

# What We Heard...

Interagency Council on Homelessness  
Medicine Hat Community Conversation Summary

*Alberta* 

**Interagency Council on Homelessness  
Medicine Hat Community Conversation: February 3, 2012**

## **Introduction**

The Medicine Hat conversation on the establishment of an Interagency Council on Homelessness included representation from a cross-section of agencies that provide services to the homeless population in the city. Representation included the community-based organization, the Community Advisory Board, and organizations that support youth, Aboriginal people, people requiring mental health and addictions services, and victims of family violence..

To help us shape the role of the Interagency Council, 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 has worked well to reduce homelessness in Medicine Hat**

Participants noted several factors that contributed to housing many of Medicine Hat's homeless population. They attributed their success in effectively addressing homelessness to having a Housing First program, other housing programs with appropriate client level supports, and prevention programs. However, participants pointed out that without the leadership and advocacy of the community-based organization and agency executives, Medicine Hat's homeless population would not have decreased as rapidly as it has. Many participants also commented on landlord relationships as making a positive difference in the community.

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Another significant factor in addressing homelessness is the high degree of interagency coordination and collaboration. This collaboration was evident in the community's approach to capacity building and training of staff, participants said.

**What changes are required to end homelessness by 2019**

Although Medicine Hat has been successful in reducing the number of people who are homeless, participants pointed out that homelessness will not end or be prevented unless there are a number of different housing programs and supports that are "person-centred". Participants' primary concern was that there are insufficient permanent supported housing programs and there is no support for supervised housing programs. They pointed out that some clients need and/or want a more controlled living environment so that they can be successful. Participants stressed the importance of having a continuum of housing programs to suit a variety of client needs, and recommended that this be addressed in the province's plan to end homelessness.

Income support programs were also identified as an issue as participants felt that these programs did not provide sufficient funding to sustain clients. Participants also expressed that if government policies and program practices were more flexible, agencies would be able to help clients who may not meet all the qualification requirements for a program.

In addition to flexibility, participants pointed to the importance of having sustainable funding. They indicated that they are unable to provide the supports needed by their clients, and frequently have to fill the gaps by taking funding from other programs due to low funding levels. Having sufficient funds was also identified as important to allow agencies to pay employees a competitive wage, as employee retention was identified as a problem for many agencies.

There were two other gaps that participants identified. The first was support for families, and in particular, the children attached to those families. Participants noted that the system currently only counts the head of household and often children are left without the supports they require. The other gap was support for Aboriginal people who come into the urban centre and need assistance in navigating the system. Participants asserted that having more services dedicated to Aboriginal people is important to prevent them from becoming homeless.

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

One of the primary roles participants identified for the Council was that of monitoring the progress of the provincial plan. They suggested that the Council should assess its performance and report back to the community. Participants said that the Council should facilitate inter-ministerial coordination to ensure policies and practices are aligned across the system. Participants also felt the Council should ensure decisions and planning are based on good data and applied research. Participants said it is important to understand the social return on investment, to understand whether programs are working, and to know the population being served so that good planning and programming can be put in place. Public awareness and community engagement were also identified as roles the Council could assume.

**Council membership**

There were many suggestions regarding who should be on the Council. However, participants felt that whoever is on the Council must be in a position to inform and effect policy and program changes. They said that not only must the different ministries be at the table, but also the community. People said that while the community-based organizations have a place on the Council, agencies and clients also needed to be represented. Suggestions included having the homebuilders association, landlords, and provincial groups represented. Some participants suggested that the Council be a Premier's Council on Homelessness as this structure would facilitate recruitment of the appropriate community leaders and increase the profile of the Council.