

Housing and Homelessness Ten-Year Plan Development

Leeds and Grenville Community Consultations- 2013 Focus Groups Results Report

INTRODUCTION

This report shares the findings from the Focus Groups that were held during the Fall of 2012, conducted by the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville to learn about housing and homelessness from different lenses (i.e., EMS, youth, seniors, planners, mental health service providers, and community housing).

The focus groups undertaken are part of the Counties' Community Engagement Strategy which is an important component of the Housing and Homelessness Plan process.

This report is intended to reflect the stories and ideas relayed from the various stakeholder groups that were consulted. The document is organized to report on results by type focus group stakeholders.

APPROACH

- Focus group sessions were held during the Fall of 2012
- 188 invitations were sent out to various types of organizations (children, youth and senior services, addictions service, mental health services, disabilities services, violence/assault services, EMS, Fire and Police, religious organizations, private housing developers, municipal CAOs and planners, food banks and non-profit housing providers and co-operatives.
- Eight sessions were held and there were a total of 135 participants.

OVERVIEW OF COMMON OBJECTIVES

Connecting with 135 different people means that there were many stories, concerns, suggestions and potential solutions. People reiterated that **SAFE, AFFORDABLE AND STABLE HOUSING** is a critical need. The benefits of stable housing go beyond the four walls and a roof. Stable housing is good for physical and mental health, good for employment stability, for family connectedness and for civic engagement.

While there was a real diversity of stories and solutions, seven common objectives resonated from the responses:

1. Address the gap in meeting the housing needs of individuals, families, youth and seniors with complex issues and behaviours or requirements for those who are homeless.
2. Increase the number of affordable housing units - make it accessible.
3. Increase the number of appropriate transitional housing units with on-going supports for homeless or at-risk homeless individuals and families.
4. Enhance coordination of information among agencies and support initiatives that improve communication around the homelessness issue and the services available to vulnerable households.
5. Implement elements of the Housing First Concept in Leeds and Grenville (one-stop shopping).
6. Attract industry/employment into the community to assist with the economy.
7. Increase and continue advocating for more housing investment from senior levels of government and making sure that land use planning processes work for affordable housing development.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS – PRESSING HOUSING ISSUES

The participating stakeholders were asked four questions. Those questions were:

1. What do you see as the most pressing housing issues?
2. Are there recent successes you can point to that have helped address these issues?
3. What challenges stand in the way of addressing these issues meaningfully?
4. What priority actions should be undertaken to move possible solutions forward? Who should be responsible?

A SYNOPSIS FROM THE RESULTS OF EACH QUESTION BY TYPE OF FOCUS GROUP STAKEHOLDER RESPONSES IS OUTLINED IN THIS REPORT

PRESSING HOUSING ISSUES:

- Lack of funding stability, inattention to the root causes of homelessness and poverty and the variety of unique issues that different populations face were articulated as continuing to challenge the housing and homelessness system.
- Four common issues that were raised by the various focus group stakeholders:
 1. Population groups (i.e., youth, seniors, individuals with mental illness) face increased barriers and have different issues related to accessing housing based on unique factors.
 2. People, regardless of demographics, require to feel safe and secure. Nearly every group talked about safety, eviction, mental health and crime faced in their various housing situations and engagement with clients.

3. People need help knowing where to go to get support with their housing.
4. There is a need for tailored housing options.

EMERGENCY SERVICES:

Related to housing issues this stakeholder group articulated the following:

- On receiving medical or emergency calls, it is challenging to trace and track families because they do not have a fixed address.
- When an individual or household is identified as requiring support, at risk or in high need, they can't always connect them to the supports or services due to privacy issues (they can't release information). As a result, these individuals fall through the cracks.
- Disconnect with agencies/service providers processes- if there were no resources (i.e., funding) to support the individual at first contact, they resort to referrals to other agencies.
- Mental health issues compound housing stability and can perpetuate eviction. This can result in unsafe housing situations – (i.e., living in boarding houses).
- Family support while an important safety net at times, prevents formal assistance from being obtained.
- Hoarding history and identified hoarders, impact individuals from getting and maintaining housing.
- Low-income stigmatization; landlords do not want to rent to low-income families
- Support is needed to assist vulnerable households to maintain their homes (i.e. housekeeping).
- Lack of decent and affordable housing - there are not enough physical buildings and subsidized housing options for low-income families.

SENIOR SUPPORTS, SENIOR HOUSING SOUTH CROSBY-ELGIN, SENIOR HOUSING NORTH GRENVILLE:

Specific to senior issues, these groups of stakeholders mentioned:

- Difficulty for seniors knowing where to turn for assistance if they want to sell their homes but do not want to leave their community.
- Newer buildings in Leeds and Grenville are not suited for senior needs, too large and not affordable.
- Need for more available affordable housing options and remove hidden costs (i.e. heating/utilities).
- Need to look closely at overall cost of living compared to senior incomes.
- Assisted living is needed but in a supervised setting.
- Retirement homes are not subsidized.
- Seniors with mental health issues can risk losing their housing if they are hospitalized for an extended time period. In addition, there are increased problems such as unit damages and increased risks of seniors leaving the stove on.
- Need support to building a better community - assisted supports that enable individuals to stay in their home
- Long-term care has become the stop gap for seniors because there isn't community supports.
- Waiting list for home respite is long.
- Seniors suffer from isolation due to the rural location of the units.
- Need a transition facility with supportive housing.

YOUTH CONNECT AND YOUTH SUPPORTS:

Related to the youth, the participants described situations that relate to the cycle of poverty and interplaying factors such as employment, no stable address, and family conflicts.

- Identified as a gap - *on the street to unstable housing*. Youth end up on the streets with no options available in Leeds and Grenville.
- Unstable housing for youth is primarily a result of family conflicts.
- Agencies have challenges remaining connected to the youth to provide additional support because they don't have a contact number.
- Youth shelters should come with increased support, similar to a group home setting.
- Couch surfing isn't the best situation for a stable environment. Families for which the youth go to 'couch surf' often are unstable as well. *"Couch is provided but the youth are very hungry and other needs are not being met."*
- Youth face instability of not knowing where they are going to sleep every night. This impacts work and school functioning capacities.
- Youth trying to obtain employment face challenges such as not having an address or telephone number to put on a resume. In addition, they may not be able to afford cell phone cards, limiting employment opportunities.

HOUSING (NON-PROFIT AND GANANOQUE FAMILY HOUSING):

These discussions were specific to access to subsidized and affordable housing:

- Shortage of affordable housing.
- Waiting list and times have grown substantially in recent years - demand for two bedrooms with parking has increased.
- Not enough housing for non-senior singles.
- Individuals with hoarding and mental health issues; threat to health and safety.
- Gaps in shelters; single men/women youth.
- Seniors aging in place in their units require more attention than in the past. The demographic of dependency has changed.
- Education campaign designed for tenants to educate them to be responsible for their own homes.

ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH:

The premise from much of the discussions with stakeholders dealing with clients with addictions and mental health is that housing is a determinant of health. In addition, equally important is getting people into permanent housing as quickly as possible and bringing in supports to help them deal with any issues they are facing (i.e. addictions, mental health, etc.). Some of the key pressing issues reported by this group include the following:

- Lack of emergency housing in Leeds and Grenville; have to resort to transporting youth to shelters in other areas.
- Men and women with serious mental illness/addictions and leaving treatment centres have difficulty with the affordability of housing.

- Even in a supportive housing environment, adequate and safe does not translate into affordable. People leaving treatment end up residing in shared housing to make housing affordable but they may compromise the treatment plan.
- Individuals experiencing domestic violence have challenges navigating the shelter system and remain in unsafe situations.
- Ensure family reconnections are maintained.
- Adopt Housing First approach.

“Need the housing – but they can’t provide the supports. Gananoque do not have typical group homes, aging parents who have a grown child with a disability have nowhere to live. Families want to stay with their children but in rural areas they have no options. (i.e. support takes the adult child shopping to supply groceries for the whole family); similar with brain injury. Parents didn’t institutionalize their child and want to remain with them.”

DEVELOPER/PLANNER STAKEHOLDERS:

Developers and planning stakeholders spoke about making a strong business case for affordable housing. This includes “density bonusing” for new construction - offering incentives and concessions to developers if they include affordable housing.

- Of clear importance is the need to think out of the boundaries and ensure planning is inclusive for rural experiences. People in rural areas require different solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity than people in the urban centre.
- Specific to rural areas; issues were raised with regards to accommodating aging parents, conversion of homes or granny suites on the property.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS – PRESSING HOUSING ISSUES

- Costs of multi-units in a rural settings will drive up the cost of the units, (i.e. wells/sewer, etc.). *“Mallorytown small water regulation - makes sense to think about the water on top of land with seniors and kids.”*
- Mentioned was the need for more supply of geared-to-income and affordable housing and need to think about different ways to provide this affordability beyond the traditional social housing approach.
- Entry-level housing into the housing market for young families is increasingly becoming an issue. There are fewer post war, war-times homes available to be purchased as affordable costs. In addition, working-poor families are being squeezed out of the housing market. *“Families cannot afford to pay \$300,000 for homes. Subsidized families are not able to own houses. Builders are building houses that are too large so that they can make money. How do you get builders to build houses that are 1000 sq.ft.”*
- Planning is complex; high density at the high transit nodes. Offsets to be considered include changing zone, reducing taxes, fees, etc. Consider permitting a mall/store in a neighbourhood that connects housing more closely to services.
- Suggested is a ten-year deferral on development charges; 100% down to 25% so that affordable housing can be put out in the market for purchase in North Grenville.
- Required is sustainable models that prevent abuse of the affordability of selling the house (i.e. not large increase in re-sale of housing).

“Minimum unit dwelling sizes, so families look for smaller units in swelling size and look for zoning areas for this. Affects assessment of the home, what is the reasonable size home for a family? Building codes have very little when it comes to looking at square footage. What is the unit size that is required? Bringing designers into talk about what size should build.”

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS – SUCCESSES TO HELP ADDRESS PREVAILING ISSUES

A wide range of responses were mentioned with regards to successes to help address pressing housing issues. Not every stakeholder focus group provided a response.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

SUCCESSES

- Being at the focus group session to have a frank discussion.
- Charitable organizations assisting when in need.
- Fire setting behaviours in children - partnering with agencies who can provide support to families to prevent fires/safety issues.
- Assisting with hoarding situations.
- Preventative fire safety blitz - inspections and find issues

SENIOR SUPPORTS, SENIOR HOUSING SOUTH CROSBY-ELGIN, SENIOR HOUSING NORTH GRENVILLE:

SUCCESSES

- Families have built a 'home to share', pooled resources which enables them to live longer in their homes.
- Age in Home Program.
- Client intake has increased "3,700 being served by VON".
- Volunteers used for services; some services do not have fees.
- "Community coming together to house an individual experiencing domestic violence; rural and remote area supported".
- Building for 12 affordable housing units.

YOUTH CONNECT AND YOUTH SUPPORTS:

SUCCESSES

- Finding housing and job searching; specific to Connect Youth.
- Active network for youth and homelessness supported by Leeds and Grenville.
- Grant funding from United Way to bring awareness to the issues.
- Family and Children's Services (FCS); recognizing the supports that are in the community and removing youth from unsafe homes.
- 'Dumpster Diving' stigma is now being removed and the youth are talking amongst themselves.
- Peer church provided housing for boys.
- Youth Connect taking lead by participating in research; linking with schools.
- United Way- Youth Summit.

ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH:

SUCCESSES

- Community members assisting; moving away from the stigma.
- Development of addiction support housing program; provincial initiative.
- ASH program - support to the client not to the house.
- Redevelopment of Community Mental Health; rethinking how existing properties work and creating various levels of support in the houses to deal with mixed issues.
- Providing supports on-site, co-op housing; variations of what the individual clients need.
- Transitional Housing with 24/7 housing.
- Positive partnerships (i.e., ROH works with Community Housing in Ottawa to provide the supports to tenants/clients).

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS – SUCCESSES TO HELP ADDRESS PREVAILING ISSUES

HOUSING (NON-PROFIT AND GANANOQUE FAMILY HOUSING):

SUCCESSES

- Tenant associations- empowering tenants
- Reduced arrears from \$14,000 to \$150- huge success

DEVELOPER/PLANNER STAKEHOLDERS:

SUCCESSES

- Home Ownership Alternatives (HOA) – focus is on the financial structure not the size of the unit;
 - takes some of the increase of value away from the home owner,
 - home owner would qualify with a mortgage and HOA would bridge the gap of the second mortgage,
 - they would get the increase of value, no repayment.
- HOA is earning on the cost of living increases on the units, some of the towns real estate values are not growing; Kemptville is a growth market, limitation where towns are not growing.
- Land available for 85 senior building units but funding is required to make it affordable.
- Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP) program.
- Garden suites/granny flats; typically they are portable units that are assembled and disassembled; detached garage structure.

CHALLENGES TO ADDRESSING ISSUES:

A summary of the responses from all the stakeholder focus groups are noted below:

What was said:

- **Decision makers** need to listen to people.
- **Funds are not available** to provide the partnership of services.
- **Improvement of processes.**
- **Limited support allowed;** time sensitive; “three days maximum for some support (short term).
- **Shift in expectation** of where seniors are living.
- SMILE Program **waitlist is huge** (i.e. 14 months); people end up in long-term care because of it while waiting for the services.
- **Service boundaries can cause issues** - LHIN (some people are being excluded from programs).
- **Legislation prevents from what can be done** - act as per regulations.
- Filling in large units with seniors - **family demographics have changed.**
- **Hospitals are serving as emergency shelters.**
- Teachers that reach out - they **don't always have the information, knowledge.**
- **Landlords dictate the system** - youth are living in substandard housing conditions.
- **Poor formalized relationship** with the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care and the Local Health Integration Network to address homelessness and housing and support issues.
- **Minimal wage does not correspond with the costs of living.**
- **Social Assistance rates need to be adjusted** – “systematic problem that is very hard to get around. Thirty-five percent of housing is not enough with the amount”.
- **Community Start Up changes have had a huge impact.**
- **“Not in my back-yard syndrome”.**
- **System disconnect** - fixed income with housing allowance not reflecting the housing/rental market accurately.
- **State of employment, loss of employment** has consequences - EI lasts for one year while cost of living is increasing.
- **Costs of services are significantly higher in rural areas** - the ability to deliver services cost more (i.e. transportation).
- **Access to surplus public land** - where is it and how do you get it; meaningful use.
- **Communication between stakeholders** (including levels of government) - need to get out to private people as well.
- **Cost to construct** is same regardless of location, market rent cannot pay for construction.
- **Age of buildings and cost of repairs.**
- **Mental Health Act requires revision.**
- **Pay direct cannot be enforced.**
- People are staying longer than they should be in their homes because they **can't afford to move to smaller apartments, costs/availabilities.**

PROPOSED PRIORITY ACTIONS:

Based on the variety of responses from the diverse focus group stakeholders, there were several commonalities and the feedback confirmed support for priority actions in the following ways:

- Individual life skills and training for tenants who have difficulty maintaining their tenancy. Examples include assisting persons with money management skills, employment skills, budgeting and general life skills.
- A range of financial incentives from municipal government is required to build affordable housing. The range of financial incentives included local development charges relief.
- Emergency financial assistance, such as rent banks and utility banks, to help prevent people from becoming homeless.
- Partnerships and cooperation among the public, non-government, non-profit and private sectors are required to create new units.
- Support for community development activities and work.
- Increase community acceptance of affordable housing.
- Explore new housing initiatives and funding programs (i.e. private partnerships to build affordable housing units).
- Focus on integrated housing and homelessness initiatives.
- Decrease wait time for social and special need housing.
- Upgrade and maintain existing rental and social/special needs housing stock.
- Increase the number of rent supplement agreements.
- Increase supply and choice of seniors housing; co-op setting, group home like setting.
- Improve the waiting list for subsidized housing.
- One stop-shopping - centralized access/coordinated access.
- Pull out equity of existing stock to build more houses (in cases where subsidy has expired).
- Social housing – think differently about how to provide it; more scattered and not so concentrated, Habitat for Humanity concept. More integrated into a community so that there are fewer stigmas.
- Integrate social housing and market rent.
- Provide choices for families outside of social housing.
- Ensure quality of housing where tenants have their needs.
- Provide housing that focuses on helping people with higher acuity first.
- Follow a harm reduction perspective in the delivery of service.
- Ensure all services are client centered.
- Build capacity and provide agencies with proper training and tools to support issues in the community.
- Increase supports to people once housed and in housing.
- Land use provisions within settlement areas; should allow for and be conducive to higher densities; housing development subject to other planning considerations.
- Identify areas where there is appropriate land to build and where the affordable housing is required.
- Create approval processes that support the builders (user friendly for builders).
- Amendment of by-laws; waive fees.
- Examine economic development opportunities.
- Financial Housing Program that assist with first and last month's rent deposits.
- Increase income supports.
- Adjust shelter allowance and rent/utility scales.
- Transportation assistance.

Who should be responsible or included in the solution process:

- Government; (i.e. Federal, Provincial, Municipal) Council to make it a priority.
- Private landlords need to get on board.
- Relationships between housing and agency need to occur at the individual level.
- Private sector but they may be hesitant if there are not enough financial incentives for them.
- Federal housing strategy; top-down approach.
- Cooperation amongst agencies.
- Move focus from the government and move back to what is needed in the community.
- Community support up, versus Ministry (top-down approach).