
1.0 Introduction

The Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness was struck to develop a strategy that will end homelessness in ten years. The Committee works through four sub-committees: Housing, Prevention, Services, and Community Engagement.

There is ample evidence to show that successful plans to address homelessness are those which are jurisdictionally owned and community based. Central to the success of Edmonton's strategy is ensuring that the hearts and minds of citizens are engaged and committed. That way, all sectors of our city will vigorously support the process, plans and goals of the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness.

The mandate of the Community Engagement Sub-Committee is to seek input as well as galvanize the community. The Committee is to create the support, buy in, and commitment necessary for the plan to end homelessness to succeed. As an initial step, the Community Engagement Sub-Committee conducted extensive public and key stakeholder discussion groups and interviews. This report outlines the Sub-Committee's findings.

1.1 Methodology

There were three considerations that were critical and specific to designing a community engagement process for this initiative:

- The mandate demanded a thoughtful process that moved beyond public consultation and stimulated solutions, generated commitment and created the will to do what it takes to implement the plan.
- The concept of "Housing First" turns traditional thinking about the stepped approach to homelessness on its head. The community will need to challenge traditional thinking to embrace a model that, while proven, is new.
- The very elements that guarantee the success of the mission to end homelessness - high visibility, aggressive timelines, and an innovative committee approach - layers another level of complexity on an already complex problem.

These factors were integrated into the community engagement process.

The community engagement process was kicked off by a ½ day meeting of the Leadership Committee of the Committee to End Homelessness. The Leadership Committee determined the philosophy, tone and template of the consultation. Within the meeting, the sub committees of Housing, Prevention and Services answered the following:

- Who do we need to consult with?
- What information do we need to collect?
- What questions do we to ask?

The consultation design was based on the results of the meeting (see the Appendix for the minutes from the meeting).

1.2 Who Was Consulted

Over 800 people participated in the consultation process. The process included large and small groups, as well as one-on-one interviews. The following groups were consulted:

- Aboriginal Community.
- Association of Conference Hotels.
- Business Revitalization Zones (BRZs).
- Business Community.
- Christie Communications.
- City of Edmonton Youth Council.
- Downtown Business Association.
- Edmonton Emergency Service (Fire and Medical).
- Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues.
- Edmonton Police Service.
- Elected Officials.
- Epcor.
- Faith Community.
- Frontline Workers.
- Homeless Citizens.
- Industry Associations.
- Landlords and Developers.
- NexGen.
- Post secondary and Training Providers.
- Rotary.
- St. Joe's High School World Vision.
- Telus.
- United Way Supporters.

Each attendee received a written invitation and backgrounder (see the Appendix for more information).

1.3 What They Were Asked

To maintain data consistency, all discussion groups and interviews followed the same format:

- A brief explanation about the mandate of the Committee and the purpose of the consultations.
- An overview of the Housing First program, either through video (CBC Victoria-Portland model, PBS Pathways to Home model) or facilitator explanation.

- Discussion was based on the following questions:
 - What is your reaction to the Housing First concept?
 - How can Housing First be successfully implemented? What do we need to do?
 - What are the barriers and solutions related to Services, Prevention and Housing that need to be overcome?
 - What role do you see yourself playing in the fight to end homelessness?

The consultation team designed a reporting template to make it easier for the committees to synthesize and use the community input.


Each session had a recorder for taking “transcript like” notes of the discussion. Each facilitator was responsible for reviewing and ordering the recorder’s material to serve as an addendum to the session’s report. The session report was submitted to the facilitator for final review and sign off. Then each facilitator submitted the session report to the project coordinator who forwarded the comments to the committees for inclusion in their planning process.



2.0 Overview of Findings and Themes

 *“Don’t be scared to make mistakes. Start small and work out the kinks, but don’t be afraid to start.”*

The support for the work of the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness was overwhelming. All groups acknowledged that homelessness was an issue that needs to be addressed. Many cited ‘Tent City’ as the trigger point for their individual and collective consciousness. Comments such as *“There is no reason for homelessness in this city, let alone this province”* were common. Many people felt shame that homelessness existed side by side with wealth and prosperity.

 *“The dehumanizing issue of homelessness diminishes us all. I have to escort my staff to their car. I am deeply saddened that in MY city, fear and despair are major components of the downtown scene.”*

Common myths emerged, citing the need for increased awareness and education to be a part of any implementation plan. The three most commonly believed myths were:

- People want to be homeless. Some people choose to be homeless.
- There is a total shortage of available apartments. We must build new ones.
- There is no cost to people being homeless.

The most difficult of these myths to debunk was the notion that people chose to be homeless. Even though many participants voice the sentiment ‘there but for the grace of God go I’, the notion that homelessness was a choice lingered.

The landlords consulted quickly dispelled any notion of apartment shortages. They said that the necessary units are indeed available, particularly if there is the opportunity for a long term lease. Some other groups suggested, however, that while there are rental units available, not all will be affordable or available to the homeless. Thus some new housing may need to be constructed.

The cost of homelessness was the easiest myth to debunk. Participants readily understood the costs once the demands that people who are homeless place on the system were discussed. When participants considered homeless citizens’ use of ambulance services, emergency rooms, and police interactions, as well as shelters and soup kitchens, costs became readily apparent.

The acknowledgement that ending homelessness is both a moral and fiscal responsibility led to participants embracing the concept of Housing First - a solution that was viewed as a triple win.



Participants were also curious as to how homelessness was defined and who would be the beneficiaries of the Housing First solution. Some people felt that the committee should start with the easy to house.


“Why should we put someone from prison into homes instead of the single mom who is not on drugs and has a baby?”

“We need to think about the easier people: the people whose problems are based on money only, instead of drugs, crime and mental illness.”

While there was lively discussion regarding who should be housed first, most people agreed that the greatest impact would come from first housing the chronic homeless, and then moving along the spectrum to resolve other types of homelessness. Participants emphasized that Housing First would need to be very clear on who should be housed and why. They cautioned that the program should not sacrifice itself for arbitrary measures of success.

“How do we measure success? Is it by how many people remain housed? Then we would put the people from the pocket of least resistance into housing. But they are not the ones we see on the street; they are not the costly homeless. Do we measure success by not having as many visibly homeless, by a decrease in the cost and strain on the medical and police systems? Then we house the chronically homeless.”

2.1 What do you think of the concept of Housing First?


 *“We are spending a lot of money to keep people homeless. We need to make the public understand that it is far more expensive to keep people homeless than it is to house them.”*

“This can’t be only about saving money.”

Although the concept of Housing First is a new and paradigm-shifting solution to homelessness, the majority of participants ‘got it’.


People readily agreed that the issues plaguing people who are homeless, such as addictions and mental illness, would be more effectively managed and even conquered if people who are homeless were housed. In the words of one participant, *“It just makes so much sense. I can’t believe we haven’t thought of this sooner.”*

While most people understood the overall philosophy of a Housing First approach, there were some common misconceptions in the details of where people would be housed. The concept of scattered housing is a difficult one in a city that for years has been told that no apartment units are available and there is a shortage of affordable housing. Thus, some participants assumed that new housing units would be built, or that people who are homeless would be housed together in select apartment blocks or renovated existing structures.

 *“We need to build a new structure but there is no more land. Maybe we can house them in old schools.”*

Participants from communities that already had a large number of group homes or subsidized housing units encouraged the scattered approach. They indicated that they were already ‘full’ and wanted to consider scattered housing in other areas of the city.

Employers supported the concept while also raising a concern about access to affordable housing for their employees. While employers support the need to end homelessness by providing housing, they caution that the initiative may lead to an unintentional competition with the business community when it comes to housing.

 *“Will the City be competing with my young staff for affordable apartments? It is difficult enough to recruit talented young workers, and they already have troubles finding accommodation. We support the idea (of Housing First), but also want to ensure affordable housing for our employees.”*

Participants understood the complexities of a Housing First concept, and realized that implementation would require strong leadership and a designated organization.

“We need an identifiable leader, and an organization to take this on. Currently, there are too many organizations and no identifiable leader of the homeless.” Nobody “owns” the homeless.”

Many people felt that if the concept were to be successful, it would need to be nimble, and responsive, with the ability to change and improve in real time.

“We need a powerful leader who has the support of all the politicians and a team that can make their own decisions, based on what’s in front of them. They have to move fast, and if it’s not working, change it. They can’t be rule bound or operate like a bureaucracy. This then excludes the City and the Province.”




2.2 A Circle of Hope around Homelessness

In addition to strong leadership and a nimble organization, participants identified six elements they deemed crucial to the success of a Housing First initiative in Edmonton. These elements define a Circle of Hope around homelessness in support of the Housing First initiative.




“We need everything working in tandem. We need to design this using the cooperation and skills of everyone from the business community to the social agencies to the homeless themselves.”

Wrap Around Service

 *“If we commit to a Housing First model, then as agencies, we are going to need to go back and re-examine the very fundamentals of how we provide service. Housing First will only succeed with a profound shift in the way each and every one of us deliver our services.”*


It was unanimous: the key element in a successful Housing First program is the capacity to provide seamless, easy to access, and targeted wrap around services. Equally unanimous was recognition for

the tremendous work the agencies currently perform, and the results they achieve, often with a lack of resources and incentives. Participants felt that the agencies themselves may hold the key to success.


 ***“Edmonton is not starting at square one. We are a fair way along in this type of program. There are numerous organizations that provide housing and supportive, excellent services.”***

Agencies are the key


There was recognition that, despite the excellent work, agencies were stretched thin, and the demand was often great than agencies’ abilities to respond. Participants felt that there was a lack of understanding about the roles that different agencies play, and expressed concern for overlap and duplication. Participants also suggested that while agencies often tried to collaborate, the system was designed to minimize collaboration. There is a perception that, through no fault of the agencies, the system is seen to be structured to keep agencies operating in silos, forcing agencies to protect their own resources and mandate.

 ***“There is no wrap around service now because agencies compete for the same funding. At this point there is no benefit to working together. Do we have to re-invent the services? Currently they are not talking because there is no upside to integrate.”***

Participants also spoke of the number of agencies, and admitted to a lack of understanding about the roles and responsibilities of the agencies. The majority of groups felt that an inventory of existing services was essential in order to plan and deliver a new type of service. One solution might be the creation of two service ‘maps’, one representing current service and the other proposed services. The two ‘maps (current and future) could then be overlaid or compared to identify which desired services are presently being delivered by existing agencies and whether any service gaps need to be filled. This process would streamline the transition from current service delivery to the new initiatives by providing a clear basis for discussions with existing service delivery agencies and funding organizations. Current service delivery and funding agencies would have a basis for determining their roles and responsibilities in any new initiative and be clear on the transition requirements from current roles to possible new service delivery roles and opportunities.


 ***“We need to construct a map of services. We need an inventory of services, roles and responsibilities. Perhaps we can use existing resources in new ways. But right now we don’t even know what’s out there. And even for those who know what’s out there it’s a mass of confusion and cross threading.”***

For a Housing First concept to be successful in Edmonton, participants felt there had to be a central conduit that opened the door to simple, easy access to services. Everyone, from the Police, to people who are homeless, to community members, need ‘one stop shopping’ that streamlines services.


 ***“Support and services need to be integrated through one office that says ‘Homelessness’ on the door. Even if some services are provided elsewhere, this needs to be an effective portal to simplify access. It is a question of legitimacy.”***

Worker’s wages

The other recurring theme was the issue of worker’s wages. The business community in particular felt that the worker’s value was not being recognized, and that any effort must include a redress of what was seen by the majority of groups to be a terrible wrong.


 ***“The real miracle is that we have such excellent workers being paid wages that place them below the poverty line. We in the business community would not be able to survive personally or professionally on the worker’s wages and agencies’ budgets.”***

Participants in almost all groups commented on the abysmal wages of the people working with our most vulnerable citizens. The irony wasn’t lost on participants that the very people working to help people escape poverty and homelessness were often paid wages that put them in the realm of ‘the working poor.’

 ***“If we are going to end homelessness, then we need our best and brightest to be out on the streets, motivating staff and working on social change. It is a crime that our best leaders spend a majority of their time on grant applications instead of doing what they do best - working with the homeless.”***

Agency and frontline workers participated in a full day session to offer input on the Housing First program. Their comments were significant and held great depth. Their comments in their entirety were submitted to the planning committees so they could be incorporated into the overall plan.

Urban Aboriginal Community Involvement

 ***“Until we have a strategy involving Urban Aboriginals, we will never end homelessness. We need someone with a vision and tactical ability.”***

Almost all groups, but particularly elected officials, acknowledge the challenges facing the urban Aboriginal community. People were not surprised to learn that over 40% of people who are homeless were Aboriginal. Participants felt strongly that the Aboriginal community must be involved in ending homelessness, and that any discussions involving Aboriginals should honour their tradition by including elders, ceremony, and practices that are central to the Aboriginal culture. There was optimism that the newly signed provincial accord and the Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee were important steps towards a collaborative relationship.

Participants in all groups felt that the Housing First should work with the Aboriginal community to determine the need for welcoming centers, a central Aboriginal Housing Authority, housing within the community, and prevention strategies.

“We need to dialogue with the Aboriginal community. We need to develop more of a political spine, and work together on this issue.”

An Aboriginal consultation, organized by Wicahitowin Housing Circle, was included in the engagement process. Over 75 people attended an event that honoured traditional beliefs and practices. All of the notes from that session were forwarded to the planning committees for incorporation into their plans.

Homeless Citizens

All groups felt it was important to consult with people who are homeless themselves. People felt that the urgency to resolve homelessness, - the statistics, trends, best practices, conferences, meetings, etc. – must also include the voices of the people who are homeless. Participants suggested we follow the adage “Nothing about us without us.”

“The less money you have, the less power you have; the less ability you have to interact. They (the homeless) become voiceless. The more urban the context, the less opportunity they have to express, to participate. They need to be consulted in this process. They must be allowed to interact in their future.”

Over 60 one-on-one interviews were held with homeless people. The summary results of the interviews appear in the Appendix report, *“You Never Know if You’re Going to Wake Up Dead: Living Without a Home.”*


Policy Framework

Elected officials and agencies, business leaders and post secondary educators - all groups felt that a comprehensive policy framework needs to be established.


“In addition to political will, we need a policy framework. This can’t be left to the whims of government or the turbulence of the budgetary process. We need a policy framework that proves that Albertans believe that having a home is a fundamental human right. This is very important given the wealth of Canada and Alberta.”

Questions were raised about the linkage between the Edmonton Committee to End Homelessness and the provincial initiative. It was deemed important that the Edmonton Committee connect in some way with the province.


Before Homelessness

 *“I like the idea of Housing First, but what are we doing on the other end? What are we doing before they become homeless? We need to catch them BEFORE they fall.”*

If there was a sense of discouragement and lack of optimism, it was related to prevention. Homelessness was viewed as a large and unwieldy issue, with little or no hope of being prevented even if Housing First becomes a reality. The majority of participants felt that prevention resided in the realm of government policy, and, as such, had little faith that governments would embrace the policy positions necessary to prevent poverty and homelessness.

 *“This is the question that troubles me the most: how do we lock that front door so that we can shut homelessness out? We can track the escalation of poverty around the world to political decisions made largely by conservative governments who were in power at the same point in history: Thatcher, Reagan, Mulroney. There is a significant correlation between the increase in homelessness and the conservative government’s elimination of social policy and programs.”*

Historically, many people from a cross section of groups drew a direct line between today’s homelessness problem and policies implemented in the 1980’s.

 *“Some of our homeless are a result of public policy. Policy related to mental illness and the belief that they were better to be community based - instead they ended up on the street. They were released from hospitals or institutions due to a policy which believes that people do better in the community, but they end up on the street because the community didn’t accept them.”*

Prevention and Services

Prevention was also linked very closely to Services. Participants felt that if current agencies were not forced to be reactive, and tangled up in a plethora of bureaucracy, they could better manage the programs that would actually prevent homelessness. When agencies were asked the question “What would be the role of the agencies if there were no more homelessness?” the responses were unanimous: they would spend more time on prevention issues, and return to the mandate of their organizations. Currently, the housing crisis their clients face often cause agencies to detour from their original mandate and put out the fires related to housing.


Participants from all groups felt that the following were central to prevention:

- Government policy that supports eradication of poverty. There is ‘no buffer’ between the working poor and potential homelessness. Force the government to step up to the plate and acknowledge the downstream impact of poverty and no social safety net.
- Start younger. Educate the next generation.
- Get to the root of the original cause. Put focus on prevention. Policies need to be more proactive rather than reactive, i.e. housing before services/preventing eviction.
- Focus on the social determinants of health. (emotional well being, financial).
- Increase capacity in staffing and resources provided through agencies, i.e. mental health.


Metrics and Measures

 *“We want a businesslike, measurable approach that solves or works on a social issue.”*

Participants emphasized the importance of having measurable targets that are staged and met, and encouraged the development of procedures to do the measuring or monitoring. They suggested that targets were important for continuous improvement:


 *“If you are not meeting targets, and you catch it early, you have the ability to adjust and re-evaluate. You can correct quickly. Success depends on flexibility and the capacity to adjust as you go. But you can only do it if you measure key variables.”*

People agreed that measuring performance in the private sector is easy. It is based on how much money the company/individual made last year. The public sector is harder to measure, but participants referenced Toronto’s Streets to Home program as an example of how business measures could be applied to a social program.

 *“The business community will not renew its support after the initial funding if we cannot demonstrate and follow up with expected (and visible, measurable) results. Businesses want to be tied to success.”*

Housing and Landlords

Many participants felt that the Housing First program would not work in Edmonton due to a shortage of suitable apartments. Lack of available units is a concern that was frequently stated.

 *“This can only happen if we inject more units into the market. We must build more units.”*

People who felt that new apartment blocks must be built were worried that all of the people who are homeless would be placed into the same new apartment building.

 *“Don’t take a whole population and ghettoize them.”*

“How is this going to work? We must make sure we just don’t warehouse them.”

Discussions with landlords and developers suggest just the opposite. While market conditions may affect availability, there ARE units available. If the circumstances were right, property owners, landlords, and developers would welcome the opportunity to work on this concept. Depending on circumstances, new units may need to be constructed.

 ***“Whatever you do, don’t build anything new! It is too costly right now, and there are plenty of alternatives to building.”***


“It is the norm to have 50% turnover in tenancy for these people. I would be delighted to participate in a program that ensured a longer lease with regular rent payments”

Project Management

The following would facilitate the involvement of landlords and property managers:

- A third party holding the lease, paying the rent directly to landlord.
- Damage deposits covered, or waived completely because the lease holder would pay for any damage.
- A landlord relations manager assigned to build relationships and problem solve between the tenant and the landlord.
- A mentorship program that helps newly housed through the process of being in a home. (where do you register for sports, how do you set up a bank account and manage it, etc.).
- Wrap around services.
- A case worker available 24 hours a day in case of problems.
- Changes in current regulations and policy (e.g. Capital Health) would be necessary.

Landlords and developers felt that they would seriously consider being involved. They suggested that there be a process of trial and error, and the plan should start on a small scale. A lack of bureaucracy is seen to be critical to success as is the ability to move quickly and decisively.


 ***“Whoever is in power must be able to make quick decisions and the ability to put those decisions in place.”***

“The program manager must have a lot of power. Must move quickly and adjust.”

“Who is going to be connecting the dots? We need a leadership face.”

Pride of Place

Pride of place and choice were seen as essential for success. Participants encouraged the idea of homeless citizens having some choice in where they were going to live, and in selecting and decorating their new home.

 ***“They need to be allowed to interact with their space. Paint a wall, grow some flowers, select their own furniture. Give them options on everything. Give them the support they have never received before.”***