

During the 4th States General on Homelessness, 450 people from different backgrounds (elected officials at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, representatives of ministries and public institutions, community-based non-profit organizations, research, networks and coalitions, and people who have experienced homelessness) met to discuss current issues related to homelessness. Following three days of training, discussion and co-construction, these people developed a common declaration to guide future efforts to reverse the trend in homelessness.

REVERSING THE TREND, A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

CONCERNS AND FINDINGS

Homelessness is first and foremost a societal issue. Rooted in structural factors such as poverty and increasing social inequalities, it is now a radical manifestation of the shortage of social housing as well as insufficient housing that is adapted and truly affordable. Current issues witnessed in the field of homelessness reveal that vulnerable people have few or no options to fulfill their basic needs, and that they are unfairly held responsible for finding themselves in a situation they did not choose.

Homelessness affects a growing number of people, and the problem is becoming more complex, with growing challenges related to youth-specific issues, loss of autonomy, mental health or addiction, trauma (particularly historical and intergenerational) and various forms of violence (including systemic, domestic and sexual violence) against women, First Nations, Métis and Inuit, racialized people, migrants and immigrants, people with disabilities, people of sexual diversity and gender plurality, as well as other discriminated and marginalized social groups. The specific experiences of people affected by these realities are neglected and made invisible, which creates major obstacles in identifying needs and ensuring access to specialized, safe and adapted services. Furthermore, the social fabric and social ties necessary for the (re)affiliation of people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness are weakened by the denial of the rights of these people. Whether they are expressed through stigmatization, social and/or racial profiling or criminalization, the multiple violations of their rights, including the right to be present in public spaces, compromise the safety and dignity of the persons first concerned by homelessness.

Faced with these increasingly complex situations, prevention remains an essential lever that has proven itself, but which remains insufficiently mobilized to effectively reduce homelessness. Adequate support for people at risk of homelessness, particularly youth in periods of transition, such as the discharge from institutions, is crucial to avoid disruptions and disaffiliation.

The requirement of a comprehensive approach associated with specialized services offering a response adapted to the diversity of needs, is increasingly acknowledged. However, existing solutions are insufficiently and inequitably deployed in different regions and communities in Quebec. Among other things, the support and guidance offered to people experiencing homelessness is insufficient in number and it is not truly adapted to their needs, realities and cultures.

Chronic underfunding of community-based non-profit organizations and the lack of recognition of their expertise, seriously compromise their ability to meet the needs of disaffiliated people, while creating unacceptable working conditions and precariousness for the staff and human resources.

The various stakeholders involved in the field of homelessness (provincial, federal and municipal authorities, public, community and private organizations, etc.) encounter difficulties in collaboration and coordination efforts, which lead to service disruptions. These problems, due to the lack of a common vision and the persistence of organizational constraints, generate silo work that hinders effective interventions and, more generally, the quality of current or potential responses to reverse the trend in homelessness.

VISION OF CHANGE

We aim to build a fundamentally equitable and inclusive society, where every person finds their place and lives in dignity as well as physical, psychological and financial security; this includes, first and foremost, guaranteed access to housing and a decent income, as well as access to health care, education and the opportunity to fully exercise citizenship rights. Such a vision requires a focus on prevention and tackling the structural causes of homelessness, rather than managing its consequences, in a context of urgency. In terms of services, and particularly health-related services, this vision requires going beyond the medicalization of issues to offer comprehensive, culturally safe and trauma-sensitive support.

Such a vision of homelessness prevention involves a shared responsibility across society and implies that the public sector, the municipal sector and the community-based non-profit sector collaborate to develop concerted responses adapted to the diversity of experiences related to homelessness, while ensuring an adequate offer of services throughout Quebec. To achieve this, we need a renewed intersectoral governance that allows for true coordination between the essential allies fighting against homelessness, and in which the experiential knowledge of the people primarily concerned by homelessness truly guides the directions chosen and the action taken. To optimize this collective effort and enable real collaboration between stakeholders, the respective missions, responsibilities, expertise and contributions of the various spheres of action (community-based non-profit, institutional, municipal and government) must be recognized and supported by sustainable, predictable and adequate funding.

It is by engaging in a profound social transformation that we will increase our collective capacity to prevent precariousness and support each member of our community and, thus, significantly prevent and reduce homelessness in Quebec.

PROPOSALS AND COMMITMENTS

To increase the respect for the rights and dignity of people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness, and to guarantee a response adapted to their needs, the following orientations and actions must be prioritized:

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND NEEDS

RIGHT TO HOUSING – Recognize the fundamental nature of the right to housing, massively develop social and community housing, facilitate access to housing, control the cost of rents and provide the necessary support to maintain vulnerable people in housing.

DECENT INCOME – Guarantee the right to a decent income that preserves dignity, namely by reviewing social assistance programs and establishing a guaranteed minimum income.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS – Prioritize a comprehensive approach to address the structural causes of homelessness, with major investments in prevention and a focus on protective factors, namely by strengthening the support offered to youths, families and other people exposed to situations likely to make their life trajectories more fragile.

SERVICES AND INTERVENTION PRACTICES

ACCESSIBILITY TO SERVICES – Guarantee universal access to essential services, with inclusive and culturally safe approaches, which are also sensitive to trauma, personalized, and adapted to collective needs of diverse populations.

CONTINUITY AND TRANSITIONS – Avoid disruptions in social ties and within services by ensuring sustained support during transitions likely to hinder people's life trajectories, particularly during youths' transition to adulthood, and after the discharge from institutions (youth protection, hospital, physical rehabilitation, detoxification, detention).

RESPECTFUL PRACTICES – Guarantee the exercise of the rights and freedoms of all people by putting an end to discriminatory practices (social and racial profiling, criminalization) and by promoting humanist and respectful approaches, including harm reduction and the adoption of responses that preserve the dignity of people who occupy public spaces, particularly those in

unsheltered homelessness situations (for example, in camps). These approaches must be co-constructed with the people primarily concerned by experiences of homelessness, including their expertise and experiences.

SAFETY AND INCLUSION – Strengthen the fight against stigmatization, violence and discrimination against marginalized groups and people in vulnerable situations by promoting awareness, social solidarity and strengthening social ties. This includes respectful media treatment of issues surrounding homelessness, reporting the views of the people primarily concerned by homelessness.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

GOVERNANCE AND COMMITMENT – Establish concerted action plans with firm, cross-partisan political commitments accompanied by increased accountability of public stakeholders, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, transparent decision-making processes based on dialogue, and effective collaboration and coordination mechanisms that respect the expertise of all stakeholders.

FUNDING AND RESOURCES – Ensure sustainable, predictable and adequate funding for community-based non-profit organizations, by prioritizing mission-based funding, adapted to the needs identified by the community, allowing for the development and maintenance of infrastructure as well as ensuring human resource stability.

PARTICIPATION AND EXPERTISE – Recognize and value the expertise of the community-based non-profit sector and those primarily concerned by the experiences of homelessness by developing approaches **BY, FOR and WITH** communities.