

CANADIAN POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY COMMUNITY CONSULTATION: VERNON BC

JUNE 2017

PARTNERSHIP MODEL:

**North Okanagan Early Years Council
City of Vernon - Partners in Action Committee**



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INTRODUCTION

“The Government of Canada wants to hear from all interested Canadians on developing a Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy.” www.canada.ca

This call for input was noted by both the North Okanagan Early Years Council and the City of Vernon’s Partners in Action Committee and an action team was formed to host a community consultation. Both these coalitions have witnessed the devastating impact of poverty on individuals and families in the community. They have also seen how poverty impacts the health and safety outcomes of the wider community. Both committees felt it was important to bring stakeholders together, provide data and information, and encourage as many organizations as possible to take part in the on-line consultation currently taking place through the federal government. There was a wonderful community response with 59 participants attending the consultation.

GOALS/AGENDA

Poverty Reduction Strategy – Community Consultation May 25, 2017 at the Vernon Lodge Hotel

Goals:

- Encourage our community to take part in the on-line tools available for the federal consultation process
- Ask for a commitment from organizations to mobilize their staff/clients to take part in the on-line surveys
- Learn together and ensure a strong response from our area

7:30 – 8:00	Registration, Breakfast and Welcome Okanagan Elder: Pauline Gregoire
8:00 – 9:00	Adrienne Montani, First Call BC Federal, Provincial and Regional Poverty
9:00 – 9:45	Panel Discussion Local Organizations Provide a Frontline Perspective
9:45 – 10:00	Small Break
10:00 – 11:15	Breakout Session and Sharing What does success look like?
11:15 – 11:30	Evaluation and Commitment Provide feedback

The key note speaker for the morning was Adrienne Montani from First Call BC. The slides from the presentation are available upon request, but the main highlights include:

- One out of five BC children are poor
- Four keys to success for children and families:
 - Strong commitment to early childhood development
 - Supports in transitions from childhood to youth to adulthood
 - Increased economic equality
 - Safe and caring communities
- Socioeconomic factors (poverty, education, housing and inequality) have the largest impact on health
- Health and social problems are worse in countries with more income inequality (Canada is middle of the pack amongst industrialized nations)
- A city composed of only BC's poor children would 163,260 residents and be the fifth largest city in BC.
- Since the House of Commons passed a resolution in 1989 to eliminate child poverty in Canada, BC's child poverty rate has risen from 15.5% to 19.8%
- North Okanagan child poverty rate:
 - 2013: 21.1% = 3200 children
 - 2014: 20.6% = 3160 children
- BC poverty rates are higher than the national average (BC at 16% vs. Canada at 14.4%)
- Canada underinvests in early care and education compared to other nations
- One in every two BC children of single parents were poor in 2014 (\$10 a day childcare could assist with this problem)
- One third of recent immigrants are living in poverty
- Almost half of former youth in care will go on social assistance within a few months of the 19th birthday
- In 2016, 33,300 BC children relied on food banks
- BC's income assistance rates have not increased since 2007, despite the rising cost of living
- Between 2007-2014, increases in family incomes fell far short of increases in family costs:
 - Income rose 10% but rent is up 26% and childcare rose by 35%
- The September 2015 elimination of the welfare claw back of child support reduced the depth of poverty for over 5400 children
- Living wage campaigns can assist with family poverty
- Sixty percent of BC youth in care are aboriginal
- Cost of poverty is \$8-9 billion; cost of poverty reduction \$3-4 billion
- First Call BC has outlined concrete actions for a poverty reduction plan for BC
- Charity helps but doesn't solve the problem; ask the big questions about the root causes of poverty

PANEL DISCUSSION

The federal government developed a backgrounder on poverty that contains valuable information and data on poverty issues in the nation (<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/backgrounder.html>).

The study outlines who the most vulnerable groups are in terms of poverty. These include: indigenous people, recent immigrants, single parents and their children, people with disabilities and unattached people aged 45-64.

The organizers of the event wanted participants to hear first-hand from local organizations, some of the challenges faced by these groups in our community. Our panel included:

- Micki Materi – Vernon Women’s Transition House
- Carol Wutzke – Vernon and District Immigrant and Community Services
- Lisa Briggs Kongsdorf – Independent Living Vernon
- Caroline Huisken – First Nations Friendship Centre
- Jesie Harms – Okanagan Boys and Girls Club.

Each of the presenters spoke to the challenges and realities faced by the individuals and families that they work with on a daily basis. The notes of two of our speakers are attached to this report.

BREAKOUT SESSION

The workshop participants were divided into smaller groups and provided with flipcharts and a facilitator at each table. Each group was asked to brainstorm answers to the question:

What does success look like in terms of a Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy?

The following is a compilation of the breakout session conversations. We have combined the comments into common themes/recommendations.

Accessible and Affordable Housing:

- Affordable housing model that is diverse, multi-level and comprehensive (students, seniors, families, peoples with disabilities, immigrants, aboriginal, persons of varying mental wellness together)
- Affordable quality housing options; continuum of housing
- Tax incentives for building more affordable market housing; engage developers and private market to build low to mid-range market housing (not just high end houses)
- Federally funded supported units – get back in the game!

- Affordable housing with supportive educated staff to help people navigate systems; encourage tenants/provide opportunity to purchase homes
- Control housing speculation
- More housing subsidies that are attached to people rather than units
- Utilizing existing infrastructure for housing (ie empty schools)
- Exclude child maintenance and support payments from subsidized housing formula

Accessible and Affordable Quality Child Care Program

- Implement \$10 per day child care plan
- Program that is properly funded and that works for families
- Universal; focuses on quality (early years child development); builds on successes; access to early intervention
- Pay parents if they choose to stay home and care for their kids
- Longer parental leave that is paid out at a consistent rate

Increased Employment

- Reduce unemployment rate
- Job creation programs; educated employers (incentives for employers)
- Reduce “red tape” for employers

Income Inequality is Addressed

- Living wage (according to cost of living in your area); success equals working and not living in poverty
- Guaranteed basic income BUT don't lose what we already have; strengthen income support programs both provincially and nationally for all populations
- Government programs/subsidies (income assistance rates, CPP etc) keep up with cost of living; reduce eligibility income requirements
- Income assistance is accessible when you need it
- Family bonuses consistent across Provinces
- Decrease gap between rich and poor
- Address income inequality with proportional income tax system
- Increase child tax benefit; extend benefits to 18 years
- Allow people on income assistance to earn and keep income

Universal Health Care Expanded

- Universal dental care and other extended health services
- Broadening of what can be accessed in MSP; dental care, more mental health services, prescriptions
- Indigenous health outcomes are equal to non-indigenous health outcomes
- Funded federal disability advocate (includes physical and mental disabilities)
- Basic foods are accessible to everyone (subsidized); National Food Program
- Takes a village to raise a family; support healthy relationships and reduce isolation

Overhaul the Federal Justice System

- Stop incarcerating for poverty and health related issues; don't criminalize addiction
- Provide staff education re: indigenous, mental health, developmental disability etc.

Government Systems/Programs are Accessible to All

- Make it easy to access government programs; simplify access to services (and provide the resources to do so)
- Reduce application barriers to access support through a support network/person
- Excessive paperwork minimized; a staff person attached
- Services need to be accessible; increase front line staff; reduce red tape; alternatives for low tech or literacy levels
- Must provide support for all people to access services
- Aging out of programs/support would be funded

Accessible and Quality Education

- Remove student loan interest
- Funded school breakfast/lunch programs (only G7 that doesn't have one)
- Assessments for children and adults (ie FASD, ADHD)
- Provide support services; engage a variety of learning styles

Strategy is Long Term, Specific and Includes All Levels of Government

- Long term strategies/plans rather than based on election cycles
- Policies are research based
- Public awareness about cost/cause/solutions for poverty
- Set clear targets and milestones (e.g. lowering the poverty rate by ___ over ___ years)
- Include involvement of specific target populations in strategy (children, youth, immigrants, seniors, indigenous people, parents, people with disabilities etc.)
- Align federal and provincial systems (e.g. childcare program; standardized child definition)
- Review transfer payments and make some things conditional upon provincial targets/policies
- Unanimous legislated buy-in from provinces/territories for national and provincial reduction strategies; have concrete poverty reduction targets
- Use 1 to 2 % of GDP (increase investment) to implement the United Nations 13 Priorities for Sustainable Communities

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Thanks, in part, to the lure and reward of dark chocolate, there was a 78% return rate for our evaluation form.

Participants were asked to rate different components of the workshop based on a scale of one to ten (one being poor and ten being excellent). Some highlights of the evaluation include:

WORKSHOP COMPONENT	AVERAGE RATING (SCALE OF 1 TO 10):
Keynote Speaker: Adrienne Montani, First Call BC	8.7
Panel Discussion: Local Frontline Perspective	8.6
Breakout Session: What does success look like?	8.9
Usefulness: Did the workshop prepare you to provide input to the Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy?	8.8
Commitment: Will you take part in the on-line consultation?	Yes – 43 No – 1 Unanswered - 2

NEXT STEPS

The next steps include:

1. Visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/consultation-poverty.html>
2. Participate in the online survey. Share the link and opportunity with your colleagues, clients, co-workers and contacts.
3. Encourage and assist individuals and families that you work with to share their stories online.
4. Email tracy@noeyc.ca when you have completed the survey for a chance to win a gift of thanks for participating.
5. Follow the process on social media and join the discussion to #ReducePoverty! Send your story, photo or video and include @SocDevSoc in your tweet or @esdc-edsc in your Instagram post.
6. The action team will continue to follow up with organizations who attended the consultation in order to track our community's response to the on-line input. **As of June 30, 2017, eighteen organizations in the North Okanagan had taken part!**
7. The action team will also provide a copy of this report to the Government of Canada

APPENDICES

Please find the following:

- A list of poverty reduction resources developed by First Call BC (available upon request).
- The powerpoint presentation from Adrienne Montani of First Call BC is available upon request. Participants of the consultation received the original slides and were encouraged to use them in their own work.
- The speaking notes from two of our panel members (see below).

Micki Materi - Vernon Women's Transition Society

Women/Single Parents:

We provide a wide range of supportive services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. We provide shelter, residential support for young parents, counselling, child and youth advocacy, outreach services, and much more.”

What are the biggest poverty related challenges for our clients?

Housing, housing, housing –

You know, people often ask why women stay in abusive relationships, well the reality is that in some ways women are safer to stay. When they leave – they often end up with years of insecure housing and poverty.

First of all, they often end up staying at a Transition House with a whole bunch of other women from all walks of life having also fled an abusive relationship. Not necessarily what every little girl dreams of for herself.

Often having to leave a job or you lose your job as a result. You may not even have a source of income. You may have children that may have to change schools. You leave your stuff behind which is very difficult because as humans – we like our stuff – it helps us feel secure with our stuff around us. You may even just have the clothes on your back or what you can carry in garbage bag that you quickly stuffed with as much of what is most important to you. Making sure that your child has their favourite blanky or stuffed toy.

For some – they may have a friend or relatives that will let them stay for awhile. Maybe they might have a little money to stay in a hotel for a few days while they make a plan for their future. Essentially, when you leave – you become homeless.

So, now you need to access financial resources – Do you have a job, Do you need start looking for a job, are you eligible for EI, or do you need to apply for Income Assistance. Can you find another place to live – Can you afford another place to live. If you have children – how do you access child care, are they in school...

What we know is that women who leave a partner to raise children on their own are more than 5 times likely to live in poverty than if they stayed with their partner. Your risk and vulnerability further increases if you are aboriginal, immigrant, person with a disability or a senior.

So the biggest poverty related challenges are lack of safe affordable housing, low incomes, access to childcare resources. Having a safe affordable place to live is the foundation upon which we can build our lives – for the women we serve – they are re building their lives. We

need a standard living wage in order maintain a basic standard of living. You know – to pay the rent and feed the children. Access to Childcare is so essential.

At present, finding housing in general is challenging never mind affordability. We need more options for housing in general. For women re building their lives after abuse, we need a continuum of supportive housing options, second stage housing, third stage housing, residential treatment, cooperative housing, etc.

In 1989, the House of Commons passed a unanimous resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, in 2009 the House of Commons passed a resolution to develop an immediate plan to end poverty for all in Canada. Not only have we not eliminated poverty – it has increased.

In terms of one or two recommendations to the federal government beyond the need for affordable housing options and standard living wage – I would suggest simply going back in time to the 1980s when a National Childcare Plan was promised and then again in 2004 or 2005 when a National Childcare Strategy was (this close to happening) before it was scrapped in 2006 or 2007 – To just do it already!

Also, we need to remember that it is not a matter of whether we have the financial resources to implement these programs. We have the resources. It is simply a matter of priorities and will.

If we want to develop a Poverty Reduction Strategy that will have the positive impact and outcome we desire, we need to focus on our most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities. Because if we ensure a safe affordable community for our most vulnerable, we create a better community for us all.

Seniors

The challenges of a lack of safe affordable housing and income insecurity are similar in terms of need. Also, Health costs compound the challenges, the isolation and vulnerability to abuse and neglect. The issues are a little different in that Seniors are on a fixed income – as cost rise their ability to pay those costs decreases. For seniors that may still be in a home they own. Often the housing is in need of major repair which seniors can ill afford, therefore, creating the potential of losing when it comes time to sell. For seniors there are essential health services that are not covered by our health care system. Home support services, residential care, prescription medications, community mental health, vision and dental care. 1 in 10 seniors report having unmet health care needs.

Access to publicly funded home support services has declined over the years. Things like assistance with bathing, managing medications and preparing meals. Also residential care and assisted living. While there are many seniors that are not technically in poverty, the still struggle to make ends meet and are at risk particularly if they experience greater health care expenses due to chronic illness or disability.

Recommendations include:

Investing in a diverse range of affordable housing options

Introduce a universal pharmacare program

Improve retirement security – enhance CPP and increase OAS

Lisa Briggs Kongsdorf – Independent Living Vernon

People with Disabilities:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Basic needs met first such as food water, sleep, then employment, education and access to transportation before moving up to the top of the pyramid which is self-actualization and (problem solving).

Independent Living Vernon supports people with a variety of disabilities in many ways. One of the things we do regularly is support individuals trying to access Provincial disability (Persons with Disabilities Designation) through the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation and or Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPPD). There are many, many barriers to accessing this and the income is minimal and often not survivable, especially with children in the home. For example, I see women and men staying in abusive toxic situations because they cannot survive. I have helped many individuals who contemplate suicide and women with children who contemplate prostitution just to feed their children. We have a crisis. Since 2005 there has been one small increase in basic support. That for many only resulted in about \$25.00 as the bus pass program was revamped to no longer include a \$45.00 a year bus pass but instead \$52.00 a month. What are we doing to the children of the next generation. Many of you would be shocked at the number of youth coming in to see me with very high anxiety and depression applying for disability.

Accessing CPPD or PWD is a daunting process that requires people to first find out how to apply. Many have lost their life savings, homes or both because the process is often too long and daunting. Independent Living Vernon supported 8,000 individuals with a variety of disabilities last year. This was done with an equivalent of 3 full-time staff members. Provincial disability begins with an on-line application through the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation. Firstly, this process requires appropriate Identification, a computer, a phone, email and scanner to scan identification to. Although we have tried to help people fill in the application on line, with recent changes it is too long of a process for our staff. (2 hours approx.). We were told by MSDSI to send people back to Social Development and Social Innovation. That is not working as that Ministry has repeatedly sent people back to us.

For CPPD you pick up an application from Service Canada. The next step requires help from a physician to fill in part of the paperwork. At least 30 percent of applicants do not have a physician. Without a physician they cannot move forward. No paperwork filled out no disability and therefore no income.

Employment and Education are not realistic goals until basic needs are met. Without access to a better income and nutrition people with disabilities often end up in the hospital and then back on the streets and thus begins the vicious cycle of homelessness, hospital and then again homelessness.

Yes, homelessness is a definite problem but without adequate income and access to healthcare people have great difficulty moving forward.

I want to end with this...in this province we have a children in care advocate, a seniors advocate but not a disability advocate. Help all persons with a variety of disabilities have a collective voice. The Manager of Community Relations and Service Quality has a very specific job and cannot advocate for people with disabilities who are not on provincial income. This position is also difficult to access, and most people with disabilities don't even know it exists. Service providers are too busy to play telephone tag. The Federal government is working on a National Disability Strategy why not include a Disability Advocate.

Also, streamline all the applications (CPPD, PWD, Disability Tax credit etc) so that they are quicker and people are not losing their homes, life savings etc.

Provide easier access to health even if it is on-line physician assessments that can be done to help speed up applications with a service provider present. Change the fee structure, provide more incentives so that more physicians go into private practice.

Support people with a variety of disabilities by providing funding for individuals (both children and adults) to have appropriate access to assessments. I.e ADHD and FASD etc. For example, it is estimated that there are 23,000 individuals with FASD in the interior. Over 88 percent have not been identified due to lack of government support and funding access. Help them to stay out of jail, have better health care, reduce mental health issues.

Adequate Social Housing is a definite solution for a variety of issues but it is not the only problem.