

BC POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY CONSULTATION – POSITIVE LIVING NORTH

Date	Interviews completed during February 2018
Community	Prince George, BC
# of Participants	12
# of Organizations	1

ISSUES

Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes food, shelter, safety and sustainability as essential to reaching one's potential. In interviews, Positive Living North (PLN)'s members regarding issues and solutions for poverty reduction, Maslow's needs were repeated again and again.

1. Housing is unsustainable in the current system.

In Prince George, affordable housing for single, couples, and families experiencing poverty is challenging. Members must choose between utilities, food, or rent when money comes in.

Many members live in shelters, due to the inability to afford or qualify for safe housing. Members of PLN, are often at the mercy of "slumlords" and live in situations with infestation of rodents and bugs, substandard electricity and sewer systems, and improper ventilation which leads to deathly black mold. All of which provide unsafe, unhealthy environments to persons with already compromised immune systems. Due to "slumlords" not signing leases, there is a monthly if not daily threat of losing their home if the tenant cannot comply with requests from the landlord for more money or if the tenant asks for repairs.

As an Aboriginal organization, staff regularly hear and witness instances of racism when our members seek housing or interact with potential landlords. Additionally Members have experienced stigma and discrimination when members give potential property owners an "intention to rent forum", and landlords learn members were on Social Assistance or Disability.

2. Income for people on Disability or Social Assistance is not adequate to meet basic human needs.

Disability, social assistance and pension benefits from the government are inadequate; causing people to choose between rent, food, or bills. In cases of living on the street, people have no fixed address, which prevents them from accessing different government and housing subsidies.

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Without access to food banks, faith-based organization's meal programs, and donations to a variety of service organizations food security is unattainable. Even then, the food provided is incompatible with a nutritious diet. Food is often high starch, high calories, high sugar, and high salt - all of which put people in poverty at risk for serious health issues.

3. **Members of PLN find discrimination to be a significant barrier** to accessing work, food, housing, social services, disability, as well as interacting with society and the community and affect an overall perception of abilities.

Members are turned away from housing opportunities because of race, source of income, and HIV status. People are assumed to be stupid, lazy and uneducated if they are accessing social services or disability.

Racial discrimination is still very real and predominant in the current culture. People of Aboriginal ancestry are shadowed in stores, refused housing, and generally perceived to be criminal. Racial slurs are common in the daily interactions of our members. Additionally, our members suffer from stigma and discrimination related to living with HIV.

SOLUTIONS

Strategy 1

Increasing the amount of social assistance, pension or disability to over the poverty line or a living wage. People should not have to choose between paying bills, food, or rent. Everyone should have enough income be able to afford, sustain, and maintain a safe and stable home.

Strategy 2

Increasing the accessibility to affordable and safe housing. People cannot move forward in their wellbeing without first addressing stability of shelter.

Strategy 3

To address the instances of racial, economic discrimination and lower the power of illegal authority of slumlords, **we recommend a low barrier (no or low cost) and accessible (not electronic) process** in which economically disadvantaged individuals can report racism, discrimination, and harassment.

**POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY CONSULTATION MARCH 12, 2018
FIRE PIT CULTURAL DROP IN CENTRE**

Introduction:

Date	March 12, 2018
Community	Prince George, BC
# of Participants	56
# of Organizations	1

About the Participants:

The participants of the Fire Pit Cultural Drop In Centre consultation covered a wide range of demographics: single men, single mothers, grandparents with custody of grandchildren, transgendered, Seniors and Elders, and youth. Ages ranged from a youth of 15 years to people in their 70’s with the majority of people between 30-50 years of age. Living arrangements included people living in low-income housing, shared accommodations (multiple persons sharing one dwelling place), people who are homeless or living in shelters. Participants were First Nations and Metis ancestry as well as European ancestry. Sources of income included disability, CPP, or social assistance. Some participants were employed or seeking employment to supplement the government assistance.

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

“EVERYTHING COMES BACK TO HOUSING; IF MY RENT WAS LOWER I WOULD HAVE A BETTER CHANCE TO MAKE ENDS MEET.”

HOUSING was identified as a priority issue for almost all 56 patrons attending the meeting. Housing and utilities costs are unaffordable, and unsustainable. Rent is too high for singles to afford a single dwelling place. People have to share an apartment sometimes with strangers in order to afford housing. Often people are forced to share accommodation without a lease or formal agreement that has resulted in eviction without notice. Landlords often ask for more money for utilities or rent than agreed to, leaving the tenant without options other than eviction if they do not pay. Additionally if evicted, the property owners rarely

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return the damage deposit, meaning people will not qualify to rent another unit without the damage deposit. BC Hydro is too expensive.

Single rooming place, they hire a guy who doesn't really clean the place too well. He takes advantage of the tenants with alcohol, smokes and money. He also is verbally and mentally abusive. Complaints to the manager does nothing.

New places get built but tenants have to pay rent, hydro, cable and internet. We can't do it and this is for singles and couples.

The safety of the housing people are able to afford is questionable. Comments about safety included rental units are often infested with bed bugs, rats and mice. Electrical systems are old or dangerous. People reported hearing crackling in the walls and smelling burning wires. One participant spoke of being unable to use the oven due to the faulty wiring in the apartment. Water running down inside walls during the spring melt is another hazard. Renters are often reluctant to report safety issues due to lack of housing alternative and being unable to navigate the landlord tenant dispute process (no money to apply or no computer knowledge).

When there is too many men in a rooming house they all get together against the women. It's not safe in the single places especially for women.

Shelters are not an adequate option. There are no shelters in Prince George for couples or families. If a person is staying at a shelter and trying to get housing, references from the shelter will be unacceptable and prejudice landlords. Additionally shelter workers may evict people with little or no cause.

Additionally many people have to surrender their pets in order to have shelter either in the shelters or in a rental unit. While pets viewed as an unnecessary expense to a Ministry worker are often necessary for mental health which is well documented in health literature.

Transportation

Transportation was also identified as an important barrier to food. People receiving the subsidy for bus passes need to use that money to pay utilities or buy

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food. Inaccessibility to reliable transportation makes it impossible to access less expensive goods and services located outside city centre.

Financial

Participants talked of choosing between paying for rent, food, utilities and furnishings. Tax rebates that might allow individuals to purchase furnishings such as a freezer or beds for children replaces social assistance until it is used. Disability does not help with rent and pays single people \$400 per month to cover ALL expenses.

Minimum wage is not helpful when employers do not provide adequate hours to access benefits. Most low income jobs are either paid less than minimum wage or less than 40 hours a week. This necessitates people working 2 to 3 jobs to make ends meet even while receiving social assistance or disability. Additionally working people are not eligible for the same things such as medical assistance which forces choices between rent, utilities, food and health.

“THERE IS NO FUNDS FOR CLOTHES FOR JOB INTERVIEWS BUT THERE IS A \$100 FOR CLOTHES ONCE THE PERSON IS HIRED. HOW DOES THIS MAKE SENSE?”

The \$100 is for clothing for the entire year including boots and coats for winter that are essential in northern BC.

Peoples who had their social assistance raised by \$100.00 on their cheques now cannot receive food from the Salvation Army food banks because their income is too high. So they are either not able to get free food anymore or a Christmas hamper or they need to receive less income.

Having children apprehended means more expenses for counseling and other activities in order to get the children back.

“GOVERNMENT EXPECTS YOU TO DO WHAT THEY WANT YOU TO DO BUT IT PUTS YOU IN POVERTY SUCH AS BEING TOLD TO MOVE TO A TWO BEDROOM WHEN IT IS TOO EXPENSIVE.”

Ministry workers are viewed as liars and barriers to funding. If the person is unaware of the specific wording to request funds the workers will not volunteer

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the information. People are kept running around to different agencies to get information that the workers don't even use.

“UNLESS YOU RECEIVE THE RIGHT WORKER THESE THINGS CAN BE ACCESSIBLE.”

A person with a bad back tried to get help through ministry. They said “no I don't qualify” which is wrong. Even if the worker puts in a bed request.

HEALTH/ MEDICAL

Dental care and eye care is too expensive. Disability only covers \$1000 per year and prescriptions are not covered. Paying half of the cost of dentures or glasses is no help when a person can't afford food. Without universal dental and eye care and pharmacare, people are left choosing between food and medications or procedures.

“DENTAL FOR DISABILITY IS NOT FULLY COVERED, ONLY CERTAIN AMOUNT; THE REST HAS TO BE FROM SELF WHICH IS HARD TO COME UP WITH”.

It is very difficult to get financial help for mobility issues. Disability process is drawn out and complicated

No support from doctors and medical assistance. There is a lot of judgement from those we try to get help from based on where we come from and who we are, not stereotyping and racism.

FOOD

“WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH FOOD.”

“I FEED MY KIDS AT HOME THEN I COME TO THE FIRE PIT TO EAT. I USUALLY EAT ONCE A DAY.”

“THE \$100 RAISE FOR WELFARE MEANS WE ARE CUT OFF AT THE FOOD BANKS LIKE SALVATION ARMY”

“FOOD MONEY GOES TO FIXING RENTALS OR PAYING UTILITIES SUCH AS HEAT”

STIGMA

MORE WHITE PEOPLE GET ALL THE HELP THROUGH EVERYTHING THAN A NATIVE. IT'S THE TRUTH. STIGMA FOR SURE!!

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We are not treated as a human. Service providers are rude and do not understand what you are dealing with. Homeless people are treated badly.

There are huge mistreatment of those who are living on social assistance and on disability, a lot of judgement; this creates a barrier between worker and client.

The basic needs are not being met.

People with mental health issues are treated badly in shelters

INFORMATION/TECHNOLOGY

People who are living with disabilities need more help – learning, being up to date with the changes. Some are hearing impaired, sight is not good, learning capabilities take longer.

Being homeless there are no access to computers – much less knowing how to use computers. Everything is electronic based. Makes it harder for those not familiar with computers etc.

- Information on changes that the government is implanting on those living on disability and social assistance is not shared with those who access these services. They do not take the time in order to help people understand the changes that are made or how it affects their lives until much later. There are no info sessions etc.

EMPLOYMENT

If they don't trust you... you'll never get a job.

It is hard to get jobs if you have additional challenges such as hard of hearing or not having transportation. Not having a high school education is a huge barrier to jobs. We need temporary job agencies and work jobs that are more suitable for elders. We need extra training to be able to apply for jobs such as how to use a computer.

SUBSTANCE USE

Many people living in poverty living with addictions. They can't afford anything so turning to addictions to cope with the depression and stigma. It is hard to stay sober in shelters

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MAIN ISSUES FACING PEOPLE IN POVERTY

“EVERYTHING COMES BACK TO HOUSING; IF MY RENT WAS LOWER I WOULD HAVE A BETTER CHANCE TO MAKE ENDS MEET.”

THE THREE MOST COMMON ISSUES RAISED WERE:

- **Not enough safe affordable sustainable housing.** The cost of rent and utilities is too high. Housing that is affordable is unsafe. Wait lists for BC housing are too long. Damage deposits not returned from landlords; no help from government to get money back. We can't get another damage deposit from social assistance but the ministry will not go after the landlords. Many of the participants spoke of landlords that refused to sign leases then raised the rent or demanded more money for utilities while threatening eviction.

Issues such as bed bugs, rat/mice infestation, flooding are often ignored by the landlords leaving the person little recourse. The cost and time required to complete landlord/tenants dispute is difficult to navigate without computer knowledge and advocacy. Additionally maintaining a home is expensive when the choice is between cleaning supplies or food.

- **Not enough money from disability, CPP and social assistance.** One person revealed that she will feed her children at home but she will get her meals from the Fire Pit or St Vincent De Paul Drop In Center. Most of the participants are dependent on the food banks, drop in centers and churches for food. High rates for rent and utilities takes the majority of their income.

Another participant stated she had asked her worker for a clothing allowance to get some new clothes for a job interview, the worker stated “I can't do that but when you get the job, I can issue you a clothing voucher”.

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Participants also discussed how when they did their taxes for the year, the calculations would show they should receive a large rebate (over \$500). Yet the rebate was clawed back due to them being on assistance or they were without the monthly assistance check until the rebate was spent. They couldn't use the rebate to stock up on food, clothes for their children or furniture such as beds for children. Similarly the transportation allowance was given but to be used on bus passes; only the seniors seemed to have monthly passes at the consultation.

- **Health care is not universal in that it does not include dental care, eye care and prescriptions.**

Many of the participants had their teeth removed but could not afford dentures even though the government pays for half. People are already choosing between food, utilities and rent. No having teeth impacts already compromised health due to low income by further restricting their diet to soft food.

A number of the participants need to hold papers 3-4 inches from their face in order to read. This is a huge health hazard as most the participants walk and cannot actually see what is in front of them, read instructions or restrictions on medications or foods.

Lastly, prescriptions were unaffordable for the working poor. Employers will not give enough hours for employees to have health care benefits and the employees make too much money to qualify for ministry funding.

Possible Solutions

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

Housing

Building tiny houses for couples and singles that they can rent to own.

Building more affordable housing for families, ideally rent to own.

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Lower rental rates at a percentage of a person's income or a rent freeze as a percentage of the poverty line.

Cracking down on landlords so that rental units are safe and provided regular care and upkeep.

Rentals that are pet friendly.

Food

If housing costs were lower, people would not have to choose between housing and food.

More community, public gardens for food.

Make it illegal to throw out food such as the grocery stores or create second hand stores for day old food.

Social assistance should provide food vouchers

Financial

The welfare, disability and Pension Plan rates all need to be higher. At least to the poverty line.

If the rents cannot go down then raise rent assistance

Raise minimum wage and more low barrier job training to be employable with free training for folks on disability

Income and housing are a huge part of being able get out of poverty the basic needs in order get out poverty.,

There needs to be more funding in order to support the populations of people who are living in poverty, for drop in centers, funding is being cut, there is a need for more funding and workers in the non-profits.

Stigma

There needs to be better communication between government workers and the people they are supposed to be helping, need sensitivity training and an understanding of generational trauma. There are too many misconceptions on those who live in poverty

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Health/ Medical

Free universal health care that includes dental and vision care as well as medications. It should also include alternative care such as physiotherapy, massage therapy and chiropractor.

Information/technology

More time spending on understanding the newer changes that are happening. Not everyone has addresses to receive information about new changes in accessing services or legislation. Internet access is not a necessity to people who are choosing between shelter and food.

Specific workers to help people access these services, because different workers have knowledge of different things, not everyone is on the same page.

More consultations from those living in poverty – like the one tonight, group sessions.

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?

Housing

- Building tiny houses for families, couples and singles
- *****Low income houses**
- Safe housing for people with pet companions
- Less wait time for BC housing

Food Insecurity

- Public garden for all people to help supply food for folk
- Community gardens / More green spaces
- Food vouchers for the farmers market

Financial

- *****Raise welfare, disability to at least the poverty line**
- Raise minimum wage
- Raising the Social Assistance & Disability

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Stigma

- More family friendly place
- More communication between workers and service users

Health/ Medical

- *****More medical, dental, vision help**
- Free Dental
- Free Vision Care
- Free medications

Education

- More programs for youth / children to promote self-esteem. Boys / girls club to pick up & drop off students, substance misuse workshops to keep kids off the streets
- Educating Canadians should be the first priority

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

1. The welfare, disability and Pension Plan rates all need to be raised, raising the rental portion of subsidies to current market value.
2. Freeze the rent and utilities rates. Hold landlords accountable for providing safe affordable shelter.
3. Free universal health care that includes dental and vision care as well as medications. It should also include alternative care such as physiotherapy, massage therapy and chiropractor.

REPORT FROM TABLES:

- Felt really amazing after, felt their voice was heard. It was good that there were recorders (note takers) in smaller groups.
- Thank you!