FLOURISH TOGETHER

Official Community Plan Update 2020-21

POVERTY REDUCTION ASSESSMENT

SPRING 2021

Merritt

FLOURISH UNDER THE SUN

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that the Nicola Valley is the traditional territory of the Nlaka'pamux and Syilx peoples, and has never been ceded or surrendered in a Treaty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty, as defined in *Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy* (2018)[1], can be understood as the condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic level of living standards and to facilitate integration and participation in society.

Poverty is a reality for far too many British Columbians. In 2016, 557,000 people in British Columbia (B.C.) were living in poverty, including 99,000 children. In response to these staggering numbers, in 2018, the Province issued its first-ever Poverty Reduction Strategy, entitled *TogetherBC*[2]. *TogetherBC* identifies common themes and challenges for communities across B.C. and sets ambitious targets for reducing poverty, particularly for children.

Grants from the Association of B.C. Municipalities have been made available to help connect these provincial targets and strategies to the local context. The City of Merritt's Official Community Plan (OCP) update has created this connection through the preparation of a poverty reduction assessment and by adding a poverty reduction lens to the OCP. The updated OCP will not only guide future growth and development in the community but will do so by examining the role of the OCP in eliminating poverty.

Through engagement with key stakeholders, community members and individuals with lived experiences of poverty, the poverty reduction assessment identifies the challenges and barriers as they relate to poverty in Merritt. The assessment highlights many of the extraordinary organizations, services and initiatives currently working to help lift people up and out of poverty. And finally, the assessment provides recommendations for what we, as a City, can do better or differently to help our neighbours and strengthen our community.

[1] https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/strategy.html

[2] https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/initiatives-plans-strategies/poverty-reduction-strategy/togetherbc.pdf

2. POVERTY REDUCTION FRAMEWORK

The following paragraphs outline the key goals, priorities and investments made by both the Government of Canada and the Province of B.C. as part of their commitment to reduce poverty and improve the lives of individuals and families across this country and province.

2.1 OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL (2018)

In 2018, Canada released its first-ever Poverty Reduction Strategy, entitled *Opportunity for All*. *Opportunity for All* establishes the foundation for future federal government investment in poverty reduction based on the following three pillars:

- **Dignity**: Lifting Canadians out of poverty by ensuring basic needs – such as safe and affordable housing, healthy food and health care – are met;
- **Opportunity and Inclusion**: Helping Canadians join the middle class by promoting full participation in society and equality of opportunity; and
- **Resilience and Security**: Supporting the middle class by protecting Canadians from falling into poverty and by supporting income security and resilience.

For the first time in Canada's history, *Opportunity for All* sets an official measure of poverty: **Canada's Official Poverty Line**, based on the cost of a basket of goods and services that individuals and families require to meet their basic needs and achieve a modest standard of living in communities across the country. The basket includes items such as healthy food, appropriate shelter and home maintenance, and clothing and transportation. It also includes other goods and services that permit engagement in the community, particularly for children, youth, parents and seniors.

The cost of each item in the basket is directly linked to the prices of these items in communities across Canada. Canada's Official Poverty Line reflects poverty thresholds for 50 different regions, including 19 specific communities. Wherever individuals and families are living, if they cannot afford the cost of this basket of goods and services in their community, they are considered to be living below Canada's Poverty Line - or living in poverty.

Opportunity for All also sets ambitious and concrete poverty reduction targets: **a 20% reduction in poverty by 2020** and a **50% reduction in poverty by 2030**. These targets are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty.

Key Investments

The following chart illustrates recent key federal government investments that have be made to help lift Canadians out of poverty and support the middle class. These investments were included in the federal Government's 2016, 2017 and 2018 budgets.

Initiative	Projected New Investment
Canada Child Benefit	Budget 2016 introduced the **Canada Child Benefit**, which represents new investments of over $25 billion over five years, including the value of indexing the benefit beginning in 2018–19.
Guaranteed Income Supplement	Budget 2016 increased the **Guaranteed Income Supplement** top-up for single seniors with new investments of over $7 billion over 10 years.
National Housing Strategy	Budget 2017 introduced a National Housing Strategy. The 10-year, $40-billion plan will give more Canadians a place to call home and includes $16.1 billion in federal investments in provincial and territorial housing programs, including $2.1 billion for **Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy**.
Indigenous Housing	Through investments made in Budget 2017 and Budget 2018, the Government announced dedicated funding of over $1.7 billion for Indigenous housing, including: · $600 million over three years to support housing on reserve as part of a **10-year First Nations Housing Strategy**; · $240 million over 10 years as announced in Budget 2017 to support housing in Nunavut; · $400 million over 10 years to support an **Inuit-led housing plan in the Inuit regions of Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and Inuvialuit**; and · $500 million over 10 years to support the **Métis Nation's housing strategy**.
Public Transit Infrastructure	Budget 2016 announced $3.4 billion over three years to upgrade and improve public transit systems across Canada. Budget 2017 announced an additional $20.1 billion over 11 years in public transit infrastructure to transform the way that Canadians live, move and work. A further $5.0 billion was announced in Budget 2017 for public transit projects that will be funded through the Canada Infrastructure Bank.
Early Learning and Childcare	Budgets 2016 and 2017 announced combined investments of $7.5 billion over 11 years to improve the affordability, quality and accessibility of early learning and childcare, including for Indigenous early learning and childcare.
Labour Market Transfer Agreements	Budget 2017 provided additional investments of $2.7 billion over six years through agreements with provinces and territories to help Canadians prepare for, find, advance in and keep good jobs.
Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program	Budget 2018 introduced the new **Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program** to replace the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy with an incremental investment of almost $450 million over five years and nearly $100 million per year ongoing.
Canada Workers Benefit	Budget 2018 introduced the new **Canada Workers Benefit** to strengthen and replace the Working Income Tax Benefit with new investments of $3 billion over five years, which includes measures to improve access to the Benefit.
Home Care and Mental Health	Budget 2017 provided $11 billion over 10 years to support better home care and mental health initiatives through agreements with provinces and territories.

Working with Provinces, Territories and Communities

The Government of Canada realizes that strong partnerships with the provinces, territories and communities are essential to implementing a poverty reduction strategy that works for all Canadians. The Government is committed to working with the provinces, territories and communities to coordinate current and future poverty reduction initiatives with a focus on addressing gaps in programming, preventing duplication and making sure programs are coordinated.

Working with Indigenous Peoples

The Government of Canada is committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and a renewed relationship based on the recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership. Poverty is experienced differently among First Nations, Inuit and Metis, largely due to Canada's colonial history, in which Indigenous peoples have been subject to policies and actions that have had direct negative consequences on their standard of living and perpetuated cycles of poverty and marginalization over many generations.

2.2 TOGETHERBC (2018)

In 2018, the Province of B.C. released its first-ever Poverty Reduction Strategy, entitled *TogetherBC*. *TogetherBC* establishes a path to **reduce overall poverty in BC by 25% and child poverty by 50% by 2024**. B.C. currently has one of the highest rates of poverty in the country, and over 40% of individuals living below the poverty line are part of the workforce.

With investments from across all levels of government, *TogetherBC* reflects the provincial government's commitment to reduce poverty and make life more affordable for British Columbians. It includes policy initiatives and investments designed to lift people up, break the cycle of poverty and build a better B.C. for everyone.

Built on **the principles of Affordability, Opportunity, Reconciliation, and Social Inclusion**, *TogetherBC* focuses on six priority action areas:

- More affordable housing for more people;
- Supporting families, children and youth;
- Expanding access to education and training;
- More opportunities, more jobs;
- Improving income supports; and
- Investing in social inclusion.

Key Priorities

The strategy includes several key priorities, as outlined below, which were identified through engagement with the public and stakeholders across the province:

- **Housing and Homelessness**: The most constant and pressing issue across the province is the lack of affordable housing.
- **Supports for Children and Families**: The lack and cost of childcare has historically prevented many parents, particularly single mothers, from getting and keeping a full-time job.

- **Financial Security and Income Supports**: Government financial support services – from RAP; SAFER and other rental assistance programs to income and disability assistance rates – have historically not kept pace with B.C.'s cost of living.
- **Mental Health and Addictions Services**: No matter the community, people reported the same problems – services are hard to access, wait lists too long, and supports too late coming.
- **Food Security**: People are more and more concerned about how the lack of quality healthy and affordable food makes their lives harder and puts their family's health at risk.
- **Access to Health Care**: Too many people simply cannot afford the medicine they need, a trip to the dentist, or other medical supplies and services that are outside MSP coverage – and even more so in remote and Indigenous communities.
- **Education and Training**: While education is frequently cited as a key to breaking the cycle of poverty, its cost puts it out of reach for too many families and young people in poverty.
- **Employment and Jobs**: Many people spoke of being trapped in precarious employment, with low wages and unpredictable hours – making it virtually impossible to adequately support their families.
- **Access to Services**: There is an ongoing need identified for public services to modernize – in terms of meeting the diversity of B.C.'s population, improving both online and face to face access, and improving integration of services – so that B.C.'s most vulnerable people can better take advantage of provincial services.
- **Safe, Affordable Transportation**: For work, family and recreational purposes, people need reliable and affordable transportation options, particularly as they are forced to move further out of urban centres due to the high cost of housing.
- **Access to Justice**: Unresolved legal problems can cause serious and sustained financial and emotional issues for people living in poverty, and too often B.C.'s most vulnerable do not have access to the justice services that protect their safety and rights.
- **Discrimination and Stigma**: Living in poverty is challenging enough without being judged for it. Discrimination and stigma are significant barriers preventing people from accessing opportunities and breaking the cycle of poverty.

2.3 TOGETHERBC – WHAT WE HEARD (2018)

The development of *TogetherBC* was informed by a comprehensive public engagement process conducted by the Province of B.C[3]. The intent of the public engagement process was to ask British Columbians how the Province should work with communities to combat poverty and inequality.

The Province consulted widely, capturing as many voices as possible and discovering the unique needs in different communities – rural and remote, as well as larger urban centres. The Province wanted to hear from local governments and community leaders, from service providers and advocates, from business and labour organizations, and from people experiencing systemic barriers to participation in their communities. They wanted to hear from people of colour, Indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ2S+ people, refugee and immigrant communities, and especially from individuals living in poverty today.

There were 28 public meetings held throughout the province with over 2500 people in attendance, a website where people could contribute their thoughts, sponsored 100 small-group discussions for community organizations (2786 participants), and a call out for telephone, mail and voicemail submissions.

Key Themes

Throughout the public engagement events, several key themes emerged in every part of the province, representing the broad topics raised by stakeholders, as well as during the community meetings, roundtables and discussions. The key themes are included in *TogetherBC* and described in detail in the *TogetherBC* summary above.

Throughout the consultation, it was also very clear that poverty and discrimination are linked.

Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty as other people. Refugees and immigrants also experience high rates of poverty, as do people of colour, single parents, women, and LGBTQ2S+ people. People in these groups are also more likely to experience difficulties finding employment, housing and accessing the services they need. This discrimination makes it incredibly difficult to escape poverty.

For these reasons, improving affordability cannot be the only solution to poverty. The Province must also create opportunity, promote social inclusion and take real action on reconciliation.

People of all backgrounds, from across B.C., consistently identified the same challenges and the same solutions for breaking the cycle of poverty. These included **the need for more affordable rental housing, increased supports for children and families, and greater income supports**.

[3] https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/121/2018/07/WWH_Report-PovertyReductionStrategy_FINAL.pdf

3. LOCAL CONTEXT

The City of Merritt is located in the unceded territory of the Nlaka'pamux and Syilx Nations in the Nicola Valley of interior B.C., approximately 270 km northeast of Vancouver. Located at the confluence of four major highways - Highway 5 (Coquihalla), Highway 5A (Princeton-Kamloops), Highway 8 (the highway to Spences Bridge), and Highway 97C (Okanagan Connector) - Merritt comprises 26 square kilometres with a population of 7,722 residents (BC Community Health Data, 2020)[4].

3.1 POPULATION GROWTH

Since 1991, Merritt's population has remained relatively stable, increasing by 3.5% over the last 25 years (Statistics Canada, 2016). During that time, the City has experienced periods of growth (1991-1996) and decline (1996-2001). Although Merritt has traditionally experienced a slow growth rate, with recent changes to zoning regulations, density allotments and expected increases in infill development types, Merritt's growth rate is expected to increase significantly over the next 20 years. According to the Merritt Housing Needs Report (2021)[5], recent population projections anticipate that Merritt will grow to approximately 8,145 residents by 2026, with seniors accounting for approximately 29% of the 2026 population.

3.2 INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

There are six First Nations bands located near Merritt, including Nooaitch, Ntsla'tko (Coldwater), Sxe'xn'x (Shackan), Shulus (Lower Nicola), Spaxomin (Upper Nicola) and Cook's Ferry. Approximately 23% of Merritt residents self-identify as Indigenous, with 46% below the age of 15, representing a very young population (Statistics Canada, 2016).

3.2 ECONOMY

Well known as a forestry and former mining city, Merritt has a strong history of employment through local industry, namely though sawmill-supported employment opportunities, alongside ranching and farming, and the tourism/recreation-supported industry. In recent years, a number of the community's lumber operations have closed, resulting in a significant impact on the local economy. At the time of the most recent census, Merritt's unemployment rate was 9.5% while the provincial average was 6.7% (Statistics Canada, 2016). As discussed in the Housing Needs Report, in December 2016 (after the Census was published), Merritt's Tolko sawmill closed its doors due to a lack of lumber. This closure saw more than 2022 workers lose their jobs, with many over the age of 40. Data is not yet available to illustrate the impact of the sawmill closure, or the impacts of COVID-19 on Merritt's labour force and local economy.

3.2 INCOME

The median before-tax household income in Merritt in 2015 was $62,544, which was notably lower than the provincial median of $69,995 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Of the total households in Merritt, approximately 35% were living below **Canada's Official Poverty Line**, which is defined as an after-tax

[4] http://communityhealth.phsa.ca/HealthProfiles/HealthReportDemographics/Merritt

[5] www.merritt.ca/hnr

income of under $40,000 for the household. In comparison, approximately 29.6% of Canadian households and 30.5% of British Columbian households were living below the poverty line at that time.

3.3 HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

A shelter-cost-to-income ratio of less than 30% is required to deem housing affordable, and anything higher means the housing in question is unaffordable for that particular household. Furthermore, households spending more than 30% of their household income on shelter are considered to be in Core Housing Need. According to the Housing Needs Report, from 2006 to 2016, the rate of Core Housing Need in Merritt increased from 14% to 15%, mirrored by an increase in total households in need (380 to 430). Renters experience Core Housing Need substantially more than homeowners with approximately 33% of renter households in Merritt in Core Housing Need compared to 6% of homeowners (Statistics Canada, 2016).

According to the Housing Needs Report, the cost of rent in Merritt rose 4% between 2010 and 2019 after adjustments for inflation, which was lower than the estimated income growth during that same time period. As outlined in the report, renter households are also far more likely to live in housing that is not only unaffordable but is also inadequate and unsuitable. In Merritt, 42% of renter households currently live in an unaffordable dwelling versus 13% of owner households.

3.3 HOMELESSNESS

In the spring of 2018, the Province of B.C. funded homeless counts in 12 communities, including Merritt[6]. The Homelessness Services Association of B.C., Urban Matters and B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association coordinated these counts to inform B.C.'s Homelessness Action Plan and provide a baseline to measure progress.

The infographic, included on Pg. 14, illustrates the findings from the 2018 Count, providing a snapshot of the state of homelessness in the city. At the time, 11 individuals identified as being homeless.

A second count was conducted in March 2020, when 43 people identified as being homeless, including nine who identified as being "sheltered" and 34 who identified as being "unsheltered".

For the purposes of the 2020 count, an individual was considered homeless if they identified as having:

- Stayed overnight on the night of the count in homeless shelters, including transition houses for women fleeing violence and youth safe houses, people with no fixed address (NFA) staying temporarily in hospitals, jails or detox facilities (defined as "sheltered"); or
- Stayed outside in alleys, doorways, parkades, parks, and vehicles or were staying temporarily at someone else's place (couch surfing) and/or using homelessness services (defined as "unsheltered").

While the numbers show a 291% increase from the 11 individuals who identified as homeless in 2018, to the 43 who identified as homeless in 2020, the Province has since changed the criteria for identifying those who are homeless. Of the 43 identified as unsheltered in 2020, 19 would not have been counted

[6] https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy/affordable-and-social-housing/homelessness#count

in 2018, as they were couch surfing at the time. The 2018 Homeless Count conducted by the ASK Wellness Society Merritt may not have been a fair representation of what's going on in the community, as a count can only include those present and willing to connect with representatives during the one-day count.

The purpose of conducting the homeless counts is to provide the Province with a clearer understanding of what homelessness looks like so that all levels of government can work together to better support some of B.C.'s most vulnerable people.

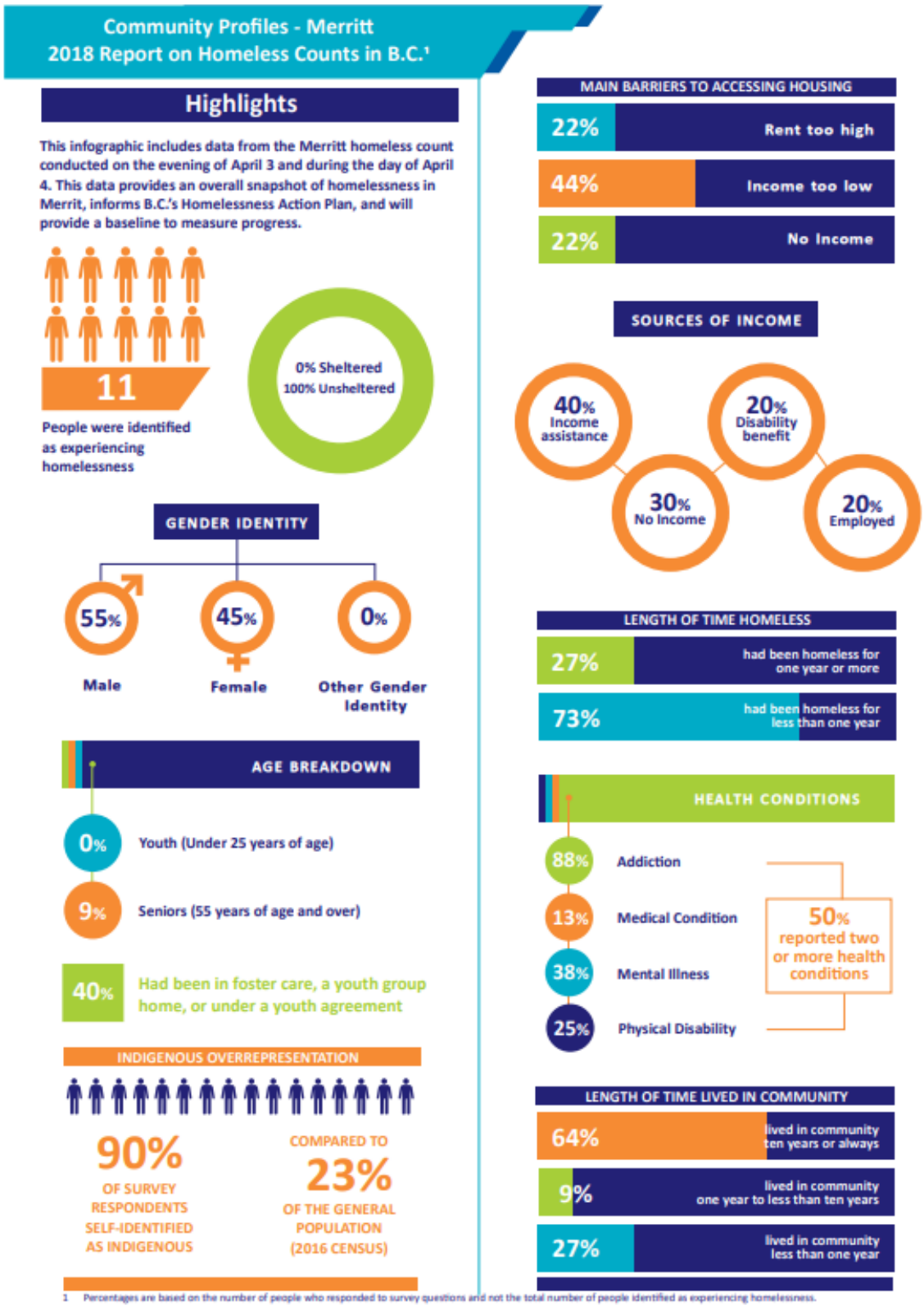

Figure 1: Merritt's 2018 Homeless Count (Source: Merritt's 2018 Report on Homeless Counts)

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This poverty reduction assessment could not have been prepared without the insight, information and stories shared by the many generous stakeholders and community members who participated in the engagement activities for this project. We thank everyone for their time, thoughtfulness and commitment to reducing poverty in Merritt.

4.1 PROCESS

Between September 2020 and April 2021, the OCP project team engaged with local non-profit organizations, government agencies and community members to gain insight into the realities of poverty in Merritt.

Due to COVID-19 and provincial regulations for physical and social distancing, all project team-led engagement activities were conducted virtually. However, with the generous assistance of a key stakeholder, the project team was able to hear directly from individuals with lived experiences of poverty, as explained in detail below.

The engagement activities conducted were as follows:

Stakeholder Discussions

Between September 2020 and January 2021, the project team conducted six telephone interviews with persons identified as working in the realm of poverty reduction in Merritt and the surrounding area (see: **Appendix A – Stakeholder Discussions**).

Poverty Reduction and Food Security Workshop

On October 9, 2020, from 4:30 PM – 6:30 PM PST, a virtual workshop was held using Zoom. The workshop included a presentation (see: **Appendix B – Workshop Presentation**), live polling and an open forum discussion (see: **Appendix C – Workshop Summary Findings**) on two interconnected discussion topics - Poverty Reduction and Food Security. Seven participants from local non-profit organizations, the school division, and health and social services agencies were in attendance.

Community Survey

Poverty-related survey questions were incorporated into an online OCP community survey during the fall of 2020. A total of 298 participants completed the survey. The majority of survey respondents (52%) indicated that housing affordability was their top housing-related challenge in Merritt, followed by lack of housing supply, lack of servicing/aging infrastructure, poor condition of existing housing and lack of variety in housing choice.

Discussions with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty

With the assistance of a key stakeholder, who coordinated three in-person group listening sessions, we were able to hear the voices of 12 individuals with lived experiences of poverty between March and April 2021 (see: **Appendix D – Listening Sessions with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty)**. The information that was shared was personal, thoughtful and provided in-depth insight into the many challenges faced by people living in poverty in Merritt.

Although all information shared throughout the community engagement process has been reflected in the **What We Heard** and **Policy Recommendations and Action Items** sections of this assessment, readers of this report are also encouraged to refer to **Appendix D** to hear the words of the individuals who participated in the listening sessions.

All poverty reduction related information shared throughout the stakeholder discussions, virtual workshop, community survey and listening sessions with people with lived experience was documented, categorized and analyzed. Information was categorized into key themes that correspond with OCP policy areas and summarized in **sub-section 4.2 - What We Heard**. The thoughts, insights and stories shared were then translated into policy recommendations and action items, which are included at the end of this report and will be put forth for consideration during the OCP policy review.

4.2 WHAT WE HEARD

The following paragraphs summarize **What We Heard** throughout the engagement process regarding poverty and poverty related challenges and opportunities in Merritt.

HOUSING AND SHELTER

- Limited affordable, safe and secure housing options.
- Limited availability and long waitlists for non-market housing.
- Limited availability of transition and second stage housing.
- Need for 24-hour supportive housing.
- Need for a long-term plan for a year-round, 24-hour, permanent emergency shelter (people are not only homeless in the winter or during a pandemic).
- People end up couch-surfing, living in vehicles, living with people they don't want to live with, because there's nowhere else to go.
- Sub-standard rental housing conditions (including hotel/motel rooms providing rental units).
- Illegal evictions so owners can "renovate" – commonly referred to as "renovictions". This leaves many renters without a sense of housing security.
- Even with a shelter allowance and disability benefits, housing in Merritt is unaffordable.
- Stigma and discrimination associated with accessing housing supports.
- Comments received regarding Housing and Shelter align with what was heard from stakeholders and community members during the preparation of the Housing Needs Report (2021).

TRANSPORTATION AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

- Lack of public transportation service after 10:00 p.m. Monday to Saturday, and after 6:00 p.m. on Sunday.
- Infrequent public transportation service (every 30 – 60 minutes).
- Far distances between bus stops.
- Limited public transportation opportunities for individuals who reside in the surrounding First Nations communities and regularly travel to and from Merritt (including high school students).
- High cost of public transportation, which can limit access to necessary services and employment.

- Many areas of the city lack accessible sidewalks, pathways, trails and bicycle lanes. (This issue is discussed in detail in the recently published Active Transportation Plan and addressed by the Proposed Active Transportation Network included as part of that Plan[7]).
- Sidewalk and bicycle lane discontinuity and poor maintenance of sidewalks and bicycle lanes.
- Lack of secure public bicycle storage or bicycle parking.

PARKS AND RECREATION

- Limited affordable extra-curricular activities for youth.
- Limited affordable leisure and recreation activities for youth, seniors and people of all ages.
- Lack of a drop-in youth centre.
- Lack of a safe, indoor meeting space for individuals of all ages.
- Limited safe 24-hour public washroom facilities.
- Comments received regarding Parks and Recreation align with many of the recommendations outlined in the Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan (2017)[8].

HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES

- Opioid crisis in the community, across the Province and the country.
- Limited access to mental health and addictions services (including detox services) in Merritt. Need for a continuum of treatment and ongoing supports - absolutely essential in order to move towards recovery.
- Many of the area's health services (including mental health and addictions services) are difficult to access by foot due to their location outside of the City Centre.
- Not enough doctors. Most specialists are based in Kamloops, including pediatricians, obstetricians, etc.
- Limited access to culturally appropriate health services.
- Stigma and discrimination associated with accessing mental health and addictions services.

INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

- Need for a living wage for all.
- Need to expand access to education and training for all.
- Lack of local employment, education and training opportunities.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

- Need for more family and parenting programs and supports.
- Many successful programs exist, but some rely on unstable funding streams. Need for reliable, long-term funding for poverty-related programs.
- Possible need to expand the food bank.

[7] www.merritt.ca/atp

[8] www.merritt.ca/downloads

- Limited access to reliable, safe and affordable childcare.
- Would like to see a service hub created in Merritt – a one-stop access centre where anyone requiring assistance – whether it be for housing supports, mental health and addictions services, employment services, affordable transportation, etc., could be assisted or guided in the right direction.

STIGMA AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

- Negative stereotypes regarding individuals and families living in poverty.
- Push back towards local organizations working to assist people living in poverty.
- Would like to see everyone engaged in community decision-making.
- Would like Merritt to be a safe place that welcomes all and lifts people up.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

The following draft policy recommendations have been categorized in accordance with existing and proposed OCP policy areas and designed to address the challenges and barriers identified throughout the background research and community engagement conducted for the poverty reduction assessment.

The recommendations are not an exhaustive list but rather, provide a package of actions that demonstrate what it could look like to apply a poverty reduction lens to municipal initiatives. Some of the recommendations are policy-related, while others may be City-championed initiatives.

5.1 SOCIAL EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Everyone deserves their voice to be heard when it comes to the future of their community. Bringing together different perspectives makes for a stronger democracy and a stronger city for all. Merritt is a regional service centre for the surrounding area, including several First Nations communities. Increasing social inclusion and providing equitable places, spaces, programs and services where residents of Merritt and the surrounding area can get together, socialize and feel part of the community can go a long way toward solving some of the basic problems that keep people living in poverty.

Objective 1: To set the stage for an updated OCP that is equitable, inclusive and champions the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Policy 1.1	Facilitate a more equitable and livable city in which all residents can meet their basic needs.
Policy 1.2	Ensure Indigenous Peoples are equal participants in Merritt's future.
Policy 1.3	Foster a community in which children, youth and families can meet their diverse needs and feel a sense of belonging.
Policy 1.4	Facilitate and support civic engagement, including with at-risk, marginalized and vulnerable populations.
Policy 1.5	Invest in social inclusion strategies and initiatives.
Policy 1.6	Create a City-led public awareness and engagement campaign that provides insight into the lived experiences of poverty.
Policy 1.7	Provide mandatory intercultural competency, anti-racism and trauma informed training for all City staff.
Policy 1.8	Conduct a complete review of City-led programs and services to better reflect the needs of Indigenous Peoples and champion the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action**.

5.2 HOUSING AND SHELTER

Throughout the engagement processes for this report and the Housing Needs Report, it was apparent that a lack of safe, affordable housing is the primary poverty-related concern in Merritt. There appears to be a lack of supply across the entire housing continuum, leaving residents with very few options and choice. In some cases, the lack of supply has led individuals and families to live in sub-standard rental housing, including run-down hotel/motel rooms. Living with the fear of eviction, tenants are afraid to complain about the health and safety issues they experience and witness around them.

There are several non-profit organizations, including ASK Wellness and Conayt Friendship Society, that provide affordable housing in Merritt, including rent-geared-to-income, low-end market rental, subsidized housing and supportive housing. However, even with a number of successful affordable housing projects, participants noted a need for more, specifically 24-hour supportive housing units in the City Centre. Most individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless are currently in the City Centre and it is important to meet people where they're at.

Participants also noted a need for a 24-hour, year-round permanent shelter. There is currently a shelter in operation, but at the time of writing, the funding agreement with B.C. Housing was set to expire at the end of June 2021. It was noted that there will always be the need for an emergency shelter in the community. Shelters provide people with supports, food, company, access to other services. They meet the needs of individuals who are habitually homeless, but also those who require a temporary safe place to stay when leaving domestic violence situations, transient individuals, etc.

Access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing is a basic human right. It has been well documented that a person can only begin to lift oneself out of a difficult situation and access the supports they need once they have a roof over their head and feel a sense of safety and security.

Objective 2: To increase housing options and supply across the housing continuum, from a 24-hour permanent shelter to affordable homes for seniors. For, every resident deserves a safe, affordable place to call home.

Policy 2.1	Ensure residents have access to affordable housing choices that allow them to build connections and community.
Policy 2.2	Work with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to develop an **Affordable Housing Strategy**.
Policy 2.3	Establish a **Community Task Force on Housing Affordability**.
Policy 2.4	Work with financial institutions to explore the financial feasibility of a **Rent Bank**.
Policy 2.5	Create an **Affordable Housing Reserve Fund** to support the development of affordable housing projects and retention of existing affordable units.
Policy 2.6	Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations in the development of affordable and non-market housing projects that respond to the unique needs of residents.
Policy 2.7	Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to support the development and operation of a year-round permanent emergency shelter.
Policy 2.8	Foster a rental housing stock in which tenants have adequate opportunities to live in healthy, safe and secure housing.

Policy 2.9 Partner with local non-profit organizations to ensure tenants are aware of their rights under *B.C.'s Residential Tenancy Act*.

Policy 2.10 Revise and update the following regulations to help increase the quality and supply of affordable housing in Merritt:

- Density Bonusing Regulation;
- Inclusionary Zoning Regulation; and
- Secondary Suite Regulation.

Policy 2.11 Prepare and include a Standards of Maintenance Regulation as part of the Good Neighbour Bylaw.

Policy 2.12 Provide surplus City land for new affordable housing developments.

Policy 2.13 Incorporate affordable housing in future developments on City-owned lands.

Policy 2.14 Dedicate a percentage of the net proceeds from City land sales to affordable housing.

Policy 2.15 Waive development fees for affordable housing developments.

Policy 2.16 Pre-zone land for affordable housing throughout Merritt.

Policy 2.17 Implement alternative development standards for affordable housing.

Policy 2.18 Provide Tax Increment Financing that prioritizes affordable housing.

Policy 2.19 Reduce property taxes for affordable housing developments.

Policy 2.20 Provide affordable housing developers hands on support from City planners and City Administration.

Policy 2.21 Expedite permit processes for affordable housing developments.

5.3 TRANSPORTATION AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

For people experiencing poverty in Merritt and the surrounding communities, it can be difficult to access the necessary resources and services, as well as employment, due to transportation barriers. Many people do not have access to a personal vehicle and public transit may be inconvenient, difficult to access and/or an unaffordable expense. The city has a large footprint, with agencies and organizations spread across various parts of the city. It was noted that many of the health and mental health support services are located a far distance from the City Centre, where many people experiencing poverty typically spend their time. Participants also spoke of transportation barriers for individuals needing to travel to and from the surrounding First Nations communities, particularly youth and Elders.

Objective 3: To build upon existing transportation and active transportation infrastructure and services in order to improve everyone's ability to get where they need to go in and around Merritt.

Policy 3.1 Implement the actions of the **Action Transportation Plan** to expand upon the existing pedestrian and cycling network and provide safe, accessible pathways and trails throughout the City Centre and other neighbourhoods.

Policy 3.2 Partner with the surrounding First Nations' bands to enhance existing transit opportunities and connectivity between Merritt and the surrounding First Nations communities.

Policy 3.3 Work with BC Transit to offer a discounted transit pass for individuals and families receiving Income Assistance and non-profit organizations that provide transit passes to low-income individuals.

Policy 3.4 Ensure future transit routes facilitate access to food and household goods, health and social services, recreation, libraries, childcare, education and employment opportunities.

Policy 3.5 Support the development of a program where unclaimed and used bicycles are collected, rehabilitated and made available to low-income individuals and families.

Policy 3.6 Support the provision of shared vehicles or a bicycle share in new multi-family residential developments to minimize the need for privately owned vehicles.

Policy 3.7 Encourage the provision of convenient and secure parking and storage for bicycles in new developments, existing public spaces and public facilities.

Policy 3.8 Revise City bylaws, such as the Zoning Bylaw, Subdivision and Development Servicing Bylaw, and the OCP's Development Permit guidelines, to increase the required number of bicycle parking spaces for multi-family and commercial developments.

5.4 PARKS AND RECREATION

Participation in physical activity, which contributes to our overall well-being, can be influenced by the built, natural and social environments in which we live. Design elements in the built environment such as street layout, land use, the location of recreation facilities, parks and public buildings, and the transportation network can either encourage or discourage physical activity. People are more active when they can easily access key designations such as parks, green spaces, pathways, services and amenities.

The revised OCP should strive to promote physical activity among people of all ages, in all circumstances, with a focus on creating equitable recreational spaces and opportunities for all. The City of Merritt has an important role to play in creating places and spaces that provide opportunities for physical activity and active living, which in turn contribute to the physical and mental health and well-being of all residents.

The City's Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan (2017) provides strategic direction regarding park use, facilities and services and contributes to Merritt's vision of being a great place to live. Many of the following policy recommendations align with the recommendations included in the Master Plan, while others expand upon its' Vision and Principles.

Objective 4: To improve access to parks and recreational activities for all Merritt residents in an equitable and inclusive manner.

Policy 4.1 Reach out to youth, seniors, First Nations, immigrant communities, and other groups to speak for themselves and help identify the types of spaces and programs that they would like to see in Merritt.

Policy 4.2 Ensure adequate provision of open spaces, parks, playgrounds and trees in all new development proposals.

Policy 4.3 Ensure all neighbourhoods have safe and adequate parks and recreation spaces (indoor and outdoor).

Policy 4.4 Update the **Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan** every five years to ensure the development and implementation of policies to preserve, protect, and enhance Merritt's park lands, greenspaces, natural areas and connecting corridors and ensure they are accessible, inclusive to all, and safe year-round.

Policy 4.5 Create a **Recreation Subsidy Program**, which provides low-income residents with a discount on most programs.

Policy 4.6 Enhance access to affordable recreational, cultural, library and other opportunities that promote health and well-being.

Policy 4.7 Support the development and distribution of an **Affordable Active Living Brochure**, which includes a list of free and low-cost cultural and recreational opportunities.

Policy 4.8 Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to develop and operate safe, indoor meeting spaces in the City Centre for youth and people of all ages.

Policy 4.9 Provide for year-round, 24-hour public restrooms and water fountains in the City Centre and at key locations throughout the city.

5.5 INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

In B.C., approximately 40% of individuals living below Canada's Poverty Line are employed and working. A living wage is key to poverty reduction in any community. Unlike the provincial minimum wage, a living wage reflects what earners need to bring home based on the actual costs of living in a specific community. A living wage can help move individuals and families out of financial stress by lifting them out of poverty and providing a basic level of economic security.

People experiencing poverty may also face additional barriers related to employment such as the need to gain employment skills and experience, access to a computer or phone, a permanent address, identification, transportation, etc. Supporting local organizations and agencies that work with people where they're at can help ensure individuals wanting to enter or re-enter the workforce have access to the resources and the support they need.

Objective 5: To support and lift people out of poverty by paving the way for equitable and inclusive employment opportunities.

Policy 5.1	Calculate **Merritt's Living Wage** using available resources[9] and share this valuable information with the community.
Policy 5.2	Build awareness around the need for a living wage and explore the adoption of a **Living Wage Bylaw**, which would ensure City employees and contractors are paid enough to meet basic, locally calculated expenses.
Policy 5.3	Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to develop new opportunities to assist people facing barriers to employment to gain employment skills and experience.
Policy 5.4	Support the sustainability of non-profit organizations through the development of social enterprise and other related initiatives.
Policy 5.5	Ensure that the **Economic Development Action Plan** encourages and supports small business development and co-operatives.
Policy 5.6	Increase awareness of the income services and supports currently available in Merritt.
Policy 5.7	Use municipal purchasing to support social and economic benefits (e.g. job and training opportunities for individuals facing barriers to employment). This can be accomplished by purchasing directly from non-profit social enterprises, or by using **Community Benefit Clauses** in appropriate tenders.
Policy 5.8	Work with local businesses, government representatives and employment training providers, such as the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, to create long-term pathways to employment focused on poverty reduction.
Policy 5.9	Encourage local and non-local businesses and industries to support the local workforce when operating in Merritt.

[9] http://livingwagecanada.ca/index.php/about-living-wage/calculating-living-wage-your-community/

5.6 SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES

Merritt's social service agencies and organizations are doing remarkable work and changing the lives of the individuals they meet. So much is already being done, but participants noted the need for more 24-hour support services. Many service providers are only able to operate Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. A key challenge to service provision is the ongoing need for sustainable, long-term funding to support programming. Successful programming can be short-lived, forced to start and stop, and/or unable to retain consistent staff due to limited funding.

Objective 6: To support Merritt's social and health service providers as they work to lift people out of poverty.

Policy 6.1 Assist the local food bank to secure a larger facility and increase food security in Merritt.

Policy 6.2 Develop and support initiatives that will increase dignified access to healthy food for all, as outlined in the **City of Merritt Food Security Assessment Report**.

Policy 6.3 Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to provide and promote senior-specific programs that will help combat isolation and loneliness.

Policy 6.4 Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to provide and promote parenting and family support programs.

Policy 6.5 Support School District No. 58 Nicola-Similkameen in their universal approach to supporting students.

Policy 6.6 Partner with other levels of government and non-profit organizations to provide culturally safe, accessible health care services in the City Centre.

Policy 6.7 Develop a **Community and Social Services Asset Map** to promote and increase awareness of the services and supports available in the community.

Policy 6.8 Collaborate with other levels of government to explore the possibility of developing an addictions treatment facility in Merritt, providing the necessary continuum of services and supports.

Policy 6.9 Partner with other levels of government, the Merritt Agency Support Table (MAST), and non-profit organizations to develop a one-stop access centre (a "hub") that connects individuals and families to housing supports, social services, employment information and training, and health services.

5.7 POVERTY AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Poverty needs to be de-stigmatized. Far too many Canadians are only a pay cheque or two away from being behind on rent and risking eviction. Poverty is a complex and interconnected topic that is further complicated by the impacts of systemic racism, intergenerational trauma and mental health issues. We need to make it easier for individuals, children and families to be able to reach out and ask for help when they need it. Resources are available, but in many cases, are not accessed due to a fear of public perception. We need to do better at ensuring everyone is treated with dignity and respect. We need to do better at making sure everyone knows they can reach out and ask for the support and assistance they deserve.

Objective 7: To foster a community that is understanding, compassionate, inclusive and equitable.

Policy 7.1 Initiate public education and awareness around poverty, creating opportunities to promote social inclusion and take real action on reconciliation.

Policy 7.2 Form a **Community Poverty Reduction Committee**, including City staff support to sit on the Committee.

Policy 7.3 Create a **Merritt Poverty Profile** to be used to determine trends, inform interventions and assist in evaluation efforts. This information can be used to help advocate to senior levels of government to plan for, fund and address community, health and social issues.

Policy 7.4 Partner with other levels of government and local organizations to produce stigma reducing communications (e.g. **a Poverty Myth Busters Brochure**) that will help provide insight on the realities of poverty.

6. NEXT STEPS

Where possible, the recommendations described above will be reflected in Merritt's OCP and will inform future updates to the recommendations of the City's various master plans, such as the Zoning Bylaw, Housing Needs Report, Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan, Active Transportation Plan, and Economic Development Action Plan. Other recommendations may be better suited to be shared with community organizations or other levels of government as ideas for future initiatives.

By completing this poverty reduction assessment, the City of Merritt is moving in the right direction towards reducing poverty for individuals and families. The City has identified poverty as an issue, gained insight on what it means to live in poverty in Merritt, and highlighted a number of ways that we can work together to lift up and support our neighbours.

7. CONCLUSION

Merritt, like other communities across the country, faces several poverty-related challenges, such as an opioid crisis, the need for more safe, affordable housing, and the need for inclusive health care services for all. Many local organizations, programs and initiatives are currently working to address these challenges and support individuals living in poverty. The hope is that this poverty reduction assessment not only sheds light on the challenges, but also promotes even greater support of these organizations, programs and initiatives. The assessment aims to take a closer look at what's going on in the community and provide clear policy direction to help reduce poverty and ultimately build an even stronger city.

During our discussions with community members, it was apparent that one of the key pieces missing in the fight against poverty is awareness. Awareness that poverty doesn't always look like what many of us, as outsiders, envision it to be. Some individuals are homeless, living on the street. Others struggle with addictions. Some work full-time but live with a constant fear of eviction. A child may go to school without adequate sleep or a healthy meal. Far too many people are forced to make difficult choices every day, just to get by. Poverty has many different faces, and sometimes we don't even realize it's there. As a community, we need to do better at understanding the complexities of poverty and supporting our neighbours in any way we are able.

The updated OCP, combined with the recommendations included in Merritt's various master plans, will provide a strong foundation for improving the quality of life for all Merritt residents. The Plan will establish a clear vision for the future of the City, written through the lens of poverty reduction, food security, kindness and awareness. The OCP will set the stage for a bright future, one where we look out for one another, free of judgement, and work together for the betterment of all.

Thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts, ideas and stories throughout the OCP and poverty reduction engagement process. We are forever grateful.

Thank you.

What do you see as this future state of Merritt where poverty has been eliminated and food security and self-reliance has been stabilized?

More local food production. Food production where all can partake.

Children coming to school healthy, rested, happy and excited to learn. Thriving.

A place where the stigma of "need" does not have to be hidden.

A community where everyone is taken care of, has their needs met, and can meet their highest potential.

People have many ways to access good quality food. People have safe and secure housing. People live with choice and dignity.

I see a community that respects all, is much more positive in their outlook and takes care of each other.

Youth, seniors, and all ages in between having judgement free inclusive access to abundant resources in Merritt.

-Poverty Reduction & Food Security Workshop

(October 2020)

What would be a game changer for reducing poverty in Merritt?

Inclusive needs to include poverty, Merritt is not inclusive for poor people. I don't feel excluded because of my race or disability but because of poverty.

A hang out place, like a community centre or rec centre, a place to hang out and play pool or use a gym or play games, somewhere to socialize and have a cup of coffee that was free or very low cost. It should have social workers or counsellors to talk to.

Housing, housing, housing.

Full-time shelter – people are not just homeless during COVID or in the winter.

Stop allowing apartment buildings and motels to kick people out and renovate and put the rent up, or to sell all the units (convert to strata).

Lower rents, and landlords should have to fix houses, just because you are poor shouldn't mean you have to live with mold.

More government-owned housing, for everyone, not just for people with kids. There are homeless people in Merritt too that need housing, and also lots of young people can't even afford to leave home. We need a home that can't get sold out from under you, nothing's safe anymore, even apartments get sold.

When out of town firms build here, they should have to use local workers, not bring in their own crews.

More mental health and addictions counsellors.

-Listening Sessions with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty (March – April 2021)

APPENDIX A

Poverty Reduction Assessment - Stakeholder Discussions

Andree Harley, Coordinator | Nicola Valley Advocacy Centre

Marlene Jones, Community Policing Office Coordinator | City of Merritt

Jim Adams, Executive Director | Scw'exmx Community Health

Keri Cooke, Director of Merritt Operations | ASK Wellness

Laurel Wilms, Acting Supervisor, Community Integration Specialists | BC Ministry of Social Development & Poverty Reduction

Lisa Baikov | BC Ministry of Social Development & Poverty Reduction

Bronwyn Coyne, Public Health Dietitian Coordinator | Healthy Communities, Interior Health

Clare Audet, Environmental Health Officer | Healthy Communities, Interior Health

City of Merritt Poverty Reduction Stakeholder Discussion

Keri Cooke, ASK Wellness, August 27, 2020 1:30 PM CST

Tell me a little bit about your organization and what you do?

- ASK Wellness is a non-profit organization with locations in three cities (Kamloops, Kelowna & Merritt).
- Working with the most marginalized folks in the community. People who don't have income or housing, mental health issues, addictions. Also, people who are falling short on rent payments, encompassing a much broader community. Providing services to any community members who need it in a non-judgemental way - wrap around services.
- Provide housing programs, landowner advocacy, etc.
- Street outreach, including harm reduction, supplies and food. Trying to build the relationship so people will feel safe to come through the doors.
- Addictions program – Interior Health provides the Recovery Program.
- ASK Wellness meets people where they're at.
- COVID-19 has only exacerbated what's already going on out there.
- Housing Inventory:
    - 32-unit Trades Winds – rent geared to income (33% of individuals' income) for seniors or adults living with disabilities.
    - 32-unit Three Eagles – townhomes, affordable housing with a family focus. 2, 3 and 4 bedrooms. Rent geared to income or low-end market in partnership with BC Housing.
    - 28-unit Supportive Housing – apartments for individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Two-year transitional. Bring individuals in and wrap them in supports and help them return to market rental. Mental health, chronic health issues. Some people will remain housed and some will not.
    - Currently in the permit phase for the development of 40-50 affordable housing units with seniors housing.

What are some of the specific challenges related to poverty in and around Merritt?

- Building education and awareness around the services that ASK Wellness and other service providers offer. For example, homelessness doesn't always look like what we see on the news.
- There are five First Nations bands that surround Merritt with a lot of folks with intergenerational issues and trauma and everything that goes with.
- Access to adequate medical services and health care in the surrounding rural communities. Many people need to travel to Kamloops for the necessary services.
- The hospital and mental health services in Merritt are in the "bench area", which is far away from the downtown core. Many people will not access services because of the location and the medical model of the system (lack of culturally appropriate services).
- Health services, including mental health services, need to be culturally safe and accessible for all - located downtown, meeting people where they're at.

- Need for 24-hour supportive housing units, ideally, in the downtown area. But love the idea of people having choice. Would be great to also have a shuttle or bus attached to the supportive housing to connect people to the necessary services.
- Need to expand the existing transit system. It would be ideal if transit could expand to the surrounding Indigenous communities.
- Need for more affordable, accessible housing – good fits, housing options that match those income sources. Core value of affordable housing, the ripple effect.
- Food security – daily meal program at a central location, knowing every human in a community is fed. A meal per day per human.
- Discrimination and stigma around poverty. Need to educate the community about what it means to be living in poverty. The ASK programs are very well utilized. Where it can be improved is education to the community. There is so much stigma associated with addictions and mental health. That's where the barrier is. Continuing that community education. We help all individuals. Everyone brings value to the community.

If you could work with the City of Merritt on any program, initiative or space, what would it be? What would be a game changer for improving the quality of life for individuals with lived experiences of poverty?

- A meal a day for every human. Would like to see the foodbank expand.
- A year-round permanent shelter. Meets marginalized people where they're at. Best point of referral – ability to connect with the services they need. Less people sleeping in doorways, helps the downtown business associations. Safe place, with year-round accessibility.
- A community centre that is more of a drop-in. A place for daytime programming like "Endeavour to be Better". Instead of drinking and using during day, people would have the opportunity to come to a drop-in centre. Need a place in town where people can go to get a cup of coffee or a meal and get out of the cold. Right now, everyone is kicked out at 8 AM. And in sub-zero temperatures, people often choose to go back to abusive situations or situations where there is drug and alcohol use, even if they were trying to stay clean or off the street.
- Need to meet the need for a safe place to socialize, escape the heat and smoke, provide some meals and offer opportunities for more activities and programming.
- Need public, accessible washrooms that aren't locked.
- Merritt had started a walking path and trail and would love to see this expand through downtown and make the entire city more accessible for all – seniors on scooters – for people to bike and run and walk. Inviting, accessible paths for people to navigate around the community. Increase connectivity for everyone.
- Would like to see the City lift all people up.

City of Merritt Poverty Reduction Stakeholder Discussion

Laurel Wilms & Lisa Baikov, BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction,

September 23, 2020 5:00 PM CST

Tell me a little bit about your organization and what you do?

- Provide outreach services, connecting vulnerable citizens to community supports and finances. Work in collaboration with different community and government agencies, such as ASK Wellness, the Ministry of Child and Families, Mental Health and Addictions, etc.
- Located in Kamloops but travel to Merritt on a regular basis.
- Travel to various locations to offer the outreach and integration services. Some of the services include expedited intakes, health requests, housing requests, coordination of services, overseeing a client's file that's falling between the cracks – providing a connection.
- The program has been operating for about a year (September 9, 2019).

What are some of the specific challenges related to poverty in and around Merritt?

- Housing is the biggest issue in Merritt. Specifically – there is a severe housing shortage, not a lot of low-income housing available. There are a few hotels that have agreed to monthly rentals, but due to the monthly cost, this is not sustainable for clients.
- Food security is ok – food bank and food provided through the legion.
- Many of the social services in Merritt are physically separated from one another. It could be approximately a half hour to an hour walk from one service provider to the next. This highlights a connectivity issue.
- It is difficult for clients residing in the surrounding reserve communities to access many of the necessary services and amenities. Everything is very spread out in the community.
- Approximately 43 homeless individuals identified in Merritt.

If you could work with the City of Merritt on any program, initiative or space, what would it be? What would be a game changer for improving the quality of life for individuals with lived experiences of poverty?

- If Merritt could provide a community hub to provide several services all together, so that clients could access everything they need in one place. Ministry/Nicola Advocacy Centre/ASK Wellness/Interior Health/safe distribution site - a true HUB.
- Work with local business associations to clarify any misconceptions around service providers. Potentially a HUB could help address some of that and a little bit of PR around the services that are being provided. People tend to focus on the safe supply of drug items, and overlook the mental health supports, child and family supports, etc. For this reason, some people avoid accessing the valuable services that are being provided and are so desperately needed.

City of Merritt Poverty Reduction Stakeholder Discussion

Marlene Jones, Community Policing Office Coordinator, December 3, 2020 12:00 PM CST

Tell me a little bit about your organization and what you do?

- A lot of background work.
- Prevention – collaborating behind the scenes. Looking at the root causes of issues and what we can do, not necessarily just enforcement.
- Focus on programs that are City of Merritt priorities, including youth engagement.
- Active role in supporting marginalized individuals in the community.
- A constable works with Marlene. They are both connected with the community and have a good rapport.
- Marlene, the Constable and volunteers are out in the community, out on patrols, checking in alleys, talking to businesses, checking the parks. They go on morning patrols near the schools to ensure the kids are going to school. Strong presence on the river path (where the kids hang out). Building a relationship with the youth. They connect with people and quietly chat about resources and services (i.e. shelter, food bank, etc.).
- "Merritt Agency Support Table" – meet once a month, including reps from the social support agencies, Community Policing Office, and probation. The RCMP identifies people that are in acute risk, and the names are brought forth to the group. The group decides who is supporting these people already. Is there another entity that can provide more support? A strong example of collaboration. Since its beginning, identified 34 individuals. Only 16 are still on the list. Individuals are connecting with agencies and now they're no longer on the police records.
- Would love to have an actual Situation Table in the community.

What are some of the specific challenges related to poverty in and around Merritt?

- The community does not have a long-term shelter plan.
- The shelter was in operation for eight years, started as an extreme weather response, funded by BC Housing (but needs to be year-round). The funding was intended to house 10 people, but the shelter was often housing upwards of 20 people. People were sleeping on mattresses and on the floor. The shelter was located downtown, which seems to be an acceptable location from the public's perspective. In March 2020, because of COVID-19 and physical distancing restrictions, the shelter could now only hold four people. To meet the shelter's needs, BC Housing rented a hotel – 20 rooms, 3 rooms specifically for COVID-19 positivity response. BC Housing provided funding for more staff, now the shelter has 24-hour staff. The Constable helps with safety training for all staff. Safety needs to be zero tolerance. It's a two-storey building, downstairs there is a restaurant and a cold beer store. A Committee came together to make this happen – ASK Wellness, Nicola Valley Support Shelter Society, Interior Health, Community Policing Office. However, the current agreement with BC Housing ends at the end of June 2021. We need to identify a long-term shelter solution for the community.
- Summer program – **Endeavour to be Better**. Great program, but with no sustainable funding. Adult drop-in program. Provides connection between individuals. The program is intended for

individuals are may be hanging around downtown drinking or involved in drug activity – many without a lot of personal connections. This program helps to bring people together. Instead of drinking together, these individuals get together and discuss the things they'd like to do and then they do it together - golfing, bowling, fishing, crafts, work experience, cleaning up garbage, graffiti cleanup, leaf blowing, blowing a little snow. Now, some of these individuals have developed skills. They showed up, felt a sense of purpose, and now they're working. We'd like that to carry on. There is currently only funding for this program until the end of June 2021.

- The lack of housing options is the number one challenge in Merritt.
- Addictions (coping mechanisms for trauma).
- Education and stigma – would like to see people not turning on the service providers.
- Long-term sustainable funding for poverty-related programs and non-profit staff. It is extremely difficult to retain staff and respond to change. If a program is going to run, it needs to run for longer than six months.

If you could work with the City of Merritt on any program, initiative or space, what would it be? What would be a game changer for improving the quality of life for individuals with lived experiences of poverty?

- Now that we have this larger shelter, we need to think about our long-term plans. The City needs to continue to support the shelter and we all need to keep letting the Province know what the community needs. We need continued support and funding.
- The Community Policing Office needs support from the City when they're looking for funding and trying to help secure long-term sustainable funding.
- The City needs to work on creating opportunities for a housing continuum. Merritt needs a range of housing opportunities and choice. Merritt needs affordable housing, places for retired people to downsize. The city doesn't need more five to six-bedroom houses.

City of Merritt Poverty Reduction Stakeholder Discussion

Discussion with Jim Adams, Executive Director, Scw'exmx Community Health Services Society (serving Area Bands of Coldwater, Nooaitch & Shackan), September 21, 2020 3:30 PM CST

Tell me a little bit about your organization and what you do?

- Work with the communities of Coldwater, Nooaitch and Shackan.
- Progressive organization that provides a nursing home, community care, youth programming, opioids programming, Elders programming, etc.

What are some of the specific challenges related to poverty in and around Merritt?

- Most challenging issue is figuring out how to deal with the opioid crisis.
- It is much more difficult to deal with the younger individuals with addictions than the older individuals. It is challenging to get the youth into programming. It's all about location, location, location, and dollars.
- In order to do that kind of harm-reduction, need a body that's going to take this on and build relationships.
- Harm reduction at the street level is very important but challenging.
- The weather is a big challenge for the area.
- Some people have choices. Some people choose to follow a path of self-enjoyment at the sacrifice of a healthy diet. Some people sell the food they are receiving, and that is their choice.
- There are opportunities for people to get the food they need in the area. The local food bank is easily accessible.
- Poverty is an economic issue. It's a social issue.
- There has been an abandonment of the children. Some people expect the schools to raise them. We need family training. We need to bring the parents in and teach them the skills they need. Knowledge sharing.
- There are 12-year-old girls who are not staying at home, for various reasons. There are 14-16-year-old girls out on their own. The RCMP are well-aware of the situation, but this shouldn't be. We can't make them go back and they keep running away.

If you could work with the City of Merritt on any program, initiative or space, what would it be? What would be a game changer for improving the quality of life for individuals with lived experiences of poverty?

- One of the most successful recent projects has been the Cold Weather Unit in Merritt. This project provided people with a warm place to stay and a meal. There was a significant reduction in emergency calls downtown while the Cold Weather Unit was in operation.
- Need a 24-hour site for homeless individuals and those experiencing poverty to go during the day. A place to get counselling (if desired) and have a warm cup of coffee.
- How do we get parenting programs out into the community? How do you get parents to participate? This needs to be done in small groups. Not in one big group. One-on-one – or no more than four couples at a time. Perhaps a way to encourage parents to attend is to have a

prominent figure as a speaker. Someone who is well-known, who might encourage them to attend. But there needs to be a solid plan – a great speaker, psychologists, counsellors, people from the communities.

- Youth are spending a lot of time downtown. It would be great to see a youth centre downtown.
- We need to look at what the youth can do. If there are no opportunities for youth, the youth will make their own opportunities. We need to look at what types of organized sports we can offer for those with minimal income. What are we doing to engage the younger groups? Movie nights – we should be doing this on a constant basis. There is a real push here to get a theatre in town. Put more effort in from the City perspective. An opportunity to get people off the street and give them somewhere else to be.
- Most of the youth go to high school in Merritt. There are some that stay around after school and then try to hitch a ride home later, 5 km, 10 km away. We need transportation options for them at 6 PM, 8 PM, 9 PM. Provide the youth with the opportunity to stay in town after school, but then also provide them with the opportunity to return home in the evenings.

City of Merritt Poverty Reduction Stakeholder Discussion

Discussion with Andree Harley, Nicola Valley Advocacy Centre, January 4, 2021 12:00 PM CST

Tell me a little bit about your organization and what you do?

- Funding for the Nicola Valley Advocacy Centre (Centre) is provided by the Law Foundation of BC (poverty law funding).
- Poverty law funding supports services that assist with income security, housing, and other poverty related legal services.
- Provincial funding is mainly directed towards regional centres.
- The Centre receives a small amount of funding through the Community Partner Program. This provides funding for a second advocate. The Centre recently lost an advocate that had been with them for seven years.
- The Centre assists with welfare, disability benefits, CERB, pensions, old age security, guaranteed income, a lot of tenancy work, helps tenants deal with landlords, helps connect homeless individuals with services, helps people deal with debt issues.
- The Aboriginal Justice Centre provides extra legal support that is culturally appropriate.

What are some of the specific challenges related to poverty in and around Merritt?

- Funding for most poverty related services is mainly directed to the regional centres – Kamloops and Kelowna.
- BC Interior Health encompasses a massive area that includes physical boundaries and barriers.
- Lawyers that deal with child protection issues are based in Kamloops and are only in Merritt once or twice a month.
- Merritt used to have a provincial courthouse, but it is closed. Now, the courthouse only provides circuit court. You can't file documents in Merritt. Need a local lawyer who can deal with Supreme Court matters.
- If your house is foreclosed on, none of that is covered by provincial funding (i.e. Legal Aid).
- Over the past few decades, several BC Legal Services offices have been closed.
- Most of the Centre's clients live in poverty, many suffer from mental health issues, physical disabilities and addictions.
- Addictions issues have gotten a lot worse in recent years - bad quality of street drugs – fentanyl instead of cocaine. A lot of alcohol abuse.
- Merritt has old motels that used to provide affordable housing for individuals. A lot are being cleaned up and rented out to contractors. This is forcing out lower income individuals who typically lived in these units.
- There is very little affordable housing for low-income, single parents and young working families.
- There are some people living in poverty who should have access to disability benefits, but are not receiving these benefits, as they have never been properly diagnosed.
- The Centre provides a Shelter and Support Service. A lot of clients do not have dependents, are suffering from a form of addiction and/or mental health issue. They may be comfortable in the

shelter, but how do you help them transition out of the shelter? There is only one supportive housing facility in Merritt. Also, some individuals don't want supportive housing. They want to be on their own, but there is no where affordable for them to go.

- Many of the units that are considered affordable are substandard. However, people are settling, because there is just not enough choice.
- Many clients live with leaks, broken plumbing, but are scared to lose their home, so they don't complain, and they don't leave.
- A lot of the rental units in Merritt have been sold off to developers from outside of the community. That really changed things around the city. Developers coming from Vancouver saw the buildings here as an affordable opportunity. They turned them into strata condominiums and sold them.
- A huge issue was when the community lost four out of the five mills. A lot of people lost their jobs.
- The city needs a permanent, year-round shelter.
- There are always going to be some people who don't want to be tied to that one house, they can't maintain it…. There will always be people who need that shelter environment, supports, food, company, access to other services. There are individuals who are habitually homeless, require a safe place when leaving domestic violence situations, transient individuals, etc. There will always be a need for a shelter.
- If the City could commit to providing funding to build a shelter or provide the land for a shelter, then the Province could provide operating funding.

If you could work with the City of Merritt on any program, initiative or space, what would it be? What would be a game changer for improving the quality of life for individuals with lived experiences of poverty?

- A permanent emergency shelter in the city.
- Provision of more affordable housing units and choice. More housing needs to be built and a lot could be done with the existing housing stock (i.e. improvements, renovations, etc.)
- The Standards of Maintenance By-law needs to be applied everywhere and by-law officers need to hold landlords accountable.
- Rent control on affordable housing buildings.
- Tax breaks for affordable housing developers.
- Inclusionary zoning.
- Safe, affordable housing.
- More addictions counsellors. There are a few in the city, but not enough.
- Treatment facility/detox centre and a transition facility for when individuals come out of treatment (second stage housing). It is very difficult for an individual to access a treatment facility that is not located in their home community. There is an opportunity here. Tie this in with social enterprise – help people gain the skills they need to become employable (i.e. working in a restaurant, running a farm, etc.). Help people to learn how to replace unhealthy activities with healthy activities. Pave the way for employment opportunities, especially for the youth.

- Addictions are routed in trauma. Trauma needs to be understood and treatment needs to be longer-term, with a detox continuum - treatment, second stage housing, employment…There needs to be a continuum.

APPENDIX B

Poverty Reduction & Food Security Visioning Workshop

Friday, October 9th, 3:00 – 5:00 p.m.

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Acknowledgement

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work, and play on the traditional territories of the Nlaka'pamux and Syilx nations, and all people who make their homes in the Nicola Valley.

Housekeeping Items

- Thank you for shifting to on-line
- Please stay on mute until speaking
- Please use “hands up” function to signal your wish to speak
- There will be opportunities for questions and discussion throughout the presentation
- This presentation will use a secure external website for live polling and feedback

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Mentimeter Live Polling Instructions

This presentation will use a secure external website for live polling and feedback.

1. Please visit www.menti.com (on your smartphone or desktop) when prompted.
2. Please enter this code: **8462559**, which will allow you to access and answer all of the live polling questions provided.
3. If you do not provide a response to a live polling question, please make sure to click ‘submit’ which will move you to the next question.

Q1: Menti Meter Test Question - What is your favorite color?

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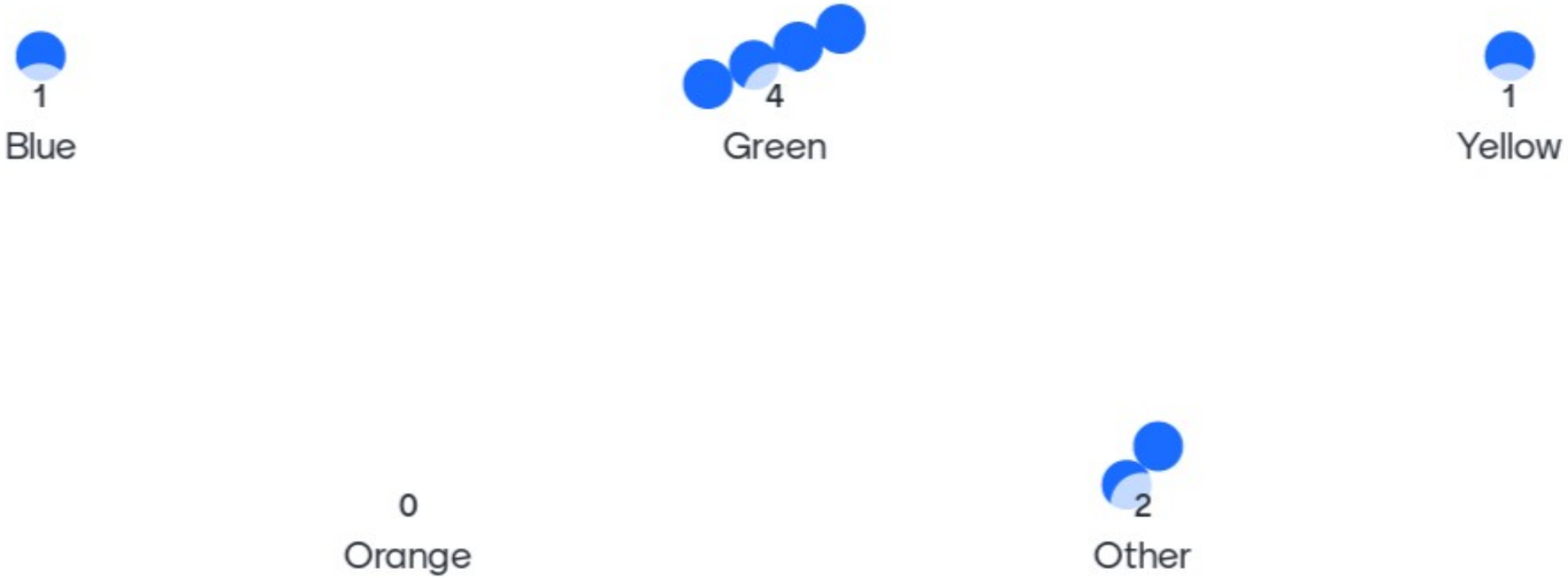

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Welcome & Introductions

- Welcome & Introductions (15 minutes)
- Presentation (20 minutes)
- Discussion (60 minutes)
- Concluding Remarks (5 minutes)
- Linger and Chat (20 minutes)

Meeting Objectives

- To provide an overview of Merritt's Official Community Plan (OCP) update process
- To virtually meet one another
- To generate discussion, and collect feedback on the current and future state of Poverty Reduction and Food Security in the City of Merritt

Q2: Who are you representing today? (i.e. community member, not-for-profit organization, City staff member, etc?)

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Education

City council

health care

Not-for-profit (ASK Wellness Society) and Community Member

WSP

Member of consulting team

City staff

Education

Not for Profit

9

Official Community Plan – What is it?

- An Official Community Plan (OCP) is a municipality's highest-level policy document that describes the **long-term vision** of communities through **objectives and policies** that guide decisions on planning and land-use management
- OCPs are written so that they **respond to the changing needs** and **long-term goals** of the community
- OCP objectives and policies will **accommodate the municipality's anticipated growth**, and guide where **future land uses** should be located / not located
- OCPs generally focus on how the municipality will grow into the future, with a **focus on land use;** however, can also include policies for other areas such as **poverty reduction** and **food security**
- OCP policies provide a basis for Council and the public to evaluate development proposals, to **ensure that all development within the municipality is consistent with the municipality's vision**

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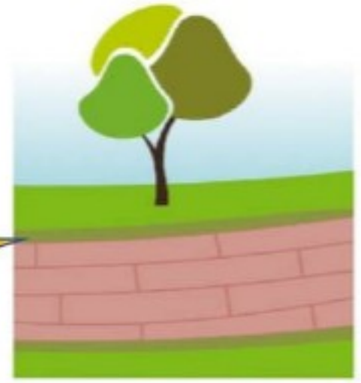
Official Community Plan – Project Timeline

Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4		Phase 5
								
Project Kick-off Engagement Plan Development May – July 2020		Background Analysis July – August 2020		Public Engagement Events September – November 2020		Draft OCP Development December 2020 – February 2021 – Report Back "What We Heard" Engagement Events February 2021 – March 2021		OCP Finalization March 2021 – April 2021 – OCP Final Adoption Public Hearing May 2021 – June 2021

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What is Poverty?

- **Poverty**, as defined in *Opportunity for All – Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy*, can be understood as *the condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic level of living standards and to facilitate integration and participation in society*.

- *Opportunity for All* is based on three pillars to help focus government actions to reduce poverty:
  - **Dignity**: Lifting Canadians out of poverty by ensuring basic needs – such as safe and affordable housing, healthy food and health care – are met
  - **Opportunity and Inclusion**: Helping Canadians join the middle class by promoting full participation in society and equality of opportunity
  - **Resilience and Security**: Supporting the middle class by protecting Canadians from falling into poverty and by supporting income security and resilience

❖ BC's *Poverty Reduction Strategy Act* has a target of reducing BC's overall poverty rate by 25% and the child poverty rate by 50% by 2024.

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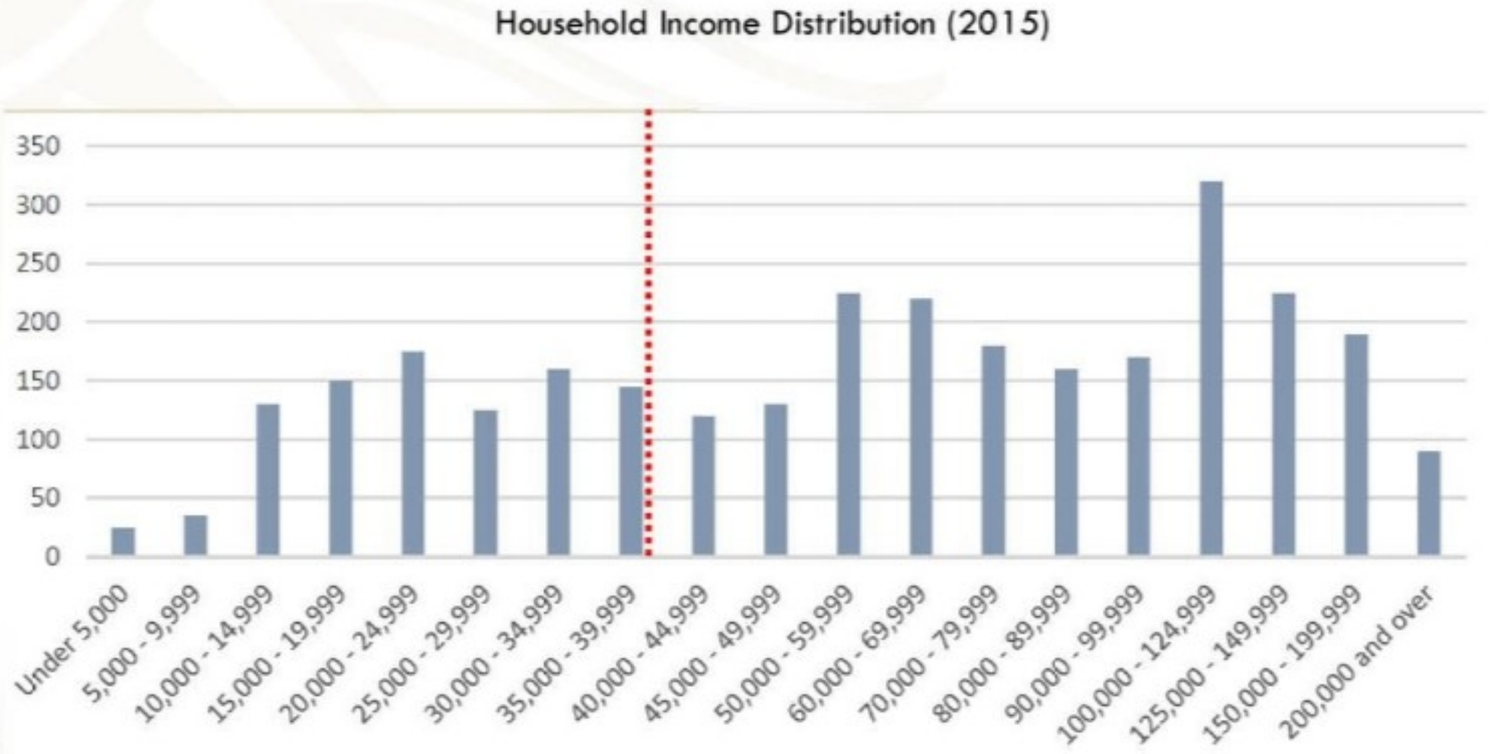
Background Information: Household Income

- **Approximately 35% of Merritt households** live below Canada's Official Poverty Line (after-tax income of under $40,000.00)
- Approximately **29.6% of Canadian households** live below this poverty line.
- Approximately **30.5% of British Columbia household**s live below this poverty line.



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Why is poverty reduction being considered?

- Approximately 35% of Merritt households live below the poverty line
- Across the Province, there is a clear link between poverty, discrimination and stigma
- Indigenous peoples and people living with disabilities are twice as likely to live in poverty
- Seniors are also disproportionately represented among individuals living in poverty
- Across the Province, about 40% of people living in poverty are working
- A need for safe, affordable housing options
- A need for after-school activity options, recreation programs and meeting places for young people
- A need for safe, indoor meeting places for all
- A need for safe, affordable transportation and active transportation options

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How can an OCP address poverty?

An OCP can incorporate policy directives that prioritize:

- More affordable housing for more people
- Supporting existing organizations
- Using a social inclusion and poverty reduction lens when developing new programs and policies
- Expanding access to education and training
- More opportunities, more jobs
- Providing safe and affordable transportation
- Investing in social inclusion

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Q3: What are the most important ways you think the OCP could address poverty? Please score each below item out of 10 (where 10 is the most important)

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Early directions for reducing poverty

- Foster economic development opportunities, providing more employment and jobs
- Public education and awareness around poverty, creating opportunities to promote social inclusion and take real action on reconciliation
- Encourage the formation of a Community Poverty Reduction Committee
- Work will all levels of government to address the need for more affordable and safe housing options for more people (Affordable Housing Strategy)
  - Explore a variety of housing options including shelter housing, transition housing, second-stage housing, non-market housing, etc.
- Explore the enhancement of existing public transportation and active transportation infrastructure and options
- Explore options for increased programming, support services and safe spaces
- Develop a Community and Social Services Asset Map
- Incorporate food security policies and measures

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What is Food Security?

HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY

Core Issue: Low income and poverty limit ability to buy food that is healthy, of good quality, and is culturally appropriate

Common/ Emerging Responses: Public health response, emergency food providers and meal programs, affordable housing and jobs.

COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY

Core Issue: Overall disconnect from food systems creates vulnerability

Common/ Emerging Responses: Re-establishing local food infrastructure, food skills (growing, preparing, preserving), connecting consumers and producers, emergency preparedness and recovery planning, culture of caring, agriculture and food security planning.

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Why is food security being considered?

- Like most communities, many people are food insecure in Merritt
- Food insecurity is caused by multiple factors: geographic and income access to food, the economy (including job market / business opportunities), climate change, community capacity / skills / knowledge and lack of infrastructure to connect consumers and producers in the region
- There are many food security issues that require short, medium, and long-term responses:
  - Poverty, unemployment, low income
  - Lack of walking distance to a grocery store
  - Lack of affordable housing
  - Lack of food skills for healthy and year-round enjoyment of local food
  - Increased costs for farmers and independent local food business
  - Lack of food storage and processing infrastructure
  - Natural and market emergencies
  - Lack of farm labour
  - Climate change impacts on agriculture (e.g. increase in number of GDD)
  - Water demand for increasing market gardening and agriculture in the region

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How can an OCP address food security?

- Including food security and poverty reduction in the vision and policies for the plan for future land use, infrastructure, housing etc.
- Identifying ways the City can support the work already happening in the community
- Upholding policies to protect land in the agricultural land reserve
- Education and awareness raising (e.g. low water food gardening)
- Leveraging existing programs and assets run and owned by the City
- Considering food and agriculture in downtown revitalizations, economic development plans, housing strategies, and poverty reduction plans
- Advocating on issues beyond the jurisdiction of the City

Q4: What do you think are the most important ways the OCP could address food security? (choose up to 4 of the below options)

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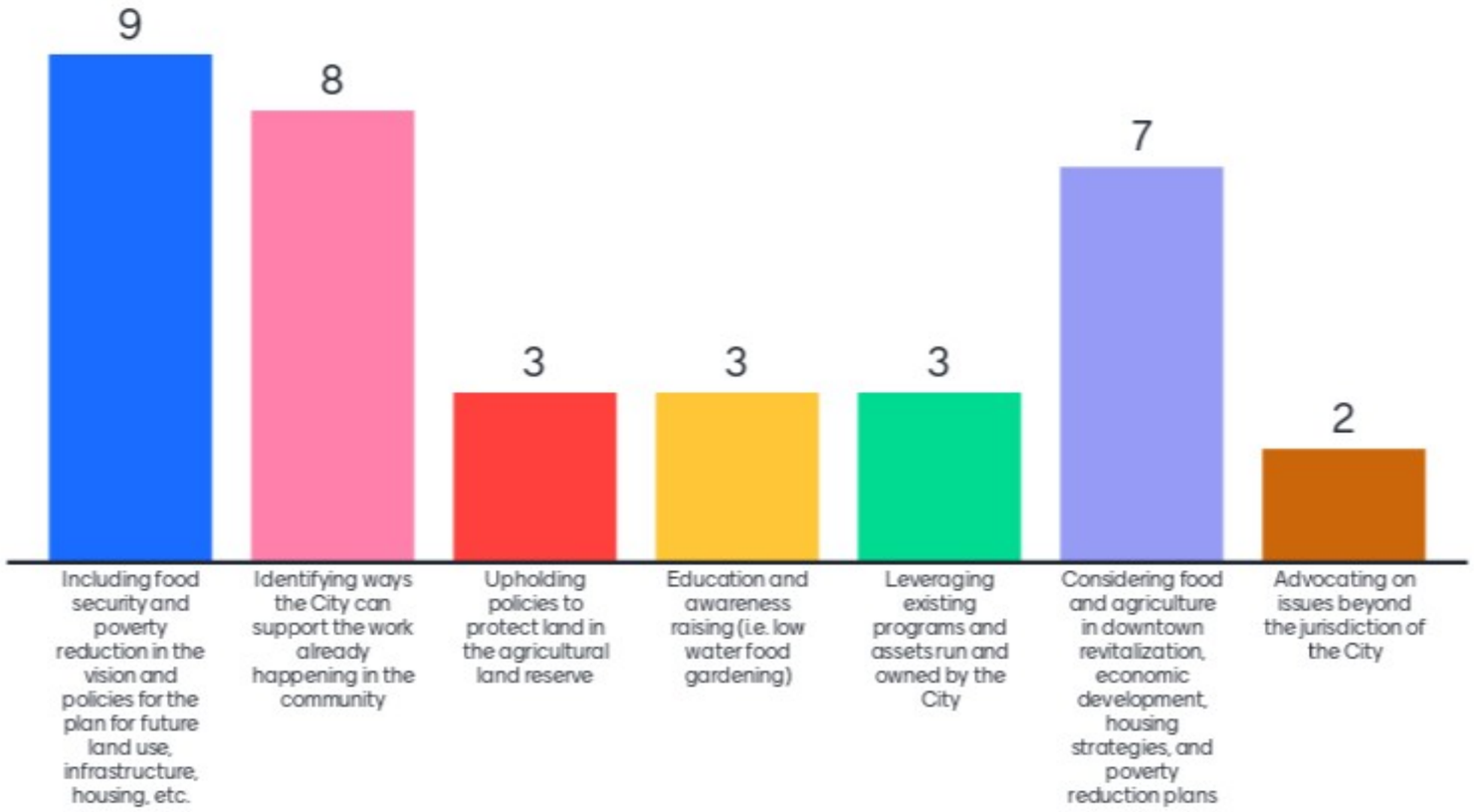

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Early directions for increasing food security

- Planning: Affordable housing, economic development, agriculture planning
- Collaboration: Working with community organizations can help to increase food security
- Specifically, potential opportunities could include:
  - Community cold storage facilities
  - Shared kitchen space
  - New community gardens
  - Yard gardening and urban agriculture
  - Agri and community food hubs
  - Farmers markets, food trucks, market stands, food sharing
  - Gardening demonstrations
  - Indigenous food sovereignty and history education
  - Regional food and agriculture planning / sector development
  - Natural emergency preparedness and recovery
  - Climate change adaptation in food and agriculture
  - Facilities for emergency food and food security organizations

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Question Preamble

If you were to imagine a future state in Merritt where poverty has been eliminated and food security and self-reliance have been stabilized for all residents, what do you see?

(please provide your open-ended answers on the next slide, which will be followed by a discussion)

Q5: What do you see as this future state of Merritt where poverty has been eliminated and food security & self-reliance has been stabilized?

Mentimeter

More local food production. Food production where all can partake.

A community where everyone is taken care of, has their needs met, and are able to meet their highest potential.

I see a community that respects all, is much more positive in their outlook and takes care of each other.

Children coming to school healthy, rested, happy and excited to learn. Thriving.

People have many ways to access good quality food. People have safe and secure housing. People live with choice and dignity.

Youth, seniors, and all ages in between having judgement free inclusive access to abundant resources in Merritt.

A place where the stigma of "need" does not have to be hidden.

7

Q6 & Q7: Discussion Questions

What do you think the main directions for the Official Community Plan should be regarding poverty reduction and food security?

What specific actions are needed?

Question Preamble

If there was <u>one big move</u> that the City and community could make, what would have the most positive impact for the most people?

(please provide your open-ended answer on the next slide, which will be followed by a discussion)

Q8: Please describe the one big move the City and community could make that would have the most positive impact for the most people.

Mentimeter

More support to the local community group

Affordable Housing Strategy

2

Thank you!

Thank your for your participation and for your interest in Merritt's OCP update!

If you are interested in providing feedback on other topics, an online survey will soon be available on the project website.

For more information, please visit:

www.merritt.ca/ocp

If you have any questions, feel free to contact:

Don McArthur, Planning & Development Services Manager

Planning@merritt.ca

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APPENDIX C

What We Heard
Poverty Reduction and Food Security Stakeholder Workshop
City of Merritt OCP
Oct 29, 2020

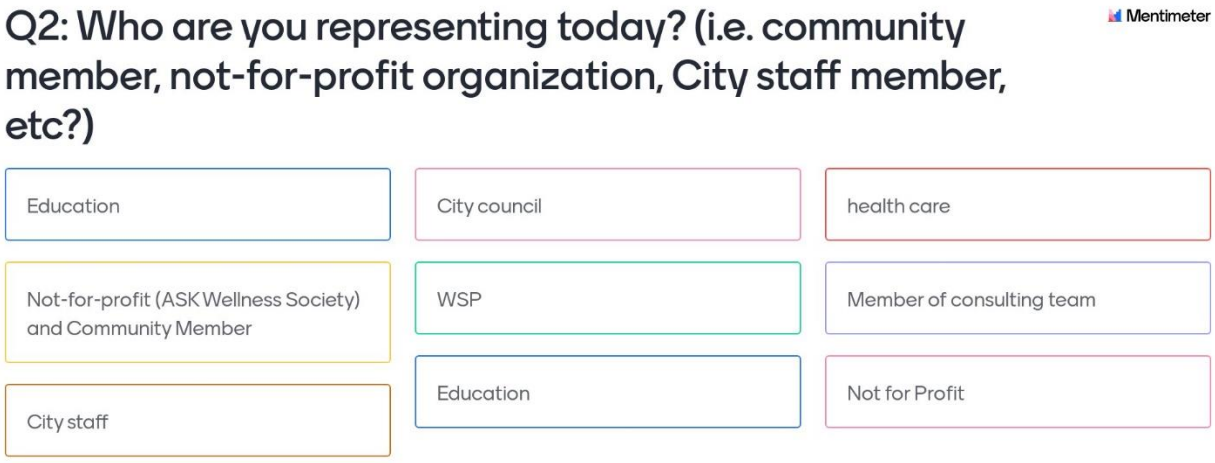
Workshop date and time:
October 9, 3:00-5:00 pm by Zoom

Participants:

Bronwyn Coyne	Public Health Dietitian Coordinator	Interior Health
Derlanda Hewton	Executive Director	Nicola Valley Food Bank
Fran Delaney	Financial Services Coordinator	Community Futures
Jane Kempston	Early Learning & Literacy	School District 58
Keri Cooke	Director	Ask Wellness Society
Mayor Linda Brown	Mayor	City of Merritt
Steve McNiven	Superintendent	School District 58

Project team members:

Brittany Shewchuk	Planner	WSP
Chen Peng	Project Manager	WSP
Don McArthur	Planning & Development Manager	City of Merritt
Janine de la Salle	Food Security Lead	Urban Food Strategies
Lauren Lange	Poverty Reduction Lead	WSP



Discussion notes from Introductions, Questions 6 and 7:

- What do you think are the most important ways the OCP could address PR and FS? What do you think the main directions should eb? What specific actions are needed?
    - Preserving agricultural land for community food security
    - 'hard to imagine' what needs to happen
    - Ask, 'what does that mum need'
- General observations
    - A lot of people need serviced but are not reaching out. Seniors have a hard time asking for help and often go with out

    - Timing with opioid and Covid - it's been mind-blowing the support that has happened.
    - The Community 'heart is in the right place' and there are great core values in Merritt
    - We need to be creative in delivery of services (e.g. adaptation to Covid and distribution to people's homes).
    - Food bank has taken steps to create a dignified environment for people to access emergency food. E.g. creating more of a store approach, recruiting and retaining good volunteers, managing increased volumes of food donations, purchase of coolers,
- Gaps/Needs/Challenges
    - Need for affordable housing
        - Seniors
        - Families
        - Individuals
        - Spectrum of supportive housing
        - Housing continuum
        - Rental
    - Youth spaces and supports are needed
    - We don't have daily access to support services, most agencies work M-F- need 7-day per week services
    - When programs are based on 'good behaviour' those that need supports the most may be excluded. Good behaviour is hard more many, even on a full stomach
    - Services in Merritt are accessed by communities beyond the jurisdictional boundaries of the City of Merritt.
    - Transportation and expanded bus services are needed to better connect
    - Supports at schools are good but what about the weekends?
    - With a lack of rental housing many are living in run-down motels
    - Renters can't make demands for fear of the risk of eviction. Market is in landlords' favour. Many buildings appear to be below basic standards
- Opportunities
    - Work with youth and others to speak for themselves and help identify the types of spaces and programs that would work
    - Make access to food and other resources 'seamless and shameless'
    - Create conditions to help people get what they need
    - Destigmatizing poverty
    - Need a universal approach and collectively be stronger
    - Agencies like Community Futures help where they see a need. The organization is looking to identify needs in Merritt and focus on measurables
    - Projects around kindness
    - Education on tenant rights
    - How to integrate kindness into the OCP.

Mentimeter results to discussion questions 3, 4, 5, and 8

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Q3: What are the most important ways you think the OCP could address poverty? Please score each below item out of 10 (where 10 is the most important)

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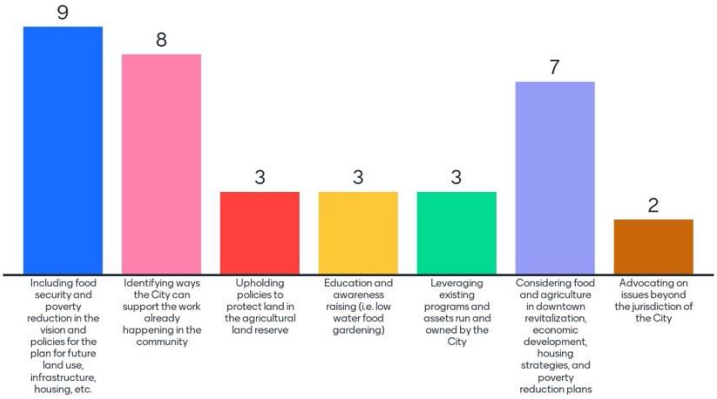
Q4: What do you think are the most important ways the OCP could address food security? (choose up to 4 of the below options)



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Q5: What do you see as this future state of Merritt where poverty has been eliminated and food security & self-reliance has been stabilized?

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- More local food production. Food production where all can partake.
- A community where everyone is taken care of, has their needs met, and are able to meet their highest potential.
- I see a community that respects all, is much more positive in their outlook and takes care of each other.
- Children coming to school healthy, rested, happy and excited to learn. Thriving.
- People have many ways to access good quality food. People have safe and secure housing. People live with choice and dignity.
- Youth, seniors, and all ages in between having judgement free inclusive access to abundant resources in Merritt.
- A place where the stigma of "need" does not have to be hidden.

7

Q8: Please describe the one big move the City and community could make that would have the most positive impact for the most people.

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- More support to the local community group
- Affordable Housing Strategy

Q4: What do you think are the most important ways the OCP could address food security? (choose up to 4 of the below options)

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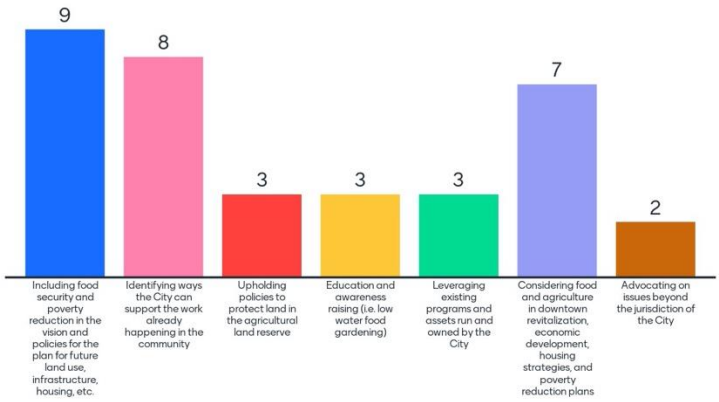

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Interpretation and observation

- There is a good degree of inter-agency collaboration in Merritt and many successes to build on
- There are many layers of poverty and food insecurity in Merritt
- Affordable housing is viewed as the top priority for reducing poverty and increasing household food security
- Including PR and FS in policies is viewed as very important
- The vision for reducing poverty and food security has been achieved includes:
    - Local food production
    - Thriving children and youth
    - Need is not viewed in a negative light
    - A community where everyone is able to meet their highest potential
    - Respect all
    - Judgement free and inclusive access to abundant resources in Merritt
    - A community that takes care of each other

APPENDIX D

Listening Session with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty

Session 1 – Group session

This Group consisted of 4 Males, ages varying between mid 20s and 40s, 2 presently homeless, 2 housed. All unemployed.

Question 1 – What challenges or barriers do you face?

"Housing, Housing, Housing!"

All four spoke to the lack of affordable housing in Merritt.

TG said he had spent 6 months couch surfing, 5 months in the cold weather shelter and ended up having to share a place with two or three other people, which did not work out as "you end up living with people you don't want to live with just to afford the rent". He says he was lucky and eventually got accepted for supportive housing.

RB has been homeless for 6 weeks and is living in his car. He spent a short time at the shelter was unable to live in a structured environment with rules resulting in conflicts with staff and chose to leave. RB has an extensive criminal record and attributes this to "being forced to chose between the street or crime", "you can't pay $1000 rent when disability benefits are only $1100, and you can't even afford to look for work so what choice do you have". He also admits to having claimed COVID benefits he knows he is not entitled to last year in order to pay rent.

SH was one of many people who received repeated illegal eviction notices from a local hotel. He fought the first one and won but moved out when he received a second notice within days of winning his first hearing as he felt it was inevitable, they would eventually get everyone out. Since then he has been homeless and is currently residing in the shelter. He spoke about the practise of renovictions and how the hotel was not the only building to be doing this. He also said many apartments had been sold and the rents had gone up (he is referring to the several buildings that have been converted to Strata complexes) saying "They should not be allowed to do that " .

AA struggles to maintain his housing citing "shelter allowance is only #375, even with disability benefits rent is unaffordable, they put welfare up $300 because of COVID, then took have of that away again." AA wants to work but says he does not have money left for transportation to look for work. He receives support from community agencies to help with food and says he could not pay his rent without this extra help. AA was angry about the lack of affordable housing in Merritt and talked about the new apartment block being built up the hill that was promoted as low-cost housing,"$1200 is NOT low-cost housing". He felt that "the BC Government does not look after the homeless".

In addition to the lack of housing the group spoke about the lack of resources in Merritt.

All four felt there was a lack of mental health and addiction services in town. In describing an incident when he was suicidal, TG said "you get emergent services only, then sent home with no on-going support". He also spoke to the lack of detox and treatment services, attributing his failure to gain sobriety to the lack of resources and supports available between detox and treatment and more

importantly after completing treatment. He said, “you need support when you get back, right up until you are able to find a job”. TG also spoke about his efforts to improve himself and become more employable, he described the frustration of finding certificate courses that were funded but were only available out of town. When he looked into this, he found out that transportation and accommodation were not funded so he was unable to do them. “I can’t afford to go to Kamloops or Ashcroft for three weeks, why can’t they be available locally”.

AA said he had tried treatment three times, each time he returned home, alone, with no support and back to a situation where all his money was going to rent, feeling depressed and hopeless he relapsed every time.

Question 2 - What would be a game changer for reducing poverty in Merritt?

Unsurprisingly most suggestions addressed the lack of affordable housing in town. The group’s suggestions did include some things that are under provincial and not municipal jurisdiction, but I have included them anyway.

“housing, housing, housing,”

“Full time shelter- people are not just homeless during COVID or in the winter”

“Enforce low-cost housing in all new developments”

“ low-cost has to be low cost for people on welfare too – not $1200 like the building up the hill”,

“when out of town firms build here, they should have to use local workers not bring in their own crews”

“Stop allowing apartment buildings and motels to kick people out to renovate and put the rent up, or to sell all the units.” (convert to strata)

“treatment centre with housing for when you get out” (second stage housing)

“More mental health and addictions counsellors”

“Opportunities to do courses and training in town”

“More jobs”

“higher welfare rates”

“Lower rents and landlords should have to fix houses, just because you are poor shouldn’t mean you have to live with mould”

Question 3 - Are there any stories or other thoughts you would like to share?

All four participants said they have covered everything in questions 1 and 2. There was discussion around if this would make any difference, only one could trust that it would result in changes.

Listening Session with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty

Session 2 – Individual participant

This interview was with a 50-year-old Male. He has physical disabilities, a brain injury and mental health disorders and has a long history of substance abuse. He is estranged from his family and community and has one close friend who lives out of town. His only support comes from community service providers.

He is presently housed and is unemployed, having recently been fired from his job when the company that employed him and accommodated his disabilities changed hands. He had held this job for 2 years, prior to that he had been unemployed for many years, and would have faced homelessness if not for the assistance received through a community agency. The loss of his job not only affected his income, but he also lost the social contact that is vital to maintaining his mental health and preventing his depression from overwhelming him.

Question 1 – What challenges or barriers do you face?

"There is nothing to do if you are low income, the pool is unaffordable, the only way I could afford to go there to use the gym, which helps my anxiety and depression, was when Housing First paid for it for me. You even have to buy extra shoes to use there, who can afford to buy extra shoes to go to the gym!"

"isolation increases mental health issues, there is no-where to go and hang out that does not cost money, I have been drinking much more since I lost my job. I only leave the house to do my shopping and errands and my depression has increased. When I was working, I could control my drinking, I only drank at weekends, now I am drinking everyday".

"There is nowhere you can just go to see a counsellor to just talk when you are feeling down, before you get really depressed."

"Transportation, when I was working, I had to pay $120 a month in cab fares, and that was after the cabbie gave me a deal, to get home from work because the bus didn't run at Midnight, the buses are no good for shift workers. $120 is a lot when you earn minimum wage.

"Housing is too expensive - you pay $850 for a run-down place and if they fix it up the rent goes up too much. Before I was working, I could not pay my rent and bills without help from the Housing First program, every month they had to help me with rent, or hydro, or my phone bill. My TV got cut off and that was my only entertainment. I was so depressed"

"There's too many renovictions, no low-cost housing left, I think my building is going to be sold, his other building sold so ours will be next. They are even kicking people out of the double d to put the rent up and look what happened to the (local hotel), and now they are working on the (apartments) so they will be next."

"Disability is not enough to live on, I have only been out of work for a few weeks and my savings from 2 years of working are nearly gone paying my bills. I can't meet my needs without a job. I was saving up for a down-payment on a trailer but its nearly all gone."

Question 2 - What would be a game changer for reducing poverty in Merritt?

“A hang out place, like a community centre or rec centre, a place to hang out and play pool or use a gym or play games, somewhere to socialize and have a cup of coffee that was free or very low cost. It should have social workers or counsellors to talk to.”

“More counselling – mental health and drug and alcohol”.

“More affordable housing, most affordable places are older buildings with mould, and then they get sold and you get renovictions”

“More work and housing for locals, out of town companies bring workers in, they get the jobs and take housing. Contractors and tree planters take all the motel rooms and locals are homeless”

“Inclusive needs to include poverty, Merritt is not inclusive for poor people. I don’t feel excluded because of my race or disability but because of poverty”

Question 3 - Are there any stories or other thoughts you would like to share?

I need job!

Listening Session with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty

Session 3 – Individual participant

This individual was a female single parent of one child, housed, unemployed.

Question 1 - What challenges or barriers do you face?

Housing –

"As a single parent I receive the same amount of money for shelter as a couple would, even though I need two bedrooms and they would only need one so most of my support allowance goes towards rent instead of living expenses"

"rents are very high for such a small town and there are hardly any available rental units, you have to just take what you can and have no choice as to where you want to live or what type of home you want"

"if you are lucky enough to find a little house you can afford you are constantly worried it will be sold out from under you and you will have to move, it has happened to me twice!"

"Its was even harder to find somewhere when I was limited to being within a toddler's walking distance of a bus stop"

Childcare-

"In order to keep a job, you need reliable, safe and affordable childcare, that is not limited to regular office hours as so many jobs around here are weird shifts, most employers won't put up with you taking days off because you don't have a babysitter". "I haven't actually been fired over this, but I have left a job because I felt like if I didn't, I would get fired as I was getting shifts cut, and threats of being fired".

"Government daycare subsidies are very low and do not pay for the cost of licenced spots, you take a huge risk using un-licenced babysitters, once one actually smacked my child, so I fired them and had to quit my job."

Transportation-

"I guess it's good we even have a bus, apparently we didn't used to have one at all, but the routes and schedules are very limited, lots of places in town are not serviced by it and to be quite honest sitting on a bus for an hour while it goes all round town to get where you want to go, and then having to wait on the side of the road for up to an hour to come back again, all with a toddler, is quite honestly not worth the bother unless you absolutely have to go somewhere."

Medical care –

We don't have enough doctors and they won't take new patients, mine retired so now I don't have one, having to go to the ER all the time and never seeing the same doctor twice is not good medical care, pediatricians and all specialists are in Kamloops and getting there is difficult and expensive, I have actually missed appointments that I waited months for because I couldn't get there. "

"you can't even have a baby here, or get an ultrasound"

No decent jobs-

There are hardly any jobs that pay well enough to make it worth working, so many are part time, or minimum wage , you can't support yourself, never mind a kid as well"

Question 2 - What would be a game changer for reducing poverty in Merritt?

"More government owned housing, for everyone, not just for people with kids, there are many homeless people in Merritt too that need housing, and also lots of young people can't even afford to leave home. We need a home that can't get sold out from under you, nothings safe anymore, even apartments get sold."

"is rent control a thing in Canada or just in the states? That's what we need here. Also, a standards of maintenance by-law like in Vancouver, so landlords have to keep their places to a certain standard without putting the rent up. People shouldn't have to put up with mould and bedbugs and dirty ripped carpets just because they are poor." "if something does break or go wrong you are scared to ask the landlord to fix it in case eh rent goes up"

"Free daycare centers"

"More better paying jobs"

Listening Session with People with Lived Experiences of Poverty

Session 4 – Group session

6 participants-

1 couple living on pensions,

3 males -2 on disability benefits, 1 employed,

1 female- living on pension that is supplemented by income assistance as it is so low.

Question 1 - What challenges or barriers do you face?

– Housing, lack of availability and unaffordability, as well as the general condition of anywhere that they could afford.

- Insecurity, never knowing if housing was sustainable. The building where they lived has been low income housing for 30 years or more, two tenants had lived there for over 15 years and now it will be lost. This made several clients very nervous about the possibility of ever finding a long-term home. The idea that it was not in their control of when and where they would move was stressful and demoralizing.

- There was a lot of anger that landlords could be allowed to kick people out, perform relatively minor renovations and put the rent up.

- Two were insulted that the landlord had offered them $500 to move out early.

- One mentioned the practice of motels evicting people at this time of year to accommodate tree planters and other out of town contractors and that this made it even more difficult to find somewhere to live.

- 4 of the 5 spoke to the limitations living on a fixed income posed, 3 were on disability benefits and one couple were living on a pension, all felt that this disadvantaged them when it came to finding housing, two spoke about the practise of landlords refusing to rent to people on assistance.

- Lack of employment opportunities.