

## **New Way to Defend Rights of People Experiencing Homelessness During Pandemic**

TORONTO, June 9, 2020 —An online form launched today at [COVIDShelterRights.ca](https://COVIDShelterRights.ca) allows anyone to anonymously report situations where the City of Toronto is not living up to its commitments and duties to protect people experiencing homelessness from COVID-19.

In response to a lawsuit filed by a coalition of public-interest organizations, the City of Toronto committed on 15 May 2020 to immediately implement certain minimal physical distancing standards in its shelter system.

The City has committed to use its best efforts to provide two metres of distance between all shelter beds, to end the use of bunk beds, and to provide a bed for anyone who has used the shelter system since 11 March 2020, even if they were forced to leave for any reason including due to fears of COVID-19.

“People experiencing homelessness in Toronto should know their rights,” said Jessica Orkin, a lawyer at Golblatt Partners representing the coalition. “If you have received shelter support services in the City of Toronto since the COVID-19 crisis began, you are protected by this agreement. This includes those living in tents. If you are being offered a space within the shelter system, it must meet these standards.”

The City’s commitments are set out in an enforceable legal agreement. The coalition that filed this lawsuit is prepared to go back to court if necessary to enforce the City’s commitments under the settlement agreement.

COVID-19 is still a serious problem for people experiencing homelessness in Toronto. To date, more than 528 have contracted the virus, 4 have died, and there have been 36 COVID-19 outbreaks at Toronto shelters.

Anyone who has information that the City is not living up to its commitments is encouraged to fill out the form at [COVIDShelterRights.ca](https://COVIDShelterRights.ca). You can also upload photos and videos of shelter conditions. You do not have to give your name, and any information you provide about conditions in the Toronto shelter system is confidential and protected by legal privilege.

“People experiencing homelessness in Toronto continue to be extraordinarily vulnerable to COVID-19,” said Greg Cook, outreach worker at Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto. “The new online form at [COVIDShelterRights.ca](https://COVIDShelterRights.ca) will help the community hold our City to account and make sure they follow through on their commitments.”

Information collected through the form may be used by the coalition of public-interest organizations in their lawsuit against the City of Toronto, in order to enforce compliance with the agreed measures to protect the health of people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The City has agreed to report regularly on its adherence to these commitments until it achieves and sustains compliance for two months.

The coalition filed its lawsuit on 24 April 2020, in response to the City’s failure to provide for adequate physical distancing in its shelters, and the rapid increase in cases of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness.

Coalition members include Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto, Aboriginal Legal Services, Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, Black Legal Action Centre, Canadian Civil Liberties Association and HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario.

More information about the lawsuit against the City of Toronto can be found here:  
<https://ccla.org/toronto-must-defend-homeless/>

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### **Quotes from the coalition members**

“It is vital that people staying at a shelter have an opportunity to stay safe and that people who ask for a bed inside have access to one. COVIDShelterRights.ca will help ensure that people are able to keep the City accountable to its commitments.” – Greg Cook, Outreach Worker, Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto

“The fight for equality must include a recognition that discrimination and poverty disproportionately affect people who are Black, Indigenous, have disabilities, or are otherwise racialized or marginalized. Every missed opportunity to house individuals in need, every missed deadline to create physical distancing in shelters has taken a terrible toll on the health and lives of people experiencing homelessness.” – Noa Mendelsohn Aviv, Equality Program Director, Canadian Civil Liberties Association

“This settlement is a two-way street. The City must be transparent and accountable. This new website helps to hold the City to account through input from people most impacted: those who rely upon or work within the shelter system.” – Ryan Peck, Executive Director, HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario

**For media inquiries, please reach out directly to each coalition member to set up an interview.**

Jessica Orkin  
416-979-4381  
Goldblatt Partners LLP  
[jorkin@goldblattpartners.com](mailto:jorkin@goldblattpartners.com)

Greg Cook  
416-457-9258  
Sanctuary Ministries of Toronto  
[gregc@sanctuarytoronto.ca](mailto:gregc@sanctuarytoronto.ca)

Kenneth Hale  
416-834-9645

Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario  
[shadpob@lao.on.ca](mailto:shadpob@lao.on.ca)

Ruth Goba  
647-294-8480  
Executive Director, Black Legal Action Centre  
[gobar@lao.on.ca](mailto:gobar@lao.on.ca)

Noa Mendelsohn Aviv  
647-780-9802  
Equality Program Director, Canadian Civil Liberties Association  
[mendelsohnviv@ccla.org](mailto:mendelsohnviv@ccla.org)