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A Deliberative Dialogue Approach to Addressing Homelessness in the West Kootenays

Introduction

This brief summarizes the collective insights, shared priorities, and actionable recommendations that emerged from a *Regional Deliberative Dialogue Addressing Homelessness*, held on April 29, 2025, as part of the West Kootenay Homelessness Response Summit in Nelson, BC.

The dialogue was designed to promote inclusive, respectful, and solutions-focused conversations among diverse regional partners. A total of 22 participants attended, including people with lived and living experience of homelessness, housing advocates, Population Health and Mental Health and Substance Use representatives from Interior Health Authority, frontline outreach workers, Indigenous partners, municipal and provincial government representatives, researchers, and students.

The dialogue was grounded in findings from the *2024 Community Perceptions on Homelessness and Related Service Provision* survey, providing a common starting point for participants to reflect on community attitudes, service gaps, and systemic challenges. These discussions were rooted in shared values of compassion, equity, collaboration and community well-being.

This summary is intended to inform regional decision-making by highlighting key themes that emerged across roles and communities, and by presenting four practical recommendations for collective action. This dialogue reflects an ongoing commitment to relationship-building and collaborative approaches that are urgently needed to address homelessness in rural regions such as the West Kootenays.

Why This Dialogue Matters

The West Kootenays face distinct challenges related to homelessness, including geographic dispersion, limited access to services, and housing and service shortages. At the same time, the region is rich in community leadership, collaboration, and innovation. This deliberative dialogue offered a valuable opportunity for cross-sector partners to engage with one another around data-informed local realities. The resulting recommendations reflect both urgent frontline priorities and shared aspirations for long-term, culturally competent, and sustainable responses to homelessness.

Key Insights

1. The Importance of Relationships

Trusting relationships are foundational to meaningful support for people experiencing homelessness. Participants emphasized that person-centered, trauma-informed, and non-judgmental approaches help build connection and improve outcomes. Relationships between service providers, decision-makers, and across sectors are equally vital. Trust, continuity, and time are key to both frontline care and system-level collaboration. Investing in relationships enhances mutual accountability, strengthens coordination, continuity and promotes well-being.

2. Challenging Stigma and Engaging Community

While survey findings revealed broad community support for services addressing homelessness, approximately 15–20% of respondents expressed stigmatizing or discriminatory views. This number felt understated to frontline workers, who regularly encounter hostility and stigma toward both unhoused individuals and service providers.

Participants highlighted the need for sustained public education and community dialogue. Strategies to address stigma included storytelling, creative outreach, and targeted information campaigns in social media, farmers markets and community events. A recurring theme was the need to work with—not against—community members who may be hesitant or opposed. Starting points included engaging local Chambers of Commerce and influential businesses, facilitating non-adversarial conversations rooted in shared values, and advocating for transparent, collaborative approaches to address concerns and misconceptions.

3. Supporting Indigenous-Led Solutions

There was strong support for expanding Indigenous leadership and visibility in regional responses. Participants emphasized the importance of cultural, spiritual, and community-rooted healing as integral to housing and health services. Recommendations included increasing cultural competence across systems, ensuring representation, and resourcing Indigenous-led initiatives grounded in self-determination.

4. Investing in Regional Capacity

Participants stressed the need for regional coordination to avoid duplication and improve access. Framing the region as a whole, despite geographic dispersion, was seen as a key strategy to leverage the population at large and advocate for increased provincial funding for the region.

Suggestions included expanding regional services such as detox, supportive housing, youth programs, and Indigenous health services; improving transportation access; repurposing underused spaces; and adapting temporary housing as community needs shift.

Selkirk College was identified as a key partner in developing the local workforce, particularly through training and employing individuals with lived/living experience. Participants also called for greater investment in youth education on homelessness, equity, and decolonization.

Actionable Recommendations for Regional Decision-Makers

1. Strengthen Indigenous Led Responses

Support a full-time Aboriginal Community Liaison through the Circle of Indigenous Nations Society (COINS) to enhance services for Indigenous Peoples experiencing homelessness, who are disproportionately impacted in the region. Collaborate to mobilize existing human resources and secure long-term funding to increase service coordination and cultural competence.ⁱ

ⁱ Action in progress. In partnership with COINS, a policy brief has been prepared to share with the MLAs of Kootenay Central and Kootenay Monashee, advocating for funding to increase the role of an Aboriginal Community Liaison from 0.2 FTE to a full-time position in the West Kootenay region.

2. Promote Inclusive Community Culture

Develop a community-wide inclusion campaign grounded in lived experience and co-led by students, local leaders, and grassroots organizations. Focus on sectors like health, education, and government through accessible messaging, experiential training, and storytelling. Offer paid opportunities for people with lived experience and create public resources to support learning.

3. Expand Education and Workforce Development

Promote subsidized programs at Selkirk College to build a skilled local workforce. Strengthen outreach through collaboration with Career Development Services (CDS), WorkBC, and other community organizations. Prioritize opportunities for people with lived experience and community members to engage meaningfully in service delivery.

4. Engage Many Voices and Leverage Influence

Host inclusive conversations with residents, businesses, and organizations holding varied perspectives. Focus on shared goals like inclusion, safety, belonging, and well-being. Partner across sectors—including service providers, businesses, civil society, and Indigenous leadership—to reduce polarization and support sustainable housing solutions.

Next Steps & Invitation for Collaboration

This summary consists of the collective knowledge, lived experiences, and shared priorities of diverse regional partners. As we move forward, you are invited to:

- Share this summary, as relevant, to encourage action
- Champion these recommendations within your networks
- Continue strengthening relationships across sectors, communities, and lived experience to deepen our collective impact

With continued collaboration, we can work together toward safe, inclusive, and equitable responses to homelessness in the West Kootenay region.