

EDMONTON'S
POVERTY ELIMINATION
STEERING COMMITTEE
SUMMARY REPORT

**Changing the Conversation
about Poverty in Edmonton**

February 2014

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Companion documents to this report are:

- *Unleashing our Potential: Eliminating Poverty in Edmonton Preliminary Poverty Elimination Strategic Framework*
- *Engaging Edmontonians to Thrive and Prosper: What We Heard*

Note: Unless otherwise notes, quotations in this report come from participants in the 2013 community engagement sessions held by Edmonton's Poverty Elimination Steering Committee.

The Challenge

More than 100,000 Edmontonians live in poverty. That's 1 in 8 of our population.

Nearly 30% of those who live in poverty are children.

Who are they? Our neighbours, co-workers, friends.

She might be a single mother, working nights at a convenience store, with 3 sons under the age of 5 to look after during the day. He might be a refugee recently arrived in Edmonton, struggling to pay back the loans that brought his family here, working as a janitor while trying to find a job that matches his qualifications. They might be teens whose father lives with a mental illness and can only work occasionally; the family moves from one low rental apartment to

the next, sometimes spending the night in the family's minivan – school attendance is sporadic, extra-curricular activities non-existent. She might be a young, Aboriginal mom with a baby, recently moved to the city from the reserve in search of work, struggling to find a safe place to stay. He might be a senior living alone. She might have been born into poverty; he might have been the victim of a series of unfortunate events.

Each Edmontonian living in poverty has his or her own unique story – and encounters one or more of the systemic barriers that need to be resolved:

- low education
- limited skills training
- low wage employment
- lack of savings
- lack of family supports
- mental illness

Each Edmontonian living in poverty has one thing in common: their

desire to be treated with dignity and respect coupled with an eagerness to take on the tools needed to break out of poverty - to use their own strengths and resilience to improve their lives. The challenge is: how do we as a society invest in those strengths and resilience by offering the right tools at the right time?

"I am responsible for picking myself up and getting up and brushing myself off and saying enough is enough. I saw a sign at the Shaw Conference Centre; saw there was a job. It was for a cook. They told me I need food safety training and a criminal record check. I went back to Bissell Centre and took the course for a whole month. Now I am working. I would say that I'm responsible for what I want to do. I know I can do it. I've never given up."

Participant

Investing in our community

We live in one of the wealthiest regions in North America.

We are fortunate in that we have the means to tackle poverty at its roots: to find long term, preventative solutions with an approach based on resilience, investment and engagement.

Furthermore, an enlightened commitment to eliminate poverty would help thousands of Edmontonians achieve their full potential, and would create a more harmonious and prosperous society.

The **social costs** of poverty are significant: thousands of Edmontonians who are unable to fulfill their true potential in life.

The **financial costs** to us as Albertans are no less considerable:

The cost of poverty to Albertans	\$7.1 - \$9.5 billion each year
Each taxpayer pays	\$2,700 - \$3,600 each year just to manage poverty

Those numbers involve:

Health care costs	\$1.2 billion
Costs attributable to crime	\$560 million
Intergenerational costs	\$473 - \$591 million
Opportunity costs	\$4.8 - \$7.2 billion

Source: Poverty Costs, an Economic Case for a Preventative Poverty Reduction Strategy, Vibrant Communities Calgary and Action to End Poverty in Alberta, 2012

“Failure to tackle the poverty and exclusion facing millions of families and their children is not only socially reprehensible, but it will also weigh heavily on countries’ capacity to sustain economic growth in years to come.”

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

There is a compelling financial argument to invest in ending poverty, rather than continuing to manage it, and to invest in preventing poverty: to ensure that people living close to the edge don’t fall into poverty. **This requires a transformative shift in thinking, which moves the poverty dialogue and action beyond alleviation of poverty to collaborative, innovative solutions.**

In 2012-2013 our work focused on the need to change the conversation about poverty in Edmonton. We identified that the time is right to advance a new asset-based, resilience model – a paradigm shift from “alleviating” poverty to capacity building towards prosperity.

The Opportunity

In our city, province and country individuals and communities are immersed in the effort to tackle poverty **differently**: to devise long term solutions; to transform the public conversation and shift attitudes.

The ‘them and us’ paradigm is outdated, along with the concept of charity. Instead, initiatives in 2014 revolve around the collective ‘we’: how do we as a community mobilize the change we want to see? **How do we invest in prevention** – providing, for example, an environment that allows each child to develop his or her full potential, thus breaking the cycle of poverty?

Momentum is under way through:

- The City of Edmonton’s The Ways Plans – including **The Way We Live**
- Edmonton’s **10 Year Plan to End Homelessness**
- REACH Edmonton: **Building a Culture of Community Safety**
- Edmonton Public Library’s **Safe Communities Outreach Workers Initiative**
- **ELEVATE** Report on Community Sustainability
- Edmonton City of Learning Initiative **Community Foundational Learning Plan**
- United Way of the Alberta Capital Region: **Creating Pathways out of Poverty Community Impact Framework**
- **Alberta’s Poverty Reduction Strategy**, the Social Policy Framework and **Together We Raise Tomorrow**
- **Federal Poverty Reduction Plan**: Working in partnership towards reducing poverty in Canada

It’s clear in the list above that while government may convene and support these change initiatives, only through robust community engagement, leadership and ideas will we succeed in changing the conversation and eliminate poverty in a generation in Edmonton. If all Edmontonians work together, we will shift attitudes and move from a charity model to one of investment, resilience and capacity building.

"Poverty reduction is more than just increased income. It's got a lot to do with raising one's self esteem."

Participant

Edmonton's Poverty Elimination Steering Committee

"Our communities are stronger than we think; we need to have confidence in ourselves."

Participant

On May 16, 2012, City Council approved the development of an Edmonton Poverty Reduction Initiative. Lead Councillors on this initiative, Ben Henderson and Amarjeet Sohi, brought together a core group of convenors including the City of Edmonton, United Way of the Alberta Capital Region, Edmonton Social Planning Council, the Lead Medical Officer of Health Edmonton Zone, and citizen champion

Janice Melnychuk. The convenors assembled a Steering Committee to lead the foundation work for a Poverty Reduction Initiative. The Steering Committee consisted of 26 cross-sectoral and intergovernmental members, and was co-chaired by Councillors Ben Henderson and Amarjeet Sohi and United Way Capital Region representatives Anne Smith (President and CEO) and Allan Undheim (Vice-President).

The Steering Committee produced a preliminary strategic framework in 2013, which defines a vision and goals and includes a set of guiding principles. In essence, the Strategic Framework intends to launch the shift of the poverty dialogue beyond alleviation of poverty to actions rooted in resilience, investment and engagement.

Preliminary Poverty Elimination Strategic Framework vision and goals

Vision:

Poverty ends in Edmonton within a generation.

Goals:

1. Edmontonians and families have income and resources to meet their needs, participate in community life and plan for the future.
2. Every child in Edmonton develops their full potential.
3. Edmontonians facing multiple barriers experience equitable access to opportunities and supports to thrive and enjoy a better quality of life.
4. Edmontonians grow their income and assets and contribute to Edmonton's vibrant economy.

Guiding principles:

- A collaborative approach that enlists a commitment among partners to work in a coordinated manner and to leverage assets and seek new approaches
- An asset-based model that builds on the resilience and strengths of those living in poverty to act as their own agents of change and development
- An investment strategy that identifies strategic areas that will make the most impact in improving the lives and conditions of those living in poverty
- A placed-based model that emphasizes local community collaboration and engagement to eliminate poverty in neighborhoods and communities

For detailed information, please see companion report: the *Preliminary Poverty Elimination Strategic Framework*.

Community engagement: what we heard

Steering Committee members recognized the importance of hearing the voices and ideas of Edmontonians. In the fall of 2013, community engagement sessions were organized with Edmontonians living in poverty and/ or with limited income, as well as those who work with them. Their voices are included throughout this report, and their opinions informed and validated the Steering Committee's work and proposed areas for future action.

Many of the 214 Edmontonians consulted talked about the importance of systemic change in social supports and service delivery: change that will enable them to move out of poverty and build their skills and capacity; change that 'enables' rather than 'disables' them.

"It's all about knowing the key words. If you say shampoo you won't get anything, but if you talk about personal hygiene, they will give you another \$50 to \$75 a month. Life is different if you don't know the key words to use to gain access."

Participant

Currently all too often, they said, the system penalizes them for trying to better themselves; for example, benefits might be withdrawn if a person finds part-time work. Complex and difficult to navigate, the present system needs to adapt and be responsive to the varying needs and circumstances of individuals and families with the end goal of building their capacity to be self-sufficient.

For more information on community engagement, please see companion report *Engaging Edmontonians to Thrive and Prosper: What We Heard*.

Building the Foundation

From its work over 2102-13, the Steering Committee suggests a number of key areas for a new Mayor's Taskforce on Poverty to consider as a springboard to action – together with some important points that Steering Committee members have learned.

Three guiding lessons learned will ensure Edmonton achieves the vision of eliminating poverty within a generation. These are:

1. **Prevention and intervention** work in tandem: while providing effective supports to those living in poverty is essential, equally important is ensuring that those teetering on the edge don't fall into poverty. That means investing proactively in children and families to build their assets and enhance their ability to succeed.
2. **Define who it is you are serving:** it's important to sharply identify and fully understand for whom and where investments and supports will have the most impact. This will help to identify outcomes and measurements of success.
3. **Changing hearts and minds:** in the past poverty was often perceived as somebody else's problem. In 2014, it's time to focus on building awareness and energy in Edmonton in seeking innovative, out of the box solutions towards removing barriers that perpetuate poverty and investing in efforts towards prosperity.

Focus Areas for Action

The Poverty Elimination Steering Committee recommends the new Mayor's Taskforce on Poverty Elimination pursue and explore further five focus areas as it embarks on this next phase of the work. Committee partners took into account the voices of those they heard in the 2013 community engagement sessions, research conducted and gathered from many sources, as well as diverse expertise in this issue. These five Focus Areas for Action are all critical and strategic opportunity areas to advance real change and progress as Edmonton shifts the conversation from one of band aid solutions to comprehensive long-term change towards ending poverty. It is important to note that each focus area is related to, and dependent on, the other. None can be tackled in isolation, and it is essential to avoid creating new silos.

The Poverty Elimination Steering Committee recommends, in no particular order, the following Key Focus Areas illustrated in the graphic on page 7.

Focus Areas for Action



Community engagement and capacity building

Strong, vibrant communities are the foundation to the effort to end poverty – communities that include business, labour, faith-based groups – all Edmontonians. Community engagement means bringing people together, ensuring that the voices of those experiencing poverty are heard, working together towards identifying solutions and taking action. It means shouldering the goal of ending poverty as a collective responsibility.

Creating capacity within communities, community building, is therefore an essential tool in the effort to end poverty. An important next step in moving forward with this initiative will be to define clearly what community building

looks like within the context of poverty elimination, intensifying the efforts already begun by government in facilitating and funding community building work.

It’s all really about building the capacity for change. Each of the five Focus Areas for Action is a critical element to pursue. Engaging partners and Edmontonians is central to success.

“Let us talk to them, let us tell them our stories ... voice our concerns to leaders and politicians.”

Participant

1. EARLY CHILDHOOD SUPPORTS AND CHILDCARE

Nurturing children to grow, thrive and succeed

Research tells us that an adult's success is dependent on her very earliest experiences. Positive early years, with caring adults who talk, sing, and play create healthy brain development, an increased likelihood of success at school and therefore a greater chance of fulfilling employment. On the other hand, negative experiences or 'toxic stress', such as family violence, abuse or neglect, including chronic hunger, have the reverse effect.

Some of the basics essential for the development of healthy brains for future success are, among others:

- Quality, accessible childcare
- Early childhood education programs
- Care for pregnant moms and young families

A positive mental and physical environment in the early years creates the conditions in which our children in Edmonton can grow, thrive and succeed.

2. EDUCATION

A pathway to economic mobility

Investing in education means tackling some very specific issues. For example:

- School fees can prevent kids from engaging fully in school activities.
- Increased diversity and language needs in the city's classrooms must be tackled.
- Barriers to high school completion still exist.
- There are inadequate linkages to the trades in high school.
- Post-secondary education is unaffordable for people experiencing poverty.

For adults, education and training span a spectrum, including the availability of flexible upgrading, literacy and ESL programs that can lead to higher paying jobs.

3. EMPLOYMENT AND LIVING WAGE

Achieving income security

For most of us, our identity is partly defined by our work. Our self-worth can be a reflection of pride in our job, the dignity afforded by meaningful work. Just some of the issues we need to tackle are:

- You can work full-time and still be living in poverty.
- New immigrants and refugees often find getting their qualifications recognised a cumbersome, lengthy ordeal.
- Many single women headed families, for example, don't make enough money to live on.

- An inflexible system creates disincentives to work.

As a community we need to deal with income and with expenses. Keeping people out of poverty and opening opportunities for them to build their assets, start from livable incomes and are sustained by employment benefits that maintain their health and well-being.

4. HOUSING

Affordable housing - flexible for changing circumstances

While great strides have been made towards ending homelessness in Edmonton with the Housing First initiative, there remain significant housing gaps: affordable housing and permanent supportive housing.

- The lack of affordable housing creates vulnerability.
- The lack of permanent supportive housing means that those who require ongoing supports to stay successfully housed can end up back on the streets, homeless once more.
- Unstable housing compromises people's economic ability to climb out of poverty and plan for a better life.

Edmontonians experiencing poverty want choice around housing - and they need reasonable rents. If most of their income goes on rent, they are unable to get out of poverty.

5. TRANSPORTATION

Affordable public transit that brings people to where they work, play and live

Transportation is a significant barrier for Edmontonians living in poverty. Some of the issues they face are:

- Transit isn't always available where and when they need it.
- Fares are expensive.
- Jobs, training centres and grocery stores (as opposed to convenience stores) aren't usually embedded in communities and might involve multiple buses.

Removing the transportation barrier will give people living in poverty immediate capacity to do more and succeed. It will also contribute to economic growth.

"Industry wages have been kept low. I make \$12.54 an hour, after 13 years in the same job. I'm constantly worried about being able to afford housing, because I make just enough to not qualify for subsidized housing."

Participant

Conclusion

“We are in this community together. We should look out for each other and take care of each other, because this produces a more vibrant, inclusive community.”

Participant

It’s time to end poverty in Edmonton. It’s also time to do this by finding a new paradigm.

The Poverty Elimination Steering Committee recognizes that bringing about the depth of change envisaged is a long-term endeavour. We need to shift our focus from charity to investment, from poverty alleviation to poverty elimination, recognizing that social infrastructure is as important as physical infrastructure. We have to be people centred and place-based, seeking

made in Edmonton solutions involving Edmontonians. It will mean grappling with difficult questions as a community dedicated to finding new solutions. Some of those questions are:

- How much are we prepared to invest in prevention up front? Is there a point at which it might be wiser to choose prevention over intervention?
- What will we stop doing in order to invest more meaningfully?
- How far is each of us as an individual, and the organisations that we belong to, actually contributing to the poverty cycle?
- What does it really mean to say that poverty is a community issue? What might some of the implications for communities be that they will have to tackle?

What is the cost to our community and our collective quality of life if we don’t respond? The evidence is clear; the cost of poverty is well beyond the dollar figures presented in this document. The cost of not responding to poverty now will have enduring intergenerational effects on individuals, families and society. Investing in eliminating poverty today is creating a better future for all Edmontonians.

We can end poverty in Edmonton in a generation and build a truly inclusive and vibrant city where prosperity is shared by all. A new conversation along with dynamic and nimble partnerships will bring us successfully to this goal.

Appendix 1

EDMONTON POVERTY ELIMINATION STEERING COMMITTEE

CO-CHAIRS

Ben Henderson

Councillor, City of Edmonton

Anne Smith

President & CEO
United Way of the Alberta Capital Region

ALTERNATE CO-CHAIRS

Amarjeet Sohi

Councillor, City of Edmonton

Allan Undheim

Vice-President, Community Investments
United Way of the Alberta Capital Region

MEMBERS

Brian Henderson

President
Edmonton & District Labour Council

Bob McKeon

Associate Director, Office of Social Justice
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Dan Charrette

Director, Strategic Policy,
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Lead Medical Officer of Health
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Mark Holmgren

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Martin Garber-Conrad

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Susan Morrissey

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Gloria Chalmers

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Edmonton City Learning Initiative

Cheryl Whiskeyjack

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