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first reading



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Edmonton Social Planning Council

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Supports For Independence: Increased Equality or Equal Poverty?

In November, 1990, Alberta Family and Social Services Minister, John Oldring, announced the introduction of Supports for Independence, a new income support system to replace Alberta's social allowance program. An increase of 61 million has been allocated to the Supports for Independence program so that necessary changes may take place. Over 90% of this money will go directly to the clients.

The government's news release billed the new reforms as "more equitable, easier to understand and simpler to administer." Supports for Independence will also "encourage independence, and will clearly outline the responsibility of clients to strive for the greatest possible degree of self-sufficiency." The aim of the program is to reduce the caseload by assisting people in becoming more employable.

While some critics have heralded the new reforms as a breakthrough in the philosophy and delivery of income support, others have pointed out that actual increases in benefits are marginal at best and have actually resulted in a decrease for many users of the new program. Both sides make valid points.

The good news is that the delivery of benefits has been simplified. Albertans accessing Supports for Independence won't have to go through the patronizing and unnecessary hassle of asking for a laundry allowance, a telephone allowance, children's recreation allowance, and money for transportation. The bad news is that children's recreation allowances were cut by more than half, while

transportation and telephone allowances for some recipients were actually reduced. Supports for Independence aims to enhance recipients' control over budgeting decisions, the resources to be budgeted remain inadequate. Many recipients have no

Welfare Reform Highlights:

- Clients will be classified in one of four categories, based on present circumstances and eligibility for employment in the future. These include:

- 1) employment and training support
- 2) transitional support
- 3) supplement to earnings
- 4) assured support

- The main component of the program is a "standard benefits package" which all recipients receive, regardless of their assigned category. The program aims to reduce requests for "extras", which will now be provided in the package and to reduce unfairness between categories of clients, by treating all clients equally.

- The new program encourages women to be employed by paying the daycare surcharge as soon as they begin working.

- People who are working or attending school are eligible for participation benefits to help cover extra costs such as day care, transportation and work clothing.

- The new standard benefits package includes allowances for food, rent/mortgage, utilities, household supplies, clothing, personal needs, transportation, telephone, laundry, and health care.

(Supports for Independence continued)

more money in their pockets than before the changes.

More resources have been provided to parents who are employed or in training to meet actual child care costs. Previously, the department would pay up to \$40/month towards the cost of subsidized day care, but the remainder had to come from money budgeted for other items, such as food.

Other improvements include an increase in basic food rates, averaging 11%, and some increases in shelter rates. A more critical appraisal, however, shows us that the additional money (an average increase of 5.2%) provided for housing will not even offset the increase of the cost of housing for 1990 (+6.1%), let alone increase over the decade. Shelter rates have not been raised since 1982. These new rates do too little too late. Clothing allowances have not increased since 1983. They

remain at \$23 and \$26 per month for children 0-11 and 12-17 years respectively, and at \$33 per month for adults. The laundry allowance remains at \$11/month for a single person, \$17 for a family of 2-3 and \$22 for a family of 4 or more. This has not changed since 1982.

A debate of the new program's pros and cons will, no doubt, continue for some time. While there are two 'sides to the story', a different question needs to be asked. Is Supports for Independence more equitable, as its proponents suggest, or does the new program simply ensure equality of poverty among those who need assistance?

What is the difference between 'equity' and 'equal poverty'? 'Equity' is a matter of fairness and justice. In this case, it is a relative measure of the distribution of resources among people in a given society, among Albertans. 'Equal poverty', on the other hand, suggests a more standardized but inadequate provision of resources. In this case, the dif-

Welfare Reform Positives:

•A Consolidated Benefits Package

There will be less confusion for case workers and recipients over what benefits are available.

•Employable Single Parents

A single parent can now wait until the youngest child is 2 years old before being considered employable. A single parent was previously expected to work after the youngest child was 4 months old.

•Day Care Surcharge

Surcharges for subsidized day care will now be paid in full if parents are in training, or working. Previously only \$40 was paid by the department.



•Short-term and Long-term Benefits

In terms of rates received, the distinction no longer exists between who is considered to be a short-term client or a long-term client; each person receives the same benefits package.

"There is a need to increase food and shelter benefits to more adequately reflect the current cost of purchasing essential items."

---One Step at a Time
Alberta Family and Social Services Brochure

Questions and Concerns:

•Differential Use of Staff

No assessment can be made at this time in regard to the effects of the differential use of staff model. The question must be raised as to whether a financial benefits worker, a client's key worker, will have the necessary skills to best serve the client's needs.

•Transitional Health Benefits

An announcement was to be made regarding the availability of health benefits for people moving from social assistance into the workforce. Presently the loss of health benefits is a major disincentive to employment. These new incentives have been promised but details have not been released.

(Supports for Independence continued)

ferences among people receiving government support are minimized. Everyone gets roughly the same amount of a pretty paltry pie. An equal piece of this pie for the poor is not the same as equity.

Supports for Independence does standardize benefits paid to Albertans who require assistance. The 'standard benefits package', as it is called, is very much the same for all categories of recipients. Among recipients, then, one might argue that there is greater equity. Such a claim is hardly true when some users of the program will benefit at the expense of others who cannot afford to have their meagre benefits reduced. Furthermore, the incomes of everyone receiving social assistance fall desperately short of the poverty line.

Albertans who access Supports for Independence will now be more equal in their poverty.

One scenario often cited by the Department of

Family and Social Services in defense of the new program illustrates this point well. Recreation allowances for children used to be a lump sum of \$220 per year. Parents could access this benefit, if they were aware of it, to pay for swimming or dance lessons, to buy a bicycle, or to send their children to camp -- among other choices. The new reforms have cut this benefit to \$108 per year per child (paid on a \$9 monthly basis). The department's rationale is this: under the old program less than half of the eligible families were utilizing this benefit. This meant that the opportunities for children in these families were not equitable; they were not fairly distributed. So, reasoned the policymakers, let's take all the money being spent on children's recreation allowance and split it up evenly among all the children in eligible families. The result? Mediocrity for everyone.

There are two basic approaches to defining poverty. One can calculate the amount it costs to en-

Welfare Reform Negatives:

•Shelter

The program states that "there is a need to increase food and shelter benefits to more adequately reflect the current cost of purchasing essential items". The last time shelter benefits were increased was in 1982. The 5% increase does not come close to matching the increase in the cost of housing since this time.



•Recreation Allowance

The recreation allowance for children has been abolished and replaced with "personal needs benefits", included in the standard benefits package. A child now receives \$9/month or \$108/year, less than half of the previous amount of \$220.

•Transportation

A transportation allowance of \$25/month is provided to each adult in the family. Previously, recipients eligible for transportation received enough to purchase a bus pass, which now costs \$40/month. At \$25/month, one adult can take only 10 round trips during off-peak hours, or 8 during peak hours. This amount does not account for any transportation a child may need. Child fares



are \$.75 for children over 5 years of age.

•Telephone

Under Supports for Independence, the telephone allowance is \$11/month Edmonton Telephones charges a minimum of \$14.25/month. For recipients living in Edmonton, this is a decrease in benefits, since the actual cost of basic phone rental was previously covered for those issued the telephone benefit.



•Employable and Unemployable

Although the department says that there is no longer a distinction made between those who are considered employable or unemployable, differences in shelter rates remain. A single employable person receives \$215/month and is not issued a damage deposit, whereas a single unemployable person receives \$300/month and does have access to a damage deposit.

•Non-continuous Benefits

Considerable differences in supplementary benefits, such as furniture and appliances, exist among those categorized under assured support and those considered employable now or in the future.

(Supports for Independence continued)

sure the physical survival of a human being. This is an absolute measure and would include provision of enough food, clothing, and shelter for a person to exist. The other definition of poverty adopts a more relative approach. As mentioned earlier, equity is a measure of what is fair and just in relation to what others around you have and do. It would seem, then, that Supports for Independence would follow this approach, given that it purports to be more equitable than the old social allowance system.

Several questions must be asked. What amount of inequality are we, as a society, willing to tolerate? If people are unable to meet their basic needs, what level of support is fair and acceptable?

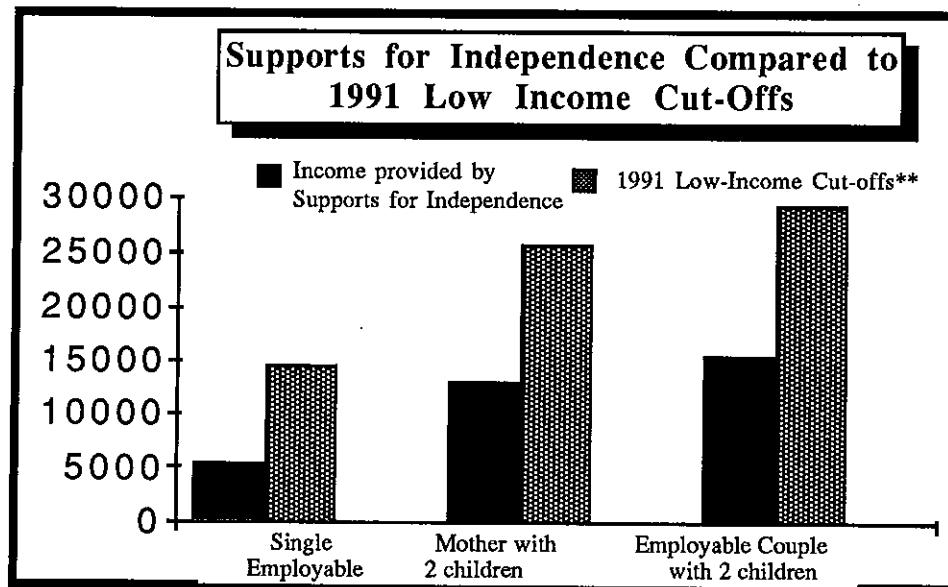
Proponents of Supports for Independence need to assess the real equity of the program and revise benefits where obvious deficiencies exist. The Department of Alberta Family and Social Services

needs to consult the public as to what should be included in the new act, which is scheduled to replace the Social Development Act in 1992. Less stigmatizing, more equitable strategies for delivering income support should be explored. Refundable tax credits provide a starting point for discussion.

Equity is the issue. It is not enough to ensure that Albertans who require assistance are equally poor. The consequences of the latter strategy, if left unchecked, will entrench in our society an underclass of people who will have little chance of escaping the trap of poverty -- ever. ♦

- Jennifer Hyndman
Social Planner, ESPC.

First Reading wishes to acknowledge Maria Mayan's contribution to this article. Maria is a Graduate student with the Department of Family Studies at the University of Alberta.



Notes:

* This income does not count health benefits, such as basic dental care and prescriptions, which are provided in some cases.

** The StatsCan low-income cut-offs for 1991 as estimated by the National Council of Welfare, based on 5.1% inflation. They are calculated for people living in a centre of 500,000 or more.

Blackjack or Bust?

By Jonathan Murphy, Executive Director
Edmonton Social Planning Council

Board, staff and volunteers of the Council emerged tired but triumphant from the count room of the ABS Casino. It was two in the morning, we had counted several hundred thousand dollars in the past two days, but we had a healthy profit to show for our labour. The Edmonton Social Planning Council would be around for at least another year or two, a voice for the voiceless and a catalyst for social change.

Almost every day of the year, the scenario is repeated in casinos and smoky bingo halls across the province. Battered women's shelters, skid road social agencies, and programs for the mentally ill jockey with minor hockey leagues, marching bands and community leagues for the right to take a cut from the gambling addictions of our fellow citizens.

It is always dangerous to criticize 'Middle Alberta'. Nevertheless I find it frustrating that essential social services must compete for funding with recreational societies, whose activities have often struck me as self-interested rather than truly charitable. After all, who benefits from the construction of a new bar and clubhouse for the Rugby Club if not its members? The parents who work casinos and bingos so their children's marching band can go to California are also self-interested, yet their registered charity is given the same fundraising privileges as groups whose selfless devotion to the alleviation of poverty mirrors that of Mother Teresa.

Our concern with fundraising activities of other community organizations might seem churlish and competitive. If so, we plead guilty but with extenuating circumstances. Human service agencies face an apparently insoluble dilemma. Government ser-

vices are being streamlined or eliminated, putting pressure on voluntary organizations to fill the gaps.

At the same time, our funding sources are drying up through funders' cutbacks and increasing competition for a stagnant or declining fundraising dollar.

Large quasi-government organizations including hospitals and post-secondary institutions are launching sophisticated fundraising campaigns in response to their own funding shortfalls. The United Way is facing increasing competition for fundraising within the workplace and did not reach its target last year, resulting in frozen allocations to services agencies. The Provincial Treasurer has just announced that in the next year, \$225 million which had been earmarked for distribution to non-profit groups will instead be plowed back into general revenues.

The Alberta government encourages the trend to human services delivery by community-based voluntary agencies.

Indeed, support for the voluntary sector was a major strand of Caring and Responsibility, the 1988 statement of social policy for Alberta: "government policies and programs should involve, to the extent possible, communities and community agencies in the development, delivery, and evaluation of services to Albertans."

It is easy but morally bankrupt for government to support with empty words the endeavours of our sector. In giving us the task of delivering more and more human services, government cannot wash its hands of responsibility to assure us the operating funds to deliver these services. When services deteriorate or are eliminated because of lack of funds, fault will not lie in our failure to run enough bingos. It will rest squarely with governments whose actions so rarely live up to their fine words. ♦



First Reading is published 6 times a year by the Edmonton Social Planning Council. We invite your comments:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
#41, 9912 106 St.,
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1C5
(403) 423-2031 Fax: (403) 425-6244

Managing Editor: Jonathan Murphy
Editor: Laurie Kolada

Council Updates

Board Elects New Executive

The Board of Directors of the Edmonton Social Planning Council is pleased to announce the election of Alyson Lavers as the new Council President.



Alyson Lavers

Alyson currently works in the social services sector as a consultant and also maintains a private practice. She received a MSW degree at the University of Toronto. Alyson previously served as a Council Board member and is a past Chairperson of the Public Education Committee. Her extensive volunteer experience will certainly be a valuable asset for all Council activities.

The new executive, which was elected on April 23, 1991, also includes Heather Konrad as Vice-President and Elizabeth Massiah as Chairperson of the Public Education Committee.



Michael Phair

As Alyson Lavers begins her first term as Council President, Michael Phair completes his second term. During Michael's tenure as President, the Council's public profile increased as its initiatives and responses to social issues were often in the news.

Michael will remain as a member of the Board of Directors and the Council is sure to benefit by both Alyson and Michael's unwavering commitment to social justice.

The remainder of the Board of Directors includes Iris Sulyma, Pat Hagey, Stephen Crocker, Lilian West, Papiya Das, June Sheppard, Nancy Kotani, Katherine Weaver, Jackie Fiala, Rocky Sinclair and Ken Mackenzie.

Tracking the Trends

Work on the 1991 edition of Tracking the Trends is underway and will focus on new Canadians. Along with the traditional method of focus groups with organizations that serve new Canadians, the Working Group will also consult directly with immigrants, through ESL classes for both teens and adults.

Social Justice/Human Rights Coalition

On April 4, 1991 a meeting took place to review the idea of forming a social justice/human rights coalition in Edmonton. The discussion session was well attended and another meeting has been scheduled for **Thursday, May 16, 1991 at 4:30 p. m.** at the 3rd Floor Boardroom, 9912-106 Street. Anyone interested in attending should contact Pratima Rao at 423-2031.

Life Choices Evaluation

The evaluation of the Life Choices program offered by Big Sisters and Big Brothers is underway. Information is currently being compiled on past participants of the program.

DECCA

The Council is conducting an organizational evaluation of the Development Education and Coordinating Council of Alberta which will be completed in six months.

Council Welcomes Summer Student

Keith Andony, a third year Faculty of Education student at the University of Alberta, began work at the Council on May 6, 1991. Keith will be involved in various program evaluations which comprise some of the Council's projects over the summer. The Council is pleased to have Keith as part of the staff until the end of August. ♦

ALBERTA FACTS

Number 9

Edmonton Social Planning Council

May, 1991

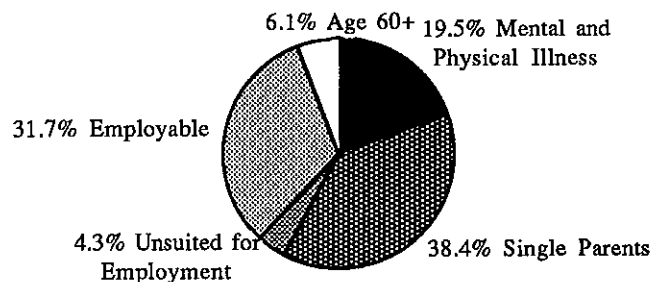
Poverty in our Province: Myths and Realities

None of us likes to admit personal prejudice towards particular groups of people. To be called sexist or racist is an insult, but prejudice towards the poor is also a source of discrimination in our province and it poses a serious social problem. Prejudice is often related to a lack of information or understanding. This fact sheet looks at some of the myths about Albertans who live in poverty. Eliminating misconceptions is the first step to changing negative attitudes towards people who are poor. In Alberta, 6% of the total population presently rely on social assistance. For children, the proportion is 10%. All of these people are 'poor' in terms of their pocketbook. Prejudice towards these Albertans must be addressed. We need to know the facts.

Marina had to keep her three children home from school today. The only thing she had to send with them for lunch was cold macaroni. Instead of embarrassing the kids in front of their peers, she will try to do schoolwork with them at home.

Marina is stressed out. Her children risk falling behind the rest of the class and being accused of 'faking' their sickness, since the same thing happened at the end of last month. What else can she do to hide her poverty?

Percentage Breakdown of People
on Social Assistance



The common myths

MYTH: "People on welfare are too lazy to work."

REALITY: Of the 147,002 people receiving social assistance in Alberta, almost half are children. Approximately 70% of all recipients are single parents, elderly, have a physical or mental illness, or are unsuited for employment for other reasons. Of the people who can work, one-quarter are employed.

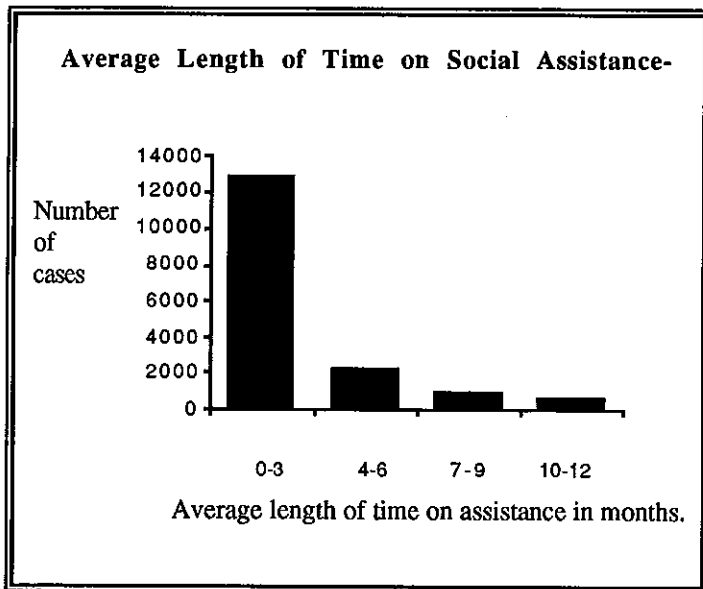
MYTH
REALITY

MYTH: "Many people who receive welfare are cheating the system."

REALITY: It has been estimated that only 4% of all social assistance cases involve fraud. In comparison, the amount of tax fraud in Alberta has been estimated to be approximately 11%.

MYTH: "Once people go on welfare, they stay there."

REALITY: A common belief is that once someone goes on welfare, they make it their "career." Of those considered employable, the vast majority are on assistance for less than 3 months. The following graph depicts the length of time employable people are on social assistance.



Fran and her two kids live in subsidized housing. Although the rent is much more reasonable than a regular apartment, she and her children pay other hidden costs.

At school the kids are teased about living in 'houses built for poor people.' Within the housing units themselves, Fran is aware of the lower status she has as a 'welfare mom'. It seems that working families are better than families which receive social assistance. Even though Fran works part-time while the kids are at school, she wonders if she'll ever be able to escape the costs of being poor.

MYTH: "If people would just get a job, they wouldn't be poor and they would need welfare."

REALITY: Today, about 14% of social assistance cases are families headed by a person who is employed, at or near the minimum wage. Many people are working; they just don't make enough. Working 40 hours a week at the minimum wage of \$4.50/hour yields a gross annual income of \$9,360.

MYTH: "People on welfare have it too good."

REALITY: By law, social assistance payments cover only people's most basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing and medical supplies. For example, a single parent with two children, receiving the maximum shelter and food benefits, is provided \$13,032 in benefits for the year. Federal, non-cash and supplementary benefits are provided in addition to the cash standard benefits income.

MYTH: "Poverty is the result of individual failure; people on social assistance don't try hard enough to find work."

REALITY: As of February 1991, the unemployment rate in Alberta was 8.2%. This number does not count people who would like to work full-time but can only find a part-time job. Even if Albertans do find work, the majority of jobs that are available are those in the service sector, which often pay near the minimum wage. People working full-time at the minimum wage rate still need income security.

MYTH: "Single mothers should not be such a burden to the system."

REALITY: Alberta has the highest divorce rate in Canada and, as a result, single parent families make up the largest percentage of people on assistance. Women who are single parents often live in poverty because they are usually granted custody of their children. Many of these parents have to turn to the government for help when spouses fail to pay adequate child support. As well, in Alberta many women working full-time earn, on average, only two thirds of what men earn.

MYTH: "Government social spending is a waste of money."

REALITY: At any time, there are people in society who cannot work due to disability, or because there simply aren't any jobs which use the skills

they have. Every industrialized country provides a welfare and unemployment system to support those who don't have an employment income. The social costs of not providing these social programs would be unacceptable. Thousands of Albertans, including children, would be made homeless, some would be forced to beg (or do worse) to support their families, while costs in health care and policing would increase.

The social assistance program allows families some financial stability during periods of great stress. It allows people the breathing space to get back on their feet, to learn new skills, and to once again become economically productive during periods of transition. Canada does not operate a "cadillac" welfare system. While government social expenditures are slightly above those of the United States (where many social services are instead paid for by private insurance), they are much lower than in most European countries.

The true measure of poverty

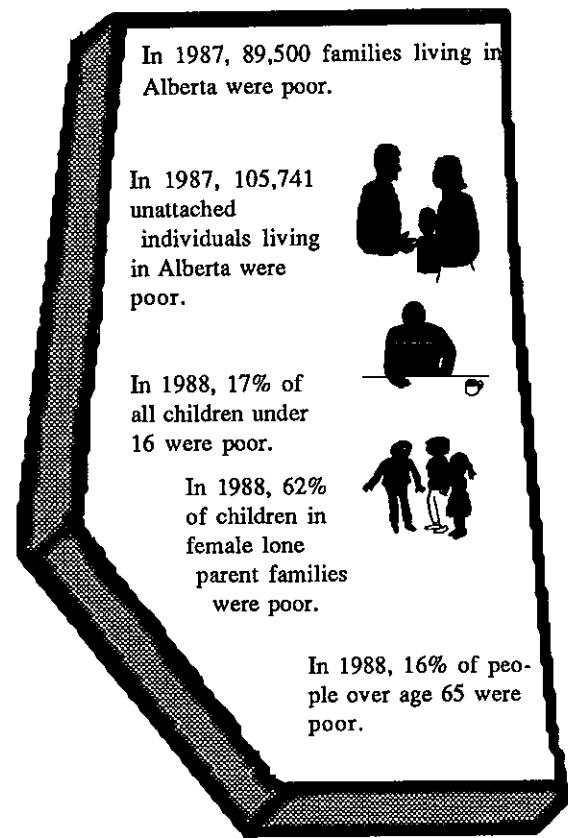
Physical survival is just one challenge of living in poverty. What must also be considered is what it costs a family to be full participating members of a community.

As Peter Townsend, a British expert on poverty-related issues puts it:

"Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong."

Social assistance is not a privilege, but a legal right. Poverty in Alberta is too widespread to be explained as personal failure; poverty is a social problem. No one deserves to be poor.

Poverty in Alberta



Defined by Statistics Canada
Low-Income Cut-offs.

Poverty and the Law

The Social Development Act is the law in Alberta which governs income security policy and practice. It says that every Albertan whose basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, heat among other necessities) are not being met is entitled to government support. A new act which better suits the new welfare reforms and direction of policy is presently being prepared by the Department of Family and Social Services for release in 1992.

The federal legislation governing income security is the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which pays half of the social assistance, costs incurred by the province.

Questions for discussion:

1. It has been said that we depend on poverty too much in our society for it to disappear. A certain level of poverty and unemployment are considered to be quite acceptable and even necessary if the rest of us are to enjoy the standard of living which we do. Do you agree or disagree?
2. Should the purpose of government assistance be to give people enough resources to live on or to help them get out of poverty, so they are, in the long term, less reliant on government support?
3. How can we address negative attitudes towards the poor in Alberta? Some people say that welfare support should not single out people who are poor because this reinforces the problem. One suggestion is that a refundable tax credit be available to all Canadians. Those that don't need it would have most of it taxed back, but there would be no discrimination as to who receives it and who doesn't. What kind of welfare system would provide for basic needs without labelling people 'poor'?

What can you do?

1. Learn more about the issue of poverty and the reality of poverty for people in your community. What are the causes of poverty? What are the symptoms? Challenge your own myths about the poor.
2. Get involved in activities to alleviate poverty in your community: collective kitchens, school snack programs, enriched pre-school education opportunities (ie. Head Start).

Recommended reading:

One Step at a Time: Supports for Independence Department of Alberta Family and Social Services. (Edmonton 1990).

Ross, D. and Shillington, R., The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty, 1989. (Ottawa/Montreal, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1989).

Transitions, The Social Assistance Review Committee report prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1988).

Riches, G., "Poverty and Unemployment: Assumptions, Responsibilities and Choices". Paper presented to the Family Service Association of Edmonton Annual General Meeting, May, 1987.

Not Enough: The Meaning and Measure of Poverty in Canada. Canadian Council on Social Development, (Ottawa/Montreal: CCSD, 1984).

1989 Poverty Lines, (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, April, 1989).

Straight Talk-Questions and Answers about Supports for Independence. Alberta Family and Social Services, 1990.

Welfare Incomes 1989. (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, 1990-91).

Children in Poverty: Toward a Better Future, Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991.

For more information about the Council, its regular publications **First Reading** and **Alberta Facts**, or other publications, please contact:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
#41, 9912-106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 1C5
Telephone: 423-2031
Fax: 425-6244



A United Way Member Agency

This issue of Alberta Facts is funded in part by Alberta Family and Social Services.

ISAC Brief to the House of Commons

On March 20, 1991 the Income Security Action Committee sent two representatives to Ottawa in response to an invitation received from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women.

Jonathan Murphy, Jennifer Hyndman and Joan Linder, a low income parent, met with the Committee and presented a report on child poverty titled "Child Poverty: Whose Baby Is It?"

The presentation focused on the practical ramifications of public policy governing employment and income support. The Committee heard from Joan Linder who described her struggle to survive the repercussions of increasingly more austere social programs. Her stories of raising two daughters on an income far below the poverty line had considerable impact on the Committee members and emphasized the human element of the proceedings.

The potential consequences of Bill C-69 (the "capping of CAP"), were highlighted by the ISAC

"The Canada Assistance Plan is the most important anti-poverty legislation. Although the programs it funds are means-tested, it is one measure that aims to provide a basic income to Canadians in need. However, as part of what is an alarming trend, this too is being dismantled."

-"Child Poverty: Whose Baby Is It?"

delegation.

The plight of 'working poor' families was explored during the meeting and the group challenged the myth that if a person is employed and work hard s/he will not be poor. ISAC also supported the idea of employment policy being directly connected to legislation for income support. One of the ISAC recommendations, included in the brief's guidelines for change, calls for a 'living wage' which, as a minimum standard, refers to the StatsCan low-income cut-off, depending on family size and place of residence.

"Child Poverty: Whose Baby Is It?" is available in the Council library. ♦

On the Subject of First Reading. . .

In an effort to continue to meet the high standard of communication that has been part of **First Reading** since its inception in October, 1982, the Council is requesting input from readers on future editions of the publication.

The Council has tried to ensure that each edition of **FR** includes a combination of indepth analyses of social issues and 'lighter' updates of Council activities. However, due to the choice of style, content and title, the publication sets a certain tone that may not be the Council's original intention.

While the Council is very proud of the quality of **FR**, we are concerned that it may not be reaching a wide enough audience. It is our goal to communicate accurately, clearly, and innovatively. A rejuvenation of **FR** may be necessary in order to achieve this goal.

The following suggestions are a starting point for improvements:

- Create a new name for the publication.
- Make it more aesthetically appealing by including less text and more graphics.
- Use more vibrant colours.
- Generate more response from readers.
- Encourage individuals to submit articles.
- Include a 'Letters to the Editor' section.

*(Editor's Note: We often receive comments about **FR** but rarely receive written responses. Your views are welcomed and encouraged)*

The Council is offering **FR** readers an opportunity to participate in its upcoming transformation. Please send your comments/suggestions to:

Edmonton Social Planning Council
#43, 9912 - 106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 1C5

Att: Laurie Kolada
Communications Coordinator

The Poverty of Stigma

Stigma is "a mark of shame" or "a stain on a person's good reputation". Being 'poor' has long been and remains a pervasive source of stigma, and subsequent discrimination.

New changes in Alberta's 'welfare' system need to be scrutinized with respect to the 'discourse of poverty'. Words shape our perceptions of the world. Labels carry certain judgements. Degrees of goodness and badness are implicit in the words used to refer to people who are poor.

The name of the income security system in the province changed from Social Allowance to Supports for Independence in February of 1991. This is a small but progressive step towards changing negative attitudes of the poor in the province. Changing words may seem trivial, even superfluous, but it can make a difference. The prejudice towards Albertans who rely on government assistance is pervasive.

Change must occur on many levels. To address poverty, policy and legislative reform is critical. Eliminating stigma is also essential as part of a strategy to change the views people have towards low-income Albertans. These predominantly negative views profoundly affect how people living on minimal incomes are treated and, in turn, how they feel about themselves.

Change must occur on many levels. To address poverty, policy and legislative reform is critical. Eliminating stigma is also essential as part of a strategy to change the views people have towards low-income Albertans.

Prejudice towards the poor is prevalent. People receiving social assistance are often accused of fraudulent behavior, even though the incidence of fraud in the Alberta system has been assessed at less than 4% of all cases. Compared to the 25% of Canadians Revenue Canada estimates evade paying taxes, 4% is a comforting figure.

Those who receive government support are often depicted as lazy, free-loading people who are morally tainted. This belief would be worrisome if it indeed described the majority of Albertans receiving assistance, but it does not. In Edmonton in December, 1989, the largest category of recipients was 'single parent families'. Of course, the major-

ity of people in this category are children.

The reforms recently introduced by Family and Social Services Minister, John Oldring, aim to counter the debilitating and unproductive ties of welfare dependence. Whether these reforms are successful remains to be seen. However, the proposed program even includes the word 'independence', in an effort to change the thinking of the public -- both recipients and Albertans at large-- and to focus programs and policies in a new direction.

In Alberta, social allowance policy during the recession of the early 1980s took an abrupt turn towards fiscal austerity and resulted in increased financial vulnerability for people receiving assistance. As unemployment soared, more and more families found themselves relying on welfare at considerable cost to the public purse. Alberta's minimum wage, among the lowest in the country throughout the decade, meant that even Albertans who worked full-time required a government supplement just to make ends meet. Caseloads increased and over the course of the decade the number of Albertans who required social allowance more than doubled.

The Deserving and the Undeserving Poor

A distinction that has always been made, though often covertly, is between the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor'. Historically, children and widows have been the deserving poor, while single, unemployed men have retained the label of the undeserving poor.

Even with the new reforms, single people face lower shelter rates than other single people who cannot work for 'legitimate' reasons (i.e. health or disability). The reforms introduced state that the employable/unemployable distinction has been eliminated, although discrimination in shelter rates still exists. A single person who can work will be, as of February 1, 1991, entitled to \$215/month whereas a single person who is unable to work will receive \$300/month. The only real change is the consolidation of short term and long term shelter rates, so that 'employables' in both of these previous categories now receive the same, higher rate (\$215 as compared to \$180 per month). Damage deposits are still unavailable to single 'employables' who seek accommodation.

This negative view towards single people, particularly men, is difficult to understand. It is, per-

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haps, a combination of sexism and 'poverty-ism', the latter being a reference to prejudice and discrimination towards people who are poor.

What rationale underlies this attitude? Is the prevailing sentiment that men are traditionally breadwinners, therefore, unemployed men are abdicating their responsibilities when they fail to find a job? If so, the implication is that unemployed men are not only economically poor but also inferior in a moral sense. This myopic assessment of single people who receive government assistance requires a second look. No one factor is responsible for unemployment. Policies, economic indicators, labour force trends, and people -- both prospective employers and employees-- are intimately interdependent.

Stigmatized Services

Generally speaking, subsidized housing and social services are stigmatized whereas health and education are not. This generalization skims over the complexity and diversity of policy and program delivery in these areas, but recognizes that a distinction is made between services which are means-tested and those which are not. Health and education in Canada are universal entitlements. Social assistance, to the contrary, is paid not by right but by need. Consequently, it is less acceptable. This kind of selectivity identifies a dependent group; it separates the poor from the rest of society and makes them aware of that separation. And dependency, it would seem, is only legitimate where there has been a contribution, either in the past (as in the case of pensioners) or in the future (as with students).

In the case of people who don't have sufficient resources to meet their basic needs, they must accept the labels attached to welfare to claim the service. The focus of debate on welfare policy most often revolves around 'universality' versus 'selectivity', the latter approach invoking the greatest degree of stigma on recipients.

Selectivity

"The idea of poverty itself is stigmatising." No one wants to be called poor; the label imputes a kind of moral judgement. To have a lack of money and to be 'poor' can be distinguished. The former is an objective fact whereas the latter is a subjective estimation. People who are 'poor' lack power in many public spheres. They have few resources to allocate, and thus fewer choices to make. In the age of consumerism, consumer boy-

cotts, and consumer rights, a person who is not free to spend is not really a full member of society. Moreover, "powerlessness is treated with contempt."

Not all stigmatized people have the same social status. Seniors and disabled people enjoy a higher status than unemployed men or unmarried mothers. For students, short term poverty is considered a natural sacrifice, even a virtue. Even so, all of these groups -- and especially the 'poor' who rely on welfare support-- share an inferior position in relation to the rest of society. Being labelled 'poor' is as much an obstacle to escaping poverty as the constraints posed by a low income. The stigma of poverty weighs heavily on low income families who are already more susceptible to poor health, experience more stress and uncertainty, and have fewer opportunities.

Attitudes are more difficult to change. Several options exist, although the efficacy of some is dubious. To overhaul social norms in an effort to eliminate prejudice towards the poor is unlikely. Education to this effect has also proven to have limited effectiveness. Integration involving equal-status contact between groups is one way of breaking down some of the stereotypical discrimination imposed on stigmatized segments of the population. And recent history attests to the successful organized lobbying by stigmatized groups themselves.

Ultimately, social policy pertaining to welfare provision must become universal. Selective, means-tested programs will always stigmatize and do disservice to those they aim to assist. The goal of welfare provision is to provide a safety net. To do this without stigma, without suggesting that people in need are somehow inferior, is critical.

In Alberta, welfare provision is a stigmatized service because it remains means-tested. The label has changed now; the policy aims to be less patronizing. But given the fact that the poor are selectively served, will this be enough to eradicate the stigma and pervasive prejudice towards those who live in poverty?

Think about it: what images does 'welfare' conjure up in your mind? ♦

-Jennifer Hyndman, Social Planner, ESPC

Sources:

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Child Welfare: Struggling to Protect the Innocent

In Alberta there is a formal agency that is responsible for providing protection services to children. This bureaucracy is called Child Welfare and it is an essential part of Alberta Family and Social Services.

The child welfare system is plagued with problems. The frustration of unrealistic caseload sized and worker shortages felt by social workers and supervisors working on the front lines culminated in a strike in May, 1990. Today, the government continues to work toward caseload standards that are reasonable with some success, but budget cuts and a lack of resources for clients and workers in many areas continue to plague the department.

Protecting Children

Contradictory to many people's belief, child welfare workers are not in the business of crashing through 'honest' and 'upstanding' citizens' doors at 2:30 in the morning to apprehend their children because of some third party accusation. There are thousands of children who need protection and, though the system is not perfect, it is a vital service.

Quite simply, some children would not survive without being removed from their home, and many would not have a fair chance at a decent life. Too many children believe misery, hurt, guilt, and anger is the best life gets. Some believe adults have the right to use them sexually. Many believe problems are solved through violence and intimidation. An alarming number will never learn to trust, to love, or to be loved. Far too many children think they are worthless and deserve their pain.

A Victim Speaks

A child who utters a short sentence such as "my daddy touched my private parts" cannot imagine the events which are then set in motion. In a short time they meet with at least one social worker. The police are often brought in for further interviews, then the child may be referred to a play therapist or psychologist. Months down the road the child could be forced to relive the experience in front of a judge and the perpetrator while being discredited quite easily by a defense lawyer. The court have no set policy on whether to allow videotaped disclosures as evidence, opening the possibility of

further trauma for the child.

Most children and youths experience enormous difficulty when they enter the child welfare system.

While some have the inner strength to pick up the pieces and are able to take advantage of a chance at a new start, many others become government wards and go through what they see as an unsympathetic bureaucracy where nobody cares. It is a system where the victim or disadvantaged child is forced to make changes, in that they, rather than the abuser or perpetrator, are removed from their home and placed in a foster home or group home filled with strangers. They are expected to immediately conform to a new way of life, often without knowing what their immediate futures hold.

Foster Care

The child welfare system also fails children who are shuffled in and out of foster homes and group

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homes. Some children who are taken into care find themselves placed in hotel rooms with 24 hour youth workers because there are no open beds within the system. Shortage of placements is a problem as old as child welfare itself, but little is done to improve the situation. This can lead to disastrous results as marginal homes get approved to help cope with the shortage.

Parents often find themselves at the mercy of the bureaucracy. Even with problems that may necessitate removal of a child(ren), there is rarely a more devastating event. There is embarrassment, anger, guilt, and often a sense of failure when facing the judge and listening to the social worker tell the court that they, as parents, have failed to provide a safe environment for their child. In many cases,

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the client may have seen the social worker as a resource to help improve their situation, but in court the trust that took time to develop is quickly destroyed, leaving the parent and/or child feeling isolated.

Judicial Responsibility

The judiciary continues to send messages to the public that minimize the devastation caused by the crime of child sexual abuse. A Vancouver judge named Peter van der Hoop gave a 33 year old man a suspended sentence for touching a 3 year old girl for sexual purposes and stated that the child was "sexually aggressive." In a separate case another judge sentenced a father to 90 days in jail after this "upstanding member of his community" sexually abused his two daughters more than 200 times over many years. The man held a senior civil servant position during and after the time he terrorized his daughters and the courts found it appropriate to let him serve his sentence on weekends so as not to jeopardize his job.

The justice system has not only failed victims of sexual abuse, but also those of physical abuse. Judge W. M. Mustard concluded that a step-father was justified in beating his child for not making an effort to secure pledges for a ringette skate-athon, for making ski plans, and for "scowling" at her step-father. He reportedly shoved his daughter to the floor, kicked her, and banged her head into a door.

Can one conclude that society is becoming a more dangerous place for children? This question is hard to answer. There is more coverage of incest, non-familial sexual abuse, physical abuse and domestic violence, emotional abuse, neglect, poverty, and substance abuse in the media. However, with the possible exception of substance abuse, the fact that these issues are in the news does not necessarily mean an increase in occurrence. Maybe society is slowly realizing that such massive problems are not going to be dealt with by ignoring them.

A Work in Progress

Obviously social workers are trying to help people improve their clients' lives or, better yet, empower them to help themselves. Unfortunately, the system works on an retro-active basis. Preventative work is often seen as expensive and results are difficult to measure. Child welfare continues

to work to protect children and to make as many lives as possible more tolerable and safe. It definitely needs to be refined and improved and this should involve not only management, but front line workers and supervisors, community resources as well as parents and children who have been or currently are, involved with the system.

The chronic shortage of foster homes continues. As well, the Child Welfare Consultants Unit, made up of highly skilled and knowledgeable workers, to whom case managers were able to turn to when dealing with particularly difficult cases,

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was significantly cutback. The ongoing struggle by management to force the unpredictable human services field into a business management model acts to increase the anxiety of workers in an already stressful job.

A considerable amount of work has yet to be done to develop a trust between the workers and management. This will inevitably help improve the service delivery to parents and, of course, children.

Our society would like to believe there is such a thing as equal opportunity. It does not exist for many children. A child living in poverty because his/her parents' welfare does not meet the family's basic needs; a child living in the suburbs who is beaten for not getting honours in school; or an upper-class child who is too scared to tell anybody his/her father molests them for fear of ruining the reputation of their parent; will not share the same opportunities as many other children who do not live in fear of such experiences. The Child Welfare Department, for all its imperfections, at least attempts to correct some of these injustices by providing protection to those children whose parents cannot or do not provide this basic right. ♦

-Peter Smyth

Peter has worked as a Social Worker for the past 2 years and is a graduate of the BSW program at the University of Calgary, Edmonton Division.

To:

From: Edmonton Social Planning Council
#41, 9912-106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 1C5
Phone: (423-2031) Fax: 425-6244

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Council Briefs

ISAC Sub-committee Update

The Income Security Action Committee's sub-committee on the 'Working Poor' is wrapping up its study of employed, low-income families in Edmonton. Funded by the United Way of Edmonton and administered by the Family Services Association of Edmonton, the final report will be released this summer.

Community Advocates Network

Membership in the Community Advocates Network (CAN) continues to increase. On May 28th, Con Hnatiuk, Assistant Deputy Minister of Alberta Family and Social Services, will attend and hear feedback on the experience of the new social assistance reforms from community advocates.

Membership Application

Membership Categories:

Individual	\$25.00
Family	\$35.00
Associate*	\$20.00
Organization	\$45.00
Limited Income	\$ 5.00

* Associate members don't have a vote or receive a discount on publications.

As a member you benefit by receiving:

- First Reading (a bi-monthly newsletter);
- Alberta Facts (a periodic fact sheet on poverty);
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- a vote at the Annual General Meeting;
- a 15% discount on all publications distributed by the Council.

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Social issues of interest

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#41, 9912 - 106 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1C5

Telephone: 423-2031 Fax: 425-6244



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