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# POVERTY REDUCTION CONSULTATION REPORT – SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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## Introduction:

On March 16<sup>th</sup>, from 7:00pm – 9:00pm, Union Gospel Mission (UGM) hosted a community-based Poverty Reduction Consultation as an extenuation of the Government of BC’s province-wide consultation process. The purpose was to give our community members a voice in the creation of a provincial poverty reduction strategy.

Date	March 16 <sup>th</sup> , 2018
Community	Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside
# of Participants	35 (Peak Attendance: 40)
# of Organizations	Union Gospel Mission (1)

## About the Participants

UGM seeks to help individuals overcome homelessness, addiction & poverty one life at a time. We do so without discrimination. While we have traditionally focused on the male population of the DTES, the demographics have shifted over the past 5 years to include higher volumes of single-women, single-mothers, and young families that cannot make ends meet. This demographic change was evident within the discussion groups. We hosted five round-table discussion groups throughout the evening with the goal of hearing from the broadly defined ‘UGM Community’. While we did not ask participants to register, nor indicate their gender, it appeared that we had a 60/40 split among males and females, respectively. The majority of participants were Caucasian, but there was a significant representation of First Nation’s individuals, both male and female. We also had one family (mother, father, teenage daughter) attend the consultation. All participants indicated that they had experienced different levels of poverty, with 90% (27) of the participants indicating that they had either experienced homelessness, or the risk of becoming homeless. Three male participants indicated that they were currently residing in UGM’s temporary men’s shelter.

Through the grant administered by SPARC, we were able to provide a stipend to six DTES community members as note takers, and event facilitators. These individuals all had lived-experience with poverty, homelessness, or addiction: two had been homeless within the past 2 years, while four had been at risk of homelessness due to struggles with addiction. All note takers had participated within the UGM continuum of care, whether they ate a meal at UGM, or entered in one of our recovery programs, all indicating they faced different barriers to overcoming the various aspects of poverty in British Columbia. In addition to individuals with lived-experience, UGM’s frontline outreach workers facilitated the discussions, working side-by-side with the note takers to accurately capture the discussions.

## About the Findings

As previously mentioned, we hosted five discussion groups, comprised of individuals from the community, one note taker, and one facilitator. MLA Mabel Elmore, the Parliamentary Secretary for Poverty Reduction, was able to attend and hear from the diverse groups that came together at UGM. She was able to hear some of the top issues that face people who have struggled with poverty, homelessness or addiction.

## Issues

The discussion was separated into two parts (Appendix 1). The first part was a time for participants to identify the issues facing those in poverty, or those who have struggled with poverty in the past. They were encouraged to speak from their own experiences. The issues identified by the participants were as follows:

*“It has been a complete nightmare in dealing with the Provincial Government to the point where there’s no point in trying.” – Poverty Reduction Consultation Participant.*

### - **Housing:**

- This was by far the largest issue identified within every discussion group. 22 individuals indicated that *housing* is an issues facing those living in poverty. While this might seem like a predictable response, the issues associated with housing were quite diverse:
  - **Affordability & Availability:** Many participants felt that housing Vancouver is unaffordable for someone making a middle class income, and therefore impossible to secure for someone living on Income Assistance, or PWD. Others felt that the lack of available housing, at any rate, will ensure that those living in poverty will continually face barriers to accessing any form of transitional or permanent housing.
  - **Livability:** One of the biggest criticisms of the ‘affordable housing’ available to individuals on income assistance or PWD is the condition of the housing. It was described by multiple individuals as “unlivable”; dirty, unsafe (specifically for women, single mothers, and the LGBTQ+ community), poorly managed, and poorly maintained. Participants also felt that landlords are not held accountable for the poorly maintained ‘welfare rate’ housing that remains the only option for many people in the DTES.
  - **Waiting Lists:** Multiple participants indicated that waitlists, specifically for BC Housing, are a major frustration. The lack of communication between BC Housing, other government agencies, and the individual was highlighted multiple times.
  - **Discrimination:** Some participants felt that they are actively discriminated against in their search for housing. Participants identified racism, a legacy of colonialism, and a lack of understanding the issues facing homeless individuals as the primary reasons.
  - **Reno-victions:** Reno-victions were only mentioned by a few individuals, but remain a concern for those who are only able to afford housing at the welfare rate, especially those who reside in older SRO hotels.
  - **Shelters:** Many participants identified temporary shelters as an issue. There are not enough spaces on nights that it rains or snows, and they tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive.
  - **Isolationism:** One aspect of housing that was identified is that the current SRO model, absent any kind of community focus, continues to encourage isolationism.

### - **Stagnant Income Assistant Rates:**

- Welfare rates were one of the biggest issues identified within the discussion groups. 12 individuals indicated that welfare is an issue facing individuals living in poverty. The issue within this category were vast:

- **Rates:** Many participants point out that as the cost of living has increased, income assistance (Welfare and PWD) has not kept up, keeping those who are unable to work trapped in deep poverty.
  - **Disincentives:** Participants identified that there are few incentives for someone to work while on income assistance. One individual noted, “People live in fear from being cut off [from] welfare.” Others indicated that they would like to work, but face disincentives due to the income exemptions associated with welfare and PWD.
  - **Government Communication:** Some participants identified government communication as a major barrier to accessing income assistance, or even finding the correct information. One participant, in a written submission, notes: “The online myselfserve program [...] has been nothing but issues in terms of applying, gaining contact with representatives and receiving empathy or understanding for my situation.” He, like many others, noted that they do not have regular access to a phone, internet, or even a permanent mailing address. Another individual noted that inter-governmental communication places individuals in a permanent holding pattern; people feel as though they are given the ‘run-around’ by the Ministry, and that they never have accurate information.
  - **Discrimination:** One First Nation’s individual felt that they had been the subject of discrimination and stereotyping from government employees when trying to apply for income assistance.
- **Identification:**
  - Six participants discussed identification, specifically the difficulty in obtaining acceptable ID, as a major issues for those who are homeless, or living in unstable situations. Participants discussed that people without ID are often excluded from government and non-profit programs.
    - **Fixed Address:** One of the biggest challenges identified was that individuals need a fixed address to obtain identification. This provides a huge challenge for homeless individuals who must rely on non-profits, such as temporary shelters, as a place to collect their mail.
    - **BCID:** Obtaining a BCID has proved challenging for individuals because it requires an individual already have primary identification, as well as photo ID. (One participant noted that a Canadian Passport does not count as a primary form of ID.) This creates a loop where a BCID becomes almost unattainable because you “need ID to get ID.” One participant shared that he had to advocate for himself until a local MLA stepped in and helped him navigate the process.
- **Job Training & Education:**
  - Nine participants at the consultation expressed their frustration at the significant barriers they continue to face while looking for to meaningful employment. A smaller subsection of these participants noted that it is harder to find work when faced with homelessness and addiction.
    - **Affordable Training/Skill Building:** many people identified the cost of job training programs and post-secondary education as major barriers to finding meaningful employment. Many also expressed frustration at the consistent funneling of low-

skilled workers into temporary employment, and an informal system of pay-day loans and advances.

- **Minimum Wage:** Multiple participants identified the minimum wage as being too low, especially for those living in Vancouver, where the cost of living is extremely high.
- **Informal Employment:** Some participants identified the local government's attitude and interaction with the 'informal economy' - primarily vendors on E. Hastings St. – as an issue.

- **Health:**

- Healthcare was identified as a major issues facing people who struggle with poverty and homelessness. 12 participants identified a variety of health-related issues.
  - **Mental Health:** Multiple participants noted that there is a severe lack of timely, high quality mental healthcare support within the DTES neighbourhood. They also identified that there is a high level of stigmatization of those struggling to maintain their mental wellbeing.
  - **Primary Healthcare:** Every participant who identified 'health' as an issue identified the current status of the healthcare system as an issue for those facing poverty. Many people shared experiences of discrimination within emergency rooms by nurses, doctors, and security guards. They shared experiences of being classified as 'drug seekers' looking for a quick fix. At an even more fundamental level, they felt as though the care they received was 'second -class' in comparison to someone who doesn't 'look' poor or homeless.
  - **Violence against Women:** Both male and female participants identified this as a major issue for those struggling with poverty. This is not only a health issue, but a justice issue as well. Participants pointed out that there are not enough spaces for women to safely flee violent situations.
  - **Food Access:** A small number of individuals noted that food access is becoming a major issue within the DTES. As gentrification continues within the neighbourhood, many people feel that they are priced out of local shops and restaurants, forcing them to rely on free food from service providers or food banks. This is a loss of agency for many families who are no longer able to provide food for their families.
  - **Hygiene:** This was identified as a structural issue by the participants. Many felt that the inability to access proper hygiene facilities (primarily showers & clean bathrooms) contributed to the stigmatism felt by many individuals living in poverty. One participant drew attention to the lack of proper washroom facilities within the SROs in the DTES. Others linked the lack of hygiene options to health problems.
  - **Treatment Options:** Multiple people identified issues with treatment options for individuals who struggle with addiction. Some indicated that the inability to taper off of methadone was an issue, while others indicated that there simply aren't enough options for women and single moms when it comes to harm reduction strategies. Some identified the lack of detox space, and the long waitlists associated with accessing recovery services, both harm reduction and abstinence based. Above all, the participants indicated that there simply aren't enough options for individuals seeking treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.

- **Dental Care:** Participants identified the high cost of dental care as a huge barrier.
  - **Assisted Living:** Many of the seniors in the group identified a lack of secure assisted living spaces as a barrier to maintaining their health. Many seniors are excluding from the traditional SROs because they require mobility aids, or have mental health struggles. Many participants pointed out that when they access shelters, including the UGM shelter, they observe a disproportionate number of seniors utilizing the facility.
- **Other:**
- Multiple people identified other issues, but did not expand upon them to the same levels as the issues stated above. They included the following:
    - **Police Relations:** Some participants shared accounts of police discrimination and mistreatment.
    - **Tax Reform:** Participants identified the tax system as 'broken' and only serving the wealthy.
    - **Public Transportation:** Many individuals are unable to afford public transit, or feel stigmatized when they are able to pay for transit services.
    - **Gentrification:** The community of the DTES continues to feel displaced within their own neighbourhood.

## Solutions

The discussion was separated into two parts (Appendix 1). The second part was a time for participants to discuss potential solutions to the main issues facing those in poverty, or those who have struggled with poverty in the past. They were encouraged to speak their mind, and “dream big”. The solutions discussed and presented by the participants were as follows:

*“It’s important that we do [events] like this, because it’s important for people who live in poverty to feel acknowledged, and asked for their opinion.” - Poverty Reduction Consultation Participant.*

### - **Housing**

- **Addressing Affordability:** This was the primary issue identified by those concerned with housing. The suggested solutions ranged from physical solution, to providing home owners and developers with tax incentives for affordable living.
  - Provide a larger stock of affordable housing in new buildings (developments) throughout the entire city, not just the DTES.
  - Require developers to make units available at welfare rates in all buildings throughout Vancouver and reassess the ‘affordable housing’ metric.
  - Implement rent controls or rent freezes and tie rental rates to the unit, not the tenant.
  - Create a tax break/incentive for individuals who own vacant homes; reduce their property tax, or provide a tax credit, to incentivize them to provide the unit at welfare & PWD rates.
  - Provide mortgage incentives for homeowners to convert their homes into multi-unit dwellings.
  - Legalize ‘alternative living’ situations such as tiny homes, tent cities, RVs, and boats and provide these communities with the same supports the suburbs receive.
  - Provide homeowners and landlords with training on how to rent to low-income residents, or those exiting homelessness.
  - Create a mechanism for all levels of government to work on a credible housing strategy.
  - Create lower barrier permanent housing options using a housing-first model, while emphasizing community development.

### - **Stagnant Income Assistant Rates:**

- **Increase the Rates:** This was the primary solution for those concerned with welfare and PWD rates, as well as the minimum wage - all falling far behind the rate of inflation, and the cost of living within Vancouver, and the province of British Columbia. The solutions to this problem were diverse.
  - Ensure a guaranteed livable income (basic income) to all residents of British Columbia using a cost of living calculation for the region, or sub-region.
  - Increase the minimum wage to \$22/hour within Vancouver to encourage more individuals to move away from welfare dependency. Provide those who want to work with a sense of agency and worth.
  - Make earning exemptions higher for those on welfare and PWD to allow those who want to work, and are able, the opportunity to make a living wage.

- Create a more equitable tax system that redistributes wealth based on social needs.
- **Identification:**
  - **Acquiring ID:** This was the primary solution to those who identified ID as one of the issues facing those who struggle with poverty. The solutions that were presented were quite innovative.
    - If an individual is involved in a police incident, or are taken to the hospital, have the officer or hospital social worker take a photo and act as a verifier to their identity. Both entities generate reports and profiles, so their identities will be stored within the respective system.
    - Implement a free or low-cost ‘Temporary ID’ that can be accepted by the civic and provincial government, and meets the criteria for acquiring permanent ID (BCID, Driver’s License, Passports, Birth Certificate, etc.)
    - Provide funding for service providers to specifically hire individuals that can assist those in poverty in acquiring proper ID.
    - Provide more face-to-face opportunities for low income individuals to speak with government agents.
    - Make the BC Bus Pass Compass Card an acceptable form of government issues ID.
- **Job Training & Education:**
  - **Addressing affordability:** Once again, this was the primary concern of those who identified education as a major issue for those facing poverty. The solutions were wide ranging, reflecting the diverse composition of the group.
    - Provide free or low cost education to those on income assistance or those struggling with poverty. Include the cost in current taxation of the top 2%.
    - Provide incentives for universities to offer free tuition to lower income individuals.
    - Provide free childcare for those struggling with poverty so that the parents can attend post-secondary school.
    - Free internet with greater accessibility to access to online education options.
    - Create a program that ensures job access following graduation.
    - Opportunities for day labour within the current earnings exemption with minimal red tape. Ensure payment happens the same day.
  - **Preventative Education:** Many participants identified gaps in their high school education that could have helped them navigate finances and various life skills.
    - **Finance Classes:** teach finance classes in high schools – budgeting, investing, saving.
    - **Life Skill Classes:** teach basic life skills in high schools – grocery shopping, nutrition, cooking.
    - **Cultural Competency:** Reform BC’s education system to ensure that students learn the history and impact of colonization on minority populations, specifically First Nations individuals within BC.
- **Health:**
  - **Quality and Access:** These were the two primary aspects of the issue that were discussed. Many of the solutions also incorporated solving the affordability issue as well.
    - Provide better Pharmacare coverage to those on income assistance and with no income.

- Provide universal, quality dental care to those on income assistance, or with no income.
- Issue grants or tax break to local companies to encourage them to provide shoes to those on fixed incomes within the DTES. Encourage them to leverage social capital.
- More rapid response teams for those struggling with mental health
- Provide more options for those seeking treatment or recovery from addictions (specifically for women), including programs to taper off of methadone.

## Solutions and Actions that Can Make a Difference

While our consultation did not utilize the dots in the exact way outlined in the SPARC guide, every individual at the consultation was given the opportunity to place dots beside the issues they found the most important, and the solutions they found the most interesting or actionable.<sup>1</sup> They were as follows:

<b>Top 4 Issues Identified</b>	<b>Top 4 Solutions Identified</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of affordable &amp; livable housing within Vancouver</li> <li>2. Low income assistance rates (Welfare, PWD, and Min. Wage)</li> <li>3. Unaffordable education &amp; job training programs</li> <li>4. Inadequate access to healthcare (physical and mental)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Create a tax break/incentive for individuals who own vacant homes; reduce their property tax, or provide a tax credit, to incentivize them to provide the unit at welfare &amp; PWD rates and create multi-unit houses.</li> <li>2. Rise income assistance rates and ensure a guaranteed livable income (or basic income) to all British Columbians utilizing a cost of living calculation for a specific region, or sub-region (city, town, municipality, etc.).</li> <li>3. Implement a free or low-cost ‘Temporary ID’ that can be accepted by the civic and provincial government, and meets the criteria for acquiring permanent ID.</li> <li>4. Issue grants or tax break to local companies, universities and vocational schools to encourage the provision of affordable good (shoes, clothing, groceries, etc.) and services (education, job training, etc.) to those on fixed incomes within the DTES.</li> </ol>

<sup>1</sup> There were five separate discussion groups. Therefore, the “Top 4 Issues” and “Top 4 Solutions” are amalgamations of the five separate group’s top four choices. (Note: Solution 3 (ID) was the most uniform idea from all five groups, and is best stated as written above, rather than as an amalgamation of five different solutions.)

## Conclusions

UGM's Poverty Reduction Consultation was an excellent opportunity for individuals who access our services on a regular basis to voice their concerns, and share their ideas and solutions on the issues of surrounding poverty. It was very beneficial to have MLA Elmore in attendance; multiple people, including our note takers, felt that the government cared about their struggles, and valued their voice due to her attendance. The most common theme that ran throughout the entire discussion was affordability. From housing to education, affordability was the biggest concern for those struggling with poverty. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that most of the solutions to the issues identified boil down to affordability; specifically, how to make services and housing more affordable to those on a limited income. This also provided a natural segue into a discussion on welfare rates, earning exemptions, and a higher minimum wage for those who want to work, but are dis-incentivized by the current income assistance structure in British Columbia.

While the top four issues didn't exactly align with the top four solutions, it is encouraging to see the UGM community engaged in both critical and solution based thinking around the issues of poverty, homelessness and addiction.

## Appendix 1

### Poverty Reduction Consultation Program

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- 7:10pm – Discussion tables are setup in UGM dining room
- 7:20pm – Opening remarks by MLA Elmore & Bobby MacDonald
- 7:30pm – Dinner service finished
- 7:25pm - 8:00pm – 1<sup>st</sup> round of discussions @ individual tables (issues)
- 8:00pm – 8:10pm – Break with refreshments
- 8:10 – 8:30pm – 2<sup>nd</sup> round of discussions @ individual tables (solutions)
- 8:30 – 8:45pm – Prioritization of the top 3 issues (discussion 1) and solutions (discussion 2).
- 9:00pm – closing remarks – MLA Elmore & Bobby MacDonald
- 9:10pm – clean up.
- 9:30pm – event over. Shelter to open.