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## Toronto Disaster Relief Committee

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### Position on City of Toronto's 'Street Needs Assessment' aka "The Count"

March 31st, 2006

The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee opposes the City of Toronto's proposed Street Needs Assessment, which includes cursory questioning by inexperienced volunteers of some people who are homeless/houseless, as well as plans to count them.

We believe that there are many inherent problems with the proposed 'Street Needs Assessment'. We believe that this count will invade the privacy of homeless people. It will also take resources away from the homeless; resources that could be used more appropriately and effectively to house the homeless.

We respectfully encourage community workers, faith groups, homeless people, housing activists and members of the public **NOT** to take part or support the needs assessment on April 19<sup>th</sup>.

#### The following are a summary of our concerns:

**Count or Needs Assessment?** Whatever name you want to use – count, needs assessment, or census – don't be confused: this **is** a count! A needs assessment is "A systematic process to determine the service needs of a defined population; a definition of the extent of need, available services, and service gaps by population and geographic area."<sup>1</sup> A **real** needs assessment of this nature is a sensitive and highly personal enquiry done within a framework of trust. It is not achieved through impersonal, simplistic questions. A real needs assessment would include an analysis of existing city services and quality/quantity of provision of said services. Some city councillors have been very clear that their goal in all of this is strictly enumerating the numbers of homeless people.

**Accuracy:** The City itself has stated that the information gathered will not necessarily be accurate – especially in the first year. They recognize that there will be "under-representation in the data in the first year."<sup>2</sup>

Professor J. David Hulchanski states, "We need to concede that all attempts at counting the homeless are doomed to failure (insurmountable methodological flaws). There are too many who do not want to be counted, too many places where the houseless can

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<sup>1</sup> [www.hivportland.org/resources/acronyms.html](http://www.hivportland.org/resources/acronyms.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.toronto.ca/housing/pdf/streetneedsassessmentfollow-up.pdf>

find a place to stay for the night, no method at all for counting those in the ‘concealed houseless’ category, and attempts to count are never provided enough resources to produce a somewhat defensible number.”<sup>3</sup>

**Hidden Homeless:** The Street Needs Assessment will not address the issue of hidden homelessness, which represents the largest percentage of homeless people in the city. “Homeless studies in communities such as Peterborough and Sudbury have estimated that for every person in a shelter or on the streets, there are three to four “hidden homeless” people.<sup>4</sup> These often include families with children who are doubled up with friends and relatives.

**Ignored Advice:** The City’s Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated People is on record as being against the count<sup>5</sup>, yet the City is still moving ahead. Why is the City ignoring the advice of the large group of community experts it has pulled together to give them feedback and information on issues concerning homeless people?

**Purpose:** What is the real purpose of the count? Reportedly, the Street Needs Assessment will determine “the needs of homeless people.” However, that isn’t hard to figure out, and we don’t need a study to tell us the answers! **Homeless people need housing.** They don’t need another report looking at the dangers and problems of living on the street. Real consultation would not take place in the evening, by volunteers and without any significant honorarium provided for homeless people’s input into the question: ‘what do you need’. **Housing solves homelessness.** These monies could have been used towards rent supplements, better for funding shelters, food for drop-ins, or other services for people without housing.

**Cost:** The face value cost of the Street Needs Assessment is \$90,000, \$50,000 of which goes to the 500 Team Leaders. Actual costs are hidden. Staff time has been used to create the Streets Needs Assessment, develop the questions, coordinate the team leaders and volunteers, and for the actual implementation of the assessment on the streets and within the shelter system on the night. What is that cost? Certainly, it is more than \$90,000 and likely is closer to \$250,000.

**Targets:** Are homeless people targets in this city? Recent reports of increased police harassment against homeless people would certainly cause one to lean in this direction. A recent Toronto Star article<sup>6</sup> about the count, said that Team Leaders “will help volunteers identify survey targets.” **Survey targets?** If this is a real needs assessment, the City would be identifying “consumers”, “participants”, or “key stakeholders” – not

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<sup>3</sup> “A New Canadian Pastime? Counting Homeless People”, J. David Hulchanski, Dec. 2000. [www.tdrc.net/2000\\_Hulchanski\\_Counting-homeless-people.pdf](http://www.tdrc.net/2000_Hulchanski_Counting-homeless-people.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> “Toronto’s proposed street count won’t count for much at all”, Michael Shapcott, Jun. 2005. [www.tdrc.net/05-06-29-CSC-MS-dep.doc](http://www.tdrc.net/05-06-29-CSC-MS-dep.doc)

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Jane Pitfield to Community Services Committee entitled “Determining the Number and Service Needs of Homeless Persons Living on Toronto’s Streets and in its Public Spaces”, Sept. 1<sup>st</sup> 2005.

<sup>6</sup> “Toronto to take homeless census” by Gabe Gonda, Toronto Star, Mar. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006. [http://www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article\\_Type1&call\\_pageid=971358637177&c=Article&cid=1143067812191](http://www.thestar.com/NASApp/cs/ContentServer?pagename=thestar/Layout/Article_Type1&call_pageid=971358637177&c=Article&cid=1143067812191)

targets! This kind of remark exemplifies the insidious, depersonalization of homeless people lying at the heart of this project.

**Revealing Locations:** While the staff reports say that the findings would not be used to “out” homeless people’s locations, both people who are homeless and workers in the field, are afraid that this is exactly what will happen. After all, immediately following the by-law change in February 2005 banning people from sleeping at Nathan Phillips Square, many of the homeless people staying there were forced to go into hiding, and broke off contact with their regular outreach workers. Will this happen again after the count?!

**Training:** While many of the team leaders have experience with homeless people and issues, many of the volunteers do not. At most, one hour of training will be provided for volunteers, which includes watching a video about what to expect that evening, and role-playing the delivery of the surveys. While we understand that most of the team leaders are trained, this still creates a situation where untrained people will be administering the survey.

**Tokenism:** Homeless people taking part in the survey will receive a \$5 gift certificate – likely for fast food. What are the ethics of telling a hungry person that they can get a gift certificate for food but only if they answer these questions; who wouldn’t answer when starving? They are also being asked very detailed questions about their lives; is that only worth \$5?

**Value:** Many homeless people report to us that they feel discounted in this city. There are too many people who are intolerant of the homeless; not wanting to see shelters or social housing in their community, let alone sleeping on the street in their community. Recent City policies and practices reinforce that attitude - Shelter By-law, Nathan Phillips Square by-law, Police actions, City staff action to tighten restrictions on the Special Diet Allowance, resistance to providing food, juice, and cots at the Metro Hall 24 hour cooling centre. If policies and practices do not model the behaviour that homeless people deserve to be treated like people, then that says they don’t count. **Don’t count the homeless for data collection, if you can’t count them in life.**