What We Heard…

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Summary of Community Conversations

March 2012

Alberta
Government

Introduction

The Premier of Alberta has mandated the Minister of Human Services to create an Alberta Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC) to lead the next phase of implementing *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years.*

In January 2008, the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness was formed and tasked with developing a provincial 10-year plan to end homelessness. In March 2009, *A Plan for Alberta* was accepted by the province, and the Secretariat's role shifted to monitoring and evaluating the plan's implementation. Although the Secretariat and its partners have seen many successes in the first three years of implementing the plan, a number of the plan's priorities require solutions involving a "whole of government" or systems approach. Achieving these priorities will depend on the cooperation and commitment of multiple agencies. As a result, an IAC composed of senior decision-makers from a variety of sectors is required to provide the leadership and direction necessary to transform current policy and delivery systems, and to ultimately end and prevent homelessness.

In November 2011, the Minister of Human Services approved a two-phased approach to consulting with key stakeholders on the establishment of an IAC. Over 225 stakeholders participated in these consultations. Phase One of the consultations took place in December 2011 and included meetings with members of the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness and senior representatives of the community-based organizations[1] (CBOs) for Alberta's seven major cities (Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer). Phase Two consisted of holding community conversations with key stakeholders[2] in the seven major cities from January to February 2012.

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[1] Community-based organizations (CBOs) are responsible for implementing both the local and provincial plans to end homelessness. CBOs distribute provincial funding to homeless-serving agencies in their community to support the delivery of programs and services that address homelessness.

[2] Key stakeholders included shelter operators, outreach and support service providers, faith-based organizations, affordable housing providers, private landlords and other housing industry representatives, Aboriginal and Métis organizations, youth sector workers, police services, municipal governments, academics, and health care professionals.

In both phases of consultation, participants were asked to provide feedback on the following four questions:
   A. What worked well (for your community) over the last several years in addressing (reducing and preventing) homelessness?
   B. What needs to happen in your community over the short, medium, and long term to ensure the province's goal of ending homelessness by 2019 can be achieved?
   C. What role do you see an IAC having with respect to addressing (reducing, preventing, and ending) homelessness in the province and assisting your community in addressing homelessness?
   D. From your perspective, who should be on the IAC for it to be successful in fulfilling its role as you have described above?

Participant feedback has been organized according to major themes and is summarized below.

Discussion Summary

A. What worked well to reduce homelessness?

   1. Establishing provincial and local plans to end homelessness.
      • The province's financial commitment to ending homelessness in 10 years was viewed by participants as a critical turning point in addressing homelessness.
      • Participants stated that having provincial and local plans supported by a significant financial investment demonstrated leadership and a commitment to addressing homelessness from both the province and community leaders.
      • The plans were also considered to be important in raising awareness and garnering community support. As a result, many stakeholders, including police services, emergency medical services, youth-serving agencies, and private sector representatives, joined forces to address homelessness in their communities.

   2. Enabling local decision-making.
      • Participants acknowledged that communities were empowered to determine local priorities and administer funds accordingly, as the community's ability to adapt to unique local circumstances was agreed to be a key success factor in addressing homelessness.
      • Participants reiterated the importance of local community involvement and decision-making, and recommended that local decision-making be preserved under an IAC approach.

3. Adopting a Housing First approach.
   - Participants identified the implementation of Housing First programs as a major factor in reducing Alberta's homeless population, stating that the provision of supportive housing, or housing with continuous wrap-around services, was a key factor in helping clients remain housed. Supportive housing was viewed as the most effective way to ensure that clients with high needs attained and maintained housing stability.

4. Collaborating as a community.
   - Participants agreed that a high degree of cooperation, collaboration, and communication between local homeless-serving agencies was fundamental in reducing homelessness.
   - Examples of successful coordination included a centralized intake point and access to Housing First programs through homeless shelters. Some agencies noted that as a result of team work, they were able to create single point of entry for their clients to be referred to services and supports.
   - Participants also noted that in many cases, the impetus for collaboration was the development of Housing First programs, which required that clients be provided not only with housing, but also with the necessary support services to help them maintain their housing.

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

1. Improve provincial cross-ministry coordination and collaboration.
   - Participants felt that there is an ongoing need for better coordination between provincial ministries, specifically a greater awareness of the interdependences between ministry programs and policies, and their collective impact on homeless clients.
   - From participants' perspective, there does not appear to be an effective, systematic cross-ministry approach currently in place, especially with respect to mental health and addictions, youth in transition, and seniors. They noted that the absence of a coordinated approach has created barriers to advancing the plan to end homelessness. Examples cited included: discharging people from provincial institutions into homelessness, failing to connect capital funding with operational funding for housing facilities, and using qualification criteria for income support and rent supplement programs that make it impossible for some homeless clients to qualify for assistance.
   - In order to understand and respond to the unique challenges posed by the homeless population, participants suggested that government policies, programs, and regulations be reviewed, revised, and aligned.

2. Restructure, streamline, and improve access to social assistance programs.
   - Participants expressed concerns with provincial social assistance programs, particularly Income Supports and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), noting that benefit amounts were insufficient to sustain their clients. Participants further noted a disconnect between traditional notions of housing and affordability, pointing out that many of their clients could not afford what is currently deemed "affordable housing."
   - Qualification criteria for social assistance programs were a common concern, as many participants felt that these criteria posed a barrier to assisting their most needy clients. Other issues identified included difficulties in navigating the application process and the slow pace of processing applications.
   - Participants recommended that the government's approach to determining supports should be reviewed with a focus on providing an adequate level of income, streamlining services, and improving client access to assistance.
   - Participants also proposed that the government take a broader perspective on homelessness and consider all the circumstances that cause people to become homeless or vulnerable to homelessness to support the planning and coordinated delivery of both preventative and reactive programs designed to address homelessness.

3. Focus on prevention and long-term planning.
   - Participants advocated for a long-term, systematic planning approach to both address and prevent homelessness.
   - Prevention was identified as a necessary factor in addressing homelessness, particularly with respect to special populations including immigrants, youth, families, seniors, and Aboriginal peoples. Participants commented that understanding the unique needs of these groups would help with planning and delivering prevention programs.
   - Participants also recommended that government, working with communities, develop plans to increase the level and variety of housing stock 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.

4. Provide a range of housing and support service options based on client need.
   - While most participants endorsed the Housing First approach, being able to provide a range of housing and support options tailored to individual need was identified as essential to ending homelessness. Participants talked about a continuum of housing and the ability to meet clients "where they are at."

- Participants highlighted, in particular, the lack of specialized permanent housing with supports for clients with complex or multi-faceted issues such as mental health and/or addictions issues.

5. Address the needs of homeless subpopulations.
   - Participants identified gaps in addressing the unique needs of various homeless subpopulations, stressing that immigrants, youth, families, seniors, and Aboriginal people have different issues. Engaging these client groups and providing them with appropriate supports was viewed as key to helping them maintain housing stability and preventing them from falling into or becoming entrenched in homelessness.

6. Change funding formulas, levels, cycles, and reporting requirements.
   - Service providers noted that the current one-year funding cycle is problematic for their agencies because they are unable to plan beyond one fiscal year. They are often unable retain or recruit staff, resulting in high staff turnover and compromised program and service delivery.
   - Participants also pointed out that they cannot guarantee that a program will continue beyond one year, and many of their clients require supports for longer than a year to successfully transition out of homelessness. High-need clients in particular require longer-term, continuous supports to maintain housing stability.
   - For these reasons, participants would like to see a longer-term funding cycle of at least three years. Participants also stated that funding levels need to be increased so that agencies can provide the outreach and support services required by high-needs clients and so they can pay their staff a living wage.
   - The manner in which funds are allocated to communities was also identified as problematic. Participants said they would prefer funding formulas to more accurately reflect the number of clients served in their community.
   - Participants commented that the current reporting situation is time consuming and suggested that funding agencies streamline reporting requirements and/or provide administrative resources to assist agencies in meeting these requirements. Coordination 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 program and service delivery could 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.

7. Build the capacity of homeless-serving agencies.
   - Participants agreed that capacity building in the homeless-serving sector was also required to end homelessness, as many agencies currently face challenges in recruiting, training, and retaining sufficient qualified staff. Participants noted that agencies take on the most vulnerable and high-need clients but often do not have sufficient staff with appropriate skills.
   - Homeless-serving agencies said they tend to compete with the health sector for skilled workers. This issue, participants noted, along with an increasing administrative burden, ends up drawing resources away from the front line.

8. Improve data collection, analysis and information sharing.
   - Participants stressed the need to have reliable information to assist with designing programs and determining priorities. They highlighted the importance of evaluating program outcomes on a system-wide basis, noting that good information is essential to measuring progress and financial and social returns on investment. Additionally, this information could be strategically shared to garner community support and improve public awareness of homeless issues.
   - Although many agencies noted that the relationships they have with each other allow them to overcome barriers to information sharing, they said that policy changes are needed to enable a systems-approach to information sharing.
   - Participants also recommended that research be undertaken to examine the profile and use patterns of homeless populations. The results of this research could then be used to inform program and policy planning, as well as resource allocation. However, in order to obtain sound data, participants repeated that they would need to be able to share client information. Although some information is currently shared among agencies, it was proposed that a formal process be developed for centralized data collection in the province.
   - Participants also commented that being able to obtain client information at a single point of entry is important not only to avoid having clients repeat their history to other agencies, but also to create efficiencies in the system, provide more reliable data regarding the populations being served, and allow for better coordination of services.

9. Extend the plan to end homelessness to all Alberta communities.
   - Participants noted that smaller communities are not included in the province's 10-year plan and pointed out that the lack of supports in rural Alberta results in many people leaving their home communities to seek services in larger centres. This migration not only creates a problem for the service providers in larger centres, but it also has the potential to create additional barriers for the clients and increase the homeless population in the larger centres.
   - Furthermore, current funding formulas do not reflect the movement of clients into larger centres.

10. Public awareness and education.
    - Participants identified an ongoing need for community engagement, public awareness, and education on issues related to homelessness. They proposed that the government and its partners in ending homelessness communicate strategically to share success stories and garner public support for initiatives that address homelessness.
    - Participants also suggested using research data to engage and inform the community on the true nature of homelessness and demonstrate returns on investment.

C. The Role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC)

1. Lead the implementation of the 10-year plan to end homelessness.
   - Participants agreed that the IAC must have the ability to effect the changes necessary to end homelessness within government programs and policies.
   - Participants agreed that the IAC should lead the efforts to end and prevent homelessness, and should be accountable to the communities for demonstrating that leadership. Accordingly, the IAC should be responsible for determining priorities, providing advice for program and policy development and delivery, and developing strategies.
   - The IAC's leadership role should also include reviewing, revising, and monitoring the progress of Alberta's 10-year plan, participants said. They suggested that the IAC assess progress made and report back to the community.

2. Facilitate cross-ministry coordination and collaboration.
   - Participants said that the primary role of the IAC should be to take action to address systemic issues at the frontline. The IAC should ensure cross-ministry and cross-sector coordination and collaboration so that different ministry programs work together for the benefit of both clients and staff.
   - Participants also felt that the IAC should play a key role in reviewing, revising, and aligning relevant policies, programs, and regulations across all social assistance programs.
   - Participants noted that the IAC's alignment with the provincial Social Policy Framework would be critical in ending homelessness as many of the roads to homelessness are rooted in social issues such as poverty, health, and education.

3. Coordinate and direct research on homelessness.
   - Participants proposed that the IAC play a role in coordinating and directing research to inform strategies, priorities, and programs related to ending homelessness. Participants acknowledged the Alberta Homelessness 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.

4. Communicate with and be accountable to communities.
   - Another important role identified for the IAC was that of connecting with communities, using their input to inform strategic planning and policy development, and then reporting back to communities on the progress of efforts to end homelessness.
   - Participants highlighted the need for the IAC to communicate directly with communities, with information travelling in both directions, to ensure transparency and allow frontline agencies to have direct input into the IAC.
   - Participants also said that they would like the IAC to help communities develop their capacity to advance local efforts 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.

5. Facilitate information sharing.
   - Participants stressed that priorities, programs, policies, and strategies in the next phase of implementing the provincial 10-year plan to end homelessness should be informed by sound research and data analysis, and the IAC should therefore play a role in gathering and sharing client information. The

dissemination of information was viewed as essential to implementing best practices and understanding the financial return on investing in initiatives to end homelessness.

6. Review funding processes and models.
   • Another role identified for the IAC was that of ensuring an appropriate level of funding is provided to sustain programs and services, and reviewing funding models and processes to support a client-centred focus on service delivery.

7. Raise public awareness.
   • Public awareness and community engagement were identified as necessary components of the IAC's efforts to implement and monitor the plan to end homelessness.

D. Council Composition

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

Participants thought that IAC members should be systems thinkers who would be able to problem-solve from a whole-systems perspective. Because participants saw the IAC as having a role in influencing and changing policy, they believed that members should have the authority to implement policy changes. Participants also said that the IAC had to be "nimble and action-oriented", and should include decision-makers, leaders, and innovators, as well as frontline agencies.

Given practical constraints on the number of potential IAC members, participants agreed that advisory subcommittees could be created to ensure that the IAC would be well-informed by all sectors and communities.

Suggestions for IAC membership included:
   • Provincial ministries with roles in ending homelessness (Human Services; Justice and Attorney General; Solicitor General and Public Security; Municipal Affairs; Health and Wellness (including Mental Health and Addictions); Seniors (including Persons with Developmental Disabilities); Education; International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations)
   • Community-based organizations
   • Leaders from the Aboriginal and Métis communities

- Provincial associations (e.g., Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police, Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta, Alberta Teachers' Federation, College of Social Workers)
- Consumers of services
- Homeless-serving agencies (e.g., shelter providers, outreach workers, social workers)
- Faith-based organizations
- Industry and the private sector, including landlords and homebuilders
- Community business associations
- Researchers and academics
- Municipal and federal governments
- Community organizations with shared interests (e.g., Inner City Forum on Social Policy, Community Action Committee, United Way, Red Cross)
- Youth and youth advocates
- Police services