

**Carnegie Community Center Association
Carnegie African Descent Group (CADG)
Poverty Reduction Strategy Discussion Report
March 30, 2018**

Introduction

The Carnegie African Descent Group was pleased to receive the Small Group Discussion Convening Grant. We invited members of our community, who had expressed interest in participating, to contribute their ideas, solutions and recommendations on how to reduce poverty in British Columbia.

Dates	March 20 and March 22, 2018
Community	Downtown East Side
# of Participants	10
# of Organizations	1

About Participants

The Carnegie African Descent Group is a small community-based organization made up of adults who live and work in the downtown eastside. Members are Black residents who were either born in Canada or are immigrants from the US, South America, Europe or continental Africa. The majority are political refugees who have come to Canada in search for a safe haven. They end up in the neighborhood because of lack of affordable housing in Vancouver. They either on pension, social assistance or no income because they have lost their identity cards and are unable to apply for social benefits. CADG offers them assistance and orientation on where to find help; such as how to get duplicate of their lost identity cards and other services available in the neighborhood. Participants were made up of low-income residents, either folks who work to provide assistance or people who are living in poverty. They are looking for avenues to exit this difficult existence, at the time where they feel their community is under siege by gentrification, due to the loss of affordable housing units in the community.

About the Findings

We met on two occasions in order to facilitate participation of our members. Since most members don't have mobile phones or access to the internet the only way to communicate with them is by word of mouth. Some of them are on call so when they are called to work they drop everything and go to work.

Questions:

1. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?
2. What would address these issues and help you and others out of poverty?

These two questions generated an engaged discussion because very rarely asked they asked to articulate solutions to reducing poverty. We handed to them sticky notes and invited them to write down the barriers facing people in poverty.

BARRIERS TO EXITING POVERTY

Here are issues that were identified as barriers to exiting poverty:

1. Low Welfare Rates

Everyone felt that the current welfare rate of \$710 a month is inadequate to make ends meet. Based on a recent study carried out by the Carnegie Community Action Project, it was reported that last year, the average low-income rental in privately owned and run Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotels was \$548/month. This year, the price of rental in the same category jumped to \$687/month when the shelter allocation is at \$375/month. The hike may be the result of the \$100 increase that the NDP government added on the welfare cheque. Participants felt that without a real rent control, the increase will not benefit the renters. It went go straight into the pockets of the landlords. Landlords sent tenants to request for rental subsidy and those who could not afford to pay the rent hike were evicted.

2. Lack of Rent Control

If the government raises the welfare rate without putting in place a mechanism to protect the tenants, such as rent control, there is nothing that will stop landlords from raising the rent. This sentiment was echoed by everyone who lives in rental housing: "I rented a room in a privately-owned SRO. It was one of the best in the neighborhood. There were only 16 units in the building. When I moved out, I wanted my friend to take over my room. She went speak to the landlord, he insisted that the new tenant pays fifty dollars more. The unit was already renting for 550/month, my friend was not able to take it because it was too high." The rent price should tie to the unit, not the tenant, so that if tenant A moved out, tenant B can still pay the same price as the previous renter.

3. Inadequate Affordable Housing

The DTES has been losing not only affordable housing, but affordable shops as well. Said one participant: "People feel trapped. Most affordable shops where we used to buy things are gone. We can't afford transportation to go where prices are cheaper. As a form of resistance, people have started vending what they have found in bins or given by friends on sidewalks. The police harass venders, they take their stuff away; claiming they are stolen goods. On any given day, cops show up and take people stuff away". The impact of gentrification is pushing low-income renters out of the community. The number of homeless has climbed to 1,200 in the DTES alone. This is the highest it's been. Last year, the community lost 500 units and only gained 21 units they can afford. The rest of the housing completed were unaffordable. Participants welcome the two proposed modular housing sites on Powell and Franklin but insisted that the 3 levels of government should work together to build dignified affordable housing they can afford.

4. Housing and Mental Health

Not everyone in the DTES has mental illness and not everyone needs to live in supportive housing. While participants appreciate the attention, the government has given to housing people with mental health issues, not everyone should be stigmatized and people should be given the choice to live where they want to live. Very often, the mental health of homeless people is exacerbated by lack of housing and the stress of looking for help and inability to find someone who can help.

5. Transportation

It's virtually impossible to afford a bus or bus fare every time people want to travel in the community to look for work, to go to a doctor's appointment or shop. With rent taking the bulk of their monthly earning, the average person who lives in a privately owned and run SRO has \$23 left after paying the rent. There is no money left to pay for transit. As a result, most commuters ask for a ride and some bus drivers know/understand the predicament.

6. Food

Folks who live in shelters spend their days lining up for free food because they cannot afford to buy food. Those who live in SROs do not have cooking facilities. Shelter dwellers line up to get a bed on a first-come- first-served basis. In our discussion this point was well illustrated: "Living in a shelter feels like a trap. It's hard to do anything else if you want to be fed. They wake us up at 6:00 in the morning and we have to leave the shelter. Most places don't serve breakfast till 10:00 so you stand in line with your stuff and wait. You wait for breakfast then in a couple of hours you wait in line for lunch and in a couple hours you get ready to line up for supper. Where do you find time to look for work? In most cases, you skip the meals and you go look for a job."

7. Unemployment

The inability to find work has a lot to do with the fact that some people are excluded because they have lost their ID or that they don't know how to look for work or services that can help them. But unemployment is also the result of a communication gap between service providers and job seekers. Lack of cultural competency and discrimination are factors. Service providers don't understand how to offer assistance and often say things that are offensive to job seekers or assume that they don't fulfill the requirements when this problem can be resolved easier if the job seeker is understood.

8. Skills Upgrade

Participants felt that people who immigrate to Canada bring a lot of skills that are not utilized because little effort is made for the job market to absorb job seekers who did not study in Canada. "There are a lot of barriers that exclude poor people from getting ahead. Language is one such barrier: "I'm new in Canada. In my country, I studied occupational therapy but I was forced to flee my country because of political insecurity. My English is not good, I can't find a job in my field."

SOLUTIONS TO END POVERTY

1. Social Assistance (Welfare)

This question generated a heated discussion on the best way to remove this barrier and allow people to get out of poverty. At the beginning of the discussion, some participants felt that instead of raising welfare rates, money should be put into services like food, housing, transportation because there is a danger that the funds might be misused to satisfy people's addictions. Others made the case for decriminalizing all drugs in order to protect consumers and reduce the drug overdose crisis. This policy modification will remove the street drug trafficking and allow consumers to buy clean products the way people walk into a liquor store and buy a six pack. They felt strongly that the government should not treat adults like children. One participant summed it up: "Low income people are able to manage their money. It's true that some people might need assistance, but the majority are capable of making the transition from \$710 to a higher rate". In the end, participants concluded that \$710/month was hugely inadequate given the cost of living that has gone through the roof. The group agreed that the current rate should be raised to at least \$1,600/m on welfare.

2. Rent Control

Everyone agreed that raising welfare rates without a rent control mechanism was futile because the government may as well send the cheque to the landlords. If nothing prevents the landlords from raising rents between tenancies they will raise the rent whenever people have enough money to pay.

3. Build 10,000 Units Annually Across BC.

Housing is fundamental to one's quality of life. The current housing, we are experiencing in BC is the result of austerity measures that were put in place forty years ago. Successive government have privileged market rental housing and condo development at the expense of social affordable housing that low income residents can afford. In Vancouver, the impact of the housing crisis is alarming.

4. Independent Living Vs Supportive Housing

One participants offered an example when he said he was homeless for several years and, as a result, his mental health deteriorated. He was fortunate to be given supportive housing at Woodward's. However, after a couple years of stable living and medication, he now has work and is ready to move out if the city or province can help find affordable housing so he can live without the support of the housing operator. It was made clear that while supportive housing was necessary, it was not for everyone.

5. Transit Passes

It is impossible to afford a bus pass if you are on welfare. Yet, people need to commute on a daily basis. Instead, they risk the humiliation by transit police or bus drivers who may refuse them a ride. The government needs to provide free bus passes to people on welfare to enable them fulfill their needs of looking for work, going to the doctor's appointment or visiting friends.

6. Food

Open more affordable eateries like the Carnegie, where food and wages are subsidized by the government and serve healthy nutritious meals. It is unconceivable that a rich province like BC, people should go hungry why food is wasted. While food banks should not be a permanent solution, there must be a better way to manage these resources and create jobs for people. Quest Stores are a good example where food is donated and low-income residents can buy at very minimum price.

7. Cultural Competency Services

Most immigrants who come to Canada bring skills that are not fully utilized because of the communication gap between the job seekers and potential employers. The system need to hire people from these communities who have the cultural competency from the new comers' communities, who are able to communicate with the clients and assist job seekers to land jobs that will help them integrate into the Canadian society. " I met a doctor from my community who is driving a cab in order to feed his family. He was not able work in his profession because he didn't have the accreditation to work in Canada. If they were properly advised, they could have taken the time to prepare for the exams and get back into healing people instead of driving them around town."

8. Skills Training

The Key to finding work is networking and getting access to information. Unfortunately, some immigrants only network with a small group of people who are in the same boat. In addition, when you are beaten down by poverty your mental health is worsened. New immigrants or vulnerable low-income residents who live in the DTES need counseling, advice, assistance by trained professional who can help people find jobs where they can thrive. They need to explore ways the government can subsidize their wages by linking them to employers able and willing to hire them.

TOP THREE SOLUTIONS

Based on our discussion and ideas that were generated by our focus group participants, these three solutions were identified at top three.

1. Social Assistance: Increase to \$1,600.00/month
2. Housing: Rent Control and Construction of 10,000 units per year across BC
3. Transit: Provide free bus passes for people on social assistance.

Conclusion

The Carnegie African Descent Group was pleased to participate in this province-wide consultation. Our members appreciated being included in these consultations. We hope that this is the beginning of a new relationship with a government that listens to the people and that our recommended solutions will be taken into account as the province prepares to enact this much-awaited Poverty Reduction Plan.