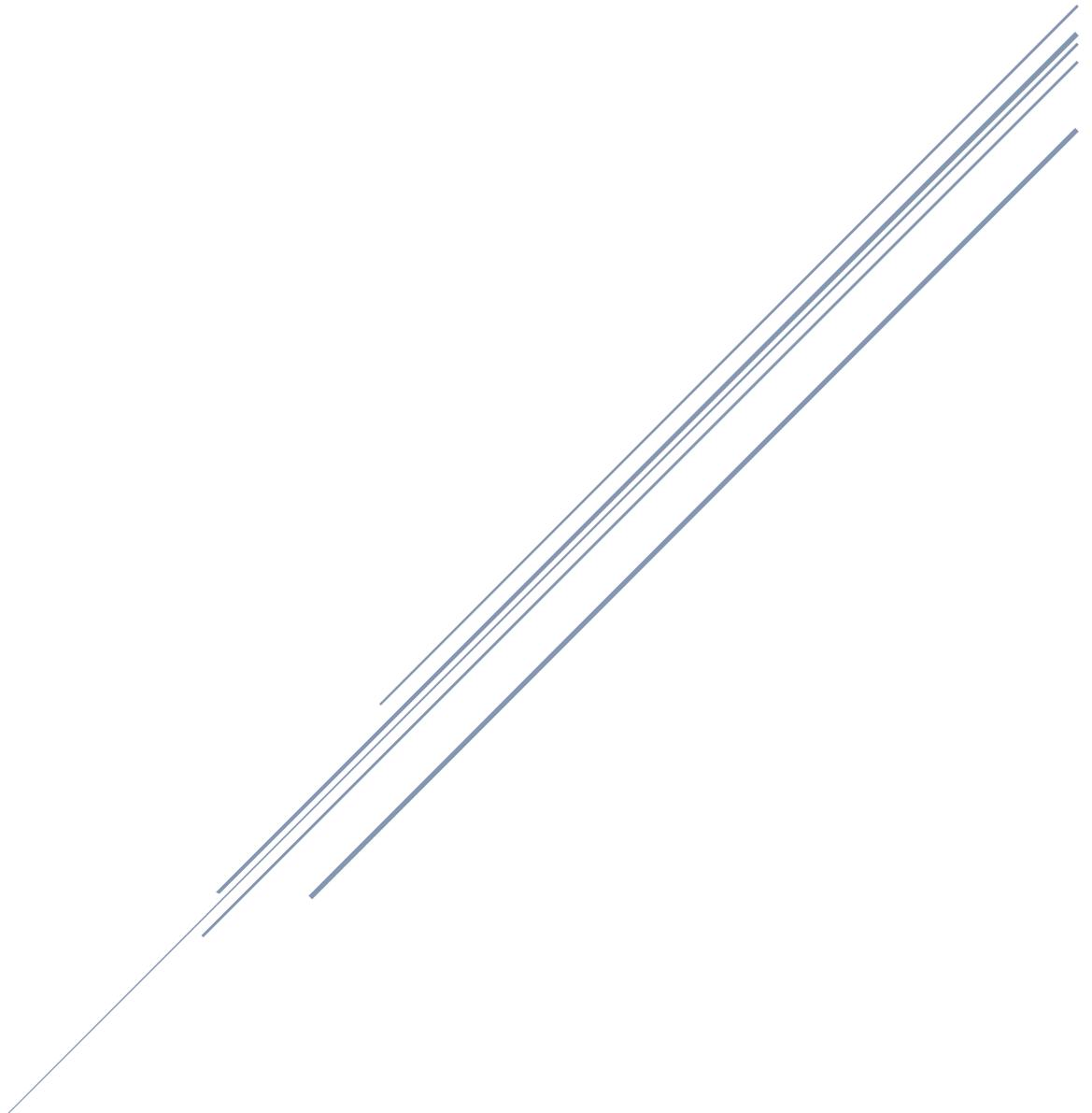


# BC POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

CMHA KAMLOOPS Small Group Session Report



Prepared By  
Alfred Achoba & Sheena Christian

# Introduction

On behalf of Canadian Mental Health Association Kamloops Branch, we are pleased to present our report detailing steps to eliminate poverty and recommendations for BC poverty reduction strategy. Our session was hosted to address poverty, voiced directly from individuals (youths, adults and seniors) experiencing homelessness including episodic, chronic and transitional cases.

## Participants

Our small group session was hosted on March 19, 2018 in Kamloops BC. Our focus groups were the homeless population and individuals diagnosed with a mental illness and or substance use disorder. In total, 31 adult individuals attended our small group session, with representatives from the following service providers; ASK Wellness Society of Kamloops, Lil Michif Otipemisiwak Family and Community Services, Open Door Group, WorkBC, Kamloops Corrections Centre, Emerald Centre, The CMHA Clubhouse, Thompson Rivers University students, and members from The Lived Experience Committee.

Individuals and service providers identified what was working, but also voiced what needs to be done to eradicate poverty for people (mainly the homeless and vulnerable population). We heard from individuals who experience poverty due to employment restrictions, inability to find good paying jobs, unrealistic support rates (provincial and federal) and sadly poverty because of denial (self) due to lack of access to information or resources.

At the end of our discussion, there was a glowing sense of encouragement and hope from individuals that these small group sessions and BC's poverty reduction strategy will provide feedback to mitigate poverty across the province and the vulnerable population, who often times are neglected and "housed" in poverty.

***"We need policies that are based on current situations for people... people should be entitled to assistance that reflects the cost of living and their situations" – LAVENDER***

# About the Findings

## What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?

While we did not define poverty, most of our participants described feeling helpless and entrenched in poverty due to additional factors or barriers that elevate or contribute to it such as homelessness, mental health issues and addictions. Our small group discussion highlighted several overlapping issues summarized below:

- **Lack of accessible, safe, affordable housing.** Many of our participants feel a growing sense of fear and concern that safe, accessible and affordable housing are difficult to find or are unavailable. The negative effects of nimbyism around affordable housing restricts people's access to supports and resources. Needs cannot be met because affordable housing are sometimes isolated or distant from the city, medical facilities and other social amenities. Unaffordable or high rent reduces income available for transportation, food and medical needs. Affordable housing needs to accommodate a growing family and not just a single individual.

***“Just because I am homeless and you give me housing doesn't mean it should be out of town. I have to spend money on transportation to the grocery store, work and hospital. You assume because I am homeless I can walk to the foodbank? The foodbank doesn't have all I need, I need nutrients and good food to survive”- PINK***

- **Inability to find good jobs.** People who are homeless, vulnerable and suffer from mental health issues have low paying jobs. The spontaneous nature of low paying jobs (seasonal or temporary) results in poverty and these jobs do not have room to grow. While participants recognized that the ministry provided a “top-up” amount, this amount was still not sufficient to meet basic needs or improve the quality of life; a good job is hard to find for our vulnerable population who enter the job market with hopes of improving their quality of life. With limited supports from employers and government, individuals face restricted options and discouragement when rebuilding their careers from scratch or to achieve employment, as this may result in jobs that do not match their skills.

***“What good is a job if at the end of the day I still cannot feed myself? It doesn't matter how long I work I still don't make enough to remain healthy and productive” -RED***

- **Job market is inaccessible or do not accommodate.** Employers are reluctant to hire people who are homeless, vulnerable, suffer from mental health issues or have a history of a criminal offence. Specific examples include people who suffer from disabilities that affects their ability to work or perform duties listed in job descriptions and employers hire them part-time often times with little or no benefits. Individuals charged of a crime often times cannot afford to apply for a pardon and the process to receive a pardon for a criminal offence can be lengthy. The emotional, physical and psychological impact of employment on their health and wellness causes more issues and challenges.

***“Disability is not lazy. The fact is I worked early life and I am not going back to work. I’m 50 years old and have cancer & kidney diseases. Why do I have to suffer just to eat” - YELLOW***

- **Lack of centralized information system on programs and incentives.** The growing amount of information and variety of programming offered within the community can be difficult to navigate. Often times, individuals will struggle with understanding where and how to access services that are appropriate and relevant to their needs. People reported it being difficult dealing with government employees from various programs and understanding if their met the criteria and eligibility to receive specific services. People also expressed frustrations when understanding how to apply for income assistance, indicating the forms were difficult to gain access to and overwhelming to complete.

***“The system is terrible even if you get a counselor or advocate they can’t really help or get your needs met. I see so much waste in the way money is used to pay government agencies, but when your counselor needs to get you help they can’t even reach anyone. They need direct phone lines to the government” – GREEN***

- **Lack of income or financial security.** Income was a big theme in our discussion it was highlighted that a lack of income prevents individuals from participating in the economic and social life of their communities. Almost all participants feel that income assistance programs did not provide enough financial resources to meet their basic needs. As a result, this creates multiple barriers for achieving independence due to the many restrictions and eligibility criteria that will often times leave people in poverty.

## What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

Many of our participants expressed a desire for BC to share tools, ideas and resources with other provinces to address poverty. Federal and provincial resources should be channeled to communities to support their poverty reduction initiatives and if there is none, the government should become a leader in creating a template that will help to assist provinces nationally.

***“The rest of society’s judgment thinking we have it so good and get everything handed to us is wrong and harmful. They have no idea!” – CRANBERRY***

This section of the report outlines the top three priorities or actions developed from our groups and some other themes that emerged from our discussion;

1. **Engaging everyone to work together towards a solution.** Provincial, federal, small & cooperate businesses, service providers, BC Housing, clients and proprietors need to work together to reduce poverty. Investing time and being more inclusive will increase responsibilities, and create further opportunity for all parties to collaborate ideas and benefit from discussed solutions. There is a sense of fear from participants for example, that even if more rental subsidies are provided to everyone, property owners still find a way to increase the cost of renting (in some way). Participants believe that with an inclusive approach, landlords would understand that subsidies are to assist clients to remain housed and not a reason to increase rent, forcing them out of their homes.
2. **Realistic income assistance.** A realistic and sufficient financial support that reflects the cost of living is needed across the board and that income should be at a level that promotes social and economic inclusion, with attention to the needs of the people who are most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Promote the idea around a living wage for people and ensure employers pay enough to meet or exceed the threshold of the living wage. The idea around Minimum wage is “minimum” and not sufficient to improve the quality of life. The government should create more awareness and incentives to help people save for retirement. Benefits should be essential and available to everyone.

***“The reality is that most of these people will never have a job or can’t even make enough money if they have one, so pay them enough to live on”-BROWN***

3. **Provide more affordable, accessible, safe housing.** Kamloops needs more housing for all age groups. Housing should also be more affordable, accessible and safe so that people can have a stable residence that allows them to grow towards independence. Partnerships should be created to ensure housing is available for the homeless or those at risk of homelessness. BC Housing and other stakeholders should make Housing First, their main mandate to meet all housing needs. Affordable, safe and accessible housing should come with adequate supports for people. Government should reward property owners with tax breaks for every affordable housing unit they provide.

***“Just because you provide me with housing doesn’t mean you should have all these rules like I cannot have guest. It is no longer my home since you make the rules. I’d rather be outside camping” -***

**LAVENDER**

- Create a streamlined and coordinated access point to services. Information and services should be reachable at a single place to create systems that are more efficient.
- Ministries may have different programs and services but they should be able to work together to move people through the system. One piece of identification should work for all and be easy to access.
- Invest in education and apprenticeship. Participants discussed more access to free education or training as a key factor to eliminate poverty. Invest in early childhood education for children and provide more support such as childcare to parents so that they can attend school.
- Create more culturally inclusive educational programs that supports all demographics.

**“The cost of poverty affects us all” - GREY**

- Ensure that employers are providing professional development opportunities to employees such as resume assistance and computer training.
- Provide more support to people with multiple barriers and understand that these barriers impede their ability to function in society. Provide more outreach and advocacy support to assist with navigating through the system.
- More accessible and affordable health services including treatment opportunities and wellness programs.

- People should earn more money even when they are receiving assistance without being penalized.