

BC Poverty Reduction Strategy: Small Group Discussion Report

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Event Details

- Date: Saturday March 24, 2018
- Community: Langley/Aldergrove, open to all self-identified women
- Organization: Ishtar Transition Housing Society
- Attendees: 18 women
- General demographic information based on 15 surveys collected from participants:

Age profile	Ethnic background	Community	Dependents
Average age: 41.5 Youngest: 25 Eldest: 61	European ancestry (including mixed European): 11 Indigenous: 3 Asian: 1 Did not specify: 1	Langley: 6 Aldergrove: 5 Surrey 2 Abbotsford: 1 Langley/Surrey: 1	0 dependents: 5 1 dependent: 5 2 dependents: 2 3 dependents: 2 # dependents not specified: 0

Introduction

Ishtar Transition Housing Society is a feminist anti-violence agency that has spent over 30 years providing services in the Langley and Aldergrove area. Ishtar operates numerous programs available to survivors of violence and serves a diverse community of women, including women with child protection case files, single mothers, those involved in the justice system (including family or criminal courts), as well as women accessing shelter and related support services. We convened a Small Group Discussion in order to enable women in our community to participate in the provincial consultation process. Women who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, violence face barriers to accessing these kinds of civic engagement opportunities.

Interested participants first took part in a brief phone conversation to register and outline any accessibility requirements, including transportation supports and dependent care. We organized a nutritious meal, cash stipends, and on-site child minding as well as child minding at one of our Transition Houses. Ensuring access was a fundamental part of our forum’s success: many women reported that they would not have been able to come without free childcare.

This dialogue provided a safer space for women with lived experience of abuse and poverty to share their wisdom. Their feedback and insights appear throughout the report in italicized quotes.

Thank you to the women who shared their deeply personal experiences of poverty and inspire us with their visions of a better world.

Prioritization of Issues

We initially asked participants to vote on the things that were hardest to access for women living in poverty. Each woman received four stickers to cast their votes; not all women opted to participate. Here are the results of the dotmocracy exercise:

1. Stable Income @ 9 votes
2. Housing tied with Education @ 7 votes each
3. Healthcare tied with Childcare @ 5 votes each
4. Justice @ 2 votes

Issue Summaries

The facilitated discussion in two break-out groups surfaced six main areas impacting women's lives: income assistance, childcare, healthcare, transportation, access to justice, and housing.

(1) Income Assistance

"This process is horrendous"

- Inadequate rates – small increases help in the short-term but significant increases are needed
- Inaccessible bureaucracy at MSDPR
 - o Important paperwork being lost (i.e. direct deposit slips)
 - o Ministry withholding rental portion in informal housing situations (i.e. couchsurfing)
- Issues with MySelfServe, but when it works it is convenient
- Dehumanizing workflow and reliance on telephone system, rather than individual caseworkers who know their clients
- Programs that sound good, like the Single Parent Employment Initiative, but involve so many hoops that women cannot be successful

(2) Childcare:

"You know how they say it takes a village to raise a child? Where is my village?"

- Lack of affordable childcare
 - o Women report that employment is not even feasible when you factor in the cost of childcare
 - o Impacts of not having access to childcare – i.e. mothers cannot work, attend counselling, participate in recreational activities, or socialize
- Women who are working report that their employment can be impacted if they need to take time off work to care for their children – i.e. children's sick days, needing to leave early to make it to the childcare before it closes
- Many recreational programs for children also include fees

(3) Healthcare

- Mental health concerns and trauma impacting many survivors of violence
- Women prioritizing their children's needs and often navigating multiple systems when advocating for their children (i.e. medical professionals, school system, additional care providers)
- Women reporting that they cannot put their kids mental health on hold – they want to fix, mend, and heal their children in order to stop repeating the cycle of abuse
- Prescription costs

(4) Transportation

- Travel costs prohibitively expensive for women, including fuel and public transit
- Transit routes not comprehensive enough and schedules too limited; even if it were more affordable, travel time is considerable
- Judgments against women travelling with children on public transit – one woman reported being treated like “white trash” by other passengers
- Women not always being safe on public transit – one woman recounted a serious assault she experienced on her regular route

(5) Access to Justice

“Social Services complicates my life”

- Inadequate legal aid
 - o Family Duty Counsel services not thorough; stressful to line up on your court date
 - o When women do qualify for legal aid referrals, the hours are too limited and there are very few family lawyers taking on cases
- Constant presence of MCFD in the lives of women living in poverty – fear that by asking for help they will lose their kids, women don't feel MCFD is meant to support families
- Family law system not serving women – multiple women reported being taken back to court repeatedly by their exes
 - o Some women want to avoid any contact with their exes, including service of applications, which means they do not seek any support orders
- Legal challenges: seeking parenting arrangements, support orders or custody agreements through the courts means you remain entangled with an abusive ex-partner t
 - o One woman shared that her violent ex who bribes his kids so that he has more time with them and does not need to pay as much
 - o Another woman shared that her ex's legal abuse has cost her several jobs, he has put a lien on a property she co-owns with her father
- Family Maintenance Enforcement Program: paperwork overwhelming and hard to tackle
- One woman reported that her child was in the care of extended family (in-laws). Her parenting time was extremely limited, but she would rather accept it than cause further family strife
- Crime Victim Assistance Program: one woman reported that her CVAP counselling benefits were briefly stopped, due to the timing of CVAP's budgets, which impeded her access to counselling

(6) Housing

“You have to basically decide if you are going to eat at the end [of the day]”

- Unaffordable housing (and income assistance rates have not kept up with market rentals)
- Paying more for less – no storage, laundry, or utilities included; added costs of pet deposits
- Being under-housed – women and multiple children living in a one bedroom
- Immense power exercised by landlords due to the shortage of affordable housing
- Increasingly onerous housing applications, including requests for social insurance numbers, credit scores, and criminal record checks
- Discrimination against women whose rent comes from MSDPR, even though landlords are virtually guaranteed payment
- Predatory landlords – some women report being asked to exchange sex for rent
- Discrimination against single mothers, often in subtle ways – i.e. the place is rented out by the time they arrive for a viewing

Overarching Themes

During the rich discussion of the issues, several overarching themes became apparent: dehumanizing bureaucracies, entangled systems, stigma, and the relationship between poverty and violence.

“I’m so tired of fighting, just to live”

(1) Dehumanizing Bureaucracies

“It’s like they want to keep you in poverty”

Dehumanizing systems rely upon computers and phone systems to administer key programs to women. For instance, the MySelfServe Portal is helpful, but when there are issues with the documents, women find themselves cycling between attending a local MSDPR office and phoning the call centre. Many women spoke of the previous income assistance administration, where office caseworkers handled files and had a better understanding of their clients’ needs. Women who access income assistance report feeling judged by staff and even treated as less than human.

(2) Entangled Systems

“Nobody teaches you any of this stuff”

Women living in poverty are often interfacing with multiple government departments, including provincial and federal benefits, such as Canada Child Tax Benefit, Income Assistance, and the Canada Pension Plan. They must become self-advocates within the systems. Furthermore, each time a woman seeks support through a new government department or non-profit, she must do a completely new intake: women are wondering why these systems cannot talk to each other and expedite services. For example, one woman shared a story of her children being apprehended by MCFD and losing her Child Tax Benefit almost immediately, whereas it takes upwards of one month to reinstate the benefit when children are returned.

(3) Stigma

“We can’t be successful single women in society today”

Women living in poverty report significant societal discrimination and judgement. Even in settings where women are seeking support, such as healthcare, MCFD, or income assistance, they report feeling judged by staff. Smaller micro-aggressions also occur throughout the public sphere, such as interactions with bus drivers, transit passengers, and landlords.

(4) The Relationship Between Poverty and Violence

“[My son asked] How come we have to suffer mom? And now we have to suffer more”

Many participants reported how deeply they were impacted by violence and abuse. Many services, such as counselling, that are meant to serve women are not accessible because they lack child minding, so women cannot even begin to heal. Multiple women felt that they had no choice except to return to their abusive partners when faced with the impact of poverty, such as precarious housing, managing their own health needs, life on a single income, and no support in child-rearing for single mothers.

Possible Solutions

Following a discussion of the overarching themes, women engaged in a solutions-focused brainstorm and provided numerous suggestions for change and future steps.

“I can do this. I can fight through these challenges”

“The best support I have is my friends”

“Give a person a chance - don’t just judge us”

(1) Income Assistance

- Education for governmental workers to address stigma towards women living in poverty
- A more humane income assistance system
- Eliminate the numerous hoops that women need to jump through and create systems that are more responsive to critical and urgent situations
- More education and information about entitlements available through MSDPR

(2) Housing

- BC Housing to prioritize women in transition houses for available vacancies
- Low income options should include single-mother specific housing, more second-stage housing, and non-profit managed housing
- License landlords; make the landlords have to find us instead of the other way around
- Cohabitation model – families living together – moving beyond the Transition House model

(3) Healthcare

- Doctors who want to do a good job and are thorough when assessing their patients
- Increased access to counselling services, including on-site child minding

- (4) Access to Justice
 - Support women's ability to parent with minimal disruption following separation/divorce
 - Train lawyers and judges better
- (5) Transportation
 - More availability of bus pass, not just for parents and people with PWD designation
- (5) Childcare
 - Communal childcare options – collective model – building connections & learning through care
 - Accessible childcare subsidy; income-tiered childcare subsidy; \$10/day plan
 - Increase the number of licensed daycares
 - Fewer barriers and restrictive intakes at licensed daycares
- (6) Community Development
 - Women's nights – opportunities for informal discussion groups and mutual aid
 - Increased and specific supports for single mothers
 - Culture shifts to encourage women supporting other women
 - More accountability from men, especially fathers – men should also uphold women's rights

Top 3 Solutions

“Society should have a woman's schedule”

- (1) Significantly increase Income Assistance rates and make the systems more responsive to critical and urgent situations
 - Support and rental portions of income assistance must be increased
 - Ensure a consistent workflow related to the Assessment of Applicants and Recipients Fleeing Abuse
- (2) Create more low-income housing units, giving priority to single mothers and women escaping violence
 - Single-mother specific housing resources that encourage cohabitation and community development
 - BC Housing should create second-stage transitional housing in Langley/Aldergrove
- (3) Make childcare more accessible
 - Increase the number of licensed daycare facilities
 - Regulate the cost of childcare so that providers do not increase their rates based on increased subsidies available to families
 - Childcare facilities should be available on evenings and weekends, to accommodate the needs of women and families

Future Steps

“What this is today - this is a good start”

- Increased outreach to single women to learn about their specific needs, since our group was primarily composed of women with dependents
- Deeper discussions of the impact of family law on women’s lives, specifically tailoring discussions to the impact of Family Law, Child Protection, and available services (i.e. family duty counsel, legal aid, Family Maintenance Enforcement Program)

Conclusion

“We need to do this more [...] let’s fill a stadium!”

This forum highlighted the expertise that women hold in their own lived experiences. The women who attended the Ishtar forum are incredible self-advocates and survivors. These women had to become advocates in order to navigate the many systems that people living in poverty interact with, such as income assistance, healthcare, MCFD, non-profit agencies, and the school system. In particular, mothers at the forum reported how they prioritize their children’s needs over their own, making numerous sacrifices to support their children’s livelihood and wellbeing.

As the forum wrapped up, women shared that they were feeling hopeful about their group and the government’s interest in their voices.

Although it was hard for many attendees to report much optimism, the facilitators highlighted their strength and resilience: despite the many, many barriers they face – they are still here.