



**United Way**  
Central & South  
Okanagan Similkameen



# Small Group Community Discussion Penticton, BC

## Final Report

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Prepared for:  
Social Planning and Research Council of BC

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## Participants

Date	March 28 2018
Community	Penticton
# Participants	25
# Participants with Lived Experience (note: those that shared this openly in the discussions)	4
# Organizations (note: some participants represented multiple organizations)	22

The small group discussion in Penticton included diverse representation across the community. Those in attendance ranged from 21 to 77, with an average of 44 and a median of 39. Majority of attendees were representatives from the non-profit or social services sector, providing programming and supports to adults, seniors, children, youth, families, students, and persons with disabilities. Some attended as members of the community and four openly shared that they have or had experience living in poverty. There was direct community representation of the voice of seniors, single mothers, persons living with disabilities, families with children with disabilities, students (post-secondary), and people with history of mental health challenges.

The areas of focus and priorities for the organizations present at the meeting were varied and are listed below for reference:

- Addiction recovery
- Youth, adults and families with mental health challenges
- Children and youth with disabilities
- Employment
- Health and wellness
- Post-secondary education and students
- Poverty advocacy
- Food bank
- Local government
- Technology sector
- Early years development
- Community resource centre
- Legal advocate
- Family support, counselling
- Under-privileged youth
- Domestic violence (women, children)
- Seniors support
- Food security
- Community funder

Other partners invited, but unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts and/or school break included those from local government (City of Penticton, Regional District of the South Okanagan, Ministry of Social Development), local emergency shelter providers (South Okanagan Women in Need Society, Salvation Army Compass House) and other local social service providers (Canadian Mental Health Association, Penticton and District Society for Community Living, South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services, Alzheimer Society, Arthritis Society, Youth Engagement Strategy project, Special Olympics BC, Interior Health Authority, School District 67).

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## Findings

### Issues

List below by topic is a summary of the issues facing those in poverty in the Penticton community. Those issues which did not fit under a specific topic or category are listed under General.

#### Shame, Stigma

- There is a lot of stigma associated with 'poverty'
- Blaming for their situation
- Lack of understanding about the structural and systematic forces that keep people in the cycle of poverty for generations.
- Miseducation of the public, myths about poverty and who lives in poverty
- There is discrimination, ageism, apathy, sexism
- No empathy or understanding

#### Community Supports

- Lack of community supports
- Not adequately funded to support needs in their community
- Very few community supports in communities outside of Penticton (Summerland, Okanagan Falls, Naramata, Kaleden)

#### Mental Health

- Cycle of mental health challenges
- Stigma, lack of understanding and discrimination
- There is stress associated with living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet
  - Exacerbates mental health conditions

#### Homelessness/Homelessness

- Rising numbers
- Complex mental health, addictions, trauma challenges
- Tensions and unsafe living conditions
- Anxiety around where they could afford to live if they lose current housing
- Affordable housing is directly competing with the tourism sector
- Lack of quality, appropriate, available and affordable housing
- Current housing that is 'affordable' is not safe, clean or up to code

#### Challenges of those immigrating to Canada

- Language barriers, lack of ESL classes
- Cultural difference
- Low-paying jobs only available

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### Employment

- The minimum wage doesn't keep up with the cost of living
  - Leads to the 'working poor', 2+ jobs but can't keep up
- Seasonal workforce for agriculture and tourism don't have stability, benefits, housing options
- Small pool of available jobs in smaller communities

### Child Care

- High cost of childcare makes it impossible to afford if you are working a lower-wage job
- Only certain hours, little flexibility with those who work evenings or weekends

### Food Security

- Lack of access to nutritious food due to high costs

### General

- Isolation of certain populations (seniors, widows, those living with medical conditions)
- People on disability support struggle to keep up
- Little access to sound legal advice, justice
- Limited access to dental care and some forms of health care
- Costs of transportation are high, but public transportation is not convenient for areas outside the city core
  - Communities aren't built for walking, biking, public transit
  - Getting to services is a challenge
- Low literacy levels because of decreased financial resources related to poverty
  - Technology, financial and traditional reading literacy
- Isolation of minority or vulnerable populations because they are living in poverty
- People have to choose between food, rent and other basics because they can't keep up with cost of living
- Lack of access to legal or tax support
- Varying types of abuse create lack of esteem, dependency, and can force women/children into poverty
- Reliance on technology for access to information, services excludes those who cannot afford a smart phone, computer etc
- Low pensions don't keep up with the cost of living

Addendum 1 (attached): A short report of input prepared by John Bubb, president of the Summerland Food Bank & Resource Centre Society for inclusion in this report.

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## **Possible Solutions**

A wide variety of solutions were discussed over the course of the community discussion. They have been summarized under major topics, and those not fitting under a specific topic were added to 'General'.

### Education

- Additional EA supports for children with special needs
- Free post-secondary education for people with low income backgrounds
- Programs to teach money management and basic financial literacy
- Accessible, low cost parenting classes, life skills classes, after school programs
- Plan to remove barriers of those living in poverty to accessing educational opportunities

### Community and public awareness

- Incentives or encouragement for people to give back or get involved
- Campaigns to debunk myths around poverty and who is actually living in poverty
  - Poverty is not a choice, the cycle of poverty can be impossible to break
  - Public awareness around poverty reduction measures

### Homelessness

- Housing first initiatives
- Supportive housing with dedicated programs for mental health, addictions

### Housing

- Funding and resources for innovative housing solutions (tiny homes, co-ops, intergenerational communities)
- Increased rental subsidies (SAFER program for example)
- Regulating foreign buyers with taxation
- Implementing rent controls (ie. capping the rent for a unit)
- Reviewing AirBnBs/VRBO regulations
  - Taxes or incentives for vacant properties
- Mandate that new housing developments must have a percentage of affordable housing units, and/or designated green space and community garden space

### Addictions

- Access to residential treatment beds
- Expansion of current programs and services (which are working but aren't enough)
- Creation of safe spaces to access resources, harm reduction, support
- Safe injection sites are needed
- Need to increase the number of trained people working in addictions (and mental health)

### Mental Health

- More support for youth experiencing mental health challenges
- Increase in awareness and community knowledge of mental health to help reduce stigma that is still associated with mental health

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### Food Security

- Increase in available food programs in schools (building on breakfast/lunch programs, Starfish pack programs)
- Increase number of and access to community garden space
- Decrease the cost of healthy foods (unhealthy and processed food is the cheapest currently)
- Programs that bring farms and farmers markets together with families
- Priority for healthy foods to be available at food banks
- Programs that prepare health food for seniors, people on disability
- Community kitchens and healthy cooking programs

### Childcare

- \$10 a day childcare (reviewing the Quebec model and adapting for BC)
- Increase childcare hours for evenings, weekends
- Incentives for employer flexibility regarding childcare options, onsite childcare
- Streamline the licensing process to facilitate more childcare spaces
- Increase to subsidies available for children 0-5

### Jobs

- Grants for microfinance or social enterprise opportunities to help provide opportunities for people living in poverty
- Mandatory benefits for part-time workers and students
- Creation of skills development and employment centres
- Review of minimum wage to living wage
- Funding to assist with unique employment models for those who are not able to be part of the general workforce
  - Odd jobs program, flexible employers

### Health Care

- Universal dental care plan
- Affordable counselling programs for families

### General

- Funding for programs that reduce isolation of vulnerable populations in the community
- Multiyear funding for community services
- Flexibility with funding options for communities, as the needs of each community are unique
- An official government definition of 'low income' and 'the poverty line'
- Support navigating the complexities of systems
  - health care
  - support services
  - government subsidies, programs
- More opportunities for community consultations, feedback and conversations
- Grants for satellite resource centres ('hubs') for rural communities where a variety of services can be delivered and accessed
- Facilitation of increased alignment of services, supports and programs

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## Priority Solutions

The solution that was identified as most important to participants was to increase funding for mental health and addictions programs and resources. Specifically, people at the community meeting stated that flexibility is essential so that the unique needs of the community can be met. Additionally, multi-year funding opportunities (as opposed to short-term funds) allow for more sustainable and impactful programs that can help those struggling with mental health and addictions. The group recognized that collaborative community partners are a key piece to supporting and driving these types of programs.

There were four additional solutions that were given high priority by participants at the community meeting. These four solutions are summarized below.

- Providing all British Columbians with a guaranteed annual income that is reasonable and related to the rising costs of living.
- Giving the decision-making power for funding to community supports and/or organizations who truly understand the needs and priorities of their community.
- Funding and support for the implementation of the Housing First model for supportive housing. This means that there are no barriers to accessing housing; it is viewed as a fundamental right. Additionally, this housing needs to have the support and wrap-around programs people need to create stability.
- The development of multi-step low income housing plans that are affordable and sustainable across communities. This means development throughout the housing continuum with a focus on affordable, rental market housing.

Below is the final list of solutions that were identified as priorities by the individuals at the meeting. However, their priority was not as high as those mentioned already in this section.

- Conduct a review old and outdated government policies and services with consultations from local communities to ensure they better reflect the unique community needs of all British Columbians.
- Implement a maximum allowable monthly rent charge (ie. controlled rent) based on geography, housing type etc. Controlled rental rates
- Provide free post-secondary education to people from low income families to provide them with the opportunity to break the cycle of poverty.
- Implement childcare that is affordable and accessible.
  - \$10 a day model is a great start
  - Ensure availability outside of 'typical' work hours for those working shift work or non-traditional jobs (ie. evenings, weekends)
- Increase the current welfare and disability rates to have better alignment with true cost of living in the province.

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- Support innovative housing options that address the affordable housing crisis for all populations of people in British Columbia.
  - Funding for co-ops, intergenerational housing, modular communities
- Within the government, increase awareness of the critical importance of social supports to people living in poverty.
- Investment in job skills development for people living in poverty, aligned with sectors which have a shortage of skilled workforce.

### **Top 3 Solutions**

1. Increase funding to support the expansion of mental health and addictions resources and programs to fill the present gaps in services and support.
2. Funding and support for the development of affordable, appropriate and accessible housing alongside a multistep housing plan that starts with a Housing First model (housing as a fundamental right).
3. Through policy development and consultation, providing communities with the flexibility and opportunity to make decisions regarding funding to ensure it is meeting their specific needs and key priorities.

### **Conclusions**

The individuals participating in the community discussion in Penticton spoke passionately about the challenges faced by those living in poverty in their community. Many expressed appreciation at the opportunity to be involved in the consultation process and help provide specific input into the provincial poverty reduction strategy. The collective voice spoke with a great sense of urgency about the need for change at all levels of government to address the challenges in our community, province and country. The announcement of BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy later this year is highly anticipated by the Penticton community. On behalf of all the individuals participating in the discussion, thank you for the opportunity to provide our input.

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# Summerland FOOD BANK & Resource Centre

My name is John Bubb and I am president of the Summerland Food Bank & Resource Centre Society. Our goal is to provide a one-stop resource centre, a community service hub, for people in need in Summerland. We have operated a food bank since 1985 and a resource centre since 2013.

We serve approximately 5 percent of Summerland's residents – in 2017 that was 253 households including 502 people of which 138 were children.

I have chosen to structure my comments around the 2018 – 2021 Service Plan of the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction – a Ministry from which we receive no financial support for our community work.

## **Objective 1.1 – Develop a strategy to reduce poverty in British Columbia**

It may be ridiculously simple to say that people live in poverty because they don't have enough money – but, unfortunately, few people say it so directly. If you agree, then getting sufficient money into the hands of the poor must be the best strategy to alleviate poverty. The best way, we propose, would be a guaranteed annual income, administered through the taxation system. This would ensure those at the lowest end of the poverty scale receive enough money for basic shelter, utilities and food. We know that the current individual social assistance and disability rates are insufficient because of the number of our households (105) that report primary income from those sources. For Summerland, we would propose at least \$1,300 per month, indexed to the cost of living, and not subject to future political ideology. We believe a guaranteed annual income deserves to be tested – and we suggest, with great bias, Summerland as a test bed for it.

## **Objective 2.1 - British Columbians in need receive assistance they can count on.**

Our main observation is that current social programs are not working. They are demanding to access, slow in responding and, in many ways, they impede the flow of money that our clients require. There is a focus on programs rather than on individuals. We need to move toward more flexible financing that is tailored to the individual or family in need. We need to move away from what "society" thinks that people in poverty need and more toward what people in poverty (and the counselors that serve them) know, they need. Anyone who has dealt with people in need understand that each individual or family has a different background story and a set of current needs that are unique to them. We currently respond with a "one size fits all" payment that in most cases misses the target.

Of the 253 households that used our food bank in 2017, 70 percent report one of three primary income sources: employment (69 households), disability benefits (75 households), and social assistance (30 households). One needs to look no further than the 70 percent to ascertain that there are major problems with income and social programs if you are at the lower end of the income scale.

Our current systems penalize people in poverty and sometimes beat them down to a lower level. One of our social assistance clients used to be in a stable partnership. The partnership has broken up, with one partner returning to live with their family. The remaining partner can no longer afford to pay the full rent and comes up \$60 short. He receives a 10-day eviction notice and thus ends up on the street. How much money is now spent, and in how many programs, before that individual can be restored to the stable situation he would be in if he had immediate access to an extra \$60 of rent supplement while he seeks an alternative?

It's mid-January. Another client on disability runs into unexpected repairs and cannot afford both rent and utilities. He chooses to pay rent and so his utilities are disconnected. Now he is in a much worse state because not only does he have arrears to pay – but also a steep reconnection fee. So, he falls further behind, his health deteriorates and now he adds anger to his hardship.

Another client, applying for disability at age 62 after a lifetime of work, is looking forward to some relative stability when old age security and her Canada Pension kicks in at age 65. However, she discovers that social assistance requires her to apply for her Canada pension now – and at a much lower rate than if she waited until 65. She is required to do this **not** so that she can benefit from the payment – but so that the Provincial Government can claw the Federal Canada Pension Plan payment back from her Provincial disability benefit.

These are but three examples. It's worth saying again. Our current systems penalize people in poverty.

### **Objective 2.2 - Supplementary supports are available to meet the changing and individual needs of eligible British Columbians**

Penticton has dozens of agencies that serve people with challenges in their lives. Why not empower and enable those agencies and our agency to provide what most people in poverty really need – and it's not a one-size fits none payment. In Summerland, we have implemented an emergency fund to cover the worst of these situations – but we shouldn't have to go begging, once more, to our already generous donors to make it happen.

### **Objective 3.1 – Support a comprehensive and integrated system of supports and services for persons with disabilities.**

We support an increase in disability payments as outlined earlier in this presentation. We also support programs as described in the Ministry Plan that provide better outcomes for people with disabilities and their families and effective transition services for youth.

Our observation would be that the current intake processes for disability payments can be inordinately difficult and time-consuming. We have a head-and-back-injured client that has been applying for at least two years (now working through a counselor). He has experienced difficulties with the medical system as well as with the social services systems. Our emergency fund has been supporting him in several ways for four months to keep him off the street while the application process is finally completed.

### **Objective 4.1 – Enhance the resilience of families in BC to achieve better lives and increasingly positive economic outcomes.**

I believe we and our government representatives need to take a stand against most of society, that believes people on income assistance are “something for nothing” people – or worse. Anyone who works with a diverse population of people in need knows this is not an accurate belief. There is a huge grey area encompassing those who have no real ability to be employed or become self-sufficient (in our experience about 2 percent of the population) through those who, with some emotional support, education, training, short-term help and counseling, can become self-sufficient (in our experience about 3 percent of the population) to the 95 percent of our population that already is self-sufficient. Surely 95 percent of us can support the 5 percent that need our help.

In Summerland we have created an odd job program to match up our low-income clients with various odd jobs in the community, providing supplementary income. One would think that a program such as this would be funded through Work BC, but an application inquiry was deflected because we were not the direct employer and our clients were not receiving Employment Assistance. Once again, our community has stepped in to fund a program that should be funded through government. In this case it was the Community Foundation of the South Okanagan Similkameen that will pay for the summer Odd Job Program coordinator's salary in 2018.

In the last week, Keith Baldry, Legislative reporter for Global TV reported that unions are re-negotiating 180 BC public sector contracts this year. He estimates that the potential increased costs of those new agreements at a compounded rate of 2 percent per year would equal \$3.6 Billion. This amount exceeds the cost of the entire social development ministry's budget and is almost twice what the ministry reports that it intends to spend on income assistance programs in fiscal year 2018/2019.

Notwithstanding the value of public services, we wonder: where will our priorities lie?

John Bubb

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