Open letter to the York University and Seneca@York communities

Thousands of students from across Canada and around the world arrive every year at York University and Seneca@York, many for their first university and college experience. We take great pride in the number and diversity of the students that choose our institutions and in having helped to create the best possible environment for them to succeed at this critical juncture in their education and in their lives.

It is with that in mind that we draw the attention of the York University and Seneca@York communities to a matter of critical and ongoing concern for all of us, specifically, the safety of students affected by overcrowding in the private housing development known as the Village.

Students need safe and affordable housing. Our concern about the well-being of many of the students in the Village revolves around overcrowded conditions in which many of them are living. Many homes have been subdivided into separate living areas, with some housing up to 15 in the same unit. The buildings often contain dangerous modifications such as inadequate fire exits, a lack of necessary fire safety equipment such as smoke detectors or extinguishers and may have infrastructure and utilities that have been illegally compromised.

Three fires have occurred in the Village in recent months, damaging several homes and displacing dozens of residents, with a personal injury occurring in the most recent incident.

‘Dwelling houses’ – properties that have been subdivided to create multiple rental spaces – are permitted only in designated parts of the City of Toronto. The Village is not one of those designated districts, but clearly many such houses exist there and in an unregulated environment. Any such properties are in breach of local bylaws that forbid this category of use and raise numerous law enforcement and safety concerns.

A new by-law covering the Village district – and any other areas of Toronto with similar needs – is an urgent and necessary next step. This action will acknowledge the reality that dwelling houses already exist in the Village, and will empower the City to more effectively address many of the serious problems that have arisen under the present circumstances.

A new dwelling house by-law in Toronto must be backed up with powers of inspection, adequate resources for enforcement, and it must be brought forward as soon as possible. York and Seneca will continue to press this issue with government, including participation in public consultations on a new by-law in Toronto by City Council.
Though neither institution has jurisdiction in the Village, York University and Seneca@York will continue to exercise whatever influence we have at our disposal to improve the living conditions of students in that development.

Meanwhile, persons aware of any unsafe or illegal conditions in the Village can report them to the City of Toronto by calling 311.

Your questions and comments on this subject are most welcome at ahickman@yorku.ca or jon.olinski@senecacollege.ca.

Mamdouh Shoukri
President and Vice-Chancellor
York University

David Agnew
President
Seneca College