

Statement from Halifax Mutual Aid

April 26, 2022

Halifax Mutual Aid volunteers were saddened to hear about the incident at Starr Park. We believe we know the individual who is in hospital. During the assembly of the crisis shelter at Starr Park and every day since, this individual has threatened volunteers and shelter occupants. We also believe this individual is responsible for using power tools to cut a hole in the crisis shelter on Sunday. To emphasize the seriousness of his threats, he told volunteers that “someone is going to jail - and I don’t care if it’s me.” We present these details not because the violence was justified, but because Halifax City Council is once again pushing false and misleading narratives that put some of the most vulnerable members of our community at greater risk of violence.

As the housing crisis in Halifax has become more widespread and dangerous, tensions in our community have grown. And like the housing crisis itself, the rising tensions have clear causes. First and foremost, Halifax council and others have aggressively pushed a viewpoint that those who are unhoused are not members of our community. The mayor has stated that parks need to be “returned” to the community. This has been a central element of Halifax Council’s messaging.

In order to combat this apparently external threat, Councilors have ordered police violence against our unhoused friends and neighbours, thereby modeling behavior and tacitly encouraging vigilante actions like those seen at Starr Park. A perfect example of this is the first online comment on Councilor Sam Austin’s statement on the incident at Starr Park. The commenter says the city should “declare war” on Halifax Mutual Aid, which he characterizes as a violent criminal organization. Councilor Austin’s platforming of this sort of violent rhetoric fans the flames of division, intolerance, and, ultimately, violence. In this case, it has left one man in the hospital and another in jail - both of which are traumatic and terrible outcomes.

Demagoguing politicians like Sam Austin are part of the reason why Halifax Mutual Aid’s work is so desperately needed. Now more than ever, the growing number of people without housing require the safety of a room with a locking door, which crisis shelters provide.

As we have always said, Halifax Mutual Aid will continue to build crisis shelters as long as people need them. We will also continue the policy of occupant’s choosing the location of their crisis shelter, as was the case for Starr Park.

The solution to this crisis will not come from further marginalization of those without housing. The solution is safe, dignified housing. We encourage everyone - especially those who have concerns with crisis shelters - to push all levels of government to treat the housing crisis as the emergency that it is and take immediate actions for Housing First solutions.