What We Heard…

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Edmonton Community Conversation Summary

Alberta

Introduction

Several sectors of Edmonton's homeless-serving agencies participated in the community dialogue in Edmonton, as well as current members of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness. There was also representation from the City of Edmonton, Aboriginal groups, other support service agencies, and Homeward Trust Edmonton, the local community-based organization (CBO).

To help the province shape the role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC) in helping communities prevent and reduce homelessness, we asked participants the following questions:

1. What worked well for your community over the last several years in addressing (reducing and preventing) homelessness?
2. What needs to happen in your community (short, medium and long-term) to ensure the province's goal of ending homelessness by 2019 can be achieved?
3. What role do you see an Interagency Council having with respect to addressing (reducing, preventing and ending) homelessness in the province and assisting your community in addressing homelessness?
4. From your perspective, who should be on the Council for it to be successful in fulfilling its role as you have described above?

Discussion Summary

What worked well to reduce homelessness in Edmonton

Participants identified the province's commitment to ending homelessness as one of the major contributions in reducing Edmonton's homeless population. Although some communities, including Edmonton, had already begun drafting local plans to end homelessness, the province's publically stated goal of ending homelessness in 10 years was, from the participants' perspective, a critical turning point. Having a local plan to end homelessness was also considered to be an important element in garnering community support. Furthermore, the provincial and local plans were noted as providing a broad framework with clear, shared objectives.

Participants also pointed out that the provincial plan was rolled out along with a significant injection of funding into programs designed to house and support homeless people, which led the public to truly believe in a concerted effort to end homelessness. Without significant capital and program support dollars, participants felt that the plan to end homelessness would not have seen any successes.

Other important success factors included the community's flexibility in planning; administering funding locally; and organizing a community response to homelessness. Participants stressed the importance of local community involvement and decision-making, and recommended that local decision-making be preserved. Having the community engaged in planning to end homelessness also raised awareness about the economic benefits of ending homelessness. Participants said that as a result, there was more understanding of the homeless population, which in turn encouraged the public to be more supportive of community initiatives related to ending homelessness.

Inter-Ministerial collaboration was also identified as a critical contribution to Edmonton's progress in ending homelessness. Participants indicated that they had seen some improvements in collaboration among and between different Ministries, for example, the government-issued identification card for the homeless. Many participants stated that inter-Ministerial collaboration and coordination is critical to ending homelessness.

Another major factor in reducing Edmonton's homeless population was the implementation of Housing First programs, which provide both housing and any necessary supports to keep clients housed. Participants also mentioned that having a central intake helped direct homeless clients to those agencies that would best serve them.

What changes are required to end homelessness by 2019

Participants acknowledged that several changes need to take place for continued progress in reducing and preventing homelessness. Most of the suggested changes centred on systems changes, changes to policies and program supports, and better integration of data collection and analysis. The key themes were:

- Cross-Ministerial coordination and collaboration;
- Reviewing and adjusting the provincial plan to end homelessness to focus on prevention and providing long term supports for the most vulnerable;

- Changing funding formulas, levels, and cycles; and
- Improving data collection, analysis, and sharing.

While participants noted that there has been improved collaboration at the cross-Ministerial level, they stated that there is still a need for better coordination, specifically a greater awareness of the interdependence of each Ministry's programs and policies, and their collective impact on homeless clients. Participants felt that there is not an effective, systematic cross-Ministry approach currently in place, especially with respect to mental health and addictions, youth in transition, and seniors. They pointed to the absence of a coordinated approach in developing policies and eligibility requirements, which has created barriers to advancing the plan to end homelessness. As one participant stated, "it is crucial to ensure we don't sabotage each other."

Streamlining client services and the collection of client information was also a priority issue for many participants. It was suggested that providing a more coordinated approach to service delivery would not only be more cost effective, but would also enable better customer service. Participants stressed that streamlining information gathering will require breaking down the barriers that agencies have erected to prevent information sharing. Many participants believed that without information sharing and streamlining, clients will have difficulty accessing the various programs and services available to them. They suggested that a more coordinated approach to housing with supports from the various Ministries would not only create greater efficiencies but would also provide the services required to support clients with multiple, complex issues.

Participants emphasized that streamlining services, coordinating Ministry and agency operations, taking a systems approach to planning, and providing the best programs and services to clients cannot be achieved without the ability to share appropriate levels of client information across the system and without meaningful and reliable data. Participants pointed out that being able to obtain client information at a single point of entry is important not only to avoid having clients repeat their history every time they seek services from another agency, but also to create efficiencies in the system, provide more reliable data regarding the populations being served, and allow for better coordination of services.

Having reliable data also means knowing the homeless population, their particular circumstances, and the supports they require. Participants suggested that the information on client populations should be used to inform priorities and evolve the provincial plan to end homelessness. Most participants deemed research to be critical to sound planning and decision-making.

Participants expressed frustration with government income support programs, particularly the Income Support and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) programs. Participants stated that the amount of these benefits was insufficient to sustain an individual. Participants also said that clients are made to undergo a "slow, bureaucratic, and un-responsive process" and are quite often unable to support themselves.

Another gap identified by participants was the availability of supportive housing for different homeless populations. While most participants endorsed the Housing First approach, they also said that other housing models are required to meet the unique needs of individuals. They pointed out that clients suffering from mental health and addiction issues often require a different type of intervention and a different type of housing program.

Participants also identified gaps in addressing the unique needs of various subpopulations of the homeless. Participants stressed that seniors, youth, and Aboriginal people have different issues, and engaging these client groups and providing them appropriate supports is important to help them maintain housing stability and prevent them from falling into homelessness. Housing programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of abused women, including second-stage shelters and longer-term accommodations, were considered necessary to address homelessness among victims of domestic violence.

The majority of participants agreed that for high-need clients, housing stability cannot be maintained without continuous supports. Participants identified the uncertainty of funding as working against both individual clients and the overall goal of ending homelessness. Service providers noted that the current one-year funding cycle is problematic for their agencies. Because they are unable to plan any further than a year ahead, they are often unable retain or recruit staff, resulting in high turnover in staff and compromised program and service delivery. Participants pointed out that they cannot guarantee that a program will continue beyond the one year cycle, and many of their clients require supports for longer than a year to successfully transition out of homelessness. For these reasons, participants would like to see a longer term funding cycle of at least three years, and preferably five years. Participants also stated that funding levels need to be increased so that agencies can provide the wraparound services required by their high-needs clients, as well as pay their staff a living wage.

The manner in which funds are allocated to the community was also identified by participants as problematic. Participants said they would prefer funding formulas to more

accurately reflect the number of clients served in the Edmonton area. They pointed out that Edmonton services a large rural area in addition to the urban core, and many people move into Edmonton to obtain the supports they need. Because of in-migration from the rural communities, participants believe that the per capita formula used to determine grant allocations puts the City of Edmonton at a disadvantage, as these allocations are not sufficient to assist the number of people who come into Edmonton to access support programs and services. Participants identified the importance of addressing rural homelessness and determining the best approach to assist smaller communities.

A frequently voiced concern was the availability and variety of housing options for homeless clients. Participants believed that the housing stability of many of their clients may be compromised "if government does not address the current social housing situation." Participants noted that many of the buildings dedicated to social housing are coming to the end of their lifespan because Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation mortgages, which guaranteed subsidized housing, are beginning to mature. Participants feared that private owners would not continue to operate subsidized housing. The condition of the social housing facilities in the Capital Region was also identified as an issue. Many buildings have not been well-maintained and will consequently need to be demolished, displacing clients.

Participants also identified an ongoing need for community engagement, public awareness, and education on issues related to homelessness.

The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC)

Participants were clear in stating that that the IAC must have the ability to effect change, commenting that "the last thing we need is another level of bureaucracy… another advisory board." Participants also said that the IAC must work across systems, Ministries, and all orders of government to remove barriers, create efficiencies, and coordinate activities with the ultimate goal of better serving clients.

It was recommended that each Ministry represented on the Council should be mandated with the responsibility for ending homelessness so that these Ministries accept the responsibility to collaborate and coordinate their efforts, share information, and act in their clients' best interests. By extension, the IAC could then "own" the plan to end homelessness and accept the responsibility of effecting the changes required to move the plan forward.

Because two important players in ending homelessness are the federal and municipal governments, participants identified the IAC as having an important role in collaborating with all orders of government and engaging them more fully in the province's plan to end homelessness.

Participants recommended that the IAC could also coordinate and direct research to inform strategies, priorities, and programs related to ending homelessness. They commented on the Alberta Homeless Research Consortium initiated by the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness and suggested that the Consortium could continue to operate under the IAC's direction.

Connecting with communities, obtaining their input into planning and setting priorities, and reporting back to communities was also identified to be an important role for the IAC.

Participants noted that the IAC's connection to social policy would be critical in ending homelessness as most of the causes of homelessness are rooted in social issues such as poverty, health, and education.

Council membership

There were many different suggestions regarding the composition of the Council. However, participants were clear in expressing that whoever was on the Council had to be in a position to effect change and implement action in support of achieving the goal of ending homelessness in 2019. Participants also felt that the voices of communities and homeless-serving agencies must be heard by the IAC.

 Suggestions for IAC membership included Human Services, Justice and the Attorney General, Solicitor General and Public Security, Seniors, Municipal Affairs, Health and Wellness (Addictions and Mental Health), community-based organizations, leaders from the Aboriginal communities, and provincial associations such as the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police, Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, and Family and Community Support Services.