

# Government of Alberta Social Policy Framework Public Consultation

Focus Group Summary Notes: Friends of Stanley Milner Library

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?

Probing Questions:

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

Responses:

1. What words would you include in your vision for a social policy?

- Respect (individuals treated as human beings regardless of their life circumstances, past behaviours or physical appearance)
- Choice (where you want to live, own a pet, etc.)
- Accessibility (housing, education, culture, recreation)
- Collective responsibility (we all need to play our part in contributing and building our community/society)
- Suggested Change to proposed vision statement:
  - Change a few words in the vision. Alberta **could be** one of the finest places in the world **if...**

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

- This is a sales pitch.
  - Every province would say same thing.
  - Are they trying to sell us something? Not sure what they're trying to convey. Everyone does not have equal opportunity. The system is set up on purpose to keep people down. We are nowhere near where we should be in terms of the vision.
- There is some truth in this statement, but the reality is that there are many challenges.
  - Alberta has a beautiful natural environment (e.g. river valley)
  - I lived here for 18 years. Alberta is friendly. It has some great people. It is better than some other places I've lived.
  - Alberta is very diverse with every race and nationality. Diversity does make AB a better place than most.
  - But economically, I've struggled as do others in this room. Why do we have 15,000 homeless in Alberta?
- Overlooks the hardships low-income Albertan faces.
  - Alberta needs to be a place where people can find good work
  - People in river valley working in temp jobs. Agency takes half your earnings. City removes tent and belongings; there needs to be standards for these temp agencies – "they feed on people like us."

- Social programs need changing. People get driver's license taken away b/c they can't make maintenance payments. Then you can't work. Makes no sense.
- Life in Alberta is tough. It is hard to live on what Alberta Works pay.
- Alcoholics have a hard time getting hired or get paid less. There are jobs but they can be hard to live on. Lots of hoops, for example getting into Housing First.
- I have seen some changes over the years. I worked in the oil industry and the in sawmills. Now I need a certificate to do the work these days. If you're not qualified, you can't get work or only about \$9 per hour. "I tried to camp on the banks of the river – it's really hard, I got my camp torn down. I need better education."
- "...I am a single mom. I want a place for my daughter to be safe. Alberta Works is barely enough to get by."
- Alberta is not fully inclusive.
  - I think Alberta is a great place for most people, but not so much for people with mental health issues, or for Aboriginal people. Such exclusion makes it hard to feel like you belong.
  - If you're one in five who has mental health issues, a vision that says all Albertans doesn't apply.
  - This is a great place with great people, but as far as the social aspect goes, I feel "unwanted." A lot of people with mental health issues are not getting help and are kind of "outcast people." Why is this the case after 100 years of Alberta being strong?
  - This vision doesn't mean a damn thing. I won't be working again. I won't raise a family because of being 53. I live below the poverty line.
  - I used to farm, and now I'm an alcoholic. I pick empties to support my habit. My Alberta is pretty limited.
  - "I am on AISH, my engagement is at a level well below the poverty line. The library is my social engagement. "

## OUTCOMES

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

Probing Questions:

- a) Where are positive social outcomes for Albertans already being achieved?
- b) Where could significant improvements be made?

Responses:

- a) Where are positive social outcomes for Albertans already being achieved?
  - Medical welfare has helped me a lot. There should be shelters in the west end and south side. Salvation Army is better but you have to pay there.
  - Program called *Employabilities*. Did an interview with them. Starting with them in April. Step up program is working. My son went through them. Will even fit you with good work clothing.
  - There's a lot of work on the south side of Edmonton but no services or shelters.
  - Capitalism is working really well for some of the agencies. Improve the bureaucracy so they treat clients like human beings.

- Some landlords do a good job.
  - Woman on fixed budget was short on money for rent. Worker was able to get a rent supplement. Happy that this program worked for her.
- b) Where could significant improvements be made?
- More Safe, Affordable and Appropriate Housing
    - Available and affordable housing is lacking.
    - Need more affordable housing, more detox.
    - More detox beds for Aboriginal people. The lack of beds has been a major problem and has been for years. Detox isn't covered/run by federal (i.e. on-reserve) health care, provincially it's hard to get in, and the paradox is that you can't get into a treatment center run by the federal government for Aboriginal people unless you are clean... but it's hard to get clean if you can't get detox!
    - Need more affordable housing which gives people choices. I live in subsidized seniors housing but I'm not allowed to have a pet. Also more access to cultural activities.
    - Everybody should have a safe place to go to. To rest. To take a shower.
    - Better quality housing is needed, rather than run down housing with leaky roofs and having to share bathrooms.
    - Rooming houses just take advantage of those with low income. We need to have better quality housing run by the government. We need more housing like Capital region housing rather than shelters. \$390 a month from social services is not enough – we can't afford a decent place for that, so the undesirable alternative is to stay in a shelter.
    - Homeless to Homes. I get penalized if I miss an appointment. But they don't if they miss something. System will never be perfect but should be a minimum – e.g. don't put people in homes with bed bugs.
    - Homeless to Homes didn't listen to me. Put me in West End, even though I said near Whyte Avenue. Couldn't even put anything on the walls. Doesn't make it a real home. I wasn't listened to. Treated me like a number.
    - Don't give money to the private sector for housing.
    - For a single guy like me to find subsidized housing, it's a 2 year wait. Have to be homeless for a year before getting housing.
  - Re-examine Shelters
    - Should be more shelters not only Hope Mission.
    - Hope Mission has the monopoly on shelters. If you get in their bad books you're screwed.
    - There should be a requirement of certain per cent of units in all residential buildings to be affordable.
    - Need more money for shelter allowance. \$300 per month gets you nothing. End up going in circles.
    - Need better places for your stuff when you're away from the shelter for a few days.
    - No place to go not only on Sundays but also on holidays.
  - Improved Transportation
    - Make transportation better.
  - Access to jobs, and/or increased income
    - Easier access to income so people can feel more included.
    - Have to jump through 9 hoops to get a cheque from social services. A few bad apples getting an AISH cheque and living at Hope Mission make it bad for the rest of us. Can't panhandle anymore but they don't offer other options.

- Minimum wage has to be raised above the poverty level. Money needs to happen. Corporations need to pay more taxes.
- More refugees [*SIC new immigrants?*] working and are getting help. Meanwhile Canadians can't get help.
- Learn from other jurisdictions
  - We should look more like BC -- be more pro-union. Too many politicians and corporate people are like pigs at the trough. More NDP type government that invests in social programs.
  - Ontario policy of running more of the affordable housing would be better.
  - BC and Ontario use a social model for affordable rather than a business model. Giving money to business people to operate housing doesn't work as well. Not a system built on equity. A system built on making certain landlords wealthy. A social model helps people at the bottom. Homeward Trust – a lot of \$ goes to their own bureaucracy.
  - Calgary does a better job of running its shelters compared to Edmonton – i.e the shelters in Calgary are newer. There are fewer line-ups in Calgary for food and housing.
  - Countries like Finland have high taxes but also really good services.
  - Follow successful examples for social programs. Switzerland has excellent programs.
- Accessible Recreation and Arts
  - Accessibility is needed for everybody to housing, education, culture, recreation.
  - We need affordable things to do for people who live on a thousand bucks a month. Currently, I eat at Mustard Seed and Marian Centre so I can go to a movie once a month.
  - I'd like to see cultural events more available for free or very low cost.
  - Art galleries shouldn't be free. They should be accessible. If you can pay for a service, you should.
- Change Core Attitudes
  - Don't judge people because of how they look. I.e. Security doesn't let you read in a public place.
  - We need more understanding of all people. Don't judge people by how they look. They have a lot to offer. Talk to them. Hopefully, eventually there will be no prejudice.
  - Need to change our attitude b/c it's gotten worse.
  - I don't think my voice counts for much because I'm not paying taxes. Needs to be better solutions for people who are seen as not being normal.
  - It's about attitudes and they need to change.
- End Child Poverty
  - I want to make sure my kids' lives are better than mine. That motivates me. I'd like to see the government make it easier for my kids to go to college.
  - If you can't pay your rent or feed your kids, that's not right. It's shameful. When you see kids living at the Hope Mission that's horrible. This shouldn't be accepted. Something should be done about it.
- More transparent, less corrupt government
  - We need to eliminate the corrupt system.
  - System is perverted and corrupted. Government needs to listen to people who went through the residential schools system. They took away their land and their culture.

## MOVING FORWARD: STRATEGIES

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

Probing Questions:

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

Responses:

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

- Government Spending
  - Government spending needs to change. I.e. Person who runs WCB makes over \$350,000. Too much for sitting behind a desk.
  - Government has to change their spending habits. Save money on art galleries and arena by building a proper building but not a luxurious one.
  - Do not charge people \$15 to get into the art gallery. It should be more affordable, so that low-income Albertans can enjoy the arts.
  - All the money into the Henday rather than into housing. Priorities skewed.
  - Arena seen as more important than people who are struggling.
  - Too much money paid on consultants like Mike Holmes.
  - For the money they're spending on Housing they should be able to build more > be more efficient
- Mobilize Citizens
  - We can't solve our problems as individuals. The homeless people should have an association.
  - Maybe we need to start occupying some place. No one is going to listen to our talk. We need some action.
- Improved, Consistent Program Service and Information
  - Most social workers know what's going on but don't have much say.
  - Some social workers give you conflicting advice. One will give you more than another. There should be consistent standards for everyone. "I was told I got \$20.00 for one program, but I was actually entitled to \$120.00
  - Have a program that helps people with their utilities. Better program availability.
  - If you need services, you have to scrape and beg for them. Remove barriers from programs. Need an attitude that says it's OK to ask for help once in a while. People lose self-respect.
  - Policies need to be flexible and respond to individual needs.
  - Should be a place open on Sunday morning for homeless people. Library should be open then.
  - BMHC isn't taking new patients. Maybe we need another health centre. Programs need to change to really help those needing them.
  - Need to advertise the programs that are out there to make them known. Most programs are provincial rather than national. Should have more national programs.
- Accountability
  - Homeless people and non-homeless people are both at fault. We all need to take on responsibility as society.
  - Need a better Mayor who will make a better deal with Katz for the arena.
  - I'd like to see government follow through on their promises and on their policies.
  - To end child poverty, all governments need to work together and not pass the buck.
  - Problem is people like to avoid their individual responsibility. We need to accept that it is a collective responsibility with everyone working together including governments.

- Continue with Street Outreach
  - We need more programs like Friends of Stanley Milner. They've opened a lot of doors for us.
- Value Change; Respect
  - Go back to our old values. Say the Lord's Prayer and sing O Canada in our schools. Need values based on biblical principles.
  - We're special people should be treated as such.
  - Need to go back to some of the pioneer days values where people cared about their neighbours.
  - Go back to our core values. Need a better community in that sense. Don't always be hassling street people and giving them pink slips for panhandling, and just being in public places like a mall.
  - Changing attitudes doesn't happen quickly.

## **FACILITATOR'S FEEDBACK**

If you wish, please provide your personal feedback on facilitating this conversation or advice you may have to the project team regarding the discussion resources or process.

- 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?