



## SPARC BC – Final Report Small Group Discussion Funding

Date of Session	15 <sup>th</sup> March 2018
Community	Arabic speaking members in New Westminster
# of Participants	32 people
# of Organizations	Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society (GVFB)

### About the Participants:

Tell us a bit about your group (i.e. general social and demographic profile – i.e. seniors, youth, single mothers, people who are homeless etc....)

The majority of the members attending the session were senior women with a refugee or immigrant experience who speak Arabic. There were two Lebanese women with children who also attended. Four men, all Syrian refugees, also attended; they were all fathers with families. The length of residency in Canada among participants ranged from 10 months to 15 years.

### About the Findings:

Tell us about the types of insights and feedback received to the following questions:

1. What are the issues facing you and people living in poverty right now?
2. What would address these issues and help you or others out of poverty?

**Thank you from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank and its members for funding this opportunity to share our voices and help inform the development of BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy.**

**Issues:** [Provide the results of your discussion of the issues – it should be transcribed from your flip chart notes]

### **Housing**

- There is a need for rent cap. Landlords can charge what they want and increase rent in a tight market. Rent starts at a reasonable price and quickly escalates to a high rate. Rent ranges from \$1100 to \$1500
- Rental assistance is only for those who have young children. Singles and couples (without children) are not eligible for this.
- “I pay my income and my son’s child tax benefit for the rent, and I am left with nothing. I still can’t move to BC Housing. I have been waiting for three years.”
- “Waiting lists for affordable housing (BC Housing) are very long.”
- Even after receiving a tenant eviction letter, I was not able to move to BC Housing.
- Lack of affordable rental options.

### **Language barrier:**

- Those sponsored by a spouse are not eligible for free LINC classes, even when the spouse is on income assistance.
- At walk-in clinics it is very hard to communicate with a doctor or a specialist who doesn’t speak Arabic without the presence of an interpreter.
- For LINC classes, the waiting list is very long, which hinders our ability to improve our language delays finding a good paying job.
- No evening LINC classes are offered. If I want to work in the morning it means I must stop working towards language efficiency, since I can’t attend English classes in the evening.
- Seniors are enrolled in English classes with the younger generation, and they are not given the attention that they require as elderly and they report often feeling ignored by teacher.
- Finding work is very hard due to language barriers and due to Islamic clothing (scarf)
- Some ESL teachers are not qualified and the organization should check on the teachers, their teaching quality, and how they treat students.
- ESL schools don’t provide child minding which makes it difficult for mothers to attend English classes and improve their ability to learn English and find work faster.

### **Income assistance:**

- Hourly wages are very low to the degree that it is very close to income assistance, which discourages people from working when they can get a similar income without having to work. Not including those who work and get paid cash to add to their Income assistance wage, because it is better than working at a minimum wage jobs with minimal benefits, and losing their Income assistance.
- Income assistance is very low, and housing portion is not logical.

### **Expenses**

- Transportation is very expensive for one person to go to work using public transport; the cost of a monthly pass is the equal to the work of two days. This depends on what zone they purchase to their pass, since the more zones, the more expensive.

- BC Hydro rate is very high (one participant pays \$400 every two month)
- Phone bills and internet are expensive; “some phone company takes advantage of people and charges us more.”
- “Food is expensive and food bank give us food that we don’t eat, too much of the same products that are canned, non-nutritional foods. Why don’t they give us gift cards instead and we can buy what we eat? “(It was explained to them that most food distributed by food bank are donated to them and not purchased)

### **Education:**

- Upgrading credentials is extremely hard, the process is long and expensive, especially for someone with a low English level and for a parent who needs to support a family.
- Post-secondary education in BC is very expensive for our children.
- Post-secondary education is very expensive for us and not all schools are eligible for student aid.
- Scholarships and bursaries are very hard to get for post-secondary education.

### **Taxes**

- Taxes are very high.
- For a single person, income taxes are very high, and takes a big chunk from the income, which is unfair for someone already struggling to make ends meet.

### **Job and employment**

- Minimum wage is very low and doesn’t reflect economical price inflation; low wages are insufficient to afford rents.
- Finding a job is extremely hard, even for a dentist attendee (who graduated back home)
- Very hard to find jobs, people give their resume to too many employers, but they never hear back from them.

### **Health issues**

- Going to Emergency room will require 4 hours of waiting.
- As refugees, we face so many challenges; economical, psychological, financial, health, language barrier, family issues that make us overwhelmed and hold us back from moving forward.
- Inability of people to afford medications and supplies (two participants were prescribed medication and due to high price didn’t buy it).
- Dental and pharmaceutical costs not adequately covered.

### **Transportation**

- Poor transit services that are often not accessible. Public transit is not available in the early morning, which is preventing people from working in faraway places and in jobs with early hours.

## **Possible Solutions**

[Provide the results of your discussion of possible solutions– it should be transcribed from your flip chart notes]

- Increase the number of English classes to reduce wait list and make evening classes available.
- Making upgrading of someone’s certifications and credentials easier and more affordable, which makes finding work easier.
- Increasing the income assistance rate to a rate that reflects the high prices of living in Vancouver.

- Establishing an Arabic center for Arabic community to help and support new immigrants in all aspect of their new life.
- More listening circle events for new immigrants to exchange ideas and voice their concerns.
- Recognizing new immigrants' foreign credentials and work experiences, to speed integration and contribution to society.
- Volunteering for long time without any paid job offer while volunteering, there should be a better recognition to volunteer work.
- Upgrading credential should be subsidized or free to be more possible and affordable.
- The way Work BC functions is not satisfying, since individuals work closely with the case worker at Work BC for 1 year or longer, without any job placement or even an interview.
- There should be another way of showcasing our skills and work experiences, other than volunteering at organizations that are not offering jobs.
- We need more conversation circles that offer English learning in a setting other than school. "They always ask us to practice in school, but we don't know English speaking person to talk to, so these circles will aim for more talking and conversation style learning opportunities for us."
- There are no English/Arabic dictionaries to help us to improve our language.
- We need more help in establishing our own businesses, this way we can use our skills and make money without the need to apply for jobs that require high level of English.
- Provide free post-secondary education like other countries.

### Solutions and Actions That Can Make a Difference

(a) Looking at the list of issues and solutions generated, what types of solutions did the individuals who participated in your meeting identify as most important to them?

[Each participant received four (4) sticky dots to put on the solutions that from their perspective are most important]. Your summary report should include any of the solutions that received a dot from those that received the most dots to those receiving only one dot.

- English classes.
- Minimum wage increase.
- Community Centre for Arabic Speakers.
- More listening circles.

(b) What emerged as the top 3 solutions or ideas based on the conversations and the individual priority setting?

- Increase English language classes; reducing waiting lists and increase evening classes.
- Increase minimum wage to be higher than income assistance rate.
- Establish a community center for Arabic speaking people, to help and support new immigrants in all aspects of their new life.