

Government of Alberta Children's Charter Public Consultation

Focus Group Summary Notes: Friends of Stanley Milner Library

Facilitated by the Edmonton Social Planning Council

September 4th, 2013

THINKING ABOUT POVERTY

How does poverty affect you in your community?

Probe Questions:

- a) What does it mean to be poor?
- b) In your own experience, what supports have you or people you know used to manage or cope with being poor?

What does it mean to be poor?

"It is a daily struggle, for housing, feeding myself and paying limited bills. I have certain injuries, and I have been drug addicted for three quarters of my life, so I don't have the skills needed to get a job. It all seems so very frightening to me."

"With the little money I get to live on - \$600.00 per month for my child, it's tough to live (ie: buying a bus pass). My daughter is diabetic, if I need to get her something, then I have to make decisions about what we go without. The money needs to stretch. I just got out of treatment, it's tough and a battle every day. When I was discharged, they put me up in a hotel but there was miscommunication with Homeward Trust and I had to leave and ended up homeless once again with my child."

"It means failure. I failed my family, my marriage, and I am poor."

"I am between places right now, in transitional housing. They treat me well, feed me, house me and I get enough for a bus pass and special diet. All of this depends on the worker you get assigned and I feel they have way too much power. If you get someone who you don't agree with, then things can be different. Everyone should be treated the same. It doesn't seem right how these worker have so much power."

"For a woman, it's even harder. I have gotten thrown out of so many places in the winter time because I was not willing to "put out". So, I walked around the streets because I don't want men to touch me."

“It’s all about knowing the key words – if you say you need shampoo you won’t get anything but if you say you need personal hygiene then they will open up another \$50 to \$75 a month. When I was in BC, they gave me a book with key phrases. Life is different if you don’t know the key words to use to gain access.”

“In the past I was never poor, I had legitimate jobs, but I am an alcoholic and I can’t hold a job. I just move around, I’ve spent 5 years on the streets. I stayed at the Hope Mission in the “snake pit” which is for alcoholics. When you are drunk you have to wait in line to be one of the 70 people who will get a place in the snake pit where you have to sleep with a bunch of drunks all night.”

“When you are on the street, and you have no money so you make friends and look out for each other.”

“Poverty feels like I am circling the drain, you keep going down until you die. I never got caught up in drugs, but I do have an addictive personality. Being poor means being depersonalized, dehumanized, you become a number and you are a bother. At an agency, you are trying to get through their numbers. When 4:30 comes, they can go home but I am still in need and depressed. I used to sleep in my truck with my tools but now I am lucky that I have a place to live. However, in the evenings there is lots of shouting, drugs and the f-word.”

“I am trying to make things better for myself. It’s good to have a bicycle that I use to get around. Someday I am going to get out of this. My faith helps me a lot, I am getting away from the “why me” attitude. But it’s very hard at times as poverty is in your face 24 hours a day which becomes a grind.”

“Poor for me is just surviving, not living and I suffer from mental health issues because of this. It’s about not getting a good night sleep which we know causes a lot of health problems. I am trying to find hope.”

“I am like everyone else, I am not an alcoholic, but I like marijuana and for that society says you are screwed up. I push myself first, self-confidence means everything to me and I keep on going.”

“I have been homeless since 2006 started with my separation from my girlfriend. I try very hard not to look poor because society judges you. It’s hard to walk across from the Police station or through a playground without having your back pack dumped. We have rights but not as

homeless people. When the police do stop you, if you pull an attitude then you are “in the bag”. We all try hard not to look homeless so they will leave you alone.”

“Poor is the opposite of rich. Rich is an accumulation of resources. Resources aren’t just financial – they could be housing resources. The biggest difference between the haves and the have-nots is upbringing. We were not taught how to hold onto resources, and how to access certain services. The rich get taught everything, they get taught at home. They get resources given to them and skills through family. They have houses to accumulate their resources; without that how can we accumulate anything? We can’t pass on any skills if we don’t learn them”.

“Being poor is not having the things you need. When I first came to Edmonton, I used to sleep beside the river. That was my home. I tried to hold a job. I’d go back to the river. I sort of picked up for a while but then I fell to alcohol and struggled with it. Recently I met a good friend [the outreach worker] that I can talk to. Now I am working at Bissell Centre cooking for the homeless and even people who have homes. I know what it’s like to live on the streets, to not have something to eat. I’ve worked there for two years and now my hours are getting cut to 9 hours a week. I struggle to pay my rent and can barely feed myself. I struggle, but I have not turned to alcohol. No matter what you do, no matter how you try, you get kicked down.”

“If it wasn’t for the Outreach Workers at the Stanley Milner Library, I would probably still be on the streets. I went to them and they helped.”

In your own experience, what supports have you or people you know used to manage or cope with being poor?

“Needle exchange in Calgary helped. They were non-judgmental, and I was able to build a relationship over time with the workers with trust. One of the workers helped me get housing – someone in her church rented me a place. The biggest thing was that they looked at me as if I was a human being.”

“Outreach workers are my biggest support.”

“My friends on the street are my biggest support. When they don’t see me for a few days they come looking for me. I call my outreach workers when I need help and they are there for me.”

“My faith in God is my support and helps me. I play music in the subway sometimes and I have gotten involved in a couple of churches. My kids still talk to me and they know that I love them.”

“I bottle pick to supplement my income. The only problem is that when it’s lunch time, my buddy sometimes eats out of the garbage can.”

“It took getting mugged and breaking my ankle to get help. They wouldn’t give me anything. I was told that I needed a job confirmation in order to get welfare, and I said that if I had a job I wouldn’t need welfare. The system is wrong.”

“One size does not fit all. For some programs they want to move you along as quickly as possible – 28 day rehab is not enough for everyone. Some need more time but that is not the way the program works.”

“The Food Bank and churches are very helpful.”

“I owe a lot to Correctional Services Canada. When I was convicted and in prison I was able to get help. It’s not the best way but at least I had access to services and supports.”

“Soup kitchens, Hope Mission snake pit, sleeping in back alleys. I am a full time student and I don’t have treaty status, so I am on a Government of Canada and Government of Alberta student loans. The outreach worker set up a meeting with the creative consultant from the Academy of Learning where I filled out an application.”

“When I got busted, I was rescued. Nothing worse than spending all that time in a cell fighting a heroin habit, lots of time to think. I was rescued by negative consequences.”

TARGET POPULATIONS

What are the most important approaches to reduce poverty? How can we remove barriers, improve inclusion, and enable everyone to participate more fully in their community?

Probe Questions:

- a) Are there simple solutions that could help lift people out of poverty? What are they?
- b. Who should be responsible for removing barriers, improving inclusion, and enabling everyone to participate more fully in their community?

Are there simple solutions that could help lift people out of poverty? What are they?

“Get rid of advertising for alcohol on TV. This seems to legitimize the use and can lead to abuse.”

“Treat people in poverty with respect and give them some power over their lives. This will help people to take responsibility for themselves; guidance, support and respect.”

Who should be responsible for removing barriers, improving inclusion, and enabling everyone to participate more fully in their community?

“Society in general, we need to get beyond judgment about poor people.”

“Government need to do more to address issues homelessness. We don't get enough money to survive and move beyond poverty. Access to programs needs to be tailored to individuals not a cookie cutter approach because one size does not fit all.”

“Individuals have to also take responsibility for their own lives, but we need help to get started.”

“The business community needs to do more to hire people in poverty. We have problems but we can also work with some support for our situations.”

“Governments need to be more accountable for what they provide and provide more programs that better suit people in need.”

“I am responsible to pick myself up and get up and brush myself off and say enough is enough. That's how I walked away from alcohol. I saw a sign at the Shaw Conference Centre, saw there was a job. I walked in there, asked them what kind of jobs they had. It was for a cook. They told me I needed food safety and a criminal record check. Two of them gave me their cards. I went back to Bissell Centre and took the courses for a whole month. I got my criminal record check. Now I am working. I would say that I am responsible for what I want to do. I can do it. I know I can. I have never given up.”