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Women and Homefullness:
What helped us land on our feet.

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Abstract

Far too often the notions of what government and funders assume is needed and necessary dictates what programs do or do not get funding. Rather than inquire about the supports women who are presently homeless need, this research focuses on those who have survived homelessness and what agencies, supports and individuals effectively and meaningfully helped them regain stability. The intent of phase one of the Women and Homefulness research study is to create a comprehensive list of suggestions and recommendations created by women who have used a variety of the social services Prince George has to offer. Ten women from varying backgrounds were interviewed regarding their struggles with previously being homeless and their journey in finding secure housing and varying forms of self-defined stability. By asking what **was** helpful, rather than speculating about what **could be** helpful, this study recognizes that the experts in the area of need vs. pre-conceived need are the women who were service users and are now success stories.

“There’s total incongruency there! When trying to come up with solutions for people who are living these kinds of lifestyles and having these experiences, you really need to include them in the solutions, because they know what they need. You can come up with these great programs and ideas but most likely they won’t work because they’re not made for and by the people that are facing those experiences and living in those lifestyles.”

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to thank all the women who shared their stories and made this project possible. Thank you for sharing your time and the intimate details of your lived experiences. All the participants were such strong, inspiring individuals and have greatly impacted our lives with their stories, and for this we are grateful. Thank yous are also extended to the UNBC Women’s Center, Dr. Si Transkin and Service Canada, all of which helped make this project possible both financially and through un-wavering support

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Disclaimer

The views in this paper are not necessarily the views of the researchers or the University of British Columbia. The suggestions and recommendations are a collection of quotes that have come directly from the ten interviewees.

Introduction

Whether you know of someone who is presently on the street or you have driven by a food bank and were inwardly appalled by the amount of people waiting in line for a free breakfast; homelessness affects all Prince George residents. In reality, with the forestry sectors slowly shutting down and the realty prices still remaining relatively high, a large percent of the population inches closer to the possibility of being homeless. Stay-at-home mothers who have no personal income, women who make a fraction of what their husbands make, and single mothers make up a substantial demographic of the potentially homeless. For these reasons, it is important to seriously address homelessness and identify what supports are truly useful in helping an individual regain stability and secure housing.

While considering the complexities of funding for social services, the researchers recognized the complete lack of input from those who have used the services around Prince George and have become successful in securing housing and gaining stability. The researchers feel these success stories are crucial in discovering what was and was not useful for a variety of individuals with varying needs. In response to the need for increasing data on homelessness and the researcher's belief that invaluable data could be gained from women's success stories, women were sought out to complete interviews pertaining to their personal lived experiences as well as recommendations for policy and programs that affect homeless women. These interviews provided a wealth of knowledge directly related to attaining success and stability and the programs and services needed to accomplish the feat of assisting more women who are in similar circumstances.

The researchers recognize that each individual is different and requires varying supports; for this reason the ten women interviewed came from diverse backgrounds. All participants accessed services around Prince George, have been homeless and the majority of women have struggled with heavy addictions. This is by no means an exhausted list of services and programs needed in Prince George, but suggestions that the women felt were crucial.

Main themes

While conducting the interviews four main themes kept arising --- empathy, timing and process, routine and education that leads to feelings of accomplishment. Women shared lived experiences that were raw, unimaginable and allowed a by-standard such as myself to better understand why these women became homeless, as well as how they struggled and fought to regain stability in their life.

Understanding and empathy

There needs to be an infectious empathy that begins to plague the city of Prince George. Much to the dislike of rampant stereotypes, this will result in individuals displaying understanding (or at least tolerance) rather than strict condemnation of others that do not meet society's expectations. Individuals may even take the time to learn the trials and tribulations of those living on the streets and every-day people in our city may start to fight along side the multitudes of vulnerable people in their town.

The women you see living on the street, do you know their story?

“I mean I don't think anyone asks to be homeless, it's just the circumstances that put them there.”

“get of their ass and go and see how these people feel. Then they'll understand exactly what **people** are going through everyday of their lives”

“I was raised in a middle-class family and I pretty much didn't want for anything...but I did go through violence and sexual abuse growing up”

“If they have been giving it away [sex] all their lives or being forced throughout their lives, why not get paid for it?”

“ Not because I didn’t have the ability to go down to income assistance and get a rent cheque or a welfare cheque, it was that I couldn’t pull myself away from the corner for enough time to actually go down there and stand in line and talk to a worker, because my need to get high was just so extreme.”

“I was 17 and then I was out on the street corner because society still bashed me. So I found solace on the streets with the other trans and the other gays”

“I’ve been there and done that and it hurts! I understand how they [homeless] feel. They feel lonely, lost, like no one’s there for them...Just to see it, hear it, it hurts.”

“I think of some of the things way back then, here I am walking a long this back alley with no shoes, just having the clothes on what I have on my back, scrounging around, sleep there, even just going with men, hoping they’re going to provide me with a hotel or whatever”

“he may not have been a pimp but he certainly benefited from that fact that I was “working”...you may look at it differently, but he was still living off the avails” *referring to a husband that encouraged his wife to prostitute herself.

“you relapse, you use because nobody likes you, you get back and you hang around the alley with the other girls again”

“I felt that that if somebody looked at me long enough, and I’m still like that today, they could tell that something was wrong with me”

“after I cleaned up I had all my memories of abuse come up, not that they really had gone anywhere...it was just sort of down there, just below my throat and then once I stopped using, god, there was no way I wanted to be alive”

“I remember times when I would go to this place, it was almost like a church , and going there crying in the hallway because I wanted to quit drinking so bad. I was just sick and tired of that certain lifestyle”

“I found myself, again, on the street, because I couldn’t get a job, I couldn’t get any help financially from Social Service. Just finding myself working back there just to support my kid-to support my baby- just to make sure [my kid] had what [it] needs”

“having people from my past see me out there, you know? Old high school girlfriends from my past high school...when I was in high school we used to drive around and throw pennies at the hookers and then being the one in that...ya...don't judge someone until you walk in their shoes”

“Staying high is easy – getting clean is the hard part”: rehabilitation is about timing and process

As a toddler, we do not speak until we are ready and consciously chose to. To try to force or prod or move along the process is frivolous. In the same way, individuals must be ready and consciously chose to try to change their life circumstances. This change then becomes a process that is on-going and ever evolving, like all normal human development.

“Just understanding that getting clean is a process. Just as becoming an addict is a process, so is cleaning up, it's a process. It's not something that you just wake up one day and say “Oh, I'm not gonna use today” or “I'm not gonna work today”. Understanding that it is a process and that we have to be supportive through every step of it”

“Because it was hell! It took me a year and four months to feel good. This is why these rehab places, these short term situations to have women cleaned up...no no! A year and six months! ...that duration was a nightmare”

“it just kinda happened gradually over the years. When I got away from it I had to take one step at a time”

“They've [homeless/ addicted individuals] got to get to the point where ...I know I can be there as opposed to saying “ya, I'm going to school” and then go once and never go again because you haven't gotten your ducks in a row”

“It's like I'm on this bike. When you're taking this bike, it's like I'm going on a nature bike ride, you're still going to have these little humps and whatever, but the important thing is to stay on that bike and just keep going. And that's what I have been doing for the last [several] years, I've just been riding this little bike”

“if they're not ready for structure then they're not ready for that transition. So if they're not ready for that transition, they're not ready to make that commitment. So...they weren't comfortable in a time in their lives to take that big step. So when you're working with women with addictions or people with addictions, they really **need to want** to make that change and begin recovery”

“Like with me for example, it took me how long...years and years I was addicted to alcohol...it took me years!”

“So when people go into recovery it’s always when there’s a plan with different stage...you know stage one, stage two, stage three and they’re all transitional stages”

“point A is the starter of getting off the drugs, maintaining a sober lifestyle...accessing people that want to help you and **sticking with it**...the problem I see is that the women, they don’t have the ability to get to point A and so they get lost”

“For the first few years in my recovery, every time I hit the two years clean mark I always would relapse and I would slip back and I just couldn’t reach or get past a certain point in my recovery, so in order for me to do it this time I really had to look at why my recovery was so important to me and what I really wanted out of life and why I was doing it...It really made me realize that I really had to do it for myself otherwise I wasn’t going to reach the goals that I had initially set for myself”

“Don’t just go cause you have to go, go because you want to!!”

Routine and the need to boundaries

When the women were asked what helped them change their lives and gain stability “routine” was the answer given by the majority of women. There needs to be a clear routine, which then leads to feelings of purpose, goals, being able to predict and anticipate what will be coming next and “normalcy”.

“Having a routine in my life. It keeps you stable right? Like if you don’t have no routine and everything is so chaotic, it’s pretty much like the addicts lifestyle, the chaos. The opposite of chaos if having a routine”

“Keeping myself on a strict regime everyday in this town. I don’t even keep food in my home because I go to the shelter to eat everyday, which gives me my exercise from my apartment, I ride my bike with my packsack and weights and it keeps me around people that are striving to do better and I get to eat well and then I go home and have a little snack and then I go to bed. And that’s how I keep a routine, a stable routine. And this is what a lot of women need to learn when exiting off the streets.”

“something to do on a day-to-day basis, where it’s as close to “normal” as I can get”

“there needs to be more discipline, we don’t want to sugar coat everything, lets get some boundaries happening, lets get some strict rules happening and if you don’t want to comply, fuck ya, because I wanted to cut it and look what’s happened, it’s worked for me”

“I needed to have some structure in my life and for me that was the scheduling. So getting up in the morning and getting on the bus and going to [omitted] or going to school, having class at this time and this time and this time and at the end of the day getting back on the bus, going home or going to pick my kid up then going home, making supper...You know, I needed that structure because when I was on the streets I had not structure, my life was chaos, I had no commitments besides myself, I had no plans, no responsibilities, no goal...well the only goal I had was to make money so I could get high”

Education that leads to feelings of accomplishment

Women were asked to describe in detail some of their “best” moments; moments that were extremely memorable and made them feel good about themselves and the world around them. For many of the participants, returning back to some form of education, while exiting a street lifestyle based on addictions and survival sex work, led to feelings of accomplishment which in turn gave the women increased confidence that they could reach other goals and reaffirmed their abilities and self worth.

“Achieving my hairdressing and when I finished the street humanities course...like graduating with the rest of the college, getting a certificate for the street humanities, even though it wasn’t a degree or anything, it was still an accomplishment from where I was sitting in my life to what I was doing”

“I realized that by going back to school and getting my education that I could use my past as a way of helping other people. To me education was my ticket out!”

“the other part of my support system was school and my teachers and the students that I was in classes with, it really made me feel a part of something bigger than myself and better, you know? I really attached myself to my education because I needed those supports to further myself and my life and get the knowledge that I needed to find some sense of direction and know what I wanted out of life.”

“Graduating...my mom and dad being there...being happy”

“So part of my recovery has been school...a huge part of my recovery has been school and that’s just how I’ve coped...using school as a tool for my recovery”

Needs and Suggestions for policy, programs and Prince George

The following sections are a compilation of quotes from interviewees that were asked “given your life experiences what suggestions do you have for service providers, or policy makers in government? What would you like to see in place to assist homeless women?” The quotes have been categorized and broken up in to “Needs” and “Suggestions”. “Needs” are recommendations that the women said were crucial and are desperately needed in our city **now**. “Suggestions” are recommendations that the women would like to see in Prince George but recognize that to see these recommendations become reality it will take time, dedication and funding. The researchers felt it was important to maintain all the interviewee’s original quotes, rather than the researchers paraphrasing for the women. This is the input from women who have used services around Prince George and engaged in the “street” lifestyle. These are wise women that understand what supports truly worked for them and what supports they feel would work for other women who are in similar situations.

Needs

Housing

“there’s a very big need for low income [housing] and even though they’re building one on Queensway, I mean that’s only going to be 30 units. It’s just not enough”

“when I first came to Prince George, the first struggle I had was securing a place for myself”

*Since this individual could not find housing she had to resort to staying in a shelter.

“There needs to be more housing available...you’re allowed to stay their for two years and then when you go into their other place (referring to Elizabeth Fry’s housing complexes) you can stay there as long as you want, but then that doesn’t leave room for people coming up...and where do [they] go?”

“My kids go to school across town, so I’m looking at re-locating so my kids can go back and forth. Everybody’s rent prices are going up – eight hundred dollars for a duplex! It’s like “oh, my God”

“Because I said I was staying at the [women’s shelter], “oh, we have a renter”, “our room has been rented”. How is a person supposed to find stability, how is a person supposed to have a roof over your own head when you have people who automatically stereotype you because you’re staying at a certain facility. That there itself is another hurdle to try and get over”

Education and Understanding on the part of family, community and social service workers

Family- lack of family support leads to ...having family support leads to...

“Some of my best moments was in the past, it always had to do with my family...being with my family and being together and doing things together and just being happy”

“then I have my grandchildren, which I cherish. What kinda example would that be? Seeing your grandma all drunk and having nothing”

“I was doing better then all my family, but apparently a second class honours isn’t good enough”

“I could imagine ever going back to that because it would cost me the relationship I have with my [child]”

Community and workers- support in the form of taking time to understand clients and the complexities of different issues is more beneficial then programs.

“talk to your clients and get to know them. You can’t help them if you don’t understand them first”

“sometimes I get comments like “oh well you don’t know what it’s like to be addicted to anything” and I said “yes, yes I do” I went through my own little personal hell before I had to quit drinking’

“If you’re not willing to do something yourself, how can you encourage other people to do something, right?”

“I did go to treatment once, but I left...I stayed for about two weeks, but I left because they would be telling me that they felt that I hadn’t dealt with [omitted] and I figured they were full of shit because how would they know? Really...if I was ok or not”

“he was actually a male and we’re still good friends to this day, and he was an important part of my sobriety. He told me, and like he did it in a way that didn’t sound criticizing or anything, he

just says “you know what, you have a drinking problem” and I didn’t feel insulted by it or anything...then it just kinda sunk it.”

“How can somebody relate to...say, you know, somebody who was a hooker or tried doing that when they’ve never done it or understand why you would do that?”

“[they] didn’t say it in a criticizing way, to me it was just like “ok this is the truth and now you can do whatever you want with it” either do something or keep going...”

“just being able to sit there and talk to me and let me get my stuff out or be myself, like accepting me...so then I could go and always have someone to talk to”

“ I didn’t want to go to somebody that hadn’t been abused, right. Same as when I was in detox, one woman, she was a counsellor and she had never used, and so in my mind if you haven’t been there how the hell you going to help me figure out what went on, right? Instead of reading to me from a book, that it says “blah blah blah” I don’t care what it says in the book.”

“Based on my experiences of being transgendered I wanted to enlighten people who want to be enlightened, to educate, to open it up a bit, in this town in particular, because I deal with a lot of discrimination”

“just because the ladies are smiling to me and being polite, because you know you’re being politically correct and it’s against the law to discriminate, but it’s there”

“that’s why I say only a certain “people” can really work with the street population, you got to have some sort of empathy, patience, understanding, knowledge”

Identifying and deconstructing barriers to accessing resources

“I don’t remember hearing about food banks and that until sometime when I was in recovery”

“I didn’t know I could get social services, I didn’t know at that time until one of my relatives told me that.

”when I was down there I didn’t really know about very many services that were available to me and actually what I could accessed to help me out, because potentially I could have gotten out sooner had I been more aware of the different help that I could have accessed down there.”

“the [omitted] women’s shelter is the one I ended up turning to, **when** I found out about them”

“I was new in town. I had no idea as to what was available to me”

“I didn’t know back then, at the time, that I could go to welfare as a single person and they could put me up”

“No, I didn’t know about them. I didn’t know about them at all [women’s shelters] If I had known about them when I was seventeen I wouldn’t have had to stay on the street’

Suggestions

Programs

Education in schools to promote empathy and understanding with youth and in the community

“When it comes to violence we should be teaching, working with our youth—that violence on the playground, things like that, aren’t acceptable. I think that’s where the true work starts, starting to do that prevention”

“It was in support of the homelessness and they had it where people could go and sit in a gym and be homeless for a night. So maybe we should have more support like that, like maybe have it twice a year so people realize...I think it’s called “homeless for the night”

“a member of parliament, come down here and actually go through what every one of those people go through in the run of a day...I mean one day and one night is not good enough, a week, a month, they need to spend time and talk to these people”

“we have to remember that it is not just us who live with addictions, it’s also our children”

“all people in government [and in general] should have to take a life course 101”

Supportive living

“we need more supported living. For a lot of women out there they’ve lost their life skills, they’ve lost a connection with the community”

“there needs to be more housing available, I think, for women that leave abusive relationships, or that are trying to get their act together.”

“I would say we need more places like AWAC with the upstairs, you know in the shelter, the second stage. And ASAP, they rent out upstairs as well, I think we need more...there is “in the moment”, second stage and then you go off, right? We need more supportive second stage”

Policy

Dismantling the “hoops” and expectations of government and specifically the Ministry of Children and Families

“one thing I’ve noticed with the government is that they want everyone to be alike...contribute financially or economically to society, but in order for that to happen they [individuals] have all these other needs that need to be met first. And to be honest with you, some of them will never be able to contribute economically to society”

“healing is a huge part of it and the government needs to acknowledge that! Holistic healing! And a lot of these government systems are the very ones that contribute to the violence and abuse in the women’s lives”

MCFD

“It is not fair for you to be judging them or making them jump through hoops to see their kids, when having that visit with their kids might be enough to get them out of their addiction”

“Like income assistance, just to fight to get diapers for you kid and then have to sell your ass for diapers because the government wont give you twenty dollars so you can put diapers on your kid”

“I spent years down there (living on the streets) and it wasn’t until I got pregnant that I cleaned up”

“I know that if anything happened to my [child], I would be out there in a heart beat. [My child] is what motivates me. [My child] keeps me sane and keeps me going in the right direction.”

“I ended up getting pregnant with my [child] and that’s right where I got turned around, cause of the baby I was carrying”

“When your kids are taken away, the longer they’re in care the less chance there is of them going home, and it just seems like the more hoops you jump through the more they set out for you to jump through”

“Forcing me to think about what I really wanted in life, because it wasn’t about me anymore, I had a [child] to raise to”

“For a lot of women, without their children, they’re lost...they’re completely lost. They don’t have the drive because what’s the point when you have nothing to move towards?”

Prince George

“Hookers and housewives” creating more options

“we were both denied welfare because of the two year independent rule just came out. So we were denied welfare and there were sex workers staying in the shelter at the time and they were dressing up and going out and making money and it just looked really enticing to me and so I went out and got drunk one night and started working the street to support me and my girlfriend.”

“there was women actively coming and going and prostitution and drugs. So it was really easy for me to get caught up in all that” *Referring to living in a shelter

“there are places a young woman should not be in, like [omitted]. Just because you’re seventeen doesn’t mean you should be staying in a place like that where there are other kids that drink and party. I wish they would have establishments around here that would put, you know, like—you have your own bedroom, you share a kitchen, you keep the place clean—for teenagers that are in that position of “don’t have a home, you don’t have anything, you don’t have anyone to support you”

“In AWAC, there’s women who are coming in to that shelter that are legitimately battered women, they need to be segregated or put into a different area of the institution. Then there are women who are on the streets, who have no place to go because they’re strung out on the drugs and they’re working on the streets and they’re using the place to flop. The problem is, the homeless women, the drug women, the legit battered women from the suburbs can not be combined... You throw a women from the suburbs who her husband has beat her, in with a junky who is going to shike her. The shelters need to be categorized, this is a shelter for this type of individual, this is a shelter for this type of individual... Why have you got the hookers in with the housewives?”

Desperate for a detox center

Prince George needs to have a detox center and a rehabilitation center so individuals do not have to leave their family and supports while trying get clean. Supports are crucial to the success of individuals who are trying to get off substances.

“there aren’t enough services to begin with! Treatment...detox! you shouldn’t have to wait a week for a bed in detox when there’s a certain window of opportunity. If someone is willing to go to detox you’ve got a short period of time to get them there before they might change their mind. If it’s too much work for an addict or it seems too hard they’ll give up very easily.”

“I think we need a treatment center for women. Not only that, but for men and women who are HIV positive. We don’t have any where to go”

“I went down there, down south (to a treatment center) and I came home two days later. I was lonely, my family wasn’t around...your supports are huge!”

Safe injection site

Less using in the shelters would mean that there would be fewer people kicked out for the night, which would lead to less people sleeping on the street.

“ A safe “using” place for people to go, then they wouldn’t have to risk their beds...like a separate building”

“Like an incite, with kinda like a bus shelter so they’re not using in the shelter when they’re not supposto”

“You don’t know, people in their addiction go through psychosis and that’s the only place they feel safe (referring to shelters). So they got to risk their bed at night to use. I’m not saying the staff have to take verbal abuse and if they let everyone in, well it would just be a crack shack in their right?...I mean there’s got to be something, like incite...and then they would have less using in the shelters”

Conclusion

As homeless numbers steadily rise and with the potential of many more becoming unemployed as northern mills and factories shut down, homelessness is a topic that must be addressed. Both increased funding for particularly successful agencies as well as developing new supports in communities must become a priority for many northern cities. Research that approaches homelessness from a fresh and new perspective needs to be initiated to gain a holistic view of what is and will be helpful in addressing homelessness; especially as it becomes an increasing reality in both, those who are one pay cheque away from living in a shelter and those who believe themselves to be far removed from people living on the street.

Using a fresh perspective to expand the collective data regarding homelessness will assist policy makers in identifying the agencies and supports that deserve increased and sustained funding. As the government of British Columbia continues to limit funding for services such as women's shelters, there needs to be more research into what is effective and "worthy" of the sparse funding. Interviewing women who have been homeless, regarding what agencies were actually helpful, removes an element of speculation and replaces it with actual insight based on success stories. This is the kind of data that is crucial in creating informed policies, successful programs and clear direction regarding where the "need" is for funders.

The researchers are happy to share phase one "Policy and Program Suggestions" of the Women and Homelessness project with the policy makers, funders and service providers of Prince George. The above recommendations are what successful, stable women, who once utilized various social services around Prince George, felt are needed in Prince George. These women were once homeless and are now living success stories that reflect courage, strength and the importance of social programs in a community. Who better to give insight into the needs of such a vulnerable population, but women who once made up part of the population. Using a holistic, inclusive and qualitative approach to policy change, the researchers of Women and

Homefullness are proud to present a compilation of recommendations from the experts on the complexities of the “street life”.

“You have to realize that lived experience is really important, that people who are out there working the streets or who are homeless...that they are truly the experts and we have to change the things so that it’s working for them.”