from places such as highways, schools and daycares, as well as any private property. But Mayor Andrea Horwath said she wants the city to go further.

"We've done everything we can within the parameters of our encampment protocols," she said in an interview. "We need to do something different now."

Cities across the country have been searching for ways to respond to a growing number of homeless people in urban areas, with some legalizing encampments in certain areas or creating official locations for people without housing to set up their tents. Hamilton declared a state of emergency last year, as have other cities including Toronto, Ottawa and Niagara Falls, Ont.

At the end of 2022, there were almost 1,600 homeless people in Hamilton, up from 1,024 in 2020, according to municipal data. A report from Hamilton Homeless Mortality showed that at least 91 people died while experiencing homelessness in the city between 2020 and 2022. About half of Hamilton's homeless population sleeps in parks, on sidewalks and in makeshift shelters, according to the city.

Ms. Horwath announced last week that she had given municipal staff a directive to assess costs, legal frameworks, locations and potential partnerships for what she described as "transitional outdoor shelter" and report back by Sept. 18.

While research into outdoor shelters has been proposed by other Hamilton councillors, Ontario's "strong mayor" legislation means Ms. Horwath's initiative carries more urgency and weight, thereby augmenting and expediting the process.

The mayor did not want to prescribe whether the outdoor shelter options should include expanded legal encampments or alternatives like previously proposed cabin communities from the Hamilton Alliance for Tiny Shelters, though she did offer criteria.

"We need something that can be done quickly, that can be responsive to the concerns that we've heard from people who are unprepared or unable to go into an actual shelter," she said. "Things like, being able to have their pets with them, having a place to put their stuff ... privacy and security."

Ronald MacPhee, director of the Hamilton Branch of Good Shepherd, a charitable organization operating homeless shelters and providing community outreach, said he regularly sees people unable to access shelters because of space shortages, their use of banned

substances, and personal circumstances that limit where they can live.

"We are seeing an unprecedented amount of individuals showing up at our door — couples and people with pets," he said. "The shelter was never designed for that."

Historically, couples were usually split up. "The woman would go to a woman's shelter and men would go to a men's shelter," he said. Now, many couples prefer to live in an encampment rather than be separated in the shelter system.

"Then there's also the issue with pets. ... The likelihood of someone having an allergy to a pet is pretty high," he said. "People who are homeless are forced to make that decision of whether they can stay with their pet or without."

Tom Cooper, director of Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and a former board member with the Hamilton Alliance for Tiny Shelters, has previously advocated for tiny cabin homes as a middle ground between shelter and encampment living.

The concept involves a site lined with cabins alongside counselling for addictions, mental health services and security. "It's really very much a transition model to get people off the street into a little bit more safety, into healthier conditions," he said.

The model has been implemented in several cities across the country, most notably in Kitchener, Ont., where A Better Tent City has 42 tiny cabins that house 50 residents at a time. They've housed about 300 people since opening in 2021.

"What they offer is a combination of security and independence," said Tony Storz, a former superintendent at A Better Tent City who went on to found BetterStreet, which extends the model to different parts of Canada. "You see people become healthier, people gain weight; many mental-health care issues decrease because doctors and nurses are able to find people on a consistent basis."

Storz said he saw countless people successfully transition out of cabin communities into independent housing. One of those people was Holly Windsor.

After finding herself homeless with a dog and unable to access most of the city's shelters, Ms. Windsor joined a tent encampment out of a truck garage before securing a small blue cabin from A Better Tent City. "I had pictures hung, a TV stand, a dresser. ... Even though it was tiny, it was my space," she said.

Two years later, Ms. Windsor moved out and into her own apartment.

But the main problem with projects like these has been community pushback. A Better Tent City moved locations several times since opening while Hamilton's tiny homes project never got off the ground.

"People are upset about losing the use of those parks and those parks becoming unsafe," said Good Shepherd's Mr. MacPhee, of outdoor shelter sites. While he's hopeful about the Hamilton mayor's directive, he wants a lasting solution. "The issue for us is, is it a long-term solution or are we putting Band-Aids on a crisis?"

Communities rejected from climate protection funding fear for future

MICHAEL TUTTON HALL'S HARBOUR, N.S.

For communities where roads and homes are damaged in climate disasters, losing out on bids for federal help to protect against coming storms are one more blow from which to recover.

Standing beside a wharf that is slowly being dismantled by Bay of Fundy tides, Dave Davies said Thursday it was hard to hear in June that Ottawa's Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund had rejected his community's \$4.8-million request for aid.

The funding was to go toward strengthening seawalls and building a breakwater in Hall's Harbour, N.S., while replacing and extending the dilapidated wharf. Now, Mr. Davies and other volunteers in the small town are left wondering where to turn for help.

"I'm rejected, dismayed, angry, all of the above," said Mr. Davies, 86, who is the vice-president of the Hall's Harbour Community Development Association. "The federal government has passed the buck to someone else down the road, and we don't know who that is."

Volunteers with his association spent two years fundraising and then commissioning a

conceptual design to protect the picturesque town from climate change.

He said the community's anxiety about forecasts for higher sea levels and stronger storms only intensified after a July 11 downpour of about 100 millimetres caused a tidal river to swell and smash the causeway that connects the two sides of the village, home to about 300 people.

A spokesperson for federal Infrastructure Minister Sean Fraser says Ottawa makes choices based on the best applications for the \$3.8-billion put into the adaptation fund since 2018. But communities losing out argue there's not enough money to go around on projects needed to protect essential infrastructure.

"Given the high volume of applications we have received ... since its inception, we had to prioritize the strongest eligible applications," said Micael Ahmed, a spokesperson for the minister's office.

He said Ottawa can't yet release how many of the 387 applications in the latest round were rejected as the list of successful bids is still being finalized. In the previous round of applications in 2021, 45 of 214 applications were accepted.

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