What We Heard...

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Red Deer Community Conversation Summary

Alberta

Introduction

There was a broad representation of Red Deer's homeless-serving agencies at the community conversation. The City of Red Deer, the County of Red Deer, the Community Housing Advisory Board (CHAB), and the community-based organization (CBO) were also represented.

To help us shape the role of the Interagency Council to 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 Red Deer

Many participants credited the Mayor of Red Deer with leading the effort to end homelessness. The Mayor's vision and the action he took in striking a task force on homelessness was felt to have inspired the rest of the community. Participants said that with the Mayor's encouragement, agencies worked together in the true spirit of collaboration to find solutions for their clients. Participants also pointed to the provincial plan as being important in supporting the work initiated by the Mayor and the task force to end homelessness.

Local autonomy over planning and developing appropriate responses was also identified as a key factor in local successes. Participants noted the importance of creating communities and integrating low-income housing into different neighborhoods. They said that this not only creates a

community for the recently housed, but it also promotes public awareness and community support. Participants also mentioned the willingness of the local business community to lend its support in addressing homelessness.

Another important success factor was the willingness of service providers to be flexible and open to different approaches in helping clients access supports. Participants pointed out that many agencies were willing to be flexible with their funding programs.

Through the cooperation of a number of agencies, government, and business, a number of outreach programs were initiated. These programs were highlighted by participants as helping to reach and assist those most in need.

What changes are required to reach the goal of ending homelessness by 2019

Participants pointed out that several groups are not receiving the required attention and supports they need to transition out of homelessness. These groups included seniors, Aboriginal people, youth, immigrants, and people with mental health problems and/or addictions. Participants recommended more outreach services be available to assist these groups. Participants spoke specifically of the urgent needs of seniors currently waiting in hospitals for beds in long-term care facilities. Additional spaces in long-term care facilities and affordable supportive living facilities were considered necessary to address homelessness among seniors in the Red Deer area.

Funding was also identified as critical for the community to put services in place to prevent homelessness. Participants suggested that the government first engage in dialogue with the community to determine what programs are required, then give the community the necessary funds. The community would decide how to spend the money, and be held accountable for the results.

However, participants stated that holding the community and agencies accountable for funding should not lead to increased reporting requirements. They commented that the current reporting situation is time-consuming, and it is not always clear how reporting requirements are related to accountability. Participants suggested that funding agencies streamline reporting requirements and/or provide administrative resources to assist agencies in meeting these requirements. Coordination and collaboration among funders with respect to reporting would allow agencies to focus their energy and resources on helping clients and improving service delivery.

Participants also felt that improvements to programs and service delivery could also be realized with greater collaboration and coordination among the service providers. However, the

competitive nature of funding allocations was felt to be a barrier to achieving this collaboration. Participants recommended that the province provide funding in a manner that promotes cooperation and decreases competition among agencies for scarce resources. Funding was also considered essential to enable agencies to pay their employees a living wage. Many participants pointed out that the funds they currently receive are not sufficient for them to offer programs as well as pay wages and benefits that are competitive enough to recruit and retain staff.

Participants agreed that income supports need to be reviewed, and suggested that a social policy approach could help determine the type and levels of support people require to remain stably housed. Participants also identified a need for more housing stock, as they were concerned that without enough suitable housing, agencies would not be able to find places for people to live. However, it was also noted that more of the community needs to be brought on side with the plan to end homelessness by raising awareness. Without additional community support, many participants believed that there would continue to be challenges around securing appropriate housing for the homeless.

The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC)

Participants expressed that the IAC needs to be focused on action: "We don't need another think tank. We need an action and advocacy body. Don't create another body tasked to talk about it, discuss it, make recommendations – it's meaningless if no action is connected."

Other roles identified for the IAC included:

- Ensuring the provincial plan is tied to a broader social policy strategy;
- Helping communities develop their capacity to address homelessness;
- Conducting research to inform programs and decision-making;
- Ensuring cross-Ministry collaboration and coordination;
- Advocating for funds to support the 10-year plan;
- Facilitating communication; and
- Engaging the community

Participants said that the primary role of the IAC should be to take action to address systemic issues identified by the community through frontline engagement. The IAC would therefore also need to ensure cross-Ministry coordination and collaboration so that different ministry programs work together for the benefit of both clients and staff. Cross-Ministry

coordination and collaboration were identified as essential in resolving the issues in programs administered by different Ministries.

Another role identified for the IAC was that of ensuring an appropriate level of funding is provided to sustain programs and services. Participants also said that they would like the IAC to help communities develop their capacity to take local action to prevent and end homelessness. They felt that through community engagement and dialogue, the IAC could understand local issues, help the community obtain the required funding, and then allow the community to direct the funds to the areas of greatest need.

Finally, participants identified the need for communication to flow between communities and up through the IAC to government, across Ministries. They also saw the IAC as being responsible for monitoring the provincial plan to end homelessness and communicating on progress and outcomes.

Composition of Council

In the words of one participant, "There are two kinds of departments: people and potholes. The people Ministries need to be at the table." The "people" Ministries were identified as Health and Wellness, Human Services, Seniors, Justice and Attorney General, and Solicitor General and Public Safety.

Participants agreed that the IAC would need to include cross-Ministry partners who are responsibility for addressing homelessness and issues related to homelessness. Health was identified as one of the largest concerns in the Red Deer homeless community, and Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services were therefore recognized as critical cross-Ministry and service delivery partners. Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) was also identified as an important partner at the provincial level through Seniors, and at the local level through the PDD board. Participants shared their perspective that IAC members need to be decision makers who are "doers" and who are action-oriented. The group also identified that members should include CBOs, urban and rural representatives, Aboriginal representatives, the federal government, industry/businesses, landlords, and clients.