

“Listen to what we are saying, please listen and try to understand”

HOMELESS VOICES, PART 3 – SUMMARY

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present the perspectives of people who have experienced homelessness, so that decision makers can respond more effectively. This third round of Homeless Voices interviews was designed to gather input on questions related to draft recommendations in the Call to Action. These recommendations came from the Creating Housing Choice forum, 3 days of dialogue among over 100 people.

Outreach workers conducted interviews with 42 people in communities across Metro Vancouver, including women, youth, seniors and people who identified themselves as Aboriginal. Each was currently with no fixed address or had experienced homelessness in the past 2 years.

What kinds of housing and services do people want?

Asked what kinds of housing they want to see built, interview participants spoke of modest, self-contained, subsidized units such as bachelor suites or apartments. They typically dream of something that is “clean and secure”, warm and dry, and “structurally sound”. Some suggested that the ideal housing would be a “small community”.

- Regarding location, there were 2 common themes: outside the Downtown Eastside, and near transit.
- The vast majority of interview participants indicated a preference for doing their own cooking. Several suggested a choice of eating alone or communally.
- Most participants said they would like to have on-site health services and social supports, although some said they would rather not.
- Most said it is not important to live in the same building with their friends and family. On the other hand, some suggested this is crucial to living well.



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What is the Impact of Homelessness on Children and Families?

Some parents chose not to speak about this aspect of their lives, perhaps because of the pain associated with having lost custody and/or being out of contact with their children.

- Comments from some parents revealed a sense that they perceive they would be harshly judged by their children.
- Some have faced a difficult dilemma in which their income was insufficient to provide adequate housing for their children.

What Would You Like People Who Work with You to Understand?

Participants emphasized how it is important for professionals serving them to be compassionate and non-judgemental, seeking to empathize with the unique situation of each individual.

- Several participants suggested it would be helpful if the workers have previously had first hand experience with homelessness and/or related issues.
- Some spoke of the need for various professionals to have knowledge of mental health and addictions.
- Several suggested it is vital to have strong communication skills and basic training in counselling.

How Can We Help People Leave the Street?

Many of the responses confirmed what we learned in the first two rounds of Including Homeless Voices, such as the fundamental point that homelessness often stems from the gap between low incomes and expensive housing markets, combined with an insufficient supply of non-market housing.

- Several commented that in a tight rental market, people on income assistance and/or who have had no fixed address face challenges when competing for scarce housing opportunities.
- Some spoke of the value of having assistance with housing search.
- Others spoke of transportation difficulties.
- Another common theme was the experience of difficulty in making the lifestyle changes associated with moving from long-term homelessness to living indoors.

How Can We Keep People from Becoming Homeless?

- The idea of a rent bank, described to participants as a ‘program to provide one-time help with rent to avoid eviction’, brought out a mixed response.
- The vast majority of participants agreed with the idea of having access to a Residential Tenancy Office (RTO) located in the community.
- Participants spoke resoundingly in favour of having access to advocates to assist with the RTO process.

Conclusion

This report reveals that people in Metro Vancouver who have experienced being homeless have diverse housing needs, dreams and preferences.

In keeping with the theme of ‘housing choice’ in the Call to Action, people who have experienced homelessness made it clear that providing health and social supports in connection with housing is felt to be necessary for some. They share a desire to see improved access to housing and independent living, in some cases with supports built in. The aspiration for many is simply to be housed.

The full Report of Listen to What we Are Saying... can be downloaded from www.gvss.ca

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Something to eat, a place to sleep & someone who gives a damn: A film about homelessness