

# Indigenous Poverty Reduction Report

## Small Group Consultations

**Port Alberni Friendship Center**

**February to March 2018**

**Number of Participants at each session: 7 – 14**

**Number of Groups: 16**

### Section A: Barriers to Reducing Poverty

What were the main barriers to reducing poverty that you heard at your consultation session? Please identify each barrier and provide a description as to why it was identified.

#### **Barrier #1:**

**Income:** for those on social assistance, the current rate of benefits does not match rate of inflation and cost of living thereby keeping people stuck in poverty and unable to live with anything other than their basic needs. For those who are employed, low paying jobs do not meet basic needs, most have to take on more than one job just to get by and be able to pay rent. Many of our families/singles will do without hydro for months and are limited to one meal a day from the local soup kitchen to be able to afford to have a roof over their head no matter how sub-standard and unsafe it may be.

#### **Barrier #2:**

**Housing:** cost of housing has doubled in the last two years alone. There has been no building of affordable housing units, no regulation around capping rental increases, or rental subsidy programs. As a result, many people must live in sub-standard housing that quite often does not meet health and safety standards or places families in unsafe neighborhoods, single people unable to obtain housing therefore resulting in homelessness or not being able to afford a place of their own. Social assistance shelter portion is not in line with current rental market rates.

#### **Barrier #3:**

**Food:** Because of the disproportionate social assistance rates and low paying jobs, and high costs of rent, there is not much money left after paying rent. People often have to choose between paying hydro or buying food. Due to low income poverty, people seldom have the means (money) to buy enough food to last the month never mind, healthy food, fruit, vegetables and snacks for their families. As a result, there is a high demand for the use of the one and only food bank in this community as well as the only soup kitchen. Currently, families accessing the soup kitchen have no choice but to go with their current “lottery” system where,

when your number is called, you choose what foods to take from the selection. If you are last to be called, families often have very little left to choose from and sometimes walk away with nothing.

**Barrier #4:**

**Need for services:** Many participants commented that, as a small community, what service agencies there are, are over-burdened, have waitlists or that there needs to be more services available to this community. Port Alberni has a large population of single parent families on social assistance as well as singles who are stuck in poverty. Oftentimes, poverty or homelessness leads to addiction issues for which services are difficult to access either due to waitlists or lack of transportation. Need for food security – Port Alberni has one food bank and one soup kitchen with no other agencies able to provide emergency food to families or singles for more than a couple of days at best. Lack of affordable housing – people are barely making their rent payments or are falling behind because they have chosen to buy enough food to last the month and sometimes it comes out of rent. Housing related resource programs – there is very little direct support for housing issues. More work is needed by the Provincial Government and City to build and or ensure there is safe and affordable housing for singles, elders/seniors and families that includes wrap around supports and services understands the overwhelming and unique needs of our community.

**Barrier #5:**

**Poor Health** is more prevalent amongst those living in poverty. They are more often living in substandard housing situations which are often moldy because they cannot afford hydro; have poor nutrition as a result of not having the resources to purchase healthy food and in many cases going without food for days. This often results in increased health problems such as Diabetes, Arthritis, respiratory illnesses and low immune system. Many of spoke about not having access to health care and feeling unwelcome at our local hospital and that racism and judgement were often the reason they would not access these services. When accessing these services, health care providers would make judgement comments and it was clear that they would be pushed to the back of the line often waiting over 6 hours for service. In many cases they would give up believing that they would not receive service no matter how long they waited.

## **Section B: Solutions to Reducing Poverty**

What were the solutions to reducing poverty that you heard at your consultation session? Please identify and provide a description as to how each solution addresses the corresponding barriers that were identified in section A.

**Solution(s) to Barrier #1:**

**Income solutions:**

- Increase social assistance/disability rates to match cost of living and current cost of housing rates

- Increase minimum wage so that it is a living wage
- Availability of Emergency funds (IE: to prevent hydro cut-off, evictions, parents needing food or items for their babies) without government red tape and long wait times
- More access to money provided for community to meet emergency needs
- More money to nonprofits to be able to support and provide for low income singles and families
- Support for people who work (fulltime or part-time) but who still need help yet don't fall into specific categories for financial help (falling through the cracks)
- More help from government (funds, programs)
- Increased shelter rates so less money is coming out of support money (which food and bill money goes toward)
- Workshops for adults and youth on how to budget money for groceries, housing, bills etc.
- Support within community agencies across the board to help employable individuals with gas cards, bus passes, clothing and footwear to reduce barriers in seeking and securing employment or education toward employment

### **Solution(s) to Barrier #2:**

#### **Housing:**

- Affordable housing needs to be built
- There needs to be more low income housing and subsidized housing available
- We need safe and accessible emergency shelters for couples, families and teenagers
- Lower rent costs and cap on BC Hydro rates/bills
- Housing for single people as well as multiple family dwellings for large families
- Implement quality control/inspections on sub-standard housing to make it safer for everyone
- Port Alberni would benefit from having a Restore/Habitat for humanity in our community – affordable building materials for landlords to be able to afford to keep their properties in good repair and opportunities for families to own their own 'forever' home
- City needs to crackdown on all Slum Lords not just 'nuisance property' identified premises
- City needs to address abandoned buildings which should either be re-built or turned into affordable housing (or, in some cases, torn down to make room for development)
- Social Assistance should allow more time to pay back damage deposits so it's less monthly coming off SA cheques

### **Solution(s) to Barrier #3:**

#### **Food:**

- Online Community food bank where community members with internet/wifi access can reach out for emergency food help
- Increase in crisis support/food banks – possibly available through organizations
- Community Food gardens, sharing of resources, teachings around food sustainability (IE: canning fish, jarring garden vegetables/fruit)
- Affordable healthy food through grocery store weekly offerings such as Quality Foods \$1.49 days but available at all grocery stores

- Food hampers available through Salvation Army made available weekly or emergency basis without appointment being required
- Improved lunch programs within schools/ Better lunches in schools
- Government money made available to non-profit organizations to be able to provide soup kitchens, emergency food staples, community lunches
- Increased food distribution at Salvation Army or other agencies

#### **Solution(s) to Barrier #4:**

##### **Need for Services:**

- More Free Stores for basic or household items (like in many small communities where local landfill sites have a separate section of re-usable items)
- Municipal, provincial and federal support around providing more subsidized programs like low income housing and daycare.
- Need services that provide safe places for the homeless with free showers/bathing facilities and access to laundry, personal hygiene products, free clothing, footwear, food
- Affordable childcare for after school (subsidized childcare for working poor)
- Collaboration and support between city and local nations (off reserve members count too) to address poverty related issues, including once a month progress review/update meetings between all stakeholders
- Social experiment: have upper crust switch roles to really experience what it is like to live in poverty
- Better distribution of information around community resources, how/where to access beds, household goods, food, vacancy listings - build awareness about where to get help
- City, stake holders and interested parties do research around what other communities, provinces, countries are doing to address poverty, more round table discussions/meetings to move forward on implementing actions
- Homeless/low-income to have better relations and more access to the police force
- Improved support and protection for the homeless
- Give youth opportunities in social service agencies and in performing service to community to help those less fortunate
- Assistance with transportation and utilities – could be made available via non-profits, city or other resources in community over and above what may be available at social assistance. Employed or under-employed individuals often do not qualify for these types of support so open it up to all those in poverty employed or not.

#### **Solution(s) to Barrier #5:**

##### **Health**

- Access to health care services at culturally sensitive organization
- Ensure Health care providers are sensitive and compassionate
- Health care providers need to provide care using a non-judgmental approach.

- Everyone deserves respect
- Elders/seniors deserve the best care no matter what age they are.
- Health care providers should undergo an assessment which measures whether they are suited for this kind of profession.
- Racism and mistreatment needs to be recognized as a clear breach of professionalism and should be reason for terminating the health care professional's ability to practice.
- Health care professions should have mandatory training in community in indigenous organizations.
- Partner with Friendship Centers to provide access to culturally sensitive health care supports.
- Provide enough social supports so there is enough money to eat healthy to improve health care outcomes
- Increase Safe and Affordable Social Housing for Families, Elders, Youth and those suffering from Addictions.
- Provide opportunities for training to employment that is individualized and realistic for each person's situation.

### **Other thoughts or comments?**

As many of the issues noted within this report cannot be changed or improved upon except at a federal or provincial level, it would be beneficial to have more municipal (city) level involvement and support to our impoverished populations as a starting point.

The sense among the various discussion tables was that the situation in our community is only getting worse, that housing prices are well outside of a majority of the community's financial reaches and that something desperately needs to be done about the rental costs, some kind of intervention that involves setting rental rates at an affordable level that doesn't exceed fifty percent of one's income. Ability to access safe and affordable housing for all ages and or rental subsidies seemed to continually come up in conversations as too much of one's income is spent on putting a roof overhead with not much left to buy food, or having to choose between having hydro or to eat.

On the other side, many landlords are getting out of the business of renting as they often feel rights are one sided and are often left with tenants not being able to pay the rent, leaving homes in disrepair costing them thousands of dollars, thereby making it not cost affective to rent.

Prices of housing going up as much as 40% in Port Alberni over the last couple of years has also had a huge effect on rental rates as homes are sold and new landlords costs have increased substantially. Increase in taxes, insurance, repairs and more have discouraged new landlords and they are often forced to ensure that the possibility of damage costs is included in their rent as they will not be able to recover this in a damage deposit.

There is also a concern that if we regulate rental costs and it doesn't cover the actual costs, it will reduce the number of rentals available as landlords will not be able to afford to continue and will move on to other ways of investing thereby having the opposite effect.

One of the ways the Provincial Government should look at ways to increase the rental stock in BC is by finding ways to attract good landlords, rewarding them for keeping their rates affordable and ensuring there are policies/guidelines that protect and make both the tenant and landlord accountable. A recommendation to host an adhoc Landlord Consultation Committee of those who are in the business not to make money but to support a community looking for suggestions on how to improve our current housing crisis. Often non-profits are in a position to find out who these landlords would be. Much can be learned by looking at both sides of the coin and can often be a way to build a better community.