

What We Heard...

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo
Community Conversation Summary

Alberta 

**Interagency Council on Homelessness
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Community Conversation: January 23, 2012**

Introduction

Several sectors of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, as well as elected representatives, participated in the community dialogue in Fort McMurray. There was also representation from various homeless-serving agencies, including those who serve Aboriginals and youth.

Fort McMurray's homeless population has decreased over the last several years and a number of factors leading to the decrease were noted by participants, including less in-migration, a financial commitment from the Government of Alberta to house the rapidly growing transient population, and a coordinated effort by homeless-serving agencies to house people.

During the conversations, participants often noted the unique challenges faced by Fort McMurray, which arise from such factors as a rapid influx of people during economic booms and a lack of infrastructure, particularly land and housing, to support population increases. This situation is exacerbated by the high cost of living in Fort McMurray, which results in many residents living in poverty.

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 Fort McMurray

Many participants said that the high degree of cooperation, collaboration, and communication between homeless-serving agencies had contributed to reducing homelessness. Flexibility in how agencies can adopt and implement policy also helped. Participants stated that having a provincial plan, supported by significant financial investment, as well as a community plan to end homelessness, demonstrated a commitment to addressing homelessness from both the province and community leaders. These plans were viewed as the impetus for the community to develop a more compassionate, humane, and effective response to homelessness.

Both the provincial and community plans promoted a Housing First approach. Participants agreed that Housing First had been successful in reducing the number of homeless people in Fort McMurray. However, it was noted that the community's ability to adapt Housing First to unique local circumstances was crucial in the model's success. Participants also stated that providing supportive housing, or housing with continuous wrap-around services, has been a key factor in helping people to retain their housing. From the participants' perspective, supportive housing is the most effective way to ensure that clients with high needs attain and maintain housing stability. A supervised housing model was also endorsed, with program proponents believing that some clients want and need help to address their barriers to independence (e.g. addictions). A voluntary housing program that imposes restrictions on substance use was thought to have contributed to helping a segment of clients deal with their addictions and reach a higher level of self-sufficiency.

Participants also noted that churches and other faith-based organizations had begun redirecting those who came to their doors to the homeless-serving agencies because they realized that their charity was enabling people to remain homeless.

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

During the community conversations, participants raised several issues that concerned them. The following items were identified as essential to ensuring both the community's and province's success in ending homelessness:

- Ensuring that government program policies and regulations do not inadvertently contribute to homelessness;
- Providing a continuum of housing and social supports based on various client needs;
- Focusing on prevention and harm reduction;
- Addressing the unique needs of distinct subpopulations of the homeless (youth, seniors, Aboriginal people, immigrants, people with mental health and/or addictions issues);
- Changing the funding cycle to promote sustainable, predictable, and long-term funding;
- Constructively addressing barriers created by the *Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act* to promote information sharing between agencies;
- Having sufficient and diverse housing stock and the ability to conduct long-range planning with respect to economic booms; and
- Developing data collection and outcome measurement systems that are sensitive to the unique circumstances of the homeless and hard-to-house populations.

Participants consistently emphasized Fort McMurray's unique situation. Due to economic cycles, there is a shortage of available housing, meaning that the community cannot accommodate the influx of people during a boom. When accommodations become available, rental costs continue to be prohibitively high, particularly to people who suddenly found themselves unemployed. Participants recommended that a strategic plan be developed to address this boom-and-bust cycle. They also stated that one of the primary factors affecting the construction of more low-income housing was the ability of builders to acquire land from the government.

Because of the very high cost of living in Fort McMurray, income supports levels are too low. Participants expressed concern regarding the inadequacy of income supports provided, as well as the qualification criteria, which they felt made it almost impossible for those most in need to obtain income supports. The most significant criticisms were directed towards the Assured Income for the

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Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, which participants felt worked against many clients. Participants identified the some of the issues faced by their clients as the bureaucratic “hoops” clients are made to jump through, the processes that have to be followed, and the slow pace of processing applications. Many participants also said that AISH benefits are too low to sustain someone who is not capable of working, particularly in Fort McMurray. Participants recommended that AISH and all other income support programs be reviewed to increase the level of support provided, as well as streamline application and review processes and harmonize the various income support programs for which a person might qualify.

Addressing unique needs of distinct populations was considered critical to ensuring that people from these populations do not become homeless. Service providers noted that many of these clients require more intense and ongoing services, and without these services and supports, they are unable to maintain their housing. Participants explained that if a client wants and needs continuous supportive or supervised housing, it should be available. Being able to provide a range of housing and support options tailored to individual needs was identified as essential to ending homelessness. Understanding and responding to the unique needs of the different populations means providing a number of different housing alternatives to allow service providers to meet clients “where they are at.”

In order to understand and respond to the unique challenges posed by the homeless population, participants noted that government policies, programs, and regulations must be reviewed, revised, and aligned. Participants pointed out that the way the system currently works in some ways contributes to homelessness. Examples cited included discharging people from provincial institutions into homelessness and using qualification criteria for income support and rent supplement programs that make it impossible for some homeless clients to qualify for assistance.

Another point raised by the majority of participants was the difficulties created due to funding uncertainties. Without some assurance of continued funding, agencies are unable to plan beyond one fiscal year. This uncertainty creates an unstable employment situation, making it difficult for agencies to recruit and retain employees. Participants noted that clients are also hurt by the short funding cycle as agencies cannot guarantee that they will be able to continue to help their clients beyond one year. Providing funding on a longer-term cycle was therefore seen as vital to the viability of programs and services intended to help prevent and end homelessness.

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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 would enable a systems-approach to information sharing. Participants further noted that these changes would facilitate better data collection. Participants also raised the issue of outcomes reporting, which is not always sensitive to the time it takes for a chronically homeless person to achieve housing stability.

The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness

Participants agreed that the role of the IAC should be to ensure coordination and cooperation between and among all Ministries whose programs and services affect the homeless population. Participants believed that the IAC should play a key role in reviewing, revising, and aligning relevant policies, programs, and regulations across all social-based assistance programs.

Participants stated that the IAC must also lead the efforts to end and prevent homelessness, and should be held accountable to the communities for demonstrating that leadership. They said that the IAC should be expected to provide direction to those responsible for program and policy development and delivery. The IAC's leadership role should also include periodically reviewing and revising *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*, as well as reporting on the IAC's work on an annual basis.

Other important functions identified for the IAC included directing the research priorities and data gathering policies; ensuring changes to regulations and policies to facilitate information sharing among the various homeless-serving agencies; and reviewing the approach to capital and operating grants vis-à-vis capital construction and maintenance dollars.

Council membership

There was a high degree of agreement on who should be represented on the IAC. As participants contemplated the IAC's roles and responsibilities, they noted that members must be people who are in positions to make changes to policies and programs. However, participants also felt very strongly that the voices of the individual communities need to be heard at the table. Participants felt that policies and programs should not be developed and/or revised without input from service delivery agents, nor should programs and policies be designed without a clear understanding how they impact clients and frontline workers. Because many of the identified issues

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were cross-Ministerial in nature, participants felt that the IAC must contain representation from each Ministry with programs and policies that impact the homeless population.

Participants agreed on specific representation from Human Services, Health and Wellness (including Addictions and Mental Health), Justice and Attorney General, Solicitor General and Public Security, Seniors, Municipal Affairs, and Education. Other groups commonly identified for IAC representation included the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police, faith-based organizations, industry employers, research members, Aboriginal and Metis representation, populations representing service consumers, and the community-based organizations (CBOs).