What We Heard…

Interagency Council on Homelessness
Calgary Community Conversation Summary

Alberta

Introduction

Calgary's community conversation was attended by a broad cross-section of homeless-serving agencies, as well as representatives from the Alberta Secretariat for Action on Homelessness, Calgary's community-based organization (CBO), the City of Calgary, the Calgary Police Service, and the University of Calgary.

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 Calgary

Participants identified several key success factors that contributed to reducing Calgary's homeless population, including community collaboration and partnerships, information sharing, improved public awareness, client input and feedback, increased funding levels, adopting the Housing First approach, prevention planning, access to housing support programs through shelters, and a local plan to end homelessness that is supported by and aligned with the provincial plan.

Participants talked about the ability of service agencies to coordinate programming despite intense competition for scarce resources. They noted that the impetus for collaboration was the development of Housing First programs, which required that clients be provided with not only housing, but also any necessary support services to help them maintain their housing.

Calgary's CBO, the Calgary Homeless Foundation, was credited by participants with raising public awareness of and garnering community support for initiatives to end homelessness.

As a result of heightened public awareness, many other stakeholders, including the Calgary Police Service, Emergency Medical Services, youth-serving agencies, and private sector representatives, joined forces to address homelessness.

Participants also acknowledged that their success in reducing homelessness would not have been achieved without a local plan as well as a provincial plan sustained by predictable funding.

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

Participants felt that the key to ending homelessness in Calgary was being able to offer a continuum of housing programs with supports tailored to individual needs. Participants said that many of their clients had mental health issues, addictions, and/or cognitive disabilities and would always require intensive supports to prevent them from cycling in and out of homelessness. Many participants stated that having a client-centred approach to service delivery would help eliminate protective attitudes and encourage agencies to focus on the unique needs of each client. Participants also pointed out that housing clients was only part of the solution; helping clients remain housed and feel a sense of community was equally necessary. Having a range of support services, housing options, and outreach services was therefore considered essential in ending homelessness.

Participants stressed the need to have good information to assist with designing programs and determining priorities. They also brought up the importance of evaluating program outcomes on a system-wide basis, noting that good information is essential to measuring progress and financial returns on investment. Participants commented that during the first year of the plan's implementation, organizations began sharing information, making it possible to track the number of times individual clients accessed the homeless-serving system. This data sharing was later discontinued. However, participants pointed out that this type of information sharing is necessary to lend credibility to government initiatives and spending, and may promote community support.

Participants also recommended that research be undertaken to examine the profile and use patterns of homeless populations. The results of this research could then 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 addition to supporting research and information sharing, participants suggested that the province consider long-term, systematic planning to both address and prevent homelessness. Prevention was identified as a necessary factor in addressing homelessness, particularly with

respect to immigrants, youth, seniors, and Aboriginal peoples. Participants commented that understanding the unique needs of these groups would help with planning and delivering prevention programs.

Collaboration between homeless-serving agencies is a key success factor, and so is collaboration between Ministries, participants said. They stressed the importance of Ministries working together to ensure their programs and services are coordinated. Ministry collaboration and coordination would also help to address the policies and regulations that may present barriers to clients accessing the services they required to secure and maintain housing. Alberta Health Services was identified as one of the major stakeholders that should be involved in ending homelessness as mental illness, addictions, and cognitive disorders are often root causes of homelessness.

Participants agreed that capacity building in service agencies 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. They also stressed the need to provide their staff with competitive salaries and benefits, as there is competition with the health sector for skilled workers.

Participants also identified the need for sufficient housing stock, including a variety of low-income housing options. Participants felt that the way affordable housing programs are currently structured places this type of housing beyond the reach of many of their clients.

Finally, providing sufficient income supports was deemed critical in assisting clients to remain housed. Participants stressed the need to raise income support levels, and further recommended that the government's approach to determining supports should be reviewed with a view to streamlining services and improving client access to assistance. The need to provide adequate income supports was noted as part of a larger social issue, and participants 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.

The role of the Interagency Council on Homelessness (IAC)

Participants expressed some confusion over the term "interagency council" and questioned the need for such an entity. They were concerned that the IAC would be another advisory body without the power to effect real change. However, participants agreed that they would welcome the creation of the IAC provided it had the ability to remove systematic barriers to ending

homelessness; improve Ministry collaboration; coordinate capital and program funding; and effect changes to policy and programs.

Participants identified removing systematic barriers as a primary role for the IAC. They suggested that the IAC address issues such as time-limited funding, lack of affordable housing, and root causes of homelessness (e.g., poverty, family violence, mental health, and addictions). The IAC could also increase benefit levels for social-based assistance programs as a form of prevention. Participants expressed their desire that the IAC be an objective body that supports community initiatives and removes any administrative hurdles that agencies encounter. Accordingly, participants felt that it would be important for the IAC to have a frontline perspective and understand the intersecting issues that impact homelessness in individual communities.

Another important role identified for the IAC was setting priorities, developing strategies to address priorities, and advocating for funding. Some participants believed that the IAC itself should make funding decisions, stating that "if the Council has no funding value and doesn't contribute to funding decisions, then there is no point in having a Council." Other participants felt that the IAC should not be "championing a cause, identifying priorities, and managing funds", as it could only remain objective with respect to influencing policy and programs if it was not involved in funding decisions.

Participants stressed that priorities and strategies should be informed by sound research and data analysis. Gathering and sharing client information was viewed as critical to implementing best practices and understanding the financial return on investing in initiatives to end homelessness. In addition to the IAC playing a role in facilitating information sharing and research, participants pointed out the need for the IAC to communicate directly with communities, with information travelling in both directions.

Other IAC roles proposed by participants included advocating on behalf of the homeless and homeless-serving agencies, engaging the business community and other funders, and overseeing the implementation of the 10-year plan. Participants also suggested that the IAC play a role in influencing social policy and addressing the root causes of homelessness, which are often the root causes of other social issues.

Composition of Council

Participants felt that IAC members should be systems thinkers who would be able to problem-solve from whole-systems perspective. Because participants saw the IAC as having a role in influencing and changing policy, they also believed that members should have the authority to

implement policy changes. Participants said that the IAC had to be "nimble and action-oriented", and should include decision-makers, leaders, innovators, and frontline workers. It was proposed that the IAC contain equal representation from frontline workers, homeless-serving agencies, clients, and Ministries. However, given practical constraints on the number of IAC members, participants agreed that advisory subcommittees could be created to ensure that the IAC would be well-informed by all sectors and communities.

Participants also stated that IAC members needed to be senior government officials from key Ministries, community representatives (including CBOs), corporations, landlords, and service recipients.