

3.7 Police, Fire and Emergency Medical Services

During the consultation process, the true cost of homelessness was always a lively topic of discussion. Most participants underestimated the hidden costs of keeping people homeless (estimated to be between \$90,000—\$135,000 per person in other Canadian cities). Three people were not surprised by these high costs and fully appreciated both the costs and the plight of people who are homeless: the Police Chief, the Fire Chief, and the Deputy Chief of Emergency Medical Services.

Part of the solution

All three officials were able to ‘connect the dots’ very quickly when presented with a concept that could end homelessness in ten years. And all three were eager to be a part of the solution.

 *“I am excited to participate in this process. Police officers want to feel they have options and opportunities to help. They want to be a participant in a healthy way.”*

“The flow of the city and the changing demographics mean that the problem shifts from community to community. We need to address the problem, not move the problem. The Firefighters regularly interact with the homeless, we have the relationships. We are well positioned to make a difference.”

“We have been involved in some very creative solutions to assist the homeless to get the care they need without going to a hospital emergency room. We can do more of that, and our Master Plan document has been very proactive in addressing many of the issues the homeless have.”


Adjusting resources

All three supported the idea of Housing First, acknowledging that wrap around services would be essential. They all felt that these services would allow a seamless, supportive interaction mechanism that would contribute to long term success.

EMS estimates that 14% of their 14 million dollar budget is lost in bad debt from serving people who are homeless. Although this almost 2 million dollar loss is significant, EMS were quick to point out that their mandate superseded any numbers and figures.

Fire Services could save upward of 2,500 hours of manpower a year if they were not responding to people who are homeless. This time could be used in policy development, training, inspections, and helping people who are homeless in more productive ways.

Police also acknowledged the high cost of services provided to people who are homeless, citing constable involvement, dispatch costs, etc.

 *“Often there are simply no options. If someone calls 911 because a homeless person appears injured or ill, we need to take that seriously and respond. Once we start the response process, there is no turning back - it ends up in a trip to the emergency room, whether or not it was warranted.”*

“We treat people. Period. Some of them might not have homes, but we look at them as people first.”


“If we had a Housing First model, we could respond to the homeless in ways that were truly helpful. Perhaps we could help with assessment. Perhaps we could link closely with the agencies to help get them into housing.”

Coordination and linkages

The need to link with other provincial groups working on similar strategies was emphasized.

The Provincial Crime Reduction Task Force was one example of a potential ally. The Police do not want to criminalize homelessness. They acknowledge that linking homelessness to crime was a very sensitive area and a difficult conversation to have, but nonetheless, one that must be explored.

Recent government policy changes will see the province being responsible for delivering emergency response service, which impacts both EMS and Fire. Both groups acknowledged that it will be difficult to determine their role in Housing First until those negotiations are complete. What is clear is that no matter what provincial legislation is implemented, Housing First has three very good allies in the Police, Firefighters, and Emergency Response teams.

 *“It is a very difficult conversation to have. As a human being, I am very concerned and feel great compassion for the homeless. That compassion crosses over into my role as Police Chief. My people are also caring; however we are mandated to manage social disorder. Homelessness leads to social disorder, and social disorder is linked to crime. The homeless are victims of crime and also victimize other homeless people. If we eliminate homelessness, we significantly reduce social disorder. If we reduce social disorder, we reduce crime. The Provincial Crime Reduction Task Force could be interested in that. We need to find a way to respectfully have this conversation.”*

