

NSHTF Targeted Engagement Summary

October 2021



Overview

The purpose of this engagement is to inform a meaningful, human-centred strategy for the North Shore that empowers collective action in addressing homelessness and its causes. This engagement's purpose was to **engage members of the community** that are along the housing continuum on the North Shore. This includes residents that are currently street-entrenched, accessing shelters, in precarious housing, or at risk of being homeless. The engagement design ensured that any work or plan developed was centred on the voices being affected by this issue.

More specifically, this engagement aimed to build a **better understanding of the opportunities, needs, and challenges of individuals** along the housing continuum to inform the North Shore Homeless Community Action Strategy. Lots of data and information is available, thanks to the support of many of the organizations and key stakeholders already engaged in the situational analysis. However, it is important to recognize that much of the quantitative data on homelessness is inaccurate at best, and **underrepresents the “hidden homeless”, and many equity-seeking groups** due to limits in methodology. We believe that speaking directly to individuals affected by homelessness is the most effective way to ensure we have a more accurate and nuanced understanding of what homelessness looks like on the North Shore.

The engagement strategy was also an opportunity to **establish ongoing relationships** with community members during the development of the Homelessness Community Action Strategy.

Methodology

With support from staff and volunteers with strong community relationships, we engaged a diverse group of residents facing challenges with housing stability. We leveraged existing programs and services that take place in the community to facilitate focus groups and 1-on-1 storytelling sessions. The consultants conducted some interviews, and recruited community agencies to conduct others using an engagement toolkit (including questions and interview prompts, informed consent process, trauma methodology, facilitation techniques, data collection process). An online survey was also developed to include community members that preferred to contribute digitally. We were able to collect 30 individual perspectives using this combination of 1-on-1 interviews, focus groups, and the online survey (these perspectives only include community members with lived experience, not perspectives from community partners). The community partners that hosted or co-hosted engagements were:

- Alliance Church
- St. Andrew's Church
- West Vancouver Shower Program
- North Shore Neighbourhood House
- Family Services of North Shore
- Squamish Nation
- Harvest Project

- Canadian Mental Health Association
- North Shore Crisis Service Society

Insights

The quality of support is key to the person's well being. Stories were shared about both negative experiences (feeling stigmatized, discriminated against, unsupported, feeling like a burden, inconsistency in service) and positive interactions (sense of belonging and community, feeling cared for, having something or someone to lean on).

Consistency in by-law regulations/enforcement is preferred. Especially for those living on the streets or in their vehicles, the greatest insecurity is the irregularities of by-law enforcements, which can result in tickets and fines, and added stress. If individuals knew where they were allowed to park, or shelter themselves, many stated they would gladly respect these regulations.

People do not want to leave the North Shore, but many feel “priced out”. Priced out may mean resulting in homelessness, moving away from the North Shore, or feeling less and less included in the communities they live. It was clear that the North Shore is a special place for many, whether that is because of family and friends, the natural surroundings, the services and businesses they access, or otherwise. However, as affordability becomes increasingly an issue, many face the risk of having to leave the North Shore, or end up with precarious living situations.

Informal supports (family/friends) are key factors to well-being. For better or worse, friends and family and other forms of informal supports can change someone's life quite drastically. Some stories were shared about family being the only form of support that helped them through tough times, or provided them with a sense of purpose. Other stories were shared around how family can be a burden, and taking care of them results in an inability to support themselves properly.

History of trauma or ongoing trauma. Trauma was an overwhelming pattern in most people's history, or ongoing situation. Some community members also disclosed experiences with services and agency staff that were not trauma-informed, and therefore did not feel comfortable .

Public spaces are essential. One of the biggest challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic was the lack of public spaces available. Many considered public spaces as an essential part of one's ability to use the bathroom, socialize, and find places to spend their time. With the closure of public spaces (libraries, community centres, public bathrooms, etc.), many found it challenging to meet their daily needs (social, charging their phones, using the bathroom, shower, etc.)

Health (physical/mental) as a key factor. Another overwhelming trend was the prevalence of both mental and physical health challenges that hinder individuals' ability to feel confident, find work, stay connected to family, etc.

Purpose/meaning is a key driver. Whether it was friends, family, work, or volunteering, having some sense of purpose helped individuals stay motivated, and contributed to their positive mental health. As an example, one storyteller shared that after experiencing the loss of a loved one, they lost their

sense of purpose. But once they started volunteering at a meal program that they used, they rediscovered a new sense of purpose.

Instability creates vulnerability. It may seem obvious, but having any sense of instability can create great vulnerability in one's sense of safety and mental health. This is why consistency in services and regulations are important.

Fear of being punished when trying to access supports. Some community members shared that they intentionally live "off the grid" and do not access any formal supports due to fear of being punished. For instance, some members owe money due to fines, or having not done their taxes, or claiming their income, or having negative experiences with certain agencies, and feel shame.

Next steps

The most important part of this engagement was to ensure that the community action strategy is centred on the voices of those most precariously on the housing continuum. These stories and insights will be used to inform the community engagement strategy. Some community members also asked to be followed up with. The consultants will work with the NSHTF to ensure these members are included in the process to ensure we are moving in the right direction.



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