



the *f*ACTivist

Newsletter of the Edmonton Social Planning Council



www.edmspc.com

Summer 2007

In this issue of the *f*ACTivist: We put the issue of food security front and centre.

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"...the first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind. Food is the moral right of all who are born into this world."
(Norman Borlaug)

Hunger and Insecurity Despite Prosperity

By Susan Morrissey, Executive Director, Edmonton Social Planning Council

Now that we have entered the summer months, our minds have turned to the many family gatherings and barbeques that are a fixture of the season for many of us. Yet, we must not forget that many folks are dealing with an issue that really began to draw my attention about a year ago - food security.

Food security is the ability for community residents to obtain a safe, personally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes healthy choices, community self-reliance and equal access for everyone.

Living in such prosperous times when we can have the pick of a literal "smorgasbord" of foods, it seems difficult to imagine that this could be a problem.

Research has shown that food insecurity is largely the result of low income and financial insecurity. When fixed costs - like rent, utilities and child care - continually rise, people begin to run out of money for food. Grocery budgets are more flexible, and are one of the few areas families can cut back on in an emergency.

One month you may be eating a fairly balanced diet. The next month, you may have to do without because of unforeseen circumstances that stretch an already tight budget.

There is also the issue of people who subsist due to the generosity of others, often through stop-gap measures such as food banks and soup kitchens. These services offer important immediate assistance but do not provide sustainable solutions.

In this issue of the *f*ACTivist, you will read about some of the programs and initiatives established to meet immediate needs, and the challenges that they are facing.

The Council continues to work on a number of projects related to food security, including our Working Poor Report and the Renters Listening Forums and Report. Our staff and board members will also be participating in the annual Inner City Barbeque on July 20th (see page 6).

As I review the articles in the following pages, I am reminded of a United Nations declaration on food security:

"Every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties. Society today already possesses sufficient resources, organizational ability and technology and hence the competence to achieve this objective. Accordingly, the eradication of hunger is a common objective of all the countries of the international community, especially of the developed countries and others in a position to help."

(United Nations)

It is my hope that the work of the Council will support other organizations in their efforts to eradicate food insecurity across the province.

We are proud to lend our voice to this important issue, and the agencies who have dedicated themselves to it.



United Way
Member Agency



Living Without Food: Can We Imagine What It's Like?

A Summary of the Bissell Centres' report "Living Without Food", released March 2007

By Lana Phillips, *STEP Social Research Assistant*

Over half of the families living in the neighbourhoods surrounding Bissell Centre live below the poverty line. For these families, food insecurity is a daily reality.

The experiences of residents of the inner city, west end, and south side of Edmonton who access food-providing agencies are the focus of Bissell's recent report, *Living Without Food*.

Between September and December 2006, 48 people were anonymously interviewed. Four had children from the ages of 2 months to 16 years living with them. Two-thirds were homeless.

The trained interviewers were low-income community residents who had recent or related experience of living in poverty.

This report provides a rare glimpse into the daily lives of people who live without food.

Getting Food

Walking between agencies and waiting in lines for serving times takes up most of the day for many people.

"Getting food is a full-time job."

"You're forced to walk; you are not allowed to sit anywhere ... not allowed to sleep anywhere. You can't stop walking. You walk from 7 to lunch, walk to supper till you find a place to sleep and you wake up and start walking."

As most free food is offered in the inner city, finding food can expose people to unsafe environments.

"It's pretty violent out there. I don't like standing at the lines. People fight. I don't like it, but I have to do it."

Barriers

People who are working may have greater difficulty accessing food, as serving times can conflict with work schedules. This creates a barrier for people to move on to paid work or school, which would allow them to become more self-sufficient.

"I've been 3 months without a job. I'm too sick to work right now. I'm supposed to rest— it's hard to do. You have to keep moving to get to places to eat and sleep."

Quality of Food

Generally, those who had safe housing were able to eat healthier meals. It is possible to get healthy food from agencies; however, fresh fruits, vegetables and milk can be hard to get. Many people cannot meet their nutritional needs.

"I'm losing weight and not feeling healthy. I have no energy and it puts me in a negative mood. You just want to give up."

Sharing Food

Even though they have very little, people do their best to share their limited resources with others and stay positive.

"We get as much food as possible to help each other out."

"Most people do as well as they can to get food. You have to keep positive."

Solutions

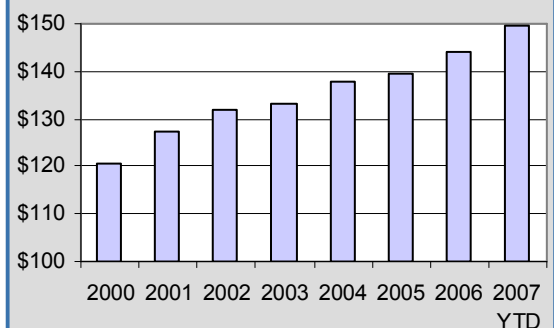
The interviewees also shared some ideas that would make it easier for them to eat regularly and to have enough to eat.

"We need low rental housing where you can have your own things, cook your own things."

"Services are not out there to help the people. Address the issue. Realize that the food situation is more of a problem. Poverty leads to crime and mental health problems."

The complete report can be found at www.edmspc.com in the Links section.

Average Weekly Cost of Nutritious Food Basket for Family of 4, Edmonton



Source: Tracking the Trends (Alberta Agriculture)

Food Security Agencies

1. **Growing Food Security in Alberta (GFSA)**
(foodsecurityalberta.ca/)
2. **Edmonton Food Bank**
(edmontonfoodbank.com/)
3. **Wecan Food Basket**
(www.wecanfood.com/)
4. **Sharing & Responsibility**
(www.foodbasket.ca/)

Local Resources: Agencies Serving Food

1. B's Diner
2. Bissell Centre
3. Boyle St. Comm. Centre
4. Cdn Native Friendship Cntr
5. Christ Church
6. Dickinsfield Amity House
7. Edm. Centre Victory Church
8. Edm. Family Worship Cntr
9. Herb Jamieson
10. Hope Mission
11. House of Refuge
12. Inner City Victory Church
13. Marian Centre
14. Mustard Seed Church
15. Native Seniors' Centre
16. Old Strathcona Youth Co-op
17. Red Road Healing Society
18. River of Life Society
19. Robertson-Wesley Church
20. St. Faith's Anglican
21. Salvation Army
22. Victory Church

** Addresses and Phone #s available at www.edmspc.com



Housing Pressures Spread to Food Security

By Lana Phillips, *STEP Social Research Assistant*

“...we ultimately would like to work [our volunteers] out of a job. We want to initiate changes that would enable people to feed themselves—and our statistics clearly show that people *want* to feed themselves.”
(Jack Little, Board Chair- Edmonton's Food Bank, 2006)

A single person in Alberta received \$4800 less in assistance in 2005 than he/she would have in 1986.

In March 2006, **25,206 households** were receiving social assistance in Alberta-- **40%** of them lived in Edmonton.

What is Food Security?

“The condition in which all people at all times can acquire safe, nutritionally adequate, and personally acceptable foods in a manner that maintains human dignity.”

The **Circle of Food Security** includes:

- ◆ Planting, Growing, & Harvesting
- ◆ Transporting
- ◆ Shopping
- ◆ Preparing & Eating, and
- ◆ Preserving our environment.

... with **Equity and Choice** at every point.

GFSA defines the **5 Elements of Food Security** as:

- ◆ **Availability** - sufficient supplies of food for all people at all times
- ◆ **Accessibility** - physical and economic access to food for all at all times
- ◆ **Acceptability** - culturally acceptable and appropriate food and distribution systems
- ◆ **Adequacy** - nutritional quality, safety, sustainability of available sources/methods of food supply
- ◆ **Action** - ensuring the social and economic infrastructures are in place to enable action that will ensure the previous four elements of food security.

(Growing Food Security Alberta)

The first food bank in Canada, Edmonton's Food Bank has served people in need for 25 years.

Despite their long-standing experience, Marjorie Bencz, Executive Director of the Food Bank, reports that the Alberta economic boom has had an unexpected effect on the working poor.

Employment, Wages and Cost of Living

While employment rates have risen, wages have not increased to meet the challenge of rising costs of living. This is particularly true for housing costs, which have been driven up by the city's plummeting vacancy rates (now below 1%). Some people are reporting month-to-month rent increases of up to 50%.

This situation is leading a surge of people - both first-time and former users - to seek assistance from the Food Bank. Many Food Bank users are working, but do not earn enough to meet all their households' needs.

Social Assistance

People living on social assistance or AISH are also finding that their allowances don't stretch far enough. Social assistance rates have decreased considerably since the mid-1980's.

Spending less to help those in need has been a nation-wide trend, with only two provinces - Quebec and British Columbia - showing a proportional increase.

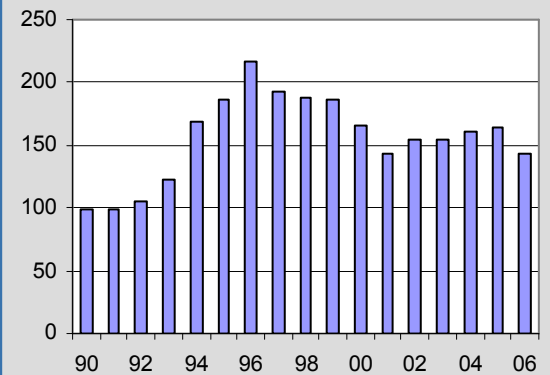
Between 1989 and 2007, Alberta had the second largest decrease in spending of all the provinces (-4.2%). (StatsCan, 2007)

It is little wonder that low-income families are finding it increasingly difficult to put food on their tables.

Food Bank Usage

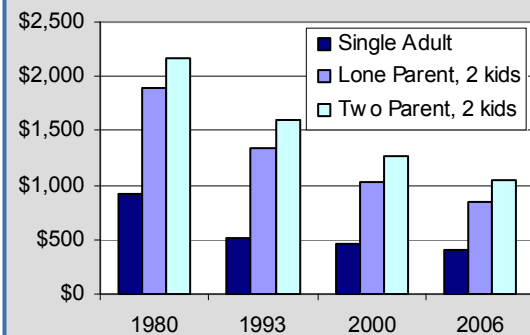
Food Bank statistics indicate that number of people served by the food bank decreased in 2006.

Annual Food Bank Usage
(thousands of individuals served)



Source: Tracking the Trends (Edmonton Food Bank)

Income Support Payments
(2005 Constant \$)



Source: Tracking the Trends

However, this trend was not a result of reduced need. In 2006, food bank usage was impacted not only by skyrocketing rents, but also the \$400 prosperity cheques distributed early in the year.

The Food Bank's Annual Report shows that usage rates across Alberta declined in March as many people on limited incomes used their cheques to buy food.

(Continued on page 4)





Housing Pressures & Food Security, cont'd...

Recommendations

In her draft submission to the Canadian Association of Food Banks for the HungerCount report to be released November 2007, Bencz made the following recommendations to government:

- ♦ Create a common approach, cohesive plan, and data-sharing method for dealing with affordable housing and homelessness. Strategies must be developed and implemented.
- ♦ Create and adequately fund programs to ensure safe, affordable housing for seniors, people with disabilities, and others on fixed incomes.
- ♦ Increase benefits for people needing AISH and other income security

programs. Benefits should be based on a market-value approach.

Bencz believes that there has been a lot of talk about what needs to be done, and the time has come for action. It is time to make the vision of food security in Alberta a reality.

"Most of us don't have as big a safety net as we think when something goes awry, and there are groups that are underemployed, groups that are vulnerable. No one is talking about them during the boom and they're not benefiting in the same way—they're just seeing the challenges."

(Marjorie Bencz, Director- Edmonton's Food Bank)

("Housing crunch strains food banks: Surging rents blamed for spike in us", Edmonton Journal, June 10, 2007)

Making Connections

Food Security is:

- ♦ One of the ten key **Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)**.

Individuals and families without access to proper nutrition have poorer health.

- ♦ An important element of **living conditions**, which is linked to **Social Inclusion**.

Food insecurity increases inequality between members of the community, which reduces to social cohesion.

(Inclusive Cities Canada, 2006)

Current ESPC Project

Working Poor Report Nears Completion

Our collaborative research initiative in a partnership with Vibrant Communities Edmonton and the United Way of the Alberta Capital Region is nearing completion.

The Edmonton area is at the centre of an Alberta energy boom that Statistics Canada recently described as "the strongest period of economic growth ever recorded by any province in Canada's history." Despite this, many Edmonton families are missing out on the benefits of this prosperity. They are instead facing stagnating wages, rapidly rising costs - especially for housing - and are finding it increasingly hard to make ends meet in today's hot economy.

After reviewing data on job trends, employment earnings and household

incomes, it became clear that we needed to look beyond the numbers, to the real life experiences of low-income working Edmontonians. Though not part of the original project design, a decision was made to conduct focus groups with low-income workers.

In May, Vibrant Communities held six focus groups, facilitated by Bryan Sandilands of Community Services Consulted Ltd. The groups represented a diverse range of working Edmontonians living on low wages. It was a unique opportunity to explore the many reasons and situations that lead people to work in low-wage jobs.

The focus group findings are now being incorporated into the report, and will inform our final recommendations.

Food Security: Cdn Community Health Survey

By Lana Phillips, *STEP Social Research Assistant*

"Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."
(Food & Agriculture Organization 1996)

In 2004, Health Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey asked Canadians to define their "food sufficiency" -- how often their households had enough of the foods that they needed over the past year.

The results might surprise some, but if you have been following the news regarding the housing crisis and rising costs of living, you might not be shocked at all.

(continued page 5)



Health in Urban Places: Vancouver Conference

According to the 2006 Census, 80 per cent of Canadians now live in urban centres. Over two-thirds of them (68%) reside in the country's 33 census metropolitan areas.

In response to this trend, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) - an independent research organization with a view to improve the health of Canadians - has launched 'Health in Urban Places'. This initiative aims to develop strategies for improving the health of urban Canadians.

The ESPC's Research and Policy Analysis Coordinator, John Kolkman, has been a key participant in this ongoing initiative. John attended a stakeholder meeting in early March in Edmonton, and was subsequently invited to attend a national consultation in

Vancouver on May 16.

Called 'Healthy Urban Places: Moving from Knowledge to Action,' the one-day session brought together policy-makers, academics and community representatives from across the country. The aim was to explore future directions for policy development and action related to health in urban places.

While in Vancouver, John also visited the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC). It was a great opportunity to exchange information and perspectives with Research Director Robyn Newton and SPARC's research staff.

To find out more about CIHI and to access their online reports, visit www.cihi.ca.

Visit www.sparc.bc.ca to learn about SPARC.

THANK YOU, MEMBERS

We would like to thank all of our members who returned the Member Surveys.

Your feedback will help us to focus our work in ways to better support our members and the community.

Stay tuned to our website!

The results will be posted there shortly.

Inner City BBQ: Free Food & Fun in the Sun

ESPC staff members and other individuals connected with our agency will be lending a hand at the 23rd Annual Inner City BBQ being held on Friday, July 20th at 12 noon.

The event provides an inexpensive alternative to inner-city residents who cannot afford to participate in festivals (for instance, Klondike Days/Capital Ex). The entertainment, free food, and friendship in a relaxed atmosphere (even when the temperature is high) gives people a chance to enjoy each other's company.

The very first Inner City Barbecue was held in 1985. The Edmonton Food Bank had received a large donation of steaks, and wanted to do more than send them out to

agencies. They contacted the Boyle Street Co-op, and began planning. Many ideas for an event were thrown around - including a street dance - but they ended up having a barbecue. In its second year, the event was held on the Sunday of the Klondike Promenade.

The event was organized by the Bissell in the early years, but is now coordinated by the Urban Core Support Network (of which the Council is a member).

The ESPC board and staff are looking forward to volunteering at the BBQ this year, and for many years to come.

It will be a great time with lots of good food and fun!

Meet the ESPC Staff

Council Welcomes Lana Phillips for the Summer



Lana Phillips joined the Council in May as a Social Research Assistant for the summer. She has a BA in English and Psychology from Erskine College in South Carolina, and a

Masters in Counselling Psychology from the University of Louisville in Kentucky.

Lana is actively involved with a variety of nonprofit agencies and committees, including the Elizabeth Fry Society, the Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Northern Alberta, and the

Low-Income Working Group for the Alberta Disabilities Forum. She has also written for [Boyle McCauley News](#), [Edmonton Street News](#) and the [Parkland Post](#), and has served on the Board and Editorial Committee of [Our Voice](#).

She is looking forward to bringing her unique experience to the ESPC.

Lana has lived in Edmonton for almost five years. Her partner Jordan Phillips is a Community Support Worker for SKILLS Society.



Council's 67th AGM: Towards Another Successful Year

By Stephanie Haar, *Administrative Assistant*

The Edmonton Social Planning Council was pleased to host its 67th AGM on May 10th, 2007. This well attended event was open to all current ESPC members and guests.

Each year, the AGM allows members to review the past year's activities and accomplishments, year-end financials, and the plans for the future. The Board of Directors is also elected at the event.

This year, the ESPC Board bid a fond farewell to a long-standing board member, Terry Anderson, who served as Treasurer. Over the years, Terry contributed greatly to the success and recognition of the Council.

The Board also welcomed many returning Directors – Doug Meggison, Ron MacLellan, Joscelyn Proby, Larry Brockman, Diane Dennis, Greg Farrants, Ann Semotiuk and Michael Sidra.

We also welcomed a number of new Directors – Father Edward Kennedy, Ken Stickland, Janet Kluthe, Alvin Finkel and Michael Cohen - bringing our Board to a total of 13 members.

Dr. Alvin Finkel, professor of history at Athabasca University, graciously agreed to be this year's keynote speaker. He gave a very interesting and informative presentation based on his book, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada: A History*, a detailed history of the evolution of social policy in Canada.

We wish to thank everyone who contributed to planning and organizing the event. The Council was proud to recognize its accomplishments in 2006, and looks forward to another exciting and successful year in 2007.

LIKE WHAT YOU SEE?

Some of the graphs in this issue of *the fACTivist* are generated from data in *Tracking the TRENDS 2007*.

Visit www.edmspc.com to view the publication or to download an order form.

Renters Listening Forum: Thank you!

By Lana Phillips, *STEP Social Research Assistant*

Thank you to the 220 concerned citizens who turned out for our Renters Listening Forums on May 23rd and 24th at the Stanley Milner Library. Over 120 individuals gave spoken and written comments that revealed the realities of the housing situation in the city.

The resulting report --released June 18-- provides details on the event, a summary of common themes, 13 recommendations to government regarding affordable housing, and an appendix including the spoken and written comments of participants.

Some of the key things that we heard from Edmontonians were:

- Some renters are receiving large monthly rent increases that they can't afford.
- Many renters believe that landlords are raising rents to unreasonable levels in order to empty apartment buildings for condo conversions.
- Many people who are working but earn less than \$10-\$12 per hour fear that the next rent increase will make it impossible for them to stay where they are.

- People on fixed incomes, such as seniors and people with disabilities, are paying up to 80% of their income (a maximum of \$1,050 a month on AISH) for rent, leaving little to no extra money for other necessities or recreation opportunities.
- Individuals with physical disabilities often have to live in apartments that don't fully meet their needs, due to a lack of affordable accessible housing.
- Many highly-skilled immigrants find that their foreign credentials aren't recognized by Canada when they arrive, and often take low-wage jobs to make ends meet. As a result, they can only afford substandard housing, and may actually live in homes that they cannot afford.

The feedback from forum attendees informed the detailed recommendations in the report, which emphasize a multi-faceted approach. Suggested actions include implementing rent increase guidelines and attaching subsidies to the person (instead of the suite).

A PDF copy of the report can be downloaded from the Publications page of our website (www.edmspc.com).



Our Vision

A healthy, just and inclusive community.



Our Mission

The Edmonton Social Planning Council provides leadership to the community and its organizations in addressing social issues and effecting changes to social policy.

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Ann Semotiuk

Michael Sidra

Ken Stickland

By Becoming a Member, you will...

... support our efforts to remain on the forefront in dealing with social issues

... make it possible for us to distribute our materials freely and widely to all

... receive our newsletters, fact sheets and other publications

... can vote at ESPC annual meetings and have a say in the direction of the organization

... be eligible to serve on the board of directors



Membership Form

Name _____

Organization _____

Position _____

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City/Town _____ Postal Code _____

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Membership Type Annual Fee

- | | |
|---|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organization | \$45 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Household | \$25 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual | \$15 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Associate (no vote) | \$10 |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Limited Income Household | \$5 |

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Membership form and details available on our website (www.edmspc.com).