

The Right Reverend
ANDREW J. ASBIL

Bishop of Toronto



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Bishop of Toronto Statement on Peter Street

July 13, 2023

Right now, an ever-growing group of asylum seekers, mostly from African countries, is encamped outside the Streets to Homes referral centre at 129 Peter St. in downtown Toronto. Occasionally, they are allowed inside to use washrooms and showers. They are being fed primarily by grassroots community groups. There is no shelter being made available to them. We have been told of at least one case in which a family arriving at Pearson International Airport was referred by immigration officials to the sidewalk on Peter Street.

This terrible situation is the result of inaction on all levels of government, resulting in an emergency situation for recent arrivals to Toronto, including children.

The City of Toronto was promised \$97 million by the federal government for shelter and housing programs aimed specifically at asylum seekers and refugees. This promise remains unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the city is currently facing a budget shortfall of \$414 million. The city's 2023 funding for the Refugee Housing Hub, which has housed about 1,200 people so far this year, is already nearly exhausted. Five hundred beds in the shelter system are normally reserved for refugees and asylum seekers, but this is far below the need, which is estimated currently to be about 2,800 people per night.

Toronto's shelter resources are stretched beyond capacity. We know that hundreds of people seeking emergency shelter are turned away every night, and a thousand or more people are living outdoors in encampments or simply on the streets, some for months and even years. While we understand the city's difficult situation, the decision to limit access to the shelter system for refugees and asylum seekers, announced by interim mayor Jennifer McKelvie on May 31, violates international human rights law and the city's own "sanctuary city" guidelines.

As Anglicans, we hold as one of our highest values the offering of welcome to strangers and to all those in need. Many of our churches are actively supporting refugees and asylum seekers in their communities and are already stretched thin by the acute need. We reject any attempts to set refugees and other unhoused people against each other. The need for decent shelter for all people is system-wide and is harming everyone.

This is a time for urgent action by all levels of government, though the federal government bears particular responsibility for the care of refugees and asylum seekers. We are disappointed that while municipal and provincial representatives have visited the camp on Peter Street, no federal representative has visited or communicated with the refugees or the groups supporting them.

We call on the federal and municipal governments to work together to open hotel rooms and additional shelter beds for refugees and asylum seekers immediately. The people outside 129 Peter St. must be given indoor accommodation now, and those continuing to arrive at Pearson must be given indoor shelter on arrival.

We call on the federal government to release immediately the promised \$97 million and, if possible, to increase this funding to \$157 million, reflecting the current need.

We call on all three levels of government to work together to provide 2,000 rent supplements so that people can move out of emergency shelters and into housing.

We must extend our compassion and support to those who have fled their homes in search of safety and protection. Those who are seeking refuge within our borders should not be left to suffer on the sidewalks of our city.

We call on all three levels of government to work, as a matter of urgency, to address the housing crisis which underlies this and many other issues.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Andrew Toronto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew J. Asbil
Bishop of Toronto