

Statement regarding the lease termination of the St-James Drop-In Centre

To our dear friends, donors, and supporters of the St-James Drop-In Centre,

For over 30 years, the St-James Drop-In Centre has been providing a full range of crisis services and interventions related to homelessness, mental illness, and marginalization in the downtown core of Montreal. We continue to transform lives – and our City – through the provision of a range of empowering, dignifying services and supports for our fellow citizens.

We take particular pride in StreetSuds, an award-winning, thriving social enterprise and industrial laundry service that offers employment opportunities and life skills development for people transitioning into the work force.

But we are facing a significant disruption in our programming unless we can find a new home by the end of this month.

After difficult and distressing negotiations with the leadership of the St. James Montreal Church we had no other option than to terminate our lease at the end of this month. We need your assistance with our transition and in helping us find a new home.

Context and reasons for our departure

Following a period of declining membership, the St. James the Apostle Anglican Church was rebranded “St James Montreal” in January 2016 and – as stated in their public communications - has sought to attract a new membership under a new organizational model.

The new Church leadership offered us a lease containing new and non-negotiable provisions that required the exclusion of our homeless and marginalized Members from Church property. The proposed lease, which represented a radical departure from our vision of a supportive, long-term tenancy relationship, would have required our Members to enter through a back-alley fire-escape instead of the usual entrance, banned our Members from the Church greenspace, and threatened “discipline” and permanent barring of our organization’s own Members and Staff by Church leadership, at the Church’s discretion. It is important to note that our organization – a registered charity - operates entirely independently from the Corporation of the Church.

We entered into negotiations with the Church in good faith. As a Board, we were prepared to accept an additional rent increase, despite having absorbed a 47% increase in the previous year. We also felt that that it would be reasonable to share in the costs of future renovations to our space, provided we were able to negotiate a long-term lease.

Our departure is therefore not reducible to financial concerns, but reflects important differences in values and priorities. Since the start of this year, negative and highly emotional interactions occurred between the new Church leadership and our Members and Staff, in the name of “site discipline,” including the photographing and public shaming of our homeless Members. These

negative interactions increased stress levels among our Members and Staff and interfered with our ability to focus on and ensure the care and well-being of our Members. Our organization moreover prioritizes empathy for the enormous personal struggle of being homeless. Member behaviours and attitudes that may be construed as personally objectionable are not straightforward to resolve, and we recognize that disciplinary measures proposed or carried out through exclusion, threats, or shaming are likely to ensure that such behaviour concerns are never resolved.

Although we are grateful to the Church for the years during which we were able to provide services to our Members from that location, we provide this contextual information to clarify what led to our terminating our lease. We should also point out that we have reached out without success to the Bishop of Montreal to discuss the events that led to our departure.

An opportunity to help us move forward

The Staff, Board, and Members of our very diverse and close-knit community are saddened by this closure, but we encourage you to choose hope with us, and to direct your energy into helping us to move forward towards a new home and a renewed community. We seek to prioritize the well-being of our Members in this time of transition and uncertainty, and to meet their immediate needs. We need your help to make this happen. We welcome your assistance as we pack up and move our belongings into storage. We are also searching for a new home in the heart of our beloved City, and we would gladly accept support for this challenging venture. This is our opportunity to overcome stigma together, and to promote the values of inclusion, acceptance, and dignity of the person, on which our organization was founded.

You can donate to our organization, here: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/st-james-drop-in-centre/>

You can reach us to lend a hand in helping us move out, here: info@stjamescentre.ca

You can contact us with leads on a new space, here: info@stjamescentre.ca

We assure you that we remain steadfastly committed to the well-being of our Members – many of whom struggle with mental illness, homelessness, and social exclusion - and to providing our Members with interim crisis services throughout this process of relocation.

Thank you for your continued support.

With sincere appreciation,

The Board of Directors of the St-James Drop-In Centre