

NO PLACE TO BE OURSELVES

**Solving
New Brunswick
Homelessness
Takes Everyone!**

February 2019

**New Brunswick
Common Front
for Social Justice**



The Common Front for Social Justice is fighting to build a more human society based on the respect and dignity of all. We want a New Brunswick without poverty. We want a society which gives each and everyone a decent living, in particular by having a minimum wage and social income on which citizens can live on and not just exist. We believe that every citizen can develop their full potential and become fully engaged in the social, economic and cultural development of New Brunswick.

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The Common Front for Social Justice is one of the largest democratic and popular organizations in New Brunswick. It brings together individuals as well as local, regional and provincial organizations to work towards the eradication of poverty.

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Searching for the Causes of Homelessness

In November 2018, the Common Front for Social Justice decided to take a closer look at homelessness, following the removal of a tent city in Moncton by municipal authorities. This resulted in a greater awareness of homelessness as a crisis in the Province of New Brunswick. We decided to form a small work group to research the issues and to see if we could contribute towards the effort to find solutions. We thought the best way to start was to interview 12 persons in Moncton who have experienced homelessness personally. After this reality check, we have produced the present document for advocacy purposes. We have researched and found empowering housing models that leverage a strengths-based view of the lived experience of homeless individuals. After people have the ability to work with the homeless community, show them how to support one another as peers, while educating the broader community on how a problem can be turned into a recovery solution.

By reaching out to Moncton homeless shelters, we identified four women and eight men, aged 19 to 63, willing to share their knowledge and experience in interviews undertaken between November 24th and December 5th at a local shelter and at the Moncton Public Library. The diverse experiences of these 12 people revealed the deep and authentic views on both the personal and systemic problems around homelessness. Their knowledge of the services available and their ideas and solutions for betterment of this awful social problem are very valuable.

We wanted to know something about their lives and how they became homeless, its duration, the kinds of places they lived in the past and currently. We asked questions on how they can exist on so little or no monthly revenue, what services and supports they use in the community, and what are their perceptions and opinions on them.

Aware that there are prejudices and restrictions against people living in poverty, we wanted to know what were some of the places they went from day to day and how they were welcomed (or not) around the community.

We also wanted to know what their ideas were to make things better. What services and supports did they think were missing? What places to go and what things to do in the community that would be welcomed, if they were possible to attain? We asked for THEIR solution to homelessness, either for them personally, or more broadly. Lastly, we asked if there was anything else at all they wanted to share. And importantly, we told them we would really try to listen carefully and that we would really want to make a difference.

What Homeless People Told Us

We heard many stories of poverty, of the associated conflicts and violent relationships, of health and addiction difficulties, of incarceration, of feelings of alienation and discrimination, and of other hardships which brought and/or kept people homeless or in shelters, where they lived in horrific locations and situations for long periods of time.

We heard of insufficient social, financial and other supports and services from family, friends and government to be able to readily and reliably climb out of adversity.

We heard of prejudices against the poor, to the extent that they had few options or locations where they could just be or exist in the community from one day to the next, where security and police would not ask them to move along. They felt they were viewed as some type of alien, or as a person that was unwelcome or a nuisance. In fact, it happened during an actual interview conducted for this report.

But we also heard appreciation from some of these people for the help that is available for the accommodations given them by some members of society. They valued being accepted as they are today, along with their ideas springing from the wisdom of lived experience that could help them get out of poverty and have a roof over their heads. Indeed, homeless persons themselves can sometimes offer innovative solutions to their own problems, particularly if citizens and their governments will listen, be open-minded and willing to follow through on progressive policies and practices existing both inside and outside the province.

The following quotations of what they said have led us to make recommendations, and propose solutions for change:

- “With not enough money, there is no place to go.”
- “We’re paying 90% of our money for rent.”
- “We must leave the shelter during daytime hours.”
- “Some shelter services are deficient; the general atmosphere is stressful, with police always coming around and the poor stealing from the poor; this is a form of abuse and is demoralizing.”
- “We miss the Reconnect Drop-in Centre that closed due to community concerns.”
- “Police and security guards always move us along - like a pigeon, a dirty nuisance.”
- “Professional staff can be good, but peers are great!”
- “Not enough housing, medical services, or jobs”
- “We need Drop-in Centres with a difference to help us kick-start our lives upwards
- “More purpose-built rooming houses are needed.”
- “City or province should start building rent-controlled rooming houses.”
- “Affirmative Action is needed”

They Told Us About the Traumas That Took Away Their Homes

There were so many different life experiences and events, as unique as the individuals themselves, that caused them to become homeless:

- At 14, a boy's parents kicked him out of the home when he came out as gay.
- A 54-year-old man in a troubled on-again, off-again relationship, struggling with alcoholism, was finally evicted by police and sheriff department staff.
- A 46-year-old indigenous woman moved from the reserve after the death of her daughter due to discomfort with community members who did not know how to act around her anymore.
- After getting into a fight with a fellow resident, a 29-year-old man, penniless, heavily medicated, and living in a special care home, was instantly evicted and dropped off by staff 20 miles down the road; he had only a 6-day supply of medicine.
- A 29-year-old man was released from jail; he has debilitating anxiety issues that prevented following through successfully to get a cheque from NB Social Development; he couch-surfed with family members, stayed in shelters from time to time, without the means to become stable through income and the White Card for medication.
- A 49-year-old woman, who had been on and off Social Assistance for 20 years, became homeless upon the closure of an unsafe rented house; later, she lost her partner because of the stress of living together in a tent.
- A 63-year-old man got « a quick onset of osteoarthritis and spinal degeneration and went very quickly from being employed and housed to living in a homeless shelter; "I'm in a really precarious situation right now," he says.

There were several others who related stories. For example, an alcoholic and unfit mother put her child into revolving door foster care. Another woman, after eight years clean from addiction, needed to get away from an all-male, family home full of bad influences; she had no relatives or friends who she felt solidly bonded with that she could ask to stay with. A person was in a rooming house which closed due to unfixable infestations of mice and bed bugs and other horrors. There was also a young man who was kicked out of his parent's home due to addiction issues, a psychotic condition and in need of reliable mental health support.

They Told Us About Incomplete Services and Supports in Today's Community

People living in poverty and homelessness look for services and supports that are right for them, wherever they can find them, be they formal or informal, free or expensive, obtained legally or illegally, great or awful. And, like beauty, good services and supports are in the eye of the beholder. Following is a partial list of what they told us about various services and supports:

- **Income and Health-related Services** - For those who can provide ID and proof of address, they can apply to NB Social Development for a small monthly income, typically ranging between \$537 and \$576, along with the White Card which provides limited and basic coverage for medications, eyeglasses, dental work, ambulances, etc. Shelter clients can use the shelter's address to obtain a cheque for only a limited time, maybe only a month, as shelters are intended as temporary residences from which people are expected to move on. For those with significant disability, they can apply for higher benefits, but this often requires a very high burden of diagnostic proofs from medical professionals and is decided in private by a medical advisory board without any interview or meeting with the applicant. It is said to be very difficult to obtain this level of benefits and with a life disorganized by physical and psychological traumas of poverty and homelessness, it is very challenging to follow through on all of the work needed to succeed.
- **Medical Care** – New Brunswick is considered by many to have a family doctor shortage with long wait lists. Sometimes those with dauntingly difficult life circumstances and complex medical challenges may not always reliably show up for appointments on a regular basis. People who are living in poverty are not the first to be taken on by medical practitioners. Hospital emergency department visits likewise can have long waits and be stressful places to be. Some of those surveyed felt traumatized or discriminated against by the way they were treated in medical settings. Downtown Moncton does have at least one specialty medical practice catering to street people and marginalized populations.
- **Emergency Shelters with Basic Needs Services** – There has been two established shelters in Moncton, operating for many years. In December 2018, with high public awareness of a crisis situation, two new, and quite different temporary shelters opened. One of these venues (Out of the Cold Emergency Shelter) has significant community buy-in and medical-social service agency. Its operational orientation and staffing are backed by government funding until March 31, 2019. Its location is in a former fire station. The other new venue is led by an outspoken can do, activist-oriented organization best known for its meal program and perhaps its audacity. They received enough individual and business donations, with minimal to no government funding, to add shelter service under the same roof as its core operations, with volunteers only.

Existing shelters typically offer client-residents a place to sleep during the overnight hours, two to three daily meals, showers, laundry service and access to a telephone. Some have Drop-in or Community Centre services for people to socialize and relax, at various times during the day or evening. Usually, shelter occupants must leave their sleeping quarters during daytime hours, but sometimes, such as in harsh winter conditions, there may be leeway on this issue.

There is some support staffing and programming for community integration such as employment and affordable housing, step up program of supportive rooming houses, addiction recovery programs, access to clothing and basic household and personal needs through second-hand type goods stores. Vulnerable persons not currently clients of the shelter can also access some of the services in a limited fashion. There are referrals given to other services and supports in the community that the shelter does not offer.

- **Stand-alone or Basic Needs Services outside of Shelters** – There are a variety of other organizations offering necessities such as:
 - a. **Meal programs.** These are available at various times, especially downtown, and include breakfast, lunch and supper for those with sufficient mobility to attend. Their schedules vary, with some operating regularly Monday to Friday, some on weekends regularly throughout the month, and some on weekends rotationally. Other types of meals are sponsored by various Churches, mainly supper meals during weekends to ensure people have food throughout the month every day.
 - b. **Clothing, Showers, Laundry Service, Personal Hygiene Needs.** These services are available free of charge at a few locations throughout the community.
 - c. **Telephone Access.** It is available free of charge at places like Service Canada and the NB Social Development Office.
 - d. **Internet Access.** It is free of charge at places like Service Canada, Library branches (if you have a card), and employment support service providers.
 - e. **Tents.** Some have been provided by at least one organization to persons who ask for them. One person said that carrying around a small tent permits him to pitch it any time of the day when he is desperately exhausted and needs to sleep.

- **Addiction and Mental Health Services**

Some of the resources available include Walk-in Service for non-scheduled emergency visits, professional counselling, psychiatric diagnosis and medication maintenance, supportive groups, including AA-type meetings, peer support workers in some Institutional and Community Services Agencies and crisis telephone lines. Harm reduction services include the distribution of clean needles and access to methadone.

- **Non-Professional, Informal Supports from Community, Family, Friends, Peers**

There are informal supports where people living in poverty can go and feel accepted as they are, in a relationship of mutuality and friendship. Couch surfing is an option for some of the homeless people. Occasionally, Internet and telephone usage are generously offered. Advocacy and Peer Navigating is offered by some community organizations. Addiction recovery support is offered through AA and other supportive groups.

During an interview, one person said: "My friend has offered to come along to an appointment with Social Development. Another interviewee said, "I've had a family doctor for 15 years through a church friend's intervention." A young man said: "Dad helps me out with cigarettes and a little bit of spending money." Another person said: "My sister has paid a fee allowing me to use showers at YMCA." A person suffering from psychosis said: "Friends supply me with morphine for therapeutic use to soothe nerves and be calmer." A person said that under-the-table work was sometimes available through informal networks.

They Told Us That Finding Their Way “Home” Will Require Deep Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Change

The Common Front for Social Justice is no expert on Housing, the Homelessness problem, nor on the Established organizations’ professional services or proposed solutions. However, many of our members feel a certain expertise in trying to be good social human beings, and mobilizing effort to change prejudices that both research and marginalized people themselves, say exist. We know that in spite of the supports and services shown above, the homelessness problem remains. In the meantime, there will remain tremendous stress and heartache for those enduring homelessness, and our society will be the poorer if we cannot bring the diversity and gifts of these forgotten human beings into the mainstream community.

Most New Brunswickers have a job or profession based on education and/or something they are good at, which helps them to make their way in the mainstream community and keep a roof over their heads. A lot of the persons who become homeless lack the security of being able to function in the mainstream community but they have a very deep education and lived experience in challenges that kept them from, or took them out of the security of ordinary people. They can and do form their own healing communities of peers and help each other get better, or recover. If New Brunswick society is really lucky, they will be willing to bring us all along and show us how this lived experience of recovery, something that no expensive services can provide, must be valued, nurtured and used as a cornerstone of future homelessness alleviation services.

Western nations have begun to recognize as an evidence-based best practice that persons who have lived with significant poverty, adversity, addiction and mental health difficulties, but have survived and overcome these barriers, can have the unique skill set to become peers and role models to help their fellows do the same. In providing a training curriculum and finding a collaborative structure within which to work, the Certified Peer Specialist workforces have become the fastest growing professions in the public mental health systems in the United States today. In working along with professionals and communities, and showing what they can do, the former “problem people” are removing stigmas and prejudices and teaching care systems, and health professionals, and academia to produce more recovery outcomes by thinking like the customer.

Conclusion

When the public in New Brunswick began to consider homelessness might be a “crisis” in the Fall of 2018, the New Brunswick Common Front for Social Justice decided that the most important people to talk with were homeless people themselves. Their stories helped us to better understand what causes homelessness, the horrific traumas, prejudice and alienation that people endure in this state of abject, all-encompassing poverty, the inadequacy of the help available today, and ideas they may have for a better future tomorrow.

We clearly heard that they perceive being discriminated against within the mainstream community, even when helping in service settings, leaving them nowhere to comfortably be in their current life circumstances.

They also have insufficient financial help from the state or the community to have a meaningful life, or an affordable place to live, a job, or a truly satisfactory social life among others.

On the other hand, there is much support and healing that arises from their community of peers but there is a need for new “positive” places, a kind of home base where their lives might flourish. These could be drop-in centres with a difference located within purpose-built rooming houses.

Everyone felt that we are in a crisis, an emergency that demands affirmative action now. It will certainly take political will and public support for these proposals but with every New Brunswicker’s mutual respect and understanding, homeless people may find a place they call “Home

Proposals to Reduce Homelessness

1. Develop a province-wide anti-prejudice awareness campaign on poverty

Citizens living in poverty and more so those who are more visible like the homeless who are on street corners, are more often than not being looked down upon. A good percentage of citizens consider them a burden on society and consider that it is their fault if they are in their present situation. If we want to address the issue of homelessness and poverty, we need to start changing our perception of citizens living in poverty.

Changing attitudes takes time, but we have to start somewhere.

We are proposing that the provincial government start an anti-prejudice awareness campaign and that this campaign be developed in collaboration with citizens who are homeless.

2. Increase Revenue

The province of New Brunswick has some of the lowest social assistance rates in Canada. For “single employable” individuals it is \$537 per month and no rate change has occurred since 2009. In 2013 and 2014, raises in the other categories were made but were not indexed for inflation. Everyone has lost their purchasing power. For social assistance to come out of poverty, their total annual income must eventually be equal to the Market Basket Measure.

We propose that over a period of 10 years, their total annual income (basic social assistance rates, additional social assistance benefits, GST rebate, federal and provincial child care benefits and provincial tax credits/ benefits) be increased to equal the amount indicated in the Market Basket Measure. This means that in 2019-2020, the Social Development Budget needs to increase to cover the proposed total incomes. We also propose that rates of social assistance should be indexed yearly to compensate for inflation.

3. Organize a Provincial Conference on Homelessness

The present crisis in Moncton and Fredericton with people living in tents and sleeping outside this winter has brought the issue of housing and homelessness in the public eye. However, homelessness is much more than this crisis and concerns thousands of individuals and families who are living in substandard dwellings or are paying too much. If we want to bring changes, we need to take stock of the situation, discuss it and propose actions.

We are proposing that the department of Social Development organize a provincial conference and bring together the different actors involved in the housing issue. The organizing committee must include municipalities, community organizations and homeless citizens.

4. “Alternative” Housing Pilot Projects for Residences for Men, Women, and Youth

The present homelessness crisis is nothing new, but our solutions have been to create shelters, either permanent or temporary. We need to look at other models.

The Common Front for Social Justice proposes that New Brunswick move forward with three pilot projects for homeless persons, one for men, another one for women and the last one for youth.

Drawing from research and lessons learned from many models, and many aspirations over the last decades, we envision co-op residences, where peers support each other to heal, learn and work together.

Instead of only having mainstream services, trying to place homeless community members into lonely mainstream community apartments all alone, from whence they must venture forth into multitudinous community integration services, we believe the time is right to add pilot projects that turn this established paradigm on its head.