

Government of Alberta Social Policy Framework Public Consultation

Focus Group Summary Notes: Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE)

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 (where everyone is treated equal and given opportunities to engage in society)
- Accessibility (to programs, resources and support services when needed)
- Perseverance (in pushing forward for better living conditions)
- Choices and options (regarding decision that individuals make)

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

- The proposed vision means “no struggles”. However, it’s hard as a single parent living in low income to raise kids.
- Unrealistic:
 - The proposed vision describes a balance. It is expensive to raise kids, it can be stressful on the money but Alberta does have a good income support program for working single moms. So the government does try to “put back” into the hands of low income people but, it’s still a struggle. Alberta is a good place to live and we are taken care of in some ways.
 - The opportunities are not there for everyone.
 - If the word “all” wasn’t in there, then I would say its true. But it’s not. Alberta is a great place to live but we don’t all have equal access to the program and services which puts some at a disadvantage.
 - The word ‘opportunity’ in the proposed vision statement does not reflect my reality. I’m living in the middle of 2 different worlds right now where I am now part of the working poor. I’ve got the job but I still can’t get off assistance. We are blessed being in Alberta with the Income Support program but it really only works when you are really poor. So I suffer from not being able to access that because I work, but I still need it. I’m not making enough to survive without that money. Once you get that job, they think that you are earning enough. Once you

hit that certain tax bracket you become working poor. I do get an income tax return so that's good but that's a lump sum once a year. I need the money on a monthly basis to help pay the bills and build up my assets. Now that I am starting to get my bearings, the rules are changing, the more you make, the more they take away from you. If I made just a little bit more in my job, it would have put me in a tax bracket which would make me pay for my medical which then would have put me back on welfare without being able to afford anything else. They want us to get ahead and get a job so I will not give up. I will get there. I'm trying to be a productive member of society, but it's hurting me and I'm frustrated with the system.

- When I read that proposed vision statement, it's only meant for "upper-middle" class. It sounds like everything is good and lovely. The Government of Alberta has no idea what people living on low income deal with. I agree there are some opportunities, but not for everyone. It seems to me that the only way to get ahead is to be lucky or through word of mouth or networking.
- In many cases choices are sometimes made for me. I don't feel like I have any power or can make decision at time about my own life.
- There are only opportunities for certain people. Things are not up to par for all Albertans.
- Frustration:
 - This statement is frustrating. I am facing obstacles, "to work and raise my son". I have a criminal record and I want to be a social worker and I can't do that. What am I supposed to do? I'm still on welfare with my son and I'm a waitress and I've been waitress for a long time so my knees are hurting. By the time I'm 40, I can't be a waitress anymore. I'm doing all these steps to make my life better. I went to JPHAWC to stand in a line over a two year period, and they told me I wasn't eligible because I have a kid. So many road blocks. So now I'm living in a place that's not safe for me or for my son. My whole family is so affected by this because my son has to stay with my dad when I work late. They are saying that there are resources out there for everyone? No way. I struggle to pay power bills or afford my kid? I disagree with this proposed vision.

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?

- More opportunities for people who are making the choice to change.
 - I do what I have to do in order to make money. I can't afford to insure my car but I need it.

- A program geared towards low income people that values and encourages personal responsibility.
 - I shouldn't have to pay for my mistakes forever. When I want to try and change and are faced with choices, don't make those choices so hard to make when I'm trying to empower myself as a single mom.
 - More patience and understanding.
 - Give me a chance, take into account my years of good behavior and working towards improving my life when considering the time left on my criminal record. I could be an asset to our society by being a social worker, by being on the other side of it and being able to truly relate to the people. But I don't have the chance because of my past criminal record.
 - Increases in income support benefits needs to be set and reviewed/changed based on cost of living.
 - They don't look at the cost of utilities. I would be able to survive not having to choose between rent and groceries.
 - Government of Alberta needs to make the barriers to getting subsidy and housing or paying the bill less difficult for low income.
 - We made choices in our life. I'm now making changes in my life and I work my butt off.
 - Increase minimum wage so that it matches cost of basic living.
 - Have a variety of programs – no cookie cutter solutions.
 - Different things for different people. Everyone's story and situation is different.
 - Public awareness
 - Individuals in different income groups need to have a better understanding of the struggles single parent in low income go through (disconnect and inaccurate perception by higher income earners of low income individuals).
 - Mandatory youth programs that will set youth on the right path.
 - Many of the programs are considered voluntary, which means that my son at 12 years of age has to decide whether he will go to a boy's home in order to move him away from the gang life that he is starting to explore. He is too young to make these critical decisions.
 - Continue to offer existing programs and services.
 - I'm grateful for the opportunities available in Alberta. I've hit so many roadblocks and I just keep on keeping on and accessing supports. I'm giving back to society now and I'm grateful for the help I've received. I'm making it work. Just need to have that motivation to be creative. You just need to keep moving.
- a) Where could significant improvements be made?
- More appropriate job training to get people working right away.
 - Resume writing courses are less important to me than the basic skills needed to immediately get a job.
 - There is a need for more agencies like CEASE where people can get the help they need.
 - Less discrimination and more compassion by some front-line workers.

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?
- b) What could be improved?

Responses:

- c) What is being done well already? What makes these actions successful?
 - “Anything is working if you work at it. If you want something enough it might take a long time, it’ll still come to you because you want it”.
 - I have a good case worker through Income Support.
 - She’s amazing. She understands my struggles and is willing to help with what I need.
 - Permanent low income housing
 - Housing has changed everything for me. That’s when I started to grow. I’m afraid of being homeless so when I got into it, it has become my home and I have some peace of mind. I have a good life. It’s working and now I have a voice and I can give back to the community.
 - Rent subsidy is working for me although it took a long time to get into housing due to my criminal record.
- a) What could be improved?
 - Appropriate, affordable and accessible housing.
 - The paper work to apply for housing is not working for me.
 - My family situation is going to change (2 months pregnant) I am wondering how I am going to transition to a different form of housing. Housing First has been helpful to stabilize my situation but what will happen next? Are the next steps going to make me and my son homeless?
 - We need more front line workers who listen to someone who wants to and is willing to make a change.
 - I am not asking for handouts, but when I hit roadblocks, give me options and point me in the right direction.
 - More prevention programs are needed, not waiting until a crisis occurs.
 - It took my son becoming involved in a gang and hitting me before I could get any help.
 - Making it easier to get rid of the criminal record when I have proven that I am working towards a healthy future for me and my child.
 - Having a better system in place to pay restitution to Capital Region Housing for past damages so that I may get on the waitlist for housing.

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.
- Our participants felt that there needed to be a greater understanding of just how difficult it is for someone living in low income to survive. They thought that things would change if the average Albertan had a better understanding.