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## Dialogues that Dig Deeper: Surfacing the Multiple Faces of Homelessness in Grand Rapids, MI (Report One)

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Dialogues that Dig Deeper:  
Surfacing the Multiple "Faces" of Homelessness  
in Grand Rapids, MI

A Report from GVSU's  
"Dialogue, Integration, and Action"  
(LIB 312-01)

**Dialogue One**  
**Deliberative Findings**  
**March 24, 2016**



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**Mission:** This community dialogue is intended to create a safe space for patrons and staff of Dégagé Ministries to come together and have a conversation on topics that are not discussed often enough. The main goal is to help bring awareness to the specific needs and wants of homeless individuals within the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Vision:** Giving individuals from a community the chance to meet together and facilitate a discussion between them that will deepen the understanding of—and enhance the response to—the cycle of homelessness.

**Values:**

- Integration of Place-Based Knowledge
- Collaboration
- Honest Discussion
- Community Involvement
- Empathetic Listening





**Project Introduction:** This Community dialogue was designed to discover what homeless individuals need, in terms of services and assistance, to prevent the perpetuating cycle of homelessness itself. After the discussion, our team hopes service organizations in Grand Rapids will take our findings into consideration in their efforts towards designing and implementing programs around homelessness.

**Timeline:**

Date	Location	Activities
February 9 4:00-5:15 pm	Dégagé 144 Division Ave S, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616) 454-1661	Tour and Narrative: Dégagé Mission & Overview of issues patrons confront
February 18 4:00-5:15 pm	MAKB2116, GVSU, Allendale Campus	Students' Initial Dialogue Design Discussion and Revisions
March 24 4:00-5:30 pm	Dégagé 144 Division Ave S, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 (616) 454-1661	Community Dialogue (student-designed and facilitated) 3-4 patrons & 4-5 staff
April 12 4:00-5:15 pm	MAK B2116, GVSU, Allendale Campus	Student Presentations on findings/summaries from community Dialogue & Debrief
April 16	<a href="http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_undergrad/">http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_undergrad/</a>	Publish Report

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**Preparation:**

In designing and planning this community dialogue, our team integrated knowledge and tools learned from Grand Valley State University's LIB 312-01, "Dialogue, Integration, and Action" course, as well as additional primary and secondary research on issues of homelessness in Grand Rapids. The Appendix below includes the Dialogue Plan as well as a list of sources that were helpful in crafting our dialogue.

Our goal was to create an inclusive dialogue on homelessness that would connect people experiencing homelessness with staff members of service organizations. The purpose of the dialogue was to elicit place-based knowledge that can be shared with others so we might better address the needs of our community. The hope is that the information gathered from can be used in the design of programs and services available to the homeless population in Grand Rapids.

**Report Findings:**

Three key recommendations emerged from the community dialogue:

- 1. Design Personalized Services:** The stories shared by the participants highlighted the need for a more personalized approach to the services currently available.
- 2. Increase Flexible Policies:** The participants each shared unique stories relating to their experiences with Dégagé and other service organizations; the common theme was a struggle to adjust to the requirements of one service or another. A call was made for greater compassion on



the part of the organizations, who may have rules in place that (although meant to help) are a sharp contrast to the environment some clients arrive from. The adjustment period needed by some clients could be a place where peer support and mentoring programs come into play.

**3. Disseminate Knowledge:** We noticed that many of the participants had suggestions on new services that could be implemented and the staff member participating in the discussion had a solution or a reference for where the individual could go to receive those services. One possible recommendation, offered by a Dégagé patron, is to increase outreach between organizations, for example by arranging a representative from one service to visit the building of another and speak to clients about the options they offer. This tactic would raise awareness of services especially among people who might feel disenfranchised or discouraged by seeking out help alone.

So that leads us to the question of how Dégagé and other organizations might better spread the word to others? To sum up our findings, we discovered that a main area for intervention revolves around communication. In order to use services available in the Heartside neighborhood, and meet personal goals with the help of those services, improved communication is essential. The Dégagé staff member in our group stated that he was surprised at how much insight he had been able to gain just from talking to a handful of clients for an hour, and that more such dialogues would be valuable to any organization's effectiveness. The patrons of Dégagé who shared their ideas demonstrated great insight into the issues surrounding homelessness and, more significantly, a willingness to take action to help others. One participant described a mentoring/outreach program she is involved in, which brought to mind in-progress goals by Dégagé to institute a mentoring program in their own ministry. Such mentoring or peer-support options could be an additional resource allowing people facing homelessness to share information in more legitimized forum, with each other and with the larger community.

**Action Options:** The following possibilities were brought up by participants during our dialogue.

- **Down payment for apartment/house**
  - Pro: More people could obtain housing
  - Barrier: How might the money be generated?
- **Furniture**
  - Pro: Once people get an apartment/house they can furnish it well to truly make it feel like a "home"
  - Barriers: Costs money, questionable donations
- **Greater compassion for homeless people**
  - Pro: Connection with others will create a sense of purpose and support

- Barriers: Need for more social workers, “making” people care is hard but needed
- **Better understanding of those with mental health issues**
  - Pro: Finding better solutions for those with MH issues
  - Barriers: Finding space and time for education and connection
- **Better understanding of those with substance abuse**
  - Pro: Finding better solutions for substance abuse issues
  - Barriers: Finding space and time for education and connection
- **Individualized plans for structured lifestyle**
  - Pro: Creating a detailed and customized plan that will better meet an individual’s needs for success
  - Barriers: People may not want a structured lifestyle and detailed personal plans may take up too much time of employees.
- **Youth programs**
  - Pro: Help youth who face homelessness, give them resources/guidance to prevent them from entering adult homelessness
  - Barriers: Finding space and time for education and connection, a lot of work to create program, need people and money
- **Social workers**
  - Pro: More personal help for those who are homeless
  - Barriers: Cost
- **Sobriety services**
  - Pro: Help keep those struggling with alcohol abuse clean
  - Barrier: Cost
- **Improve already existing resources**
  - Pro: Improve the effectiveness of resource without having to create a whole new resource
  - Barriers: Diligent investigation of resource effectiveness
- **Setting goals**
  - Pro: Giving people a goal to reach gives them a reason to act positively and proactively
  - Barriers: Potential gaps between expectation and outcomes, unrealistic goal setting
- **More dialogues/conversations about homelessness**
  - Pro: More accurate information about the issues faced by the homeless population/new ideas on how to create/improve resources
  - Barriers: Difficult to recruit participants

- **GED program at Dégagé**
  - Pro: Make people more marketable when searching for jobs/homes
  - Barriers: Costly, would need many people
- **Services at every time of day (no “gap periods”)**
  - Pro: Having no “gap periods” means that people won’t have the time to slip back into their negative habits
  - Barriers: Difficulty in scheduling who’s open when, would need more people

**Appendix:**

**Team One Facilitation Plan**

Time	Structure and Processes	Facilitation Tools & Best Practices	Reasoning/Value	Member assigned
4:00 - 4:05	Greet the participants and make them aware of the food to be offered after; Thank them for having us in their building; Introduce Guidelines for Dialogue: +participate fully +keep an open mind +respect each other, even when disagreeing +one person speaking at a time +have fun +be open to new ideas + look for common ground	“A Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Cafe” by the World Cafe 2015 <i>Facilitative Leadership “B Tools”</i> p. B9, Handout, MSU 2005	Acknowledging that we are using their space & show appreciation. For more effective dialogue, go over ground rules at the beginning, ask if everyone agrees and if any should be added.	All Members; Jason
4:05 - 4:15	Introduce our purpose for the Dialogue: Seeds of Promise wanting their input for program development, our class teams providing a forum for their ideas to be heard (our role). Icebreaker Question: If you could put a message inside a fortune cookie, would it be? -sets a casual tone, but	“Go round-robin in the group whenever appropriate, asking each person in turn to share a comment.” Dealing with Difficult Behaviors, Handout 15	Learning from the participants is the point; make clear from the start by focusing on the goals. During this time, we also want them to know us, so we could include quotes on dialogue from the class to give them a sense of what we are learning; for example, “Speak in spite of fears” is a	Cameron and Erica

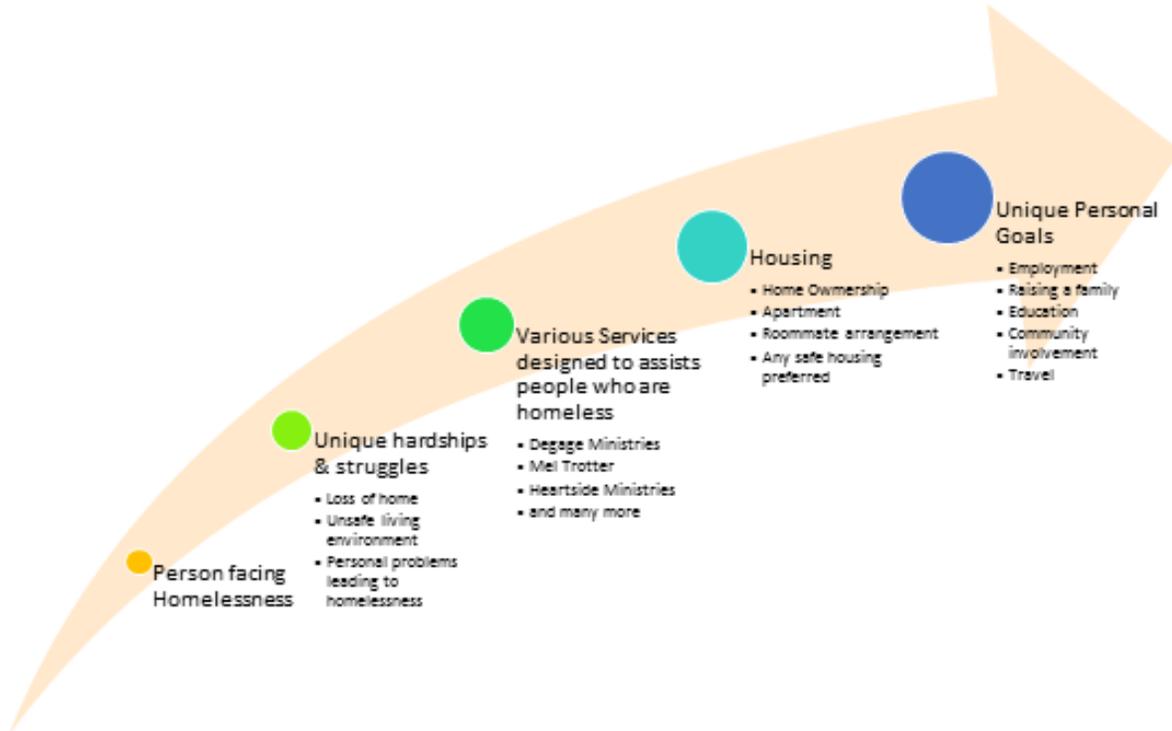
	also lets participants share values		quote that exemplifies one ideal.	
4:15 - 4:40	<p>Brainstorming: round-robin style discussion where people will talk about what impacts them the most - What are some <b>needs</b>?</p> <p>(As facilitators, we have to be aware that this topic might have emotional issues attached to it, so we could acknowledge this by letting participants know that they don't have to share more than they feel comfortable with, but if they do share they will not be judged only supported.)</p>	<p><i>Facilitator Excellence Instructor's Guide</i> by Fran Rees, 1998</p>	<p>Brainstorming is a structured process that encourages the generation of a large quantity of ideas in a group setting. Participants are encouraged to contribute any ideas, no matter how irrelevant, and to build on one another's ideas. Probably no one will learn more from this project than the students facilitating the dialogue, and the participants will be our teachers by sharing their experiences and insights. A brainstorming session, focused on their initial opinions and stories, will hopefully get people comfortable with talking together and stimulate thinking for further discussion later.</p>	Ryan
4:40 - 5:05	<p>Affinity Diagram: The second question will be introduced: what services could help you meet those needs?</p> <p>We will encourage participants to respond and add their own insights into what has been said and done, by writing those thoughts</p>	<p><i>Facilitator Excellence Instructor's Guide</i> by Fran Rees, 1998</p>	<p>We want the participants to have the experience of creating something together and seeing their ideas recorded in a visual and validating way. Affinity diagrams help to organize a large amount of information in a short time (p. A7),</p>	Sarah



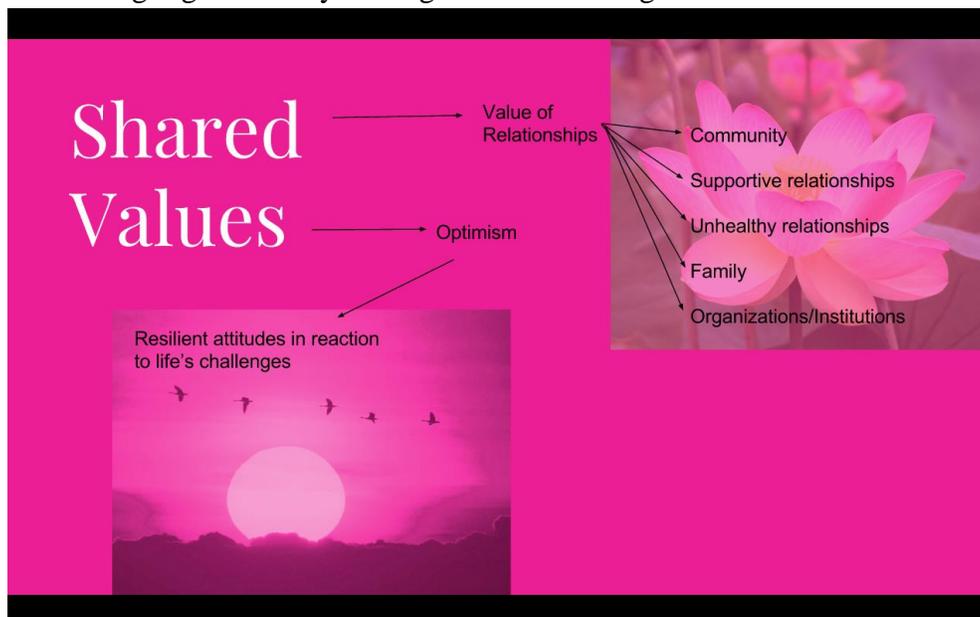
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	<p>down on sticky notes. When people are ready, they can arrange and rearrange their notes into groups, based on similarities. We will explain how the exercise is done, and provide quiet time for participants to do each step. We can include prompts, such as “If you could add a service that doesn’t exist now, what would it be?” We will encourage them to be creative in their answers.</p>		<p>stimulating creativity in a group.</p>	
<p>5:05 - 5:15</p>	<p>Wrap-up: Encourage participants to continue to be involved by making their ideas and concerns heard by the organizations that serve them &amp; in their community</p>	<p>Summarize, give positive reinforcement. Verbal Techniques, Handout 6--facilitative leadership</p>	<p>We want our participants to leave with an understanding of what was discussed. Ensure they feel appreciated by using positive reinforcement.</p>	<p>All Members</p>

This visual displays the transitions individuals experiencing homelessness may experience:



The below visual highlights the key findings from our dialogue:





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