

Government of Alberta Social Policy Framework Public Consultation

Focus Group Summary Notes: Jasper Place Health and Wellness Centre

Facilitated by the Edmonton Social Planning Council

With support from the United Way of Alberta Capital Region, the City of Edmonton, and FCSS

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VISION

Question 1: What words would you include in your vision for social policy?

Probe Question:

- a) What do the words in the proposed vision mean to you?

“Alberta is one of the finest places in the world to live, work, and raise a family because all Albertans have the opportunity to engage in our economic, social, and economic life.”

Responses:

1. The words that I would include in a social policy vision:

- Equality (in the way people are treated and the access to opportunities)
- Compassion for those who are vulnerable or who have made poor choices in the past but are working toward a better life
- Accessibility (for the following: shelter; education; support services; treatment programs)
- Choice (hybrid work-welfare options, responsive additions treatment)

a) The words in the proposed vision mean the following:

- Agreement with the proposed vision.
- Agreement to a degree with the proposed vision, but I feel some government policies and procedure keep me from getting ahead.
- Disagree – as a visible minority I don’t believe “all Albertans” have the same “opportunities”.
- Disagree (with the phrase “finest places in the world to live, work and raise a family”; and “cultural life”) – not enough affordable housing, claw-back of income is no incentive to go to work, it’s getting more expensive to raise a family; multiculturalism is not working as immigrants are not assimilating, temporary foreign workers are taking away jobs from Canadian who could be working.
- This proposed vision is something to work towards but we are not there yet.
- Agreed with this vision 20 years ago, but not now. Too many homeless people now, increased use of food banks, etc.

- Social and cultural life is great – can see it and participate in it every day in Churchill Square.
- Disagree (with “all Albertans have an opportunity”)– wealth is not distributed equally.
- Disagree (with “all Albertans having an opportunity”) – if you have a previous criminal record, this will impact future opportunities because the actions associated with your record will follow you.

OUTCOMES

Question 2: What results are needed in order to achieve your vision for Alberta’s social policy?

Probe Questions:

- a) Where could significant improvements be made?

Responses:

2. What results are needed in order to achieve your vision?

- Bring nature into our environment.
 - no pollution.
- Equal wages, better income sharing.
 - Participants perceive the income gap and feel it is disempowering for people living in poverty.
 - Need for smaller gap between haves and have-nots.
- Respect people.
 - Any services that is perceived to be “universal” (i.e. any member of society could potentially access it when they require) will likely help to reduce negative feelings associated with the use of social services.
 - Need for equality: everyone would be treated as equals and be given equal access to opportunities.
- Better access to medical/psychological care.
- A safe living environment.
 - Safe and appropriate housing options for all Albertans so that they can establish themselves and work toward a better future.
- Low income individuals would have more income to live off of, by letting them keep more of their money (AISH recipients having CPP deducted off of monthly income, claw backs).
- Open government.
 - Government would be more accountable to Albertans for their spending.
 - Spend tax dollars wisely.
- A “system” that works.

- Common complaint was the system where lots of rules exist to access social services. “You need to know where to go when you get out of detox, ... barely getting your head together ... and you have nothing to your name. Alberta is a great place to live but we are getting lost in the system in the last couple of years.”
 - Provide start-up periods.
 - Individuals would have some ‘breathing space’ when re-establishing themselves. This recognizes that it takes time to establish oneself. Low incomes individual that are able to find temporary work would not face having their Income Support file cancelled because of a short-term income increase which contradict policy.
 - A province that is drug-free as drugs and alcohol is a significant contributor to criminal behaviors which leads to social problems.
 - Government would exercise more judgment when identifying which children need to go into care. Families should be allowed to raise their children.
 - Encourage work.
 - There would be less work to go to work. The reporting system for Income Support clients who go to work should be less complicated. With all the reporting, collecting and submitting of receipts and forms, for some, it’s too much work to go to work and in many cases cost prohibitive.
 - Government to embrace a culture of “excellence” in responding to needs within vulnerable communities. One possibility could be establishing a movement where people living in poverty are challenges to achieve accomplishments within their community, and supported in overcoming their perceived failures by innovative social programs and services.
 - People would earn their increased income support by requiring them to get education and job training. Monitor and ensure people work towards their goals and not use their Income Support money for drugs.
 - Build community goals
 - Participants wanted to make a positive contribution to their community, to have pride in their work and home, and to feel accepted for who they are. It appears that many participants were ashamed of being dependent on social services, particularly AISH, but that they have gotten used to “mediocrity”.
 - Give back, give life, and feel like you’re included in your community.
 - All Albertans would take responsibility for their own lives.
- a) Significant improvements could be made in the following ways:
- Have people who are in decision making positions (MLA’s, Ministers) attend and listen in to more of these focus groups where low incomes Albertans are providing their input.

- Operate more drop-in centers (like Jasper Place Health and Wellness Centre) throughout the community which also offers programs and services to assist people in improving their lives.
- Offer more programs for substance abuse issues but in real-time. When the individual is ready for help, the services need to be immediately available and accessible.
 - Don't require folks to be 7 days clean before getting into rehabilitation program. Start them as soon as they are in agreement to begin treatment.
- When discharging people from rehabilitation programs ensure they have housing and supports in place for a period of time; don't just discharge them without support because they will return to their old ways if they don't have continued support.
- Tailor programs to individual needs instead of fitting the person into the existing program.
- Premier Allison Redford seems to be genuine, she understands and is willing to make changes to improve lives, but she and others should be sitting in and listening in these discussions.
- Education of our children should focus on life-skill training including money management, problem solving and workforce skill development. This will help to keep kids from turning to drugs and criminal behavior.
- Better transportation options for single parents who want to go to work.
- Decrease bureaucracy – increase democracy
 - Improve the efficiency of bureaucrats thereby decreasing the need for so many, and put that money into developing better programs and services.

MOVING FORWARD: STRATEGIES

Question 3: What actions could help achieve the desired outcomes for Albertans?

Probe Questions:

- a) What is being done well already? What makes these actions successful?

Responses:

- a) What's currently working and what could be improved
 - More centers like Jasper Place Health and Wellness through-out the city that provide a place for people to go, to get help and support and encourage healthy behavior and friendships.
 - Social housing for women only; similar to housing for men.
 - AISH need to be increased to about \$2,000.00 per month with annual increased to match cost of living increases.

- Different kinds of community based drug rehabilitation programs; not everyone wants to attend a 12 step program.
- Address the issues of fraud and abuse within the system.
- Single point of entry into the system with one case worker that follows you through the process. Currently the system is dysfunctional, and needs repair. When someone contacts Income Support they may deal with different workers from day to day and may be sent to various offices for service. This causes individuals to become frustrated and in many cases they give up trying.
- Improve the consistency of service provision by all case workers.

FACILITATOR'S FEEDBACK

- Our team rephrased some of the questions to facilitate a more meaningful discussion around the needs of the population we engaged with. The questions we used were as follows:

What do the words in this vision mean to you?

For Alberta to become the best place to live, work and raise a family ...

a) What would it look like?

b) Why is that important to you?

What has to happen in order to achieve what you described?

What's currently working and what could be improved?

- Our participants suggested that individuals in decision making positions should have been present to listen in to this dialogue. Participants felt that their feedback would have greater impact if heard first hand by policy and decision makers.