

Report of Comox Valley small group discussion : BC Poverty Reduction Strategy:

Facilitation Group: Comox Valley Elders Take Action

Report:

1. Introduction:

We held two meetings:

March 8, 2018: with 6 seniors living at Washington Apartments
(a supported housing complex in Courtenay)
residents: 1 woman, 5 men, facilitated by 3 members of Comox Valley Elders Take Action and a tenant support worker who works for BC Housing.

March 22, 2018: an afternoon meeting with a buffet dinner held in Evergreen Seniors Lounge of Florence Filberg Centre (ie a rented space). There were 22 participants
18 of whom living in poverty, other organizations represented: facilitators: Elders Take Action, Island Health (head injury program); 16 of the 18 non-organizational attendees were over 60. The remaining 2 were in their 40's.

2. Findings: (Consolidated from both meetings)

A) Question 1: What are the biggest challenges that you and people living in poverty face in the Comox Valley?
(comments are attached as appendix at end of report)

- Lack of affordable housing (24 out of 28: #1 suggestion)
- Lack of money to cover basic needs

- Shame/ feelings of isolation and exclusion
- Increasing needs for health care with aging (inadequacy of government coverage, inability to work, choosing which meds to take)
- Lack of good public transit.
- Lack of services and cooperation between organizations and agencies / lack of access to accurate information
- Lack of wet houses

B) Question 2: What would address these issues and help you and others out of poverty?

- Affordable accessible housing (6/6 first meeting 18/21 second)
- Guaranteed basic income: (6/6 first meeting 19/21 second: as (# 2 priority)

of equal importance (for third priority)

- 3a) 100% coverage of medical costs
- 3b) government info centre and advocacy services (for information and to offset isolation and shame)

Other priorities: (not prioritized)

- Transportation support
- More help with social supports
- More meetings like this one

C. Some Solutions and actions that can make a difference (individual assessments)

- More affordable accessible housing; QUICKLY! Many more units are required; Ideas: housing subsidies, tax benefits for those renting out low-cost rental housing; reduced restrictions (eg. the “no pets” restriction); more transitional housing to help people who have been homeless transition to living in apartment space. One group included more assisted living and residential care beds in this category.

- Guaranteed basic income: to be above poverty level federally but also supplemented if necessary based on local cost of living.
- Government info centre and advocacy services: a one-stop shop for government service info; an actual office providing all this info, developing a program of respect for elders and for the poor. Branches of government working together to offset the shame and isolation.
- Transportation support: better routing: to go to Food Bank, Re store, and better scheduling; bus passes usable on Handidart.
- More soup kitchens : more fresh fruit and veggies
- More help with social supports: eg. wet houses
- Have more meetings like these, to make those in poverty feel honoured, that their voice is important, and to create local action groups.

C. Top three solutions based on ideas:

1. **Provide more affordable housing** (see details above)
2. **Guaranteed basic income**; including 100% coverage of medical costs
3. **Addressing shame and providing respect: (and information)** meetings like this one; respect from government departments; a one-stop shop for government information; government advocate provided./ developing a local action group including those living in poverty

3. Summary:

Those of us from ETA who took part in this project learned a lot as did the participants. More significant, (for many of us in both the attendees and volunteer group), than the actual issues arising in the facilitation was the

change in the room as the facilitation progressed. In the larger meeting, people made friends at the tables, arrangements were made for a “drive to Fabricland”, a donation of cat food, a ride home. There were several who had appeared sullen and uncomfortable at the beginning of the event, who by the end were asking when we would do this again. NIMBY was transformed into IMBY – in my backyard, you are welcomed and a person of value. We cannot overestimate the importance of this and while it is difficult to quantify, it seems that generosity of spirit, has a great ability to build connection and set aside feelings of shame.

For our larger meeting (22 attendees) we provided a hot meal, with lots of fresh veggies and fresh fruit. We also paid the attendees \$20.00 as a sign that we valued their agreement to work in this process. Perhaps grants for monthly meetings of this nature (generous, providing good food, listening to those in poverty), would do a lot to empower the poor to be part of the conversation on poverty, to help the government make necessary changes and to enrich all of us as we make connections, build bridges, and listen to the voices of those in poverty.

Appendix:

COMMENTS: FROM Q: 1 WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES -

1) lack of affordable supportive housing / comments:

Workshop # 1: need for housing security / more supported housing with connection to services/ lower rents ("I never dreamed I'd be homeless," from a man who was homeless and lived in a "cave" prior to his recent move to Washington Apartments; "life on the street is terrifying", / "Housing equals security". "doubly dangerous for women" "if you are homeless your money does not go as far – eg. you are cold, so you go into a coffee shop – you have to buy a coffee" . "It is often a matter of choosing rent or hydro".

Additional notes from an attending ETA member: (in italics throughout)

Recall reference as 'The Cave' and asked my Thursday table if they knew of it and they said no and thought it was the area where people camp out. They saw 'affordable housing' as meaning that you have enough money to live on (basic needs and unexpected expenses) once you have paid for your housing. Hydro means heat. Dangerous for people with disabilities (vulnerable). Give up heat for cat's food and care. More teenagers on streets, apparently by choice, more drug related crimes such as robberies, making it increasingly unsafe for vulnerable seniors who must be in the same places to have access to needed services.

From Workshop # 2: One group included lack of assisted living and residential care spaces under this heading. Comments: hard to find safe, affordable housing, hard to find housing that takes pets. Other comments: hard to find housing where smoking is allowed. There is not enough housing; what there is, is not affordable.

ETA member notes:

Empty nester single father of five living in RV he owns but can't find a place to park it legally (Maple Pool is full), gas to move it or fuel to heat it A (uses candles) and dyslexic so has challenges using internet and making applications for subsidized housing and has given up thinking there is no point any way because of the long waiting lists. Feeling local government

is not doing enough to ensure affordable housing projects get built (NIMBY) and no information available on projects, what's coming available and when and at what cost and how do you get on the list for a unit? Based on current individual income levels a rent of \$500 or less would be affordable, one person suggested maybe \$600.

2) inadequate income: comments: Workshop #1: not enough money to live on, cannot survive and eat healthy food, cannot afford essential medical products, “I’m always having to choose to pay rent, buy food, or pay medical bills” . “I’m just keeping my head above water..” “If I had 1,800. 00 per month I could afford to occasionally go to a show or the theatre. There are things I just can never do.” “If I had \$2,000. Per month I could run a car and help at the re-store. It takes me 45 minutes to an hour to walk there” “On disability* I get \$1,103 per month, and have to pay \$600 of that for rent.”

[* “disability” was in a way the “elephant in the room”, only coming out in the last 20 minutes of the first meeting. 4 out of 6 attendees at the first meeting said that they were “on disability” income. It seems that people on “disability” may have lower monthly income and more expenses than other experiencing poverty. A guaranteed basic income taking into account any extra expenses that the individual with disabilities may have, and the cost of and availability of accommodation, and cost of other basic needs would help to address inequities here.]

Additional notes from an attending ETA member:

Lose your tenancy and become homeless, the way back and transition is long and hard and tenancy is always at risk- constant source of concern: If buy food or pay an unexpected expense, then can't pay the rent and will lose my home. Transportation to and from community food resources (food bank and soup kitchen) difficult, if disability can't carry the monthly week's worth of groceries, and difficult to set up HandiDart unless well in advance, and to and from medical appointments is difficult, distances to walk between home and bus stop and bus stop and destination; most take the bus pass cash because the bus system ‘sucks’. Spending money they

might not need to spend due to not own disabilities and mental health challenges (addiction?) to find this information and apply for it (e.g. no pharmacare); running out of money (flat broke) due to challenges managing money (spending on alcohol?). Limited local contacts for government programs (BC Housing is getting better at providing but only for its facilities) that you can meet with and who can help you with applications and when you deal with government staff they often treat you like you are trying to get something for nothing. This is hurtful and depressing as I would never have chosen this for myself, I don't have an option. It should be a case of government being proactive in assisting a person with challenges to get everything they are entitled to in terms of benefits vs. making it as difficult as possible.

From Workshop # 2: : “pay rent, utilities, groceries and then it is gone. There is no money for extras; isolation is made worse by not having any income when the basics are paid. Cannot buy healthy food. Have to choose each month what to do without. Price of food is going up but my income is not. A few who are working stated that wages in entry level jobs are not enough to live on.

3) Shame for being poor;/ Isolation and vulnerability: Comments: Workshop #1 how difficult it is for senior women who “fall” into poverty -- cannot keep up friends because cannot afford even the “extra” of going out for a coffee; Residents often feel that they are excluded from society, and others do not want them around. A NIMBY attitude isolates them.
From Workshop # 2: being ashamed of being poor; feeling isolated; age discrimination, fear, anxiety and its effects on health, depression, lack of honour, feeling vulnerable.

4) Food availability and cost: Comments: Workshop #1“ Cost of food is so high that if I buy healthy food, my tenancy is threatened – I cannot afford to pay rent”. “Good, healthy food is for those who have money”

Notes from ETA member: By eating lunch every day at soup kitchen and saving sandwich & muffin they provide can eat dinner. Food resources are good (best soup kitchen and food bank anywhere) but very difficult to plan and schedule where you need to be when. Unexpected costs that really make it a challenge to pay rent and eat are health related. A

number of participants said that when you go from welfare to old age pension, you lose income and benefits by as much as 20%. Making the money work is a constant source of anxiety.

5) Increasing needs for health care; health issues not covered by Medicare; harder to work as get older/ poverty has bad effect on health of person/ lack of dental, eye care, chiropractic coverage/ not good medication coverage/ having to choose what meds to take. (what can afford)

6) Transit issues: Workshop #1 Public transit is not co-ordinated and does not go to the places that we want to go to. The scheduling is not helpful. One man said he would like to volunteer at Food Bank, but it is over an hour's walk, and the public transit system does not help. (Bus does not go to the Food Bank) [which seems an important point – by having inadequate public transit system, we lose volunteers needed in our community] “I need to work but I have disabilities; takes 45 minutes to an hour to walk to the Re-store”. “If you don't take the bus pass, you have more housing money.” (ie \$52 per month more) . “Bus passes should be usable on Handidart”.

Workshop #2: poor bus service, cost of running a vehicle, cost of taxis; have to book Handidart in advance – involves lots of waiting.

7) Access to accurate information: workshop #1 this is a point that came up several times in the meeting. Comments/ examples: At this meeting, a resident mentioned that the Food Bank is now doing deliveries (others did not know that). “Need user friendly access; it is good here because the social worker comes once a month”. One man went to get an ID card and was told that it would cost \$35.00 by one gov't official, only to find out later that he could use a health card, that he could obtain for free. Information needs to be readily available, provided at a central easily accessible location and needs to be accurate. Several residents mentioned that one area of government service has no idea what another area provides.

There was also a complaint that the Welfare Office in Courtenay had no bathroom. Their understanding was that this was because people might use it for drug injections, but there are ways to monitor this. And

the lack of a bathroom, is according to two or three residents, one more example of how they feel shamed.

Workshop #2: : lack of information; no place to go for help; this also contributes to number 3 above. (ie shame, feeling of isolation and lack of inclusion)

Lack of coordination among government and community programs and services; no one-stop place to go for everything you need and hard to manage otherwise

8) **lack of wet houses:** places of control of alcohol consumption by people suffering the stresses of living in poverty.

COMMENTS FROM QUESTION 2: WHAT WOULD HELP ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

1) affordable accessible housing comments: quickly!! Many more units are required. Ideas under this heading: housing subsidies; housing tax benefits for those renting out low-cost housing; more transition housing; supportive housing; subsidized housing; reduce restrictions (like for example “no pets”)

2) Guaranteed basic income: to be above poverty level (federally) but also supplemented if necessary based on local costs,

3) a) 100% medical coverage: re-direct tax dollars to these services: cover: 100% vision, dentistry, chiropractic, and drug expenses

Other provinces do better (Alberta) for seniors than BC

3) b) Government info centre and advocacy services: (one stop shop for government service info) (an actual office providing all this info) developing a program of respect for elders. branches of government working together, to provide easily accessible and accurate information; reduce “silos”, provide advocacy for poor seniors. Better connection and co-operation between government offices providing

seniors' benefits and services. And creating a program to help our society respect Elders generally and poor Elders specifically.

Other priorities: from the groups (not prioritized)

4) Transportation support: bus pass free, bus pass useable on Handidart.

5) more soup kitchens

6) more help with social supports

7) more meetings like this one to continue to work on our "Action Plan". (this actually came up as in the top three in one group of 7 people, but was not in the top three when the whole list was presented.)

Hear us and give us more opportunities to share our experience and point of view.