



BC Poverty Reduction Strategy

Downtown East Side Women's Centre Shelter Users' Discussion and Input Session (**Addendum**)

Introduction

The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre has operated an emergency shelter for women since 2006; starting within its drop in space at 302 Columbia Street and presently at 412 E. Cordova.

The Downtown East Side Women's Centre shelter (<http://dewc.ca/emergency-shelter>) is one less than a handful of women-only shelters within the neighborhood. We operate the lowest barrier harm-reduction centred space to accommodate self-identified women of diverse backgrounds and ages with severe mental health and addictions. Each night the shelter is open with beds for 50 women; however the space provides shelter for up to 150 women through delivering meals, hot beverages, shower facility plus a dining room for respite from the cold for self-identified women to drop-in between dusk to 5 am. The shelter is in operation from 5:45 pm to 8:45 am on weekdays and is 24 hours a day on weekends and statutory holidays.

The shelter has operated under emergency funding for twelve years and has just been confirmed as a space (with permanent funding) to be housed in its current location (pending renovations).

The Small Group Discussions lead by the Power of Women Project were held at the Drop-In Centre at 302 Columbia; however, **there is minimal traffic between the populations of the Drop-In and the Shelter** although both communities face the same systemic discrimination listed in the opening of the Drop-In centred report. The impact of homelessness or precarious living conditions especially for senior self-identified females and/or women with severe challenges due to addiction or mental health is often under-documented or unaccounted for in studies on either homelessness¹ - or research on precarious conditions for seniors².

¹ *2017 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver* BC Non-Profit Housing Association Accessed March 30th, 2018 <http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/regional-planning/homelessness/HomelessnessPublications/2017MetroVancouverHomelessCount.pdf>

² *We Are Not All the Same: Key Law, Policy and Practice Strategies for Improving the Lives of Older Women in the Lower Mainland*, CCEL Report no. 8 (March 2017) Accessed March 30th, 2018 http://www.bcli.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/OlderWomenDialogueReportMarch_2017Web.pdf

This addendum based on 14 self-identified users of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre Emergency Shelter does not attempt to give more than a snapshot of how poverty has a similar and/or deeper impact specifically on the shelter user constituency based on what they agreed as a group would be priorities for poverty reduction for shelter users.

The session took place on Wednesday March 28th, 2018 at 412 E. Cordova between 7:30 and 9:30pm. The call for participants included a welcome to self-identified women who regularly access this after dusk space for food, showers and a safe break space from their activities in street-based informal economies whether it be sex-work or street-vending that occurs year-round.

Dinner was provided at the start of the session with bus tickets and an honorarium in the form of gift cards for those who participated for the time allotted.

Information voluntarily disclosed by the Participants

In the duration of the discussion a wider range of information came to light based on participants’ experience with chronic and episodic homelessness and experience within shelter systems based in Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley, Northern British Columbia as well as Montreal and Canada.

The single direct question asked of women about their demographic information was their length of experience with the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre shelter.

0 < 2 years: 4 women 3 - 4 years: 7 women 5 – 12 years: 3 women

There were multiple issues identified by women through the duration of the discussion based on the 2 key questions. **This session had an additional question that recognized that women who are homeless have an entirely different daily ‘flight plan’ for accessing resources in order to survive without permanent, safe storage.**

In the closing of the session participants were asked to indicate by show-of-hands what issues were of greatest priority that they wanted action on for improvement in the quality of life for shelter women living in poverty.

The main issues identified in order of importance

- Adequate and Affordable Housing and Rent
- Healthcare: Coverage and Access
- Stigma against Drug users, homeless people, the poor and those with mental health issues
- Policing and Criminalization
- Pension and Aging
- Money

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES FACING YOU AND PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY RIGHT NOW?

- Not enough money!!
- I find the problem is you have to dig deep to find out resources, free stuff. If you don't talk to the girls on the street you don't know shit. You have a worker you have to let them know it's out there. Fight for it. It's like they think its coming out of their own pocket. You are forced to run around and fighting for every dollar that you are worth.
- **Prescriptions are not all covered. I have to pay for the whole things, I became homeless and I was drugged. I am left with the aftermath to even access proper healthcare. I have problems with my jaws separating. Dentists want me to pay up front then get money from Victoria.**
- **When we got the \$100 raise, the rent went up. So they have to take the difference out of it. They always criticize us. When we got to St. Paul's [Hospital] and say I do drugs - I don't get proper care.** Even paramedics are rude to me and treat us like shit because they have a paycheque every two weeks –
- **My issue is for the future and my pension and I am trying to see if I don't have to go on pension. I am trying to get money from Federal with my learning disability from the past. I am trying to get help for that before I am 60. I can't find anyone. I know it's going to take a long time because I haven't worked for 10 years. I will be lucky I get \$200 [in pension] and with PWD they will take a cut. That's my issue for elders who live here. I need help with that now.**
- Lots of things happening with poverty – you will get so many answers and nothing happens. It's taken 10-20 years to raise [BC] welfare. There's more in Alberta and other parts of Canada.
- **They are building a complex over there and nobody I know gets in there. Module building in the street market. It's like who they like...who gets a suite. It's unfair down here. It's not getting better its getting worse.**
- **The housing being done by [a non profit]. Who has a minimum income of over 30\$K? Most of the housing is assisted or subsidized living. What about the rest of us [with no income] not a risk to ourselves? We don't hear of a building like that.**
- Welfare don't allow people to stay in one place. No boyfriend or girlfriend, no overnights.
- If you don't have an address there is no support even with BC ID. By 2020 there's no money for sure without BC ID. This has been [an issue] coming.

- **It's difficult for people to get stable to get off the street. [It would be more successful] if we had enough shelters[for transition period]. Keep trying to pull people into housing directly from the street. I have been staying in shelters for 10 – 15 years but at least not on the street. Not enough shelter beds, I haven't slept in a bed for months. I had to go to Chilliwack for an uncomfortable cold draughty shelter. We have another delay on the new shelter.**
- I want people to quit beating around the bush. Tell me what it's about. Straight up information respect and honesty. No Hidden agendas.
- **I wish they would make a shelter for folks like myself** [regular trans-identified shelter user]
- **Shelter conditions are bad**
- **Its almost like homelessness is a crime.**

WHAT IS YOUR DAY TO DAY FLIGHT PLAN IN ORDER TO SURVIVE?

- **I get up and check my place [through the day] I am happy to have this place I don't have a TV so I get isolated. I come here and other organizations. [This shelter] is open until 5 am when they close the gate.**
- I wake up do the flea market, help my kids out. Sometime s I pretend I don't see them (Laughter) I think ahead how to do this tomorrow – how to do it.
- **I lose my shit all the time and coming in here I don't have to explain myself – or can feel like myself - no judgement layover. I don't know where I'd be; I would have done something and ended up in jail since [instead] I can vent or cry[in the shelter].**
- If there are phone calls, go to library follow-up on housing. On a nice day go to the Sun Yat Sen Gardens for sunshine and get on with my day.
- In Toronto you get bus tickets; Powell Place used to do so here. No set place to get bus tickets to be able to move around beyond the neighbourhood.
- **Vending thing- What they are doing is not to clean up the streets; it's about keeping people poor. The clear up impacts folks ability to make money.**
- I always go get resources even if on my vending, and where I can find my resources. I will go over to all the places [even the] Ombudsman to help you get what you need.
- **“How am I going to make money today?”**

WHAT WOULD ADDRESS THESE ISSUES AND HELP YOU OUT OF POVERTY?

- *Legalize street vending with cheap licences. Cops hassle vendors and keep people poor [Vending] should be protected under the DEWC [as part of] a swap meet or table.*
- *Adequate and affordable housing and rent options*
- *Clothing allowance should be accumulating.*
- *All prescriptions should be covered.*
- *Housing referrals for health issues needed for the shelter.*
- *Counselling is needed at the shelters*
- *Rich people should have an obligation to give back*
- *Increase work on destigmatizing drug users, homelessness, poverty and mental health issues*

Conclusion

This short 5-page addendum captures general ideas that came out of the Shelter User session aimed at problem-targeting as well as solution-oriented discussion. The highlighted sections on pages 3 and 4 were not identified in the larger Drop-In sessions; however, there are many points from the Drop-In report that shelter users might have touched upon in a longer session.

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