Community Conversation Summary
Charlotte County

August 9, 2022

Introduction

Below, we've summarized the main themes of the two-hour conversation in St. Stephen, New Brunswick with 12 participants with lived experience of housing insecurity and poverty.

The conversation was hosted by *Vibrant Communities Charlotte County, Horizon Community Health, Future St. Stephen,* and *the Human Development Council of Saint John*, at Neighbourhood Works, in partnership with *Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty.*

This summary is in five sections based on the topics of discussion. We've listed the main themes with related content below them. We've tried to be true to the content and emotion of the conversation, which touched on the sensitive and difficult topics of experiencing poverty and housing insecurity, and that may come through in the content presented here. The conversation content will be analyzed further over the next year of the project, and we'll create indicator recommendations and a call-to-action plan from that analysis.

This summary was created after sending a draft to the participants and host organizations to see if these points sounded right, offer an opportunity for corrections or clarification, and ensure that they had the chance to hold and use this information as soon as possible. This finalized version (December 2022) reflects the feedback we received, and the content will be further analyzed over the next year with attention to that feedback. Thanks to everyone who participated and responded!

Overall learnings from the conversation and feedback included:

Community is a real source of strength in St. Stephen, but there is a need for greater social support and community connection for folks experiencing poverty. **Housing insecurity and poverty need to** be recognized by government as urgent and systemic issues. One key action item is the need for immediate emergency shelter and supports for people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Suggestions to achieve that include using existing resources, like vacant properties, to create additional affordable housing.

Since the August conversation, there has been exciting progress on this issue in St. Stephen.

Community Update Since the August Conversation

- August-October 2022: Organizations, government agencies and residents meet and work to understand and address the challenges of residents who are unsheltered.
- November 2022: An outreach worker and warming centre staff are hired as supports for those experiencing being unsheltered.
- December 2022: An out of the cold warming centre is opened and available for those experiencing being unsheltered. The shelter continues to welcome clients every night, and is open 24 hours on days with harsh weather conditions.

More information can be found at: https://togetherststephen.ca/

A community with no poverty has…

Equitable access to resources and community cooperation rather than individual success emerged as main themes for this part of the discussion.

Community

- Everybody would help one another and collaborate
- Everyone would have a place and something that they do to help out the community as a whole. Less emphasis on individual success and more on community success.
- "Be celebrated for your purpose, no matter what that purpose is […] Everyone has value."
- A cooperative agrarian community, self-sufficient, with beekeepers, animals, and music performances
- Positive support from others: "You need to have a cheerleader and get cheerleaders around you. Get just one positive person."

No stigma or discrimination

- No judgment, stigma, or discrimination for people on social assistance or living on low incomes (including internalized stigma and discrimination from others living on low incomes)
- Making it clear to the public that income assistance does not literally come out of other people's paycheques, to avoid stigma for receiving this assistance
- Different attitudes around work – need to change the perception that the harder you work, the better a person you are

Adequate income and fair expenses

- A much higher minimum wage
- Lower limits of how much you can be charged for power and rent
- Universal basic income – a playing field where everyone is equal to start with

Healthy children

- Children would show up to school clean and fed and have their homework done because parents would be able to feed them breakfast, and parents would not worry about making a living and could spend time with their children

Housing

- Thinking out of the box on housing: Different types of buildings, including shipping containers and tiny homes
- No gentrification – use existing resources
- Fair limits on rent

Food security

- Cooperative approach, e.g., everyone pitches in around dinnertime, contributes something no matter how big or small, and cooks a meal together
- No struggle or anxiety about affording food
- Systems to ensure everyone has adequate food:
- "If you go to the grocery store and you don't have enough money to pay for your food, there's something that automatically kicks in"

What is working in your community?

Participants emphasized the people who make up the community as a significant strength. They also noted specific programs or services that are working well, and the opportunity to discuss issues all together as something that feels productive.

People

- Others:
    - "We need to really realize our biggest asset is our people. I really think so."
    - Community members pitch in and help one another. Lots of good people who want to help out in some way.
    - Friends who support each other
- Self:
    - "I usually find my own way. I'm my own best strength."
    - Positivity/resilience: "There is a lot that people can do just by having a smile on your face. You never know when it's going to happen that somebody will see your light."

Programs and services

- Breakfast programs for the schools – available to all, no discrimination
- Library is a great resource
- Food bank is a good resource
- Community connection specific to rural setting:
    - "Very often, unlike the city where there's a lot of advertising of the organization that does that, in a rural setting you know the person who's in that organization so they go, "Oh, you need to talk to [Name]." They don't say you need to talk to the food bank, you need to talk to [Name].

Discussion and meetings

- "This [conversation] works, this place works. This place works! We're actually talking about stuff that matters. Like stuff that's not working, maybe we can […] do something different."

What's not working in your community?

Participants often turned to discussion of what's not working during the 'what is working' prompt, which may reflect the scale of the challenges people are facing. As one participant noted, "When there's a lot of despair and indignity and that, it's hard to see anything that's working."

Less community connection than in the past

- People are being made to feel like poverty and housing insecurity are individual rather than systemic issues. Individual approaches to success/wealth are more common – people comparing themselves to their neighbours
- Spending less time with others, especially family, was identified as an issue: "We used to spend time – nobody locked their door. Nobody knocked on the door. You just went in. And you sat down and it was usual to do that. You'd go to your auntie's and stop in."
- Similarly, people are having fewer meals together: "People used to go to people's houses for dinners. Now look at it. It's all falling apart."

Infrastructure and services

- The is a lack of affordable transportation – no taxi, no bus: "Just to get a haircut or to go for a job interview, or go to church, or an activity, it's hard to get there."
- When the highway was put in, this infrastructure shift negatively changed how people interacted with the city
- Participants noted a lack of knowledge/coordination for services – people aren't sure what's available to support them
- An impersonal/funding-oriented approach to service provision was also noted:
  - "What I've found is when I go to any kind of an organization […] it's like they're there just to collect needs so that they can have funding. That's how I feel."
  - "I'm just another checkmark on the thing. They still have to have so many people involved to get their funding. Well I was just another one. But no one actually helped me."
- There is limited cell service, contributing to isolation: "Where you live, you have to travel somewhere to get a signal. Very often if you need to use a cellphone there's a whole bunch of places along that road a cell doesn't work."

Employment

- Hard to find jobs: Young people are moving away for decent pay and work
- Barriers to employment when experiencing homelessness: E.g., not being able to get clean clothes for a job interview

Health and safety

- Mental health is a big problem and it is hard to get support for it
- There are concerns about women's safety at night due to lack of men's shelter

Housing (see next sections for more details)

- Housing prices have gone up
- Evictions, renovictions, and gentrification are major concerns
- No emergency shelter for men is another pressing issue

Housing insecurity impacts experiences of poverty in these ways…

The cyclical nature of poverty and housing insecurity is demonstrated here – as participant responses reflect, they are all intertwined.

Self-reinforcing cycle

- Rents are too high, incomes are too low, supports aren't available, leading to a cycle of precarious or unsafe housing, homelessness, an inability to get out of poverty or meet basic needs, and shame about one's situation:
  - "I feel trapped."
  - "The impact of no transportation or lack of different basics, you get the feeling of being invisible – you're isolated, there's things going on but you can't get there. You don't have the money. You don't have clean clothes. You feel less than and very invisible and you maybe make yourself a little invisible because of the shame that we put on ourselves or others make us feel."
- Made to feel like poverty and housing insecurity are individual rather than systemic issues, and the onus is on the individual to fix it:
  - "Poverty is abuse – and it's societal abuse. And then [for the government] to turn around and say, 'How can you fix it?' It's not up to that person who's living in it. It's almost like saying, you have a father that wants to give you a beating, gives you an option to see how big a switch you're going to get – you had a choice there – you got a big switch or little switch – you're still going to get the beating."
- Feeling out of control, chaotic, hectic, defeated, hard to stay optimistic:
  - "Part of what's missing is the idea that, 'Don't worry. It will work out. It will be OK.' Because the lived experience doesn't always reinforce that idea."

Actions that the government needs to take are...

While the prompt was for government action, and much of the discussion centred around that, some of the actions mentioned below may also be relevant for community organizations. Action to help people get out of the cycle mentioned above was a major theme.

A real sense of urgency came across in this discussion in terms of participants' current housing situations and what they're seeing in their community. People are in dire situations that are worsening quickly, and there is a lack of this sense of urgency from government.

Systemic change

- The need for bigger, systems-level change, rather than leaving it up to the individual or community organizations: "Stop putting Band-Aids on broken bones."

Transparency and communication

- Transparency, accountability, and communication from government officials
- Communication about community services, supports, opportunities, especially for seniors and people with disabilities: "A publication that talks about what's going on in your community."
- Cooperation between levels of government

Services and supports

- Fewer barriers to access services/supports:
  - "Even at the mental health ward, you have to meet certain criteria. I think you needed to loosen it up to include more people. More accessible and maybe less forms and navigation...so we don't have to dig so hard. Because if you don't have the phone or the WiFi or the technology, or the ride, or the people, you're isolated and you have no way to get yourself up."
  - Better communication of programs, services, resources available: "When my kids were little and my son needed special shoes, if my doctor hadn't told me about it I would not have known that income assistance would pay for that."
  - Better coordination of services
- Increase social assistance rates – they should take inflation into account
- More funding available for people with disabilities
- More funding for helping organizations
- More community discussion: "We need more of these meetings, not just once in a while. We need – the government needs to have more of these meetings. This wasn't long enough."

Housing

- Rental housing:
  - Rent caps

- Better rent subsidies that follow the person
- Inspections for rental housing
- Shelter/transition housing
  - More transition homes
  - Build a homeless shelter for men
    - Break the cycle, address issue systemically: "If you're going to solve it on a provincial level you'd better be putting in more than one because just about every community is going to need something."
- Address immediate need by using existing buildings/resources:
  - "There's a lot of empty buildings in this town that are maybe impossibly behind in taxes, which the town has probably had some access to. Buildings like that, they're actually doing nothing instead of waiting for somebody to break into them and destroy the building. Why not just give access to the building when it's needed? I think on any given night there's probably 14 people that are sleeping rough."
  - "We need to have an emergency place for people to go. Right now, who's got the most emergency? People sleeping rough, people sleeping out of their cars. Don't bring in consultants and all that. Get something on the go and then turn it into something better. Get something going that will help to free people first, and then keep growing."