

Toronto probing confusion over homeless shelter spaces during cold weather



Pedestrians pass a homeless man in front of the Design Exchange on Bay Street in downtown Toronto.

PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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The City of Toronto and its ombudsman have each launched inquiries into confusion over the availability of shelter space for Toronto's homeless on the weekend when the city was gripped by extremely cold weather.

Several advocates have criticized the city for what it called a communication error this weekend that resulted in people being told there were no shelter spaces available, when they later reported that they were only at 95 per cent capacity, not 100.

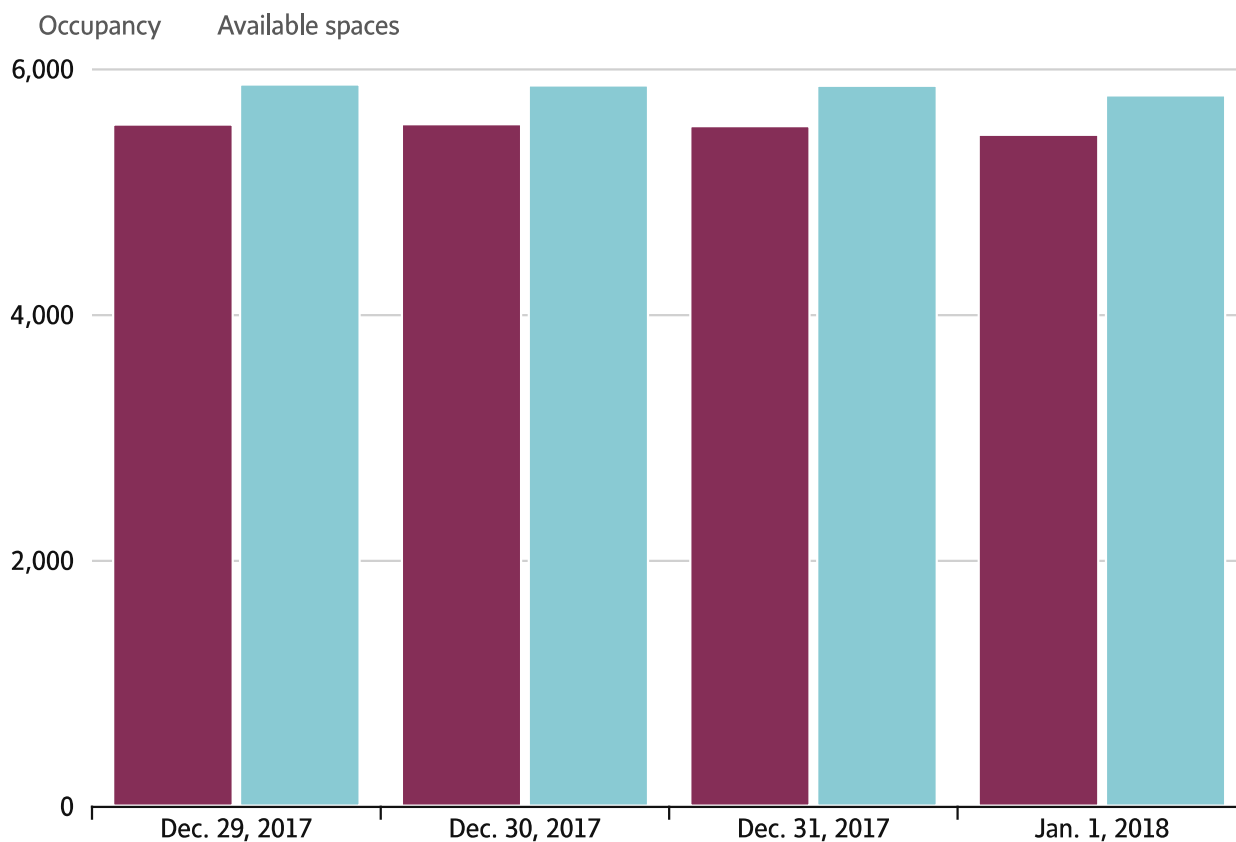
Administration, at a press briefing on Tuesday. "Information needs to be accurate and reflect real-time situations."

On Saturday, Gillian Kolla, a staff member at the overdose prevention site in Moss Park, tweeted saying she had been told there was no space available in shelters for the people who were warming up in the site's heated tent. She said she was also told the city's newest winter respite centre, the Better Living Centre at Exhibition Place, had no availability. But the next day, the city reported that there had been about 60 available spaces that night, including at the Better Living Centre.

As a response to the confusion and the outpouring of activism on social media on the weekend, the city's Ombudsman Susan Opler will conduct a review of the protocols for providing shelter to Toronto's homeless.

Toronto daily shelter census

Totals



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: TORONTO.CA

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Mr. Raftis said his review will look at improving the technology of the Central Intake system, the city's centralized system to help homeless people find shelter space, and he will work with the ombudsman on her inquiry as well.

Central Intake fields calls from those in need of shelter, interviews them and finds available and appropriate spaces for them. Every day at 4 a.m., the system receives numbers of available beds and spaces from shelters, Mr. Raftis said.

People associated with the shelters have said the weekend's confusion was likely an isolated incident, but critics have publicized other recent instances where this problem arose.

Homeless advocate Doug Johnson called Central Intake on Monday night and asked if there was availability. He was told, as heard in the recording he posted to his blog, that there was no availability. When he asked specifically about whether there was space at the Better Living Centre, he was told there was not.

But when he went to the centre to see if there was availability, he was told by staff there that they had spaces available. He said he had called Central Intake three nights earlier posing as a man with a pregnant girlfriend and was again told there was no space.

"This happens night in and night out," Mr. Johnson said.

Mark Aston, executive director of Fred Victor, which is contracted by the city to operate the Better Living Centre, said that on Monday night, the centre had space for almost 40 people.

"I'm at the Better Living Centre right now, and I can tell you there are about 75 to 80 people here," Mr. Aston said the next day. The Better Living Centre can hold up to 110 people. "There's capacity, and we're open," he said.

The centre has now added an extra 30 beds, Mr. Aston said, bringing its capacity up to 140.

However, some city councillors are still looking for answers.

"Someone is not counting, or somebody is outright lying," said Paul Ainslie, councillor for Scarborough East. Mr. Ainslie has been one of the several city councillors active on Twitter on the weekend criticizing the response.

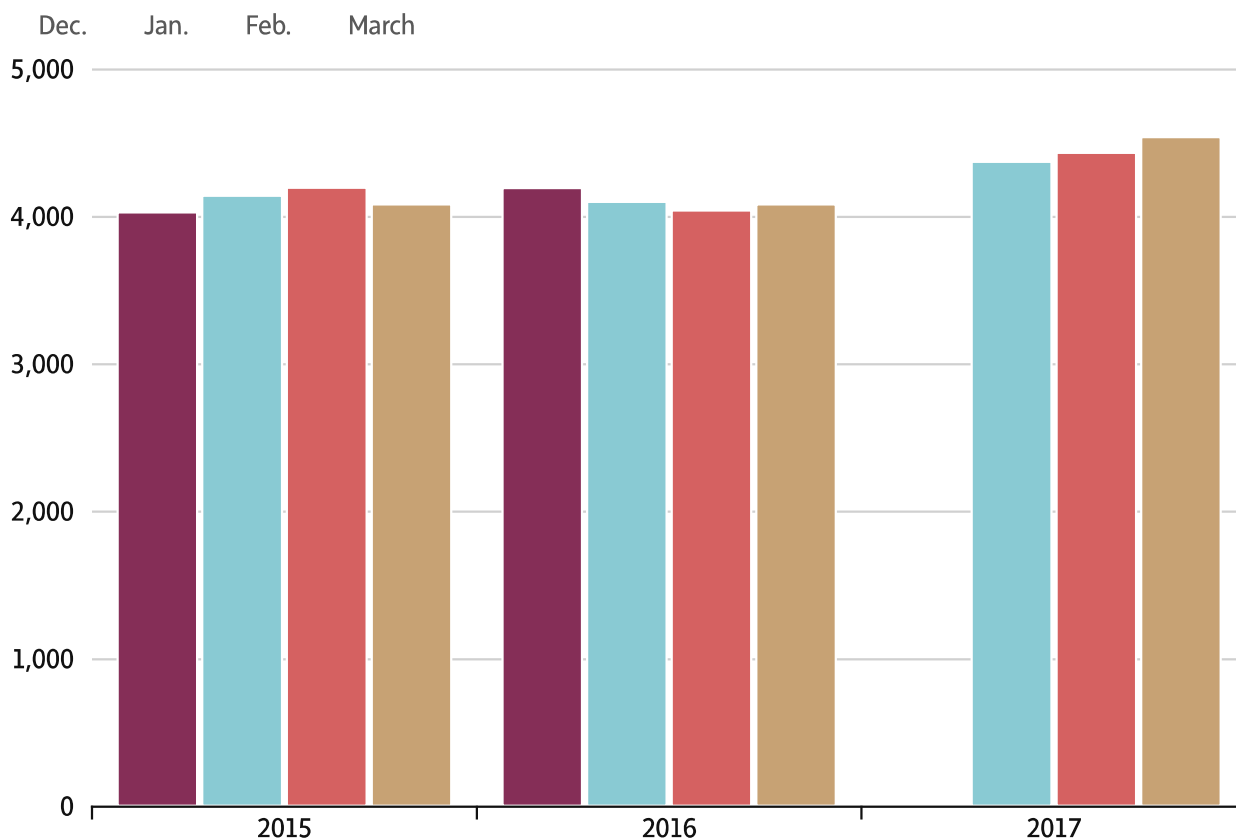
spaces for the homeless. The hashtag #OpenTheArmouries was soon trending on Twitter.

While not explicitly ruling out opening the armouries, Mr. Raftis said on Tuesday that it's not an ideal option because it can be expensive and requires co-ordination with the federal defence staff who work there. He did say that it is one of the options that the city is considering.

Councillor Joe Cressy, who supports opening the armouries and has also been vocal on Twitter about it, said that while the armouries may not be the ideal solution, they're better than the alternative, "which is people being left out in the cold," he said.

Number of people served in Toronto's permanent emergency shelter system

Nightly average, by month (Dec. 2017 not available)



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