

In February 2018 the BC Government put out a call for agencies to apply for a small grant (\$2500) to consult with people who have “lived experience” in poverty. The consultations were intended to speak to people about their experiences living in poverty and their recommendations for the upcoming Government of BC Poverty Reduction Plan. As this project fit so well with the work that we do in the Social Justice Advocate program we applied for the grant, and were successful in receiving it. The following is the final report about those consultations, this report was forwarded to SPARC BC (contract administrators) who will then send it to the government.

BC Poverty Reduction Strategy Small Group Discussion Report

March 23, 2018

Community Connections (Revelstoke) Society

Revelstoke BC

48 Participants

1 Organization

About the Participants

Our community is a small, resource based community that has recently experienced the development of a ski resort and other tourist activities (both winter and summer). This has placed stresses on both the availability and the affordability of housing, and the high costs of food and fuel, and has had a significant impact on our clients. Our organization is a multi-service agency that provides social services to a wide variety of clients.

We conducted three separate consultations with our current clients; two at our Food Bank and one at a social housing (BC Housing) building. The individuals we consulted *all* had lived experience of poverty; either the working poor or recipients of income assistance, disability pensions or senior pensions. The participants included families, single parents, single individuals and seniors, with an age range of 18 to 76 years of age.

Each participant was given a stipend after completing the consultation, food and amenities were provided during the consultations.

Note: Phrases in quotation marks are direct quotes of participants recorded during our consultations.

Issues Facing People Living in Poverty

- Incomes are inadequate to pay the bills for basic life expenses. People frequently have to make decisions about what gets paid and what they can do without.

- People are not filling prescriptions, are not purchasing needed glasses, orthotics, dentures or hearing aids. Even those who qualify for provincial assistance said the current levels of funding for these “extras” are not adequate. Both seniors and the working poor have no coverage at all to pay for these items, so do without.
- Housing costs are as high as 90% of income. Many are living in crowded or unsafe conditions as that is all they can afford. To quote one participant about his housing “I can’t afford to stay, and I can’t afford to go”. The majority of participants indicated that high housing costs place a large stress on them, and is the single largest “bill” they have to pay. “The stress we have from living in poverty has an effect on every one in our family, I hate to hear my eight year old ask at the grocery store: can we pay for this, mom?”. The topic of affordable housing was so strongly discussed at two of the groups that it was difficult to open the conversation to other topics.
- Heating and electrical costs are so high during the winter that it takes the rest of the year to pay that debt. Some families have faced hydro being cut off during the winter as they couldn’t pay their bills. “We did without hydro; we couldn’t cook or use lights for a month and had to heat with wood until we could pay”. Our community has a long winter heating season.
- Many indicated that they have inadequate clothing for our long, wet winters.
- Most people stated their nutrition was inadequate as they can’t afford the healthier food choices. They rely on our foodbank, or food recovery program, for much of their weekly food.
- Employment in our community is frequently seasonal, leaving people with no income for part of the year.
- Many individuals indicated that they are in debt to friends and/or family and/or to credit companies in order to have basic living expenses covered, with no plan for how they will pay these debts.
- Accessing government services is difficult, and often involves travel on dangerous highways. “Poor people can’t afford phones or computers and it seems that’s the only way to talk to anyone these days”. Government services are frequently not clear about their processes or policies.
- There is no training available for people to improve their employability “To take a course I would have to pack up my whole family and move to another community, which I can’t afford to do”
- Post-secondary education is out of reach for youth living in poverty; the expenses are higher for rural youth as they can’t live at home.
- Specialized supports for kids who need it are not clear and are too narrow in their mandate.
- Negative public perceptions of those living in poverty make it difficult to ask for help. Individuals living in poverty are often treated disrespectfully by schools, medical services, or government services
- The transition from disability to old age pensions often leave seniors without a check for several months.

Solutions and Actions That Can Make a Difference

A) Top Priorities

(Listed from those most popular to least popular)

- Higher rates for income assistance, disabilities, seniors pensions and minimum wage “poor people will stay poor unless they have more money in their pockets”.
- A special local fund for adults needing dental, orthotics, prescriptions, glasses etc.
- Free, or low cost, training for higher paying jobs
- Life skills training for youth and adults
- Higher minimum wage
- A diet supplement for families with growing children, to pay for nutritious food
- Easier access to existing government services, many services do not exist in our community “seniors don’t like to ask for help”.
- A “rent bank” or small loans program
- Easier access to government services and staff that treat poor people with respect “consideration and respect for people on assistance does not exist” “Dignity for each and every soul” “the professional support people need better education”
- School food programs
- Local drug and alcohol treatment (no waiting lists)
- More one-on-one supports for people with poor mental health to live independently
- Supportive housing for those who have mental health problems.
- Seniors in-home supports
- (Some topics were noticeably absent during the consultations; there was little, to no, conversation about university/college education nor about home ownership, goals that appear unattainable when living in poverty).

B) Top 3 Solutions

- 1) Increase availability of affordable housing for low income people (rent geared to income)
- 2) Start some form of guaranteed basic income, adjusted to the cost of living, for all British Columbians “many of our ideas (above) wouldn’t be needed if we just had more money when life gets tough”
- 3) Increase postsecondary training and supports for low income youth and adults. Education suggested was short-term (2 year) courses, life skills, and practical courses for the work place (e.g. first aid).

Conclusion

Our agency strongly believes that our clients are the best experts in their own lives, so we were thrilled to have this opportunity to talk to them about their experiences and ideas to address poverty. Because we already had a trusting relationship with all of the group participants the conversations were enthusiastic and insightful, and could have gone on for much longer than scheduled. It was surprising how often the same topics were brought up in three separate groups. It was a challenge to reflect those conversations in this brief report. A few clients declined to take part as they doubted that it would make any difference to the government “they won’t listen”, but most of the group participants were pleasantly surprised that the government wanted to hear from them, and were more than willing to share their ideas and experiences. Many participants told us that no-one had ever asked them about living in poverty, and being given the opportunity to talk about it was “both difficult and exciting”.

We would like to thank the Government of British Columbia and SPARC BC for this opportunity to consult with people who have lived experience of poverty.

Respectfully Submitted by:

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