

# What We Heard...

Interagency Council on Homelessness  
Grande Prairie Community Conversation Summary

The logo for the province of Alberta, featuring the word "Alberta" in a grey, cursive script font. A small blue square is positioned at the end of the word, to the right of the final letter.

**Interagency Council on Homelessness  
Grande Prairie Community Conversation: February 1, 2012**

## **Introduction**

A wide cross section of service agencies attended the community consultation in Grande Prairie. Among the participants were representatives from the local community organizations, the municipality, and a variety of non-profit organizations including those serving seniors, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and Métis populations.

Grande Prairie services a large rural area, which poses some challenges to the service delivery sector and the clients from the rural areas. The importance of including smaller communities in the province's 10-year plan was therefore a topic of discussion.

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 the IAC 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 IAC for it to be successful in fulfilling its role as you have described above?

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## **Discussion Summary**

### **What worked well to reduce homelessness in Grande Prairie**

Interagency cooperation and teamwork were identified as the two primary elements that worked in Grande Prairie to effectively address the issue of homelessness. With the community setting the priorities, agencies clearly understood what had to be done. According to the participants, industry collaborated with the agencies to address homelessness. Private sector involvement was also considered an important factor, as the landlord relationship was described as collaborative and oriented to problem solving. The Housing First model was cited as another driver for team work. The Housing First program was the impetus for agencies to join forces at the front line to provide the services needed to house clients. As a result of the team work, agencies noted they were able to create single point of entry for their clients to be referred to the services and supports, depending on their needs.

Supported housing was identified as another important contributor to addressing homelessness. Participants indicated that this type of housing was essential for their clients to remain stably housed. Being able to offer outreach services was also noted as important to addressing homelessness in Grande Prairie. Participants pointed to the fact that many of their clients have to be persuaded to come in for help, and without outreach services, many would still be out in the cold. Participants acknowledged that without funding little would have been accomplished and they credit the province and the City of Grande Prairie for enabling the plan by providing some of the funds necessary to help the homeless population.

### **What changes are required**

Several issues were identified by participants as needing attention in order for the province to successfully prevent and end homelessness. Among the many requirements to help advance the plan to end homelessness are the following:

- A variety of housing solutions with a range of wrap around supports to address the needs of mental health patients, people with active addictions, and people who are physically ill;
- Programs for seniors, including housing and outreach support;

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- Partnerships with landlords;
- Low income housing;
- More outreach services;
- Improving income supports levels and application processes;
- Increasing public awareness; and
- Increasing and providing longer term funding.

Participants pointed out the importance of having a full spectrum of housing options with the appropriate supports to “meet clients where they are at.” They highlighted the particular lack of specialized housing with supports for people who have mental health issues, and said that “people who are hard to house because of mental health and addictions continue to fall through the cracks.” They recommended that the focus shift to providing suitable housing programs for this client group. From participants’ perspective, many people who have active addictions “will not be successful if they are put in an apartment by themselves.” Participants said that a more appropriate housing model for some would be congregate living with a support worker living on site. Although people praised the Housing First program, they noted that many high risk clients do not qualify for Housing First and would therefore like to have a range of housing programs suitable for a diverse and complex homeless population.

Participants identified the need to develop targeted responses to specific homeless or at risk populations. One such group of people who are considered to be at great risk are seniors. Participants pointed out that there is an increase in the number of seniors with mental and physical health issues which make them unsuitable for the traditional seniors housing such as lodges. Participants commented that many of the seniors who require services have suddenly found themselves displaced and have nowhere to turn to for help. Participants also expressed concern for at risk youth and indicated that Grande Prairie needs transitional housing programs for youth in care. They indicated that youth leaving the child intervention and protection system often find themselves homeless and unable to access support services they require. Participants further noted there are insufficient outreach services and permanent supports for the hard to house population, pointing out that helping the hard to house and people with active addictions is a long process which can rarely be achieved within one year. They stressed that having the funds to support these clients on a long-term basis is necessary to effectively address homelessness.

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Another important component to successfully housing people is the landlord/agency relationship. While Grande Prairie has achieved some success in working with landlords, participants felt that more attention should be paid to helping landlords, and partnering with them to house clients. Tied to the importance of building relationships with landlords, participants also identified the need to ensure there is sufficient housing in Grande Prairie, as they are concerned that there has been little planning to address the housing situation during economic boom times. They noted that the vacancy rate in Grande Prairie is currently very low and there is little social or low-income housing available. As such, participants recommended that government, working with communities, develop a plan to increase the level and variety of housing to accommodate those who currently require housing assistance, or who will require assistance during economic boom times when in-migration levels and rental rates rise.

Participants also pointed out that the need for additional social housing or low-income housing in Grande Prairie is due to the difficulty many clients have in qualifying for income supports. Further, participants indicated that when clients could qualify for it, the amount of income supports provided was far too low to help them cover their rent and other living expenses. Participants recommended government conduct a complete review on income support programs not only to determine suitable levels of support, but also to improve the qualification process. Navigating the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) process, in particular, was singled out as being highly problematic for clients and for front-line workers who are trying to help these clients complete their application.

People also noted that there are insufficient funds to allow agencies to provide the range and depth of services required by their clients. Further, the short-term funding cycle was noted for creating many problems for agencies who are unable to plan beyond one year. Participants noted that uncertainty of funding has a ripple effect on clients who cannot be guaranteed help beyond the one year cycle.

Participants noted that smaller communities are not included in the province's plan and pointed out that the lack of supports in rural communities forces many to leave their home communities to seek services in the larger centres. They pointed out that this migration not only creates a problem for the service providers in larger centres, but it also has the potential to cause problems for the clients and increase the homeless population in the larger centres.

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Participants noted the need to create a place for homeless clients to feel a sense of community and to help them find meaningful employment. They also called for more training for first responders and more meaningful public awareness and community engagement.

**The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness**

Participants advised that the Council must have power to effect policy changes with respect to funding and programming, and recommended that the Council be held responsible for developing strategies to address homelessness.

They also stressed that the Council must be perceived by communities as having the power and ability to work effectively within government and with communities to bring about changes required to end homelessness. They commented that the Council must be accountable both to the government and to the community, and should play a critical coordinating role at an inter-ministerial level and being involved in other provincial initiatives. They also said that the Council should ensure that agency work was coordinated.

One of the points raised was the importance of the Council truly representing the communities, especially the smaller communities. Participants said that it was important for the Council to hear communities, allow them to bring forward issues, then respond to and share information with the communities. By doing so, participants said that the process would therefore be transparent, allowing frontline workers and people in the sector to see results.

Another important role identified for the Council was one of supporting and helping communities implement community-driven solutions. This is especially important to the smaller communities that do not have the infrastructure to help them successfully address homelessness.

**Council membership**

It was evident from the comments that participants in Grande Prairie want the Council to be made up of people who have the authority to change how programs currently work, including how funding is allocated. However, it was also clear from what was said that communities and agencies and distinct groups need to be represented on the Council. Having strong Aboriginal representation, including Elders, was also identified as important.