

Women's Centre of Calgary Calgary Municipal Poverty Reduction Strategy: A Gendered Perspective

Seven key recommendations have been identified by the Women's Centre in order to ensure that a municipal poverty reduction plan has the components that are essential to assist women in overcoming the impacts of poverty.

I. Ensure access to safe and affordable housing.

Access to safe and affordable housing is a major issue for many women in Calgary. Statistics show that single-parent mothers are 7 times more likely to be below the Statistics Canada Low-Income-Cut-Offs than double-parent homes. Although our city has made great strides in increasing the number of units and funding available for affordable housing there still remain many women in desperate need.

The following have been identified as vital areas for improvement:

1. Enforce inclusionary zoning with by-laws, legalize secondary suites, stop condominium conversions and increase incentives (tax breaks) for builders and landlords for creating low-income housing in every complex. Additionally, increase alternative means of attaining affordable housing such as improved funding for rent supplements (in non-Calgary Housing Company units). Women that live in low-income housing face oppression and stigma for living in "welfare housing". Affordable housing units in every complex would allow them to blend into market rate housing, thereby avoiding the "Not In My Backyard" attitude which is often associated with low-income housing projects.
2. Make the Calgary Housing Application more accessible and offer alternative locations and methods for submission (mail, fax or online). Currently there are approximately 2, 100 households on the Calgary Housing Company waiting list for affordable housing, some of whom have to wait as long as two years for a unit.
3. Revise criteria for affordable housing programs and definitions of low-income and affordable housing by increasing eligibility. There has been an increase in the number of the "working poor". This particular group works full time but does not qualify for social assistance programs.
4. Increase health and safety standards for affordable housing.
5. Simplify the application process by providing access to support workers that are trained to assist with housing applications, search for affordable housing alternatives in the private housing market and play an advocacy role by assisting with appeals, referrals and education regarding landlord and tenant rights.

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II. Ensure access to safe and affordable transportation.

Affordable, accessible and convenient public transportation is vital to low-income women living in Calgary. It supports women and their families to participate in employment, education, health care and a number of other vital activities that are part of community life. It is also critical for the full citizenship of people who live on a low income in Calgary.

The following have been identified by Calgarian women living in poverty as vital areas for improvement:

1. Decrease the cost of public transit. While the low-income transit pass has vastly improved access to public transit systems in the City, it is still unaffordable for many people living on a low-income. Our preference would be for free public transit for all citizens. Given that may be an insurmountable challenge (but a good future goal), we need to look at ways to keep the pass as low cost as possible, especially for those on the lowest end of the income scale. Also, low-income passes need to be available to children. It makes little sense to reduce transit costs for low-income parents but not for their children. A low-priced annual pass for all family members would be preferable.
2. Increase time limits on tickets from 90 minutes to 3 hours. There are a number of people who live in poverty who still use single tickets. A 90-minute time limit on the single-use ticket can make it almost impossible to complete a "single trip", especially for people who live on the outskirts of the city or in underserved areas (to reduce rent costs). For example, one woman from the Centre tells of having to take two buses after work to pick up her daughter from the daycare centre and then a third bus for them to go home. The two busses and the stop to pick up her child (who may not be immediately ready to go) cannot be completed in the 90-minute time limit. We support the recommendation in the Poverty Talks report to increase the ticket use time to 3 hours.
3. Increase service to industrial and outlying sectors. Many people on a low-income live in the outskirts of the city, especially on the east side. They may also live within industrial sectors. These areas often have limited service in off-peak hours and on weekends; times when many people who live in poverty work and/or participate in activities in the community. There is also very limited service on the East corridor (NE-SE), which makes it difficult to get from the NE to the SE industrial sector (where many people are employed). The City needs to look at ways to improve this service
4. Increase security and ensure accessible transit. Many women feel unsafe on public transit, especially at the downtown C-Train stations. Also, fully accessible transit benefits people with disabilities but also parents pushing strollers and many others. Accessibility includes having sidewalks in all transit areas, having curb cuts in the sidewalk and having buses with lifts serving a larger portion of the city.

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III. Extend and improve before/after school programs.

The City of Calgary is proud to take a leadership role as one of the first municipalities in Canada to approach the “critical hours” of 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. from a city-wide perspective with the Calgary AfterSchool Program. The program offers a range of after school activities for children aged 6-16 in Calgary at a variety of locations. Calgary's rate of two parent working families with children between the ages of 6-16 is higher than the national average. Working women benefit from the Calgary AfterSchool Program because it enables them to work longer hours while ensuring that their kids are involved in safe activities.

The Calgary AfterSchool Program equalizes access to recreational programs for Calgary families. The following recommendations are being proposed to extend the scope further:

1. Increase current levels of funding and number of spaces in programs for children and youth in Calgary. 53, 000 children under the age of 18 years in Alberta lived in poverty, using the Low-Income Cut-Off (After-Tax) definition of low-income.
2. Increase spaces and scope of the Calgary AfterSchool Program to include before school programs.
3. Make more programming available and provide incentives for more organizations to provide free, rather than subsidized programming.
4. Make registration accessible and ensure drop-in programs are available for families with exceptional challenges, such as lack of transportation and having children with special needs.
5. Make program evaluation data available to verify the programs are valued and widely utilized. Program evaluation data can inform program development and encourage sustainability.

IV. Ensure support for increased and sustainable Family & Community Support Services (FCSS) funding.

Until poverty has been eliminated, increased funding for city services funded by FCSS is absolutely critical. FCSS funded services strive toward increasing community capacity and building individual social capital. The result of this is a strong and maintained social infrastructure, a critical climate in which to begin eliminating poverty.

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Currently, FCSS funded services struggle to operate at status-quo with minimal capacity for growth. Although the city was hit by the recession that resulted in increased use of FCSS funded services, FCSS funding per Albertan has declined since 2002.

Increased and sustainable support for FCSS funded services would help to ensure that women and families who are struggling with poverty and other social issues have services to turn to which can help mitigate the impact of those issues.

Please see the *2010 Report on Calgary's FCSS Programs* for more information.

V. Fully implement the Fair Calgary Policy.

Given that women who use the Women's Centre also use many of the services of the City of Calgary, in particular the low-income subsidy programs, it is imperative that these programs and services are easy to access, affordable and available to them. Fully implementing the Fair Calgary Policy would help to ensure equal access to resources for women in Calgary.

Specific recommendations outlined in the Fair Calgary Policy that should be implemented include:

1. Implement one common eligibility requirement for all low-income programs i.e., all residents in Calgary, earning LICO, would be eligible for all subsidy programs. For example, in all City offered subsidy programs the income requirement is set at LICO, except the Low-Income Bus pass which is set at only 75% of LICO. Setting LICO as the common income requirement would greatly improve access to the Low-Income Bus Pass.
2. Application processes should be the same regardless of program. For example, if a person can access the fee-assistance program at any recreation facility, other programs should also be available. This means that people would have more locations to purchase the low-income bus pass, increasing access to it, as well as the overall cost of administering the program to the City.
3. Subsidies should become income based, not age based.
4. Efforts to accommodate those with special needs or cultural considerations have to be greatly increased.

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VI. Develop a municipal plan to reduce poverty that reflects the realities of women.

Research indicates that a widely accepted benchmark of 30% of membership is necessary in order for diverse voices to make a difference within a group; political or otherwise. When it comes to decision making, women are more likely than men to consider the entire community over specific interest groups and are also more likely to consider poverty as a very important issue. Although 30% is critical, 50% of female members on City committees would be considered fair and equitable.

In order to accurately reflect the issues facing women living in poverty, the membership of any poverty reduction initiatives set forth by the municipality should be:

1. Comprised of both genders equally and equitably.
2. Comprised of a fair representation of Calgary's cultural and economic diversity.

Sustainable structural changes resulting in a decrease of women and children experiencing poverty are a likely result of including the membership of women and women experiencing poverty in poverty reduction initiatives.

VII. Increase intergovernmental advocacy on the issue of poverty.

Given that all levels of government have a role in poverty reduction, we fully support the concept of all levels of government working together to address poverty issues. Additionally, we feel that non-governmental and community organizations should be active partners in finding solutions to poverty in our community.

The municipality of Calgary has recently joined as a coalition member on the Inner-City Forum on Social Policy; An Alberta Poverty Reduction Plan Initiative. This is a great first step towards intergovernmental advocacy.

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