

# Responses to the Alberta Social Policy Framework Discussion Questions

*Submitted by the Edmonton Social Planning Council*

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## **Introductory Comment**

The Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) welcomes the opportunity to provide these initial responses to the Policy Framework for Alberta Discussion Guide. These responses are based on our organization's long track record of addressing and proposing solutions to poverty and low income challenges.

Given the very short timeframe in responding to the Discussion Guide, these responses are not intended to be definitive or address all of the areas that will be encompassed by the framework. Our responses focus mainly on the economic dimensions of poverty and low income. Our intent is to focus on practical and affordable solutions that will make a meaningful contribution to poverty reduction in our province.

## **What do you see as the purpose of a social policy framework for Alberta?**

Poverty is a complex social phenomenon that defies simple solutions. The purpose of a framework should be to ensure all aspects of social policy are aligned to achieving clearly defined goals. Strategies, targets and timeframes need to be developed to achieve these goals. Alberta's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness is a good example of a framework with clearly defined goals, strategies, targets and timelines. This could serve as a model for an overarching social policy framework.

## **What are the respective roles of government(s), communities, individuals, and business in achieving a quality of life to which Albertans aspire?**

The primary role of governments is to lead and to ensure adequate and effective investments are made in poverty reduction. Within the Canadian federation, provinces are the lead jurisdiction in most areas of social policy. As such, the Alberta government's role needs to be one of leadership and coordination. As part of the development of a social policy framework, the role of all orders of government, the voluntary sector, individuals and business should be examined through the lens of achieving the agreed upon goals.

## **What kind of society do you want for yourself, your family and community?**

Alberta is fortunate to have a strong economy and job market. Educational attainment is steadily improving. Despite its prosperity and educated population, almost one in ten Albertans continues to live in economic poverty, including 73,000 children. Alberta needs to take better advantage of its strong economy to make this province a place that is healthier, socially just and inclusive of all its residents.

## Scope

### **What social and economic issues should be included in the framework?**

The Edmonton Social Planning Council has developed a series of policy recommendations that relate to each of the policy domains listed above. If implemented, these recommendations would significantly reduce poverty rates in Alberta and promote equality and social inclusion.

### **Strengthen Public Services**

The role of vital and effective public services in promoting equality and social inclusion cannot be overstated. Child care and early childhood development, child protection and family violence prevention, public education, health care, seniors and disability services are all core functions of the provincial government. Ensuring that these services are accessible and adequately resourced must continue to be a core responsibility of both government and the broader community.

### **Address Working Poverty**

For many low income Albertans, a job is not a ticket out of poverty. For example, about one-half of Alberta children in poverty live in a household where one or more persons are working full-time for the full year. Effectively reducing poverty means making work pay for all Albertans. The goal should be to ensure that no Albertan working full-time for the full-year should have to live below the low income line.

Specific policy solutions that would reward and make work pay include:

- Raise Alberta's minimum hourly wage from \$9.40 to \$10.25 (same as Ontario and BC) and index yearly thereafter. Eliminate the differential minimum wage for liquor servers.
- Extend eligibility for the Alberta Family Employment Tax Credit to low income working single adults and childless couples.
- Improve job recruitment and retention, by implementing a living wage for publicly contracted services.
- Award more bursaries to low income individuals to improve accessibility to post-secondary education. Ensure adequate funding for job training and skills development programs that provide opportunities for Alberta to retrain for better jobs.
- Protect vulnerable workers by enacting first contract arbitration. Provide temporary foreign workers with a pathway to permanent residency.

### **Improve the Income Support Safety Net**

For vulnerable Albertans who cannot work due to age or infirmity, strategic investments to improve income support programs are needed. Specific policy solutions that should be implemented include:

- Federal child tax benefits are the single largest contributor to lifting children and families out of poverty. The Alberta government should support families by introducing a parallel

refundable Alberta Child Benefit for low income families up to a maximum of \$1,100 per child, increasing to \$1,310 in 2013 (same level as the Ontario Child Benefit).

- Index the Alberta Seniors Benefit yearly based on changes in living costs.
- The Alberta government should support modest, phased-in increases to contribution rates to the Canada Pension Plan as the most effective long-term solution to improving retirement security for low and modest income Albertans.
- Ensure no disabled Albertan lives in poverty by fulfilling Premier Alison Redford's pledge to increase Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) benefits by \$400 per month and doubling the earnings exemption to \$800 per month.
- To support vulnerable Albertans, implement annual increases to Alberta Works monthly benefits at least matching living costs. Consideration also needs to be given to increasing earnings exemptions for Alberta Works recipients that are more in line with those in place for the AISH program.

### **Keep the 10 Year Homeless Plan on Track**

The adoption of a 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness was a visionary social policy achievement. Three years in though, a lot of work remains to be done if the plan is to meet its goal of ending chronic homelessness by 2019. Considerable progress has been made in recent years in increasing the supply of affordable housing. Future investment in housing supply continues to be needed. This is especially the case for permanent supportive housing for homeless persons with complex needs. Additional investment is also required to eliminate unacceptably long wait lists for affordable rental housing. Fully funding rental assistance programs is a key homelessness prevention strategy.

### **Take a Comprehensive Approach to Poverty Reduction**

Using an approach modeled on the 10 Year Homeless Plan, this province should adopt a comprehensive made in Alberta poverty reduction strategy with measurable targets and timelines. Like homelessness, failing to effectively prevent and address poverty has serious consequences and costs not only for those directly affected, but for all Albertans.

### **Social programs are delivered by government, communities, and non-for-profit organizations across the province. How would you like to be engaged during this process?**

The ESPC is supportive of the proposed approach outlined in the Social Policy Framework Discussion Guide. The proposed approach involves: "Developing a social policy framework for Alberta will be an inclusive process that addresses the perspectives of Albertans, community leaders, service delivery partners, and other government departments. The resulting framework must have broad community ownership. Meaningful public dialogue that balances a diverse range of viewpoints will be integral to developing a meaningful, framework" (page 2). Should the process proceed on this basis, the ESPC is keen to participate in this broad community consultation.

## Achieving Success

**How would you define success?**

**How should we measure success?**

Only by clearly defining what success means will it be possible to know if success is being achieved. This involves setting clear goals, targets and timelines. It involves developing agreed upon strategies for meeting those goals. Like the goal of ending chronic homelessness, it is possible to set a goal to end at least the economic dimension of poverty. This would mean setting an overarching goal that every Albertan has an income adequate to meet their basic needs and participate in society. A number of other goals with accompanying targets and strategies can also be developed. These goals include eliminating child poverty and ensuring that no one working full-time for the full-year lives in economic poverty.

## **Closing Remark**

The Edmonton Social Planning Council strongly supports the development of a Social Policy Framework for Alberta. We are eager to engage further in the process as it moves forward. Further information on our social policy positions and solutions is available on our website at [www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca](http://www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca).

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