

What We Heard...

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Lethbridge Community Conversation Summary

Alberta 

**Interagency Council on Homelessness
Lethbridge Community Conversation: January 31, 2012**

Introduction

Homeless serving agencies were well-represented at the community dialogue in Lethbridge. There was also representation from City Council, police, the health sector, the Aboriginal population, persons with disabilities and other non-profit organizations.

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 worked well to reduce homelessness in Lethbridge

Lethbridge achieved a 25% reduction in its homeless population and attributes this success to several factors. Many credited the leadership on the part of the City and Social Housing in Action (SHIA) and the close partnership between the City and SHIA that has fostered cooperation and collaboration between the City, SHIA and community partners.

Participants also credited having the provincial plan and the community plan to end homelessness with helping to focus attention on the problem of homelessness and raising public awareness and support. They further noted that a systems approach to addressing client needs, adopting the Housing First philosophy, focusing on prevention, and having the necessary funds to implement key strategies were all important contributors to the successes achieved to date.

**Interagency Council on Homelessness
Lethbridge Community Conversation: January 31, 2012**

The ability and willingness of service providers to collaborate and coordinate their efforts to find solutions was identified as one of the main factors in reducing the homeless population. Participants indicated that Lethbridge already has an interagency mindset and has worked to build the necessary bridges between the various service agencies to solve the problem of homelessness. As reflected in one participant's words, "We haven't fallen into the trap of the blame game; we try to problem solve together. Partly because the community is small, we deal with a lot of the same people and we are all focused on the client."

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

Although there have been successes, participants pointed out several areas requiring more attention if the goal of ending and preventing homelessness is to be reached. One of the most important changes identified concerned cross-ministry and intergovernmental coordination and collaboration. Related to that point was the need for a systems-wide approach to enable agencies to formally collaborate and coordinate their efforts to serve the homeless population. The systems approach must also include other orders of government, as they too, play a significant role in ending homelessness.

Participants noted that cross-ministerial and intergovernmental collaboration and coordination is particularly evident when distinct populations are considered. Aboriginal peoples, seniors, youth and people with mental health, addictions and developmental disabilities who are, or at risk of, homelessness all require coordinated responses. Participants stressed that these targeted responses require coordination of efforts across the system as well as collaboration, investment, and increased funding.

The level and certainty of funding were identified as significant issues to be addressed. Participants said that in order for agencies to provide the level of wrap-around supports clients require to maintain their housing, government must continue to fund programs. Participants also said that there are insufficient dollars for them to provide the level and types of supports needed by their clients who usually have high acuity. They pointed out that funds are also needed to build and/or acquire the type of housing that would be suitable to meet client needs. Participants further noted that there is a "disconnect between traditional notions of housing and affordability" and that there is a need for low-income housing because many of their clients cannot afford what is currently

**Interagency Council on Homelessness
Lethbridge Community Conversation: January 31, 2012**

deemed “affordable housing”. Further, participants indicated that income support and rent supplements should be increased so that their clients can maintain their housing.

The Housing First program, participants said, requires on-going investment of dollars and cannot be viewed as a short-term solution, particularly as it relates to clients with higher and more complex needs. They stressed that intensive housing support programs were especially required for clients with high acuity as many are not able to live independently or without the appropriate level of support and/or supervision. Permanent supported housing programs were therefore identified as essential to ending and preventing homelessness.

Participants pointed out the need for good data and said that to respond appropriately to client needs and make good program decisions require sound research and data gathering methodologies. They noted that accurate and reliable data would help identify the needs of the population being served and position agencies to better serve their clients.

One of the challenging issues identified was that of racism in the rental housing market, which was noted as a barrier to some of their clients finding homes. Participants suggested that greater community involvement and public awareness might help address racism and counter the “not in my back yard” attitude.

The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness

Participants stated that the Council must be “an agent of accountability for progress on the plan.” In that regard, they saw one of the roles of the Council being to remove barriers to progress and exerting pressure on decision makers and others to work towards ending homelessness. They saw the Council as overseeing the province’s 10-year plan to end homelessness. As overseer of the plan, participants believe the Council should have responsibility for determining strategies and priorities. This includes ensuring availability of housing, having appropriate levels of funding to support initiatives, having a range of housing programs, monitoring progress and reporting to the communities. Participants felt an important function of the Council would be to create and maintain linkages between the provincial plan and community plans. In this regard, participants saw another important role of the Council as being a broker between the province (the elected representative)

Interagency Council on Homelessness Lethbridge Community Conversation: January 31, 2012

and the community. The importance of the Council working closely with the communities so that its work would be informed by communities was often highlighted by participants.

Another critical role identified for the Council was that of ensuring cross-ministerial collaboration and coordination, making the connections between one ministry's programs and policies and other ministries' programs and policies. As participants frequently commented, the Council has to take a "systems approach" because without it, little progress will be made. They hoped that when one ministry created policy, it would work in unison with other policies, so one ministry was not enacting policy that would exacerbate existing issues. One example cited was discharging people from hospitals or prisons into homelessness. Intergovernmental collaboration was also noted as essential to addressing some of the issues affecting Aboriginal peoples. For example, the housing situation and access to services on reserves often forces people to leave their communities in rural areas (on reserve) to seek services in the city.

To address some of the housing issues, participants pointed out that the Council must partner with landlords and housing providers to address risks associated with the clients being housed. In that regard, participants also saw a role for the Council in raising public awareness and gaining greater support from the community.

Another role cited for the Council was that of ensuring the right research was conducted. Participants stressed the importance of using research to inform programming. They said that research would help them know whether programs are working. They also pointed to the need to know what others are doing and best practices.

Council membership

Participants felt that the voice of the community needs to be heard, but they also stressed that because so many of the issues identified by participants related to mental health and addictions, it is critical for Alberta Health Services to be at the table. Other ministries that participants said should be on the Council are Human Services, Education, Justice and Attorney General, Solicitor General and Public Security, Seniors, Municipal Affairs, and Intergovernmental, International and Aboriginal Relations. They also said that representatives from these ministries must be "people close to decision makers".

**Interagency Council on Homelessness
Lethbridge Community Conversation: January 31, 2012**

Participants also suggested the following groups be included:

- homeless-serving agencies;
- industry and private sector, including landlords and homebuilders;
- municipal councils,
- Inner City Forum on Social Policy (one representative),
- Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA);
- Federal government; and
- Aboriginal and Métis populations.