



# LEADERSHIP GATHERING

**Building Housing Solutions for  
People Facing Complex Needs**

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS: FEBRUARY 2026



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## ABOUT CONNECTIVE

Connective is a Canadian nonprofit with decades of experience supporting communities across BC and the Yukon.

Today, we offer a wide range of person-centered services, including housing, outreach, employment, justice, and community-based programs.

Every dollar invested is carefully stewarded to help meet the needs of individuals, families, and communities.

With a proven track record of effective service delivery, we are proud of what we've accomplished, eager to continue investing in what works, and ready to meet emerging challenges.



### Our Vision

A safe, healthy, and inclusive community for all.

### Our Mission

We strengthen communities by supporting people experiencing barriers so they can achieve greater independence.

### Our Values

Inclusive, Accountable, Person-Centred, Collaborative, Determined



# INTRODUCTION

Despite the significant overlap in clients and outcomes across the justice, health, housing, and social sectors, collaboration on shared challenges and opportunities remains far too rare. Connective's Leadership Gathering seeks to change that.

Since 2022, the Leadership Gathering has offered leaders and experts, including Indigenous voices and those with lived experience, a space for candid, non-attributed conversations.

These Gatherings allow participants to connect, to innovate, and to break down longstanding service silos. By platforming a diversity of voices and ideas, the event seeks to strengthen the social safety net and improve outcomes across sectors.

## History of the Leadership Gathering

### **2022: Coordinating Complex Systems**

The inaugural Leadership Gathering focused on complex service delivery and the need for stronger coordination across housing, health, justice, and social supports.

### **2023: Supported and Effective Transitions**

In 2023, the Gathering examined breakdowns at transition points between services and sectors.

### **2025: Public Health, Public Safety, and Complex Needs: Finding Common Ground**

Our third Gathering focused on moving beyond polarizing public discourse amid overlapping crises of homelessness, addiction and overdose, untreated mental health challenges, and justice involvement.



This year's Gathering, **Building Housing Solutions for People Facing Complex Needs**, explored housing's vital role in strengthening systems across sectors and stages of care.

On the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and over two days, participants examined housing models with embedded supports, reflected on lived experiences, and identified strategies to better support people facing complex needs.

**95**

Participants

**55+**

Organizations

**6**

Sectors

Through guided discussions, participants exchanged diverse opinions, identified common roadblocks, and developed a series of practical housing solutions that could be owned or supported by leaders in the room.

In addition to presenting the three recommendations selected to advance, this report also summarizes key themes that emerged throughout this year's dialogue.

While no report can fully convey the energy and urgency in the room, we hope this summary reflects the depth of engagement and helps sustain the momentum as we work to improve housing solutions for those facing complex needs.

## SETTING THE STAGE

### Complexity in BC's Social Service Landscape

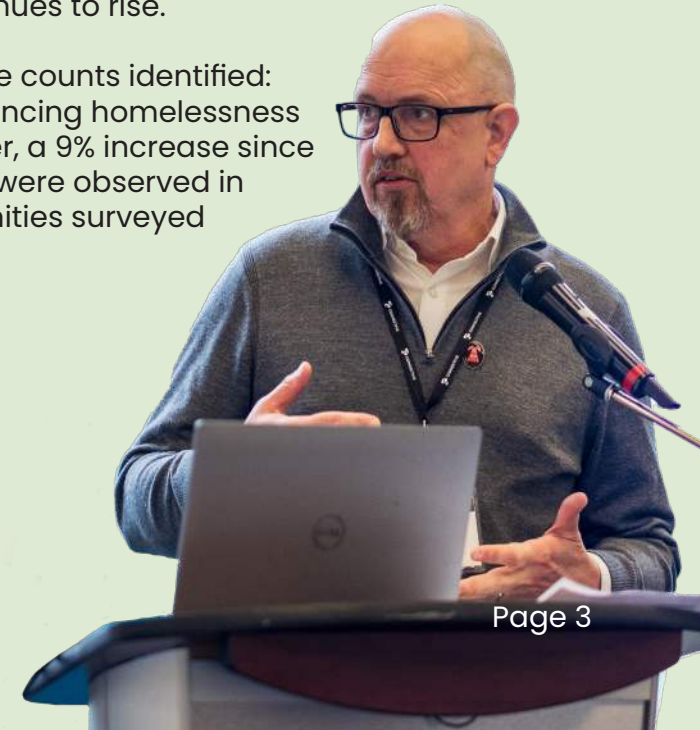
Across BC, communities are grappling with persistent and interconnected crises. Regardless of geography, population size, or resource capacity, challenges related to mental health, homelessness, and substance use remain a common thread.

Individually, each of these issues strains social systems. Together, they are compounding vulnerabilities and exposing systemic breakdowns at an alarming rate.

Rapidly evolving social, political, and economic conditions mean many of these challenges are unrecognizable from when the systems meant to respond to them were developed. Increasingly, those systems are struggling to keep up.

The housing crisis is one of the most visible pressures. As we work to improve affordability and supply, homelessness continues to rise.

Recent Point-in-Time counts identified: 5,232 people experiencing homelessness in Greater Vancouver, a 9% increase since 2023. Similar trends were observed in 12 of the 20 communities surveyed across the province.



Further still, thousands of individuals and families experience hidden homelessness, or live on the edge of uncertainty.

At the same time, British Columbia continues to face one of the most severe toxic drug crises in North America. While fatalities have declined from peak levels, the crisis is far from over. 1,826 overdose deaths were recorded last year, each of these a profound and preventable loss.

All the while, untreated mental health disorders continue to compound these pressures, harming individuals, straining communities, and overburdening the justice system.

Together, these challenges have created unprecedented levels of social disadvantage. Without sustained, coordinated support, long-term stability remains out of reach for many. Instead, people are left to cycle between emergency departments, shelters, corrections facilities, or temporary housing.

Crucially, these impacts are not experienced equally. Indigenous people remain significantly overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness, involved in the justice system, and facing mental and physical health challenges.

These disparities reflect the ongoing harms of colonization, systemic racism, and decades of underinvestment and inequitable access to services. Addressing these injustices will require allyship that goes beyond statements of support and moves toward concrete, sustained, and meaningful action.

As a longstanding non-profit, Connective has watched these challenges evolve over time. Together, they point to a clear need: housing solutions that provide more than shelter alone, and that integrate health, cultural, and social supports. It was within this context that the 2026 Gathering was convened.



## SUMMARIZING THE DIALOGUE

### Housing as the Foundation of Health and Social Stability

A central theme across the Gathering's many presentations, panels, and group discussions was the recognition of housing as a foundational determinant of health and wellbeing.

Put plainly at the start of day one, "It always comes back to housing. How does mental health stabilize without a home? How do you manage your substance use without a home?"



Participants kept returning to this, highlighting through both data and anecdote alike the role that housing plays in avoiding or exiting crisis, accessing additional supports, and overcoming personal challenges. Without it, people face significant barriers to accessing care, maintaining employment, reconnecting with family, and participating in community life.

### Housing is Not Available or Affordable

While acknowledging its importance, participants also called attention to ways housing remains out of reach. Whether from lack of availability, affordability, or suitability, far too many in British Columbia lack access to this basic human need.

Some in attendance viewed the roots of this crisis as foundational. "European countries view housing all citizens as an obligation, which provides a foundation for community action. [In Canada,] there are no legislated requirements to provide housing."

Regardless of cause, it's clear the problem has spiraled.

**"In Vancouver, 54,000 homes are needed, and more than 2,000 of them are needed for under \$400 a month. We KNOW that that housing does not exist. Another 31,000 need housing under \$1,000. Across BC, 257,000 homes are needed under those affordability thresholds."**

Investment in housing has been growing in recent years, but the scale of need continues to outpace supply.

## Modern Complexities, Antiquated Systems

Participants also spoke at length about the escalating complexity of needs across communities and sectors.

**“We are seeing a clinical presentation of a severity that doesn’t exist anywhere in the world. Schizophrenia, opioid use disorder and acquired brain injury, in any frame, are the most debilitating conditions on their own, and we are seeing them together.”**

For this population, accessing housing is more than a question of affordability. Existing systems, designed to address these issues separately, are often ill-equipped to meet diverse needs, leading to repeated failures, and forcing people to cycle through institutions.

Put bluntly by one participant, “the system we’re trying to push people through is broken.”

Participants discussed the need for everything from hyper-acute hospital care to high-, medium-, low-intensity, as well independent, housing.

Only a system with this level of flexibility can meet the diverse needs that we are seeing in communities across the province, and help address some of the conflicts in current models.

## Centering Lived Experience

While thinking at the system level, participants were also quick to foreground the individual, emphasizing that effective solutions must be informed by lived and living experience.

Lived experience speakers highlighted the challenges of navigating disconnected systems and the burden placed on individuals to meet administrative requirements while in crisis.

**“People are being asked for a lot...they need bank statements, tax documents, ID, etc. How does a person living homeless do that? Who wants to go fill out a form at BC Housing when you’re hungry and have slept outside?”**

For some, successfully navigating the maze of systems and their requirements is not even a guarantee of support, as policies and program rules often fail to account for the needs and realities of those navigating homelessness and other challenges.

“They end up sneaking their partner in, and then they get kicked out.”

From service design to service delivery, people who have “been there” have an expertise that is essential. To truly meet the needs of those in crisis, “choice, flexibility, and dignity should be basic, not special.”

## Centering Indigenous Voices



Leadership Gathering participants also identified Indigenous leadership and culturally grounded approaches as essential. As one participant noted:

**“The housing system is not adequate, and it’s culturally misaligned...Solutions need to be led by and for Indigenous partners.”**

Many of the challenges facing Indigenous communities today are rooted in the ongoing impacts of colonization and systemic racism.

Addressing the overrepresentation of Indigenous people among those experiencing homelessness, involved in the justice system, and facing physical and mental health challenges was also a consistent theme throughout the event. Participants noted that pursuing this work in earnest means “supporting Indigenous leadership with funding, decision-making power, and long-term commitment.”

Indigenous organizations are already leading the creation and implementation of innovative and culturally responsive models of care. Too often, however, this work is carried out in isolation from the broader service community. Reaching its full impact will require a greater level of integration and support.

**“In moving forward a reconciliation agenda, there is a critical need for allyship that goes beyond statements of support and moves towards action. This includes how stakeholders work together to move recommendations forward and practically action the changes necessary for equitable responses to Indigenous over-representation. This is achieved by voicing and strengthening commitments to Indigenous-led strategies and models and not just relying on Indigenous community to provide perspectives.”**

Ultimately, participants emphasized that any lasting solutions must be grounded in Indigenous knowledge, leadership, and community connection. Without this, efforts to address complex needs will remain incomplete.

## Fragmentation Across Systems

Another recurring theme raised by Gathering participants was the fragmentation of services across sectors.

Despite often serving the same individuals, housing, health, justice, and social systems operate in parallel. Conflicting policies, procedures, and philosophies can act as roadblocks, limiting coordination and frustrating those seeking service.

**“Everyone is distracted trying to solve their own problems...[and] do things on their own, but we could do much better if we were all together.”**

In order to better meet the needs of all people, and respond to shared challenges, participants agreed that sectors and systems needed to overcome their fragmentation and build stronger cross-sectoral partnerships. Centralized and shared information across mandates and partners was identified as critical to enabling this level of collaboration.

## Countering Public Misconceptions

In addition to stronger inter-agency communication, participants also agreed on the importance of working together on public communications to build understanding.

As social challenges grow and become more visible in communities, “there is growing community backlash; we’re facing politicization, and very public pushback.”

Stories can be a powerful counter to this kind of sentiment, but it was widely acknowledged that, across sectors, they aren’t being told – at least, not often enough.



“I’ve watched people change their entire lives with community programs, but that’s not being broadcast,” shared one participant.

Attendees were sensitive to the financial and capacity limitations of non-profit and social service organizations, but agreed that more needed to be done.

Drawing comparisons with the recent decriminalization pilot in BC, one participant highlighted what can happen without the right messaging:

**“Having the evidence doesn’t cut it – we need the human stories that make it relevant.”**

Several collaborative opportunities were identified by participants, including a coordinated campaign to counter misinformation, and strategies to build trusting relationships between housing providers and their neighbours.



## Understaffed and Overworked

While discussing the impacts of overlapping crises, participants of the Gathering were careful to also consider the needs and realities of frontline workers. At the forefront and faced with growing intensity, this workforce is strained.

Noted by one participant, “the work is so much more intense now...we’re stepping into non-stop crisis.”

As challenges have evolved, expectations for staff have evolved alongside them, but the resources and structures supporting staff have not kept pace. The additional and unexpected demands of these jobs can be challenging, and often, “people don’t know what they’re getting into.”

**“We are in a crisis and people are dying, and it’s tragically becoming normalized to have someone die and to have to just jump back into our day.”**

The result is rampant burnout and turnover, creating additional strain on remaining staff and interrupting continuity of care for those accessing services. In this context, even the best-designed programs can struggle to achieve their intended outcomes.

Without a stable workforce, efforts to scale our responses across systems will be hard to maintain. Participants agreed that “we need to be training staff much better,” but also recognized that in some cases, “what we need is higher wages so people with the right training want these jobs.”

Addressing the pressures on existing staff while continuing to fill new and critical roles will require a renewed focus on workforce development – better training, better compensation, and better supports.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As these discussions progressed, participants refined their focus to categories in which to consider recommendations:

- Governance strategy and systems management
- Continuum gaps and treatment
- Integrated systems and data-sharing
- Storytelling, ROI and public relations
- Flexible and individualized housing models

To guide this work, participants were encouraged to make action-oriented recommendations and articulate who should own them, including but not limited to those in the room.

By the end of day two, a series of recommendations had been developed and pitched to the room, with participants voting on a top three to bring forward.

Several key commitments emerged that cut across all recommendations, including the need for For Indigenous, By Indigenous advisory groups to guide the sector, improvements to Indigenous data generation, and strengthened access to existing Indigenous data to support evidence-informed and strategic decision-making.

Voting on the recommendations was optional and may not represent the opinions of all participants. Individuals who perceived a conflict of interest—whether personal or on behalf of their employer—were free to abstain from voting. Not all participants were able to stay through to the end of the event and missed the opportunity to vote.



## Three priority recommendations emerged through participant voting:

### Recommendation 1

**The Province to declare homelessness as a state of emergency and establish an inter-ministerial council that is responsible to develop a provincial homelessness strategy.**

The Strategy would include input from urban Indigenous organizations and incentivize the development of governance frameworks and a coordinated response by municipal and regional bodies to ensure accountability. Provincial capital and operating funding would be tied to these regional bodies, ensuring clear targets, timelines, and public reporting.

### Recommendation 2

**The Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs to develop a case-management framework for relational, person-centred planning that spans sectors (including Health, Justice, and Social Development & Poverty Reduction).**

Each partner must be clear about the resources they bring and be willing to contribute them creatively and collaboratively, with the common purpose of making access to housing and supports equitable and easy to navigate for those most in need. The framework must include collaborative funding mechanisms to allow for contributions from different sectors. This is intended to ensure the most appropriate services are in place and to support better flow and access through the housing continuum.

### Recommendation 3

**The provincial and federal government to collaborate and focus on person-centred housing by establishing individualized funding (i.e. attached to the person not the housing).**

Person-centred solutions need to include both small-to-medium-sized and Indigenous-led housing solutions that are tailored to the needs of individuals to ensure flexible options and choice. Supportive housing must be well-researched, well-designed, and well-resourced as part of healthy communities.

“Homelessness is not just a system issue. It’s living with fear, stress, and uncertainty every day. It’s trying to survive while moving through systems that don’t work together and often don’t listen. That’s why declaring homelessness a provincial state of emergency matters to me. When you don’t have stable housing, everything feels urgent. Your health, your safety, and your future are always at risk. Calling this an emergency means recognizing how serious the situation already is for people living it.”



## CONCLUSION

The Leadership Gathering was designed to transcend silos, bridge sectors, and create space for coordinated responses to complex challenges.

As this year's discussions made clear, the systems we rely on are outdated. The challenges they were built to address have evolved, and as issues overlap and converge the rate of change is growing exponentially. Our systems, by comparison, are not. Addressing this gap will require the kind of openness, creativity, and flexibility engendered by our two-day dialogue.

The recommendations developed through this process reflect what is possible when leaders come together with shared purpose. They represent not an endpoint, but a step toward more coordinated systems, more responsive housing solutions, and better outcomes for people facing complex

needs. Achieving these will require attendees, and their colleagues across systems, to continue walking collaboratively.

Connective hopes this summary report can serve as a useful tool for anyone who participated in this year's event, and for everyone more broadly who shares our vision.

Moving forward from this year's Leadership Gathering, Connective remains committed to creating spaces for these critical conversations and to advancing the ideas generated through them alongside our partners.

We encourage participants and readers to share this report with your networks. The conversation that began at the Leadership Gathering must travel across sectors, organizations, and communities if meaningful progress is to be achieved.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are profoundly grateful for the incredible collaborators who make this event possible year after year. Your dedication, expertise, and hard work are the foundation of its success, and we couldn't do it without you. A heartfelt thank you to:

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- Our presenters, panelists and participants for sharing their knowledge, expertise and ideas with group.

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- Barb Van Vugt, Correctional Services Canada
- Darryl Shackelly, Native Courtworker & Counselling Association
- Jill Atkey, BC Non Profit Housing Association
- Jonny Morris, CMHA BC
- Julia Barnes, Connective (committee Chair)
- Liz Vick Sandha, Connective
- Mark Miller, Connective
- Tonia Nicholls, BC MHSUS



## OUR SPONSORS

Thank you to our generous sponsors for making the 2026 Leadership Gathering possible.



Questions about the Leadership Gathering or this report? Reach out to Connective at [events@connective.ca](mailto:events@connective.ca) or visit our website [connective.ca](http://connective.ca)