

## Spruce Grove 5 Year Strategy to Reduce Poverty & Homelessness

# Stakeholder Interviews Summary

### Background

As part of the community engagement process, eight key stakeholders in the community were interviewed to gain their perspectives on the current challenges Spruce Grove is experiencing with respect to poverty and homelessness. The questions were also meant to engage the stakeholders to start thinking about how their organizations can be involved in finding solutions. The eight stakeholders were asked the same ten questions (see Appendix at the end of this document). The stakeholders' responses are summarized below, with key themes highlighted.

### Key Themes

#### Trend of Poverty and Homelessness in Spruce Grove

When asked about the trend of poverty and homelessness in Spruce Grove, most interview respondents felt that poverty in Spruce Grove is generally increasing, especially in the youth population. It was also strongly and frequently voiced that one of the biggest challenges in Spruce Grove right now is the lack of access to affordable housing.

One other main point that came up was stakeholders' view that the trend of poverty and homelessness in Spruce Grove is in line with the booms and busts of the oil industry locally. When people lose jobs, they tend to use support services more (e.g. computers and internet in the library, perhaps because they couldn't afford to keep theirs at home). Several respondents also believe there is residual/trickle down of people struggling with poverty and/or homelessness that are coming to Spruce Grove from Edmonton.

***“We’re seeing poverty of spirit, a lack of morale and lack of investment”***

#### How is Poverty impacting Community Organizations?

When asked about the biggest impacts to the various community organizations and service providers in Spruce Grove, interview respondents claimed that the main issues were:

- Lower literacy seen in their clients

- An increase in social issues including high-risk behavior and lifestyles, and in increase in people using alcohol and drugs. This is seen in community members frequenting their organizations and facilities
- An increase in social workers' work loads
- Long wait lists to access mental health and crisis supports in various organizations

### Where Does the Poverty/Homelessness Exist?

When asked where in the city of Spruce Grove poverty and homelessness exist, several stakeholders commented that poverty is seen:

- At the Grove Motor Inn
- In Rotary Park
- As 'tent cities' in the trails, parks and wooded areas
- In the library, as this is the place people can go for resources that is open later in the evening.

One respondent claimed, ***"You can see it everywhere if you look for it"***, while another respondent pointed out that there is lots of hidden homelessness and poverty, so it is sometimes difficult to see.

### Who is Being Affected by this Poverty & Homelessness?

Stakeholders that were interviewed came up with a list of common characteristics that they are often seeing in those that are struggling with poverty and homelessness in their work:

- Often male
- Often Caucasian
- Under 60/middle aged
- A mix between seniors and troubled youth (using Augie's Café)
- Majority have signs of mental health and addiction challenges
- Many cannot get a job or rent an apartment

Several stakeholders also mentioned Paul Band and Alexander Band as two First Nation communities that commonly access services available in the community related to poverty reduction.

Two stakeholders also mentioned that the same families tend to access community services (e.g. the library had the same family that would come in and use services every day and staff were told they mainly live out of their van).

Lastly, a few stakeholders mentioned that there seems to be a trend in the last few years of people getting laid off from their jobs at a big energy project, which can lead to prolonged poverty and/or homelessness.

## Where does Spruce Grove hold the most assets, strengths & opportunities?

When asked about where they see Spruce Grove holding the greatest assets, strengths and opportunities, respondents' answers generally fit into several categories in the following ways:

**Organizations:** The Foodbank, FCSS, Homelesslink Alberta, Auggie's, Neighbourlink

**Health & Safety:** Great primary care doctors and the RCMP are assets

**Infrastructure & Amenities:** Great parks, libraries, schools, and recreation amenities (although recreation is still expensive)

**Overall Community Approach:** Positive attitudes, safe spaces, the hospitality of the communities, tri-regional approach, collaborative wrap-around care, communication among agencies, the communities' keenness to get involved and help

**Key Programming:** The new Youth Mental Health Hub: grassroots, not dictated by Alberta Health Services, and the doctors and a non-profit specializing in youth mental health are working together. Doctors are getting additional training to specialize in youth mental health, and there is funding to hire a 'Community Connector' to help with the work

**Potential for the future:** Joint efforts and partnerships, especially between City, developers and builders. Developers have land and relationships with builders, but there is a need to figure out how to reduce costs so that affordable housing can be a reality

## Where are we seeing collaborations? What is working well and what needs to be improved upon?

When asked about great collaborations in the community of Spruce Grove, the following relationships and partnerships were identified:

- FCSSes with one another (Spruce Grove FCSS and Stony Plain FCSS) and FCSSes with other organizations
- Alberta Parenting for the Future, the Primary Care Network, and the School District
- ParentLink with various organizations (e.g. the School District)
- The Chamber of Commerce with various organizations (e.g. with Auggie's)
- RCMP with the Library: RCMP continues to do walkthroughs in the library to keep everyone feeling comfortable and safe

Some of projects and initiatives coming out of the above collaborations are identified as follows:

- The Drug Strategy and Mental Health Youth Hub pilot project (ages 11-24, Fridays for three hours)
- The Blessing Project
- 'Protection of Exploited Children'
- Town of Stony Plain's Social Innovation and Systems Thinking certification

One stakeholder pointed out that perhaps the City, the County and the Province should partner on training in this space to save money since funding and resources are limited. Another claimed that there are so many great things going on, but things have to be done differently:

***“Many of these organizations have the same clients; it would be great to be stronger together, to share resources and knowledge. There can also be better communication within the community since everyone is eager to jump on board and help, and they shouldn’t be competing if something is already happening”***

What are the gaps and the greatest challenges/lack of resources when it comes to supporting people?

Many of the stakeholders acknowledged that the greatest gap or challenge was a lack of a full spectrum of housing in Spruce Grove.

***“We are just seeing market housing, therefore we need a shelter, we need supportive housing, and we need below market housing. Especially for a city with a long, cold winter- we need a shelter! Rents are also too high”.***

Other gaps, challenges and areas lacking resources were identified as follows:

- There is a lack of a good transportation system; respondents claimed that some developments are on outskirts of town, and some low-income people can’t access foodbank because too far away. When it’s winter, respondents were concerned with how people who cannot afford to have a car will get around to the foodbank, to a job, and to get out of social isolation.
- There is a lack of good mental health and addiction supports:

***“Would be nice to have a place for these people to go as they’re transitioning in their lives”***

- The tri-region has a strong regional identity, but the municipal governments have different ways of approaching community in the tri-region. The need to talk to each other more and work collaboratively.

***“People draw lines, but poverty doesn’t see these lines”***

- RCMP are burning out and/or there is a sense of apathy
- The community still needs to work on breaking down stigma around mental health, homelessness and poverty
- Sometimes health and social professionals are looking at social and health challenges and issues too much in isolation; we need to treat the whole cycle and the underlying issues (ie. Look at mental Health, addiction, poverty and homelessness all together and how they interact with each other and affect one another).
- Primary Care Network has different policies and procedures than Alberta Health Services

- There are no supports for women fleeing violence
- There is a sense of Nimbyism (Not In My Backyard); if Spruce Grove were to have affordable housing, how would we screen people to ensure they'll be able to pay?
- Our communities aren't resource deficient, there is just a lack of efficient use of resources. There is too much bureaucracy and too much mis-management. Community members should be given more input on how the resources are used
- Other agencies (other than the library) are not open late enough in evenings and on weekends

### How can you see your organization having the biggest impact in IMPLEMENTATION of solutions?

When asked how they think they and/or their organization can help with implementation of solutions for these challenges, the following answers were given:

- Helping to reframe the question and conversation (e.g. instead of Poverty Conversations change it to Conversations around how to raise a child in the best place)
- Helping get a pulse of what people actually think and use for a branding strategy, to get buy in.
- We can have the big impact in the upstream, but also need to deal with the downstream issues right. Therefore, it's important to strike a perfect balance between Prevention and Reaction.
- Ideally, we would be the ones referring people to other organizations
- We'd like to help re-shape a narrative, there are lots of churches in the area with resources and assets, need someone to take the lead- perhaps an 'interfaith committee'?
- We need one central voice and place

***"I have the ability to stay connected and engaged with people and follow up with people. I have the ability to 'hate the drug and love the addict'. I have the ability to 'hate the mental illness and love the person behind it' "***

### Would you like to remain involved in this process?

When asked if they would like to remain involved in the process of developing this strategy, most stakeholders were very keen to continue to be involved and have input throughout the development and implementation of the strategy.

One stakeholder (the parent of a youth with lived experience) gave a few suggestions of her peers that would be keen to be involved in this work. Another stakeholder was slightly hesitant, as he was unsure if his input or insight was relevant or helpful at this time. He indicated he was happy to continue being involved if it was helpful to the process.

## Appendix

### 10 Interview Questions

1. Can you please briefly describe the services your organization offers/the role of your organization in the community?
2. From your perspective/your organization's perspective, what has been the trend around poverty/homelessness in Spruce Grove in the last 2-5 years?
3. Can you please briefly describe how poverty/homelessness in Spruce Grove has affected you /your organization during this time?
4. From your perspective, are there specific places or geographic areas in Spruce Grove that you see are struggling the most with poverty/homelessness challenges?
5. From your perspective, are there specific demographics (age/race/gender, etc.) in Spruce Grove that are feeling the greatest effects of poverty/homelessness?
6. In terms of assets where do you think the community has the most resources and strengths in supporting people who are dealing with poverty-related challenges/homelessness?
7. Are you currently collaborating with other organizations in Spruce Grove towards alleviating poverty and homelessness? Which ones? What is working well and what needs to be improved?
8. In terms of gaps, where do you think the community has the greatest challenges/lack of resources when it comes to supporting people who are dealing with poverty-related challenges/homelessness?
9. How can you see yourself/your organization having the greatest impact in the implementation of solutions around this plan?
10. Would you like to remain involved in the process of developing this strategy?