

# SISTERING

## **Meeting Minutes February 8, 2018**

Working Women Community Centre 533C Gladstone Ave

### **In Attendance:**

Tri-Chairs Judith Taylor (Resident), Charlotte Empey (Sistering), Shelley Walters (Shopkeeper)

Sally McLean, Resident/Volunteer

Melody Grant, Drop In Coordinator

Ann Ball, Resident/Volunteer

Stephen Spencer-Davis, Resident

Sonya Williams, The Paradise/Resident

Mike Layton, City Councillor/Resident

Debra Neil, Peer Worker

Anne Marie Quan, Supporter/Volunteer

Isabella Tatar, Resident

PaxLayla Gale-Santos and Alexandre Nanoff, Cristina Martins Office

Kalli Pearl, Resident

Christine McGlade, Resident

**Meeting Minutes:** Claire Burns Community Liaison Associate

### **Guest Speaker: Patricia O'Connell, Sistering Executive Director**

Sistering Background

Genesis of 24/7 Drop In, 2015

- A woman was assaulted twice in one night in downtown Toronto
- The community and the City recognized the need for safe overnight women-only space
- Prior to that Sistering was open 9-3pm and had many regular day clients

Present

- Sistering serves marginalized women, trans and non-binary identified people
- It's a low barrier agency offering trauma informed services
- There is a decidedly different demographic of clientele since the agency went 24/7- more women with chronic mental and physical health issues
- Sistering is the only organization in Toronto that takes these women in
- The agency currently employs 65 staff, varied in age, sexual orientation, ethnic background
- The majority of clients need help finding housing
- Sistering offers support for women to find and keep housing

- Support services include workers who go into the homes to help the women to learn how to shop, cook, sweep, do laundry, basic life skills that means that they can live successfully
- First contact with the agency is for basics - hot food, shelter, clothing
- Once a client has acclimatized to the agency they will often seek secondary services such as psychotherapy, legal help, access to and participation in the agency's social enterprises (Spun Studio, textile arts and Inspirations Studio, pottery) which can augment women's income

#### Future

- Agency seeks funding for the creation of a shelter for Sistering women
- Right now it acts as a shelter but doesn't have any beds, needs a larger building
- Shelter would function with the low barrier model that Sistering currently practises
- Agency would like to transition from having women sleep on the floor of the agency to providing shelter beds in a larger shelter as a stepping stone to ultimately finding affordable housing for clients

#### Questions to Pat O'Connell from the Advisory Council

- Q: What's the update on Inspirations Studio?

'Friends of Inspiration Studio' is working on transferring the program to another agency (ex. Fred Victor), Inspirations needs dedicated annual operating funding for the program for rent, materials, staffing (\$150,000/year)

- Q: Is Councillor Bailao's office in support of the creation of a shelter in Ward 18, in support of increase in shelter beds?

No representatives from the Councillor's office at the meeting. However MPP Martins' rep to connect Sistering with Cesar Palacio's office (Ward 17)

- Q: In terms of moving clients to affordable housing: are market rents in Toronto affordable for clientele?

The agency can help offset/subsidize market rent for a period of time. It is difficult to find affordable housing in the downtown core and as a result clients get pushed further to the outskirts of Toronto where there are fewer services and unfortunately Toronto Community Housing has a 12-year waiting list

- Q: Is Sistering a Safe Injection Site?

Sistering has applied to the federal government to become a safe injection site and has partnered with Jean Tweed, Anishnawbe Health and Women's College Hospital on this application. Sistering will apply for the Province's Overdose Prevention Service if the Federal application isn't accepted. The safe injection site would be open from 8pm-8am (most of the other services close at 8pm so there is available space in the facility at night)

- Q: Is the request for a 24/7 mental health nurse still with LHIN?

Yes, that request is in to the Toronto Central LHIN

- Q: What is your hope for additional funding?

Basically Sistering is asking for \$500k/annually to fund this 24/7 position. It's the equivalent of 7.5 staff. Sistering's current budget receives \$1.6M LHIN, \$1.6M City, \$400k from United Way and the rest of the operating budget is made up through private funding. There has been no increase in funding from LHIN or the City in eight years.

The agency is very tight for space for the current operations so the real dream is a bigger shelter facility. FYI: Next federal budget will have a focus on women, marginalized women, call for proposals/concepts.

- Q: What's coming up with council? How can residents help?

The budget comes to Council on the 12th. Drop ins, shelters and housing, advocates have asked for 1000 new shelter beds this year. Council has agreed to provide 1000 beds over the next 3 years. Council should commit to shelter expansion, replacing beds (eg: Seaton House's beds need replacement but the City needs to open new beds to relocate the Seaton House occupants while those beds are replaced). It can take a while to open a shelter even if Council votes in favour. (eg: Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre took 1.5 years from Council vote to opening the shelter.) There are also only certain wards that should allow shelters. Shelter users need access to services and the TTC but there are a limited number of wards that fulfill these requirements; most are in more expensive areas and currently the City isn't willing to pay premium rates for facilities in those neighbourhoods.

- Q: What can the Council do to help?

Driving traffic towards the Mayor's office and the Executive Committee is a good start

- Q: What's going on with the facade renovation?

The design is completed and ready for reno. The gate is coming out; so is the current seating. We're adding new lighting, additional heating, new seating. Should be completed within the next two months (\$35k max).

- Q: How is data collected at Sistering?

Council is trying to quantify current uses of agencies like Sistering and so the City has started an inspection program. There is data being collected by City Housing but in the agency's opinion it's the wrong kind of data that they're collecting; it's about toilets, electrical and facilities upkeep. They're not collecting data on the number of women using the space on a daily basis or what they're using the agency for. It's like they're trying to impose shelter standards on the drop ins.

- Q: The menswear shop adjacent to the agency is advertising as going out of business. Could Sistering annex the space for administrative offices?

Followup proposed.

- Q: If new shelter space opened would Sistering still be 24 hours?

Yes, because we want the Drop In to stay open at night. It wouldn't be used for sleeping though, because there would be a shelter for that. Remember that women's homelessness takes a

different form than male homelessness: women tuck themselves away (in cars, couchsurfing) so it's more difficult to gauge/see openly.

### **Melody Grant: Drop In Coordinator**

In answer to questions raised at the last meeting:

- No identifying information necessary to access services
- Majority of clients are new immigrants, harm reduction, women who have experienced abuse
- Each day in the Drop In we collect data about the women and the services they're accessing. Quarterly data reports are sent to the City, United Way and LHIN (50/50 housed/unhoused women)
- Mainly, information the staff receive is passed on anecdotally through personal stories from clients
- Large Mandarin/Cantonese speaking population, large Spanish speaking population, significant Portuguese speaking population
- The public has access to the Annual Report.
- Agency tries to encourage clients to move on after six weeks of regular stay and staff are proactive in engaging clientele to find alternate arrangements ie. housing
- Women's shelters have been at 99% capacity for the past two years
- Poor behaviour can result in being barred from the Drop In for a short time
- Staff build up rapport with clientele through small interactions as opposed to taking a hard line on certain behaviours. Policing behaviour creates a hierarchy. Staff work to create a safe and comfortable space without imposing behavioural expectations
- A hard copy of the Code of Conduct at Sistering has been provided to the Council members
- Q: There used to be a female Security Guard posted outside Sistering. What happened to that? Agency found that the women were frightened; having the guard imposed an expectation of bad behaviour which just led to bad behaviour

### **Charlotte Empey: Business Update**

Shelter/Housing and LHIN Representatives cannot sit on the Council but they will be invited as speakers to our meetings in March and April respectively

- Please send specific questions that you might have about Housing to Claire by February 16 so Housing staff have time to prepare answers
- Two members sent in a LOI (Letter of Intent) for a City grant application for the Advisory Council to organize a community event: "the unconference" for the fall; will find out by February 23 if we will be invited to apply for the grant

### **Claire Burns: Communication Committee Update**

- Councillors' offices will always field complaints so there's no sense in us trying to take that role but inviting comments/suggestions is good
- Sistering representative to meet with Councillors' staff once a month regarding complaints (to identify trends)
- Communications committee can work towards creating an orphan web page
- Communicating who we are and what we do. The page will be on the Sistering website

- Should be in the voice of the community
- Copy to be written based on Council mandate

**Judith Taylor: Re-new Focus of the Advisory Council Mandate**

- Our purpose is to make sure that neighbours, shopkeepers and people at Sistering know one another by creating relationships, communicating the work of the Council to the neighbourhood, opening up communication across the three streams, knowing each others' names, starting with modest goals such as what it means to build community
- We need to ascertain a modest understanding of our goals, which aren't that easy to accomplish
- Adding the concept of awareness and outreach; we're a conduit between the agency, the residents and the shopkeepers
- This is really about our community - which is pretty small - keeping the big issues in our minds but focusing on the micro of the neighbourhood is key

**Next Meetings**

- The second Thursday of the Month!
- Thursday March 8th and Thursday April 12
- Location TBD