



Towards a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Central Okanagan Children and Families

Phase 1 Report

If poverty is a disease that infects the entire community... then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community.

~Barack Obama

Acknowledgements

The Central Okanagan Early Years Partnership would like to acknowledge the traditional territory of the Okanagan People, on whose traditional lands we have the privilege of living, working and playing.

We wish to thank all of you who have taken part in the steps taken to date and hope that you will join us as we continue to work with all community sectors to move toward a Poverty Reduction Plan for Central Okanagan Children and Families.



United Way Success By 6® Partners

Introduction

While the Central Okanagan is a vibrant and prosperous community, it is also increasingly a community where growing disparity and inequity will challenge our long-term success. Child and family poverty is a reality that continues to be concentrated in specific groups and neighbourhoods. There is a growing consensus across all sectors that family poverty is hurting our communities, economy, and our pride. We all aspire to building a community where everyone is included and has an opportunity to succeed.

The Central Okanagan has a child poverty rate of 18%¹, however, families with young children that struggle with issues related to poverty are not highly visible within our community.

Poverty is toxic to children's health and development. From poor nutrition to family stress to exclusion from social participation, there are many ways poverty is known to raise the risk of lifelong ill effects on health and reduce opportunities for children and youth to realize their full potential². However, access to quality early years programs and child care has been shown to provide mitigating effects: reducing the impact of family stress and providing important linkages to early identification, intervention and prevention services.

Background

As guided by community partners, the Central Okanagan Early Years Partnership Strategic Plan includes the strategic priority to *Increase Awareness of Child Poverty and its Effects*. Thus, in collaboration with all interested community sectors, the Central Okanagan Early Years Partnership is prepared to focus on the unique needs and experiences of young children and families affected by poverty in the Central Okanagan by facilitating a community driven child and family poverty reduction strategy.

To date, the Central Okanagan Early Years Partnership has taken the following steps to support the development of a child and family poverty reduction strategy for the Central Okanagan:

- November 2015

Early Years Network Gathering included a speaker panel whose members spoke to their experience around influencing policy to benefit families. Child and family poverty and a local poverty reduction strategy was identified by participants as the area needing the most advocacy.

- April 2016

Adrienne Montani (First Call) and Trish Garner (BC Poverty Reduction Coalition) spoke to our network about the unique needs and experiences of young children and families affected by poverty and how to move toward solutions. At this event 60 participants signed up to attend a Community Conversation to further discuss local ideas. More information can be found here - <http://catchcoalition.ca/Conversation-on-Child-and-Family-Poverty>

¹ 2015 BC Child Poverty Report Card

² First Call BC, 2015

Summary of Community Conversation

On June 6th, 2016, 55 community stakeholders came together in a conversation cafe style event. Facilitators and scribes were assigned to five tables on the topics of: Accessibility of Living Wage, Accessibility of Safe and Affordable Housing, Accessibility of Child Care and Early Development, Accessibility of Food Security and Accessibility of Health Services. The following questions were used to stimulate discussion:

- What are you seeing/hearing about accessibility of this topic?
- What do we need more of/to do differently to develop more accessibility?
- Who else needs to be part of creating solutions/opportunities for accessibility?

To view the raw data of participant input visit: <http://catchcoalition.ca/Conversation-on-Child-and-Family-Poverty>

Despite the rich fabric of existing programs, supports, and services in the city, it's clear that existing efforts can be strengthened and enhanced, and that there is also a need for additional programs, supports as well as stronger collaboration between services to help people move out of poverty.

Six themes emerged from the conversations: Livable income and employment opportunities, safe and affordable housing, safe and affordable child care, transportation, food security and access to services and supports.

1. Livable Income and Employment Opportunities

Challenges

Participants discussed the high cost of living in the Central Okanagan and the inadequacy of social assistance and employment insurance to support families. Conversations included what some parents are doing to have enough income, including having one parent working out of town or out of province, parents working multiple jobs, or taking precarious or dangerous jobs or working in unsafe working environments.

Ideas for Solutions

Solutions focused on both reducing living expenses and increasing income.

Primary areas discussed for reducing expenses were housing, such as building additional low-income housing units and child care, for example implementing a \$15/day child care plan. As well, financial literacy initiatives and asset building programs were seen as opportunities to support families. The areas explored for increasing income included: increasing social assistance rates, implementing a guaranteed annual income, increasing the minimum wage rate, encouraging and recognizing living wage employers, increasing child tax benefits to families, as well as advocating for equitable pay for women in the workforce. Participants also discussed the value of empowering people through increasing access to higher education and job training models.

Concepts Across Themes

Participants saw value in the development of a local poverty reduction plan for families in the Central Okanagan and encouraged the plan to include opportunities to engage with all levels of government - Federal, Provincial, and Civic.

2. Safe and Affordable Housing

Challenges

Participants told us the cost of housing in the Central Okanagan is a major factor that contributes to the high cost of living and keeps home ownership beyond the reach of lower income families. The length of time that is needed to save for a down payment has increased to the point that parents are asking whether home ownership will ever be a reasonable goal to aspire to. High rent, along with associated expenses with moving means that families are juggling paying for their basic needs.

While the population is increasing, individuals understood that the housing stock that is available for families is greatly limited, as generally the number of rental units available is very low (.7%). Finding affordable rental units is compounded by the limited number of units that have enough bedrooms to accommodate a family³. Discussions included the variety of kinds of housing that is unsuitable or unavailable for families including complexes for residents 55+, strata units that discourage rentals, as well as an increasing transition of rentals to vacation rentals (such as Airbnb or Vacation Rentals by Owner - VRBO).

Participants discussed that families with young children face great discrimination as they seek of places to rent. Low standards for subsidized housing and fears of eviction are of great concern to families, and thus families are living in unsafe or overcrowded conditions. People are choosing to stay in unsafe housing situations due to the fear of homelessness. For some groups such as single-parents, discrimination can lead to a lack of housing options which contributes to being unable to leave abusive or violent situations. It was mentioned that there are no emergency housing options for families.

Concepts Across Themes

Many participants suggested that we look to other communities and their ideas and programs for possible solutions and processes for engaging broad community in solution finding. Participants acknowledged the work that has taken place in other large cities across Canada and the United States to begin to provide adequate, safe, and affordable housing.

Ideas for Solutions

Safe housing for families was seen as being a priority that can be achieved through a better connected community and policies that ensure safe spaces for children to play near their homes. Diverse options and creative partnerships were suggested to help families with affordable housing options. For example, increasing rent-to-own opportunities, rental freezes, and co-op or co-housing options. Recommended policy changes to be implemented included tax breaks and incentives for homeowners to encourage the creation of affordable housing including suites or carriage homes that would be suitable for families. Additional advocacy and information around renters rights were suggested as families struggle to navigate through the complex system.

³https://www.kelownanow.com/watercooler/news/news/Kelowna/16/08/25/Vacancy_rate_for_family_homes_essentially_zero_in_Kelowna/

3. Safe and Affordable Child Care

Challenges

Participants identified that affordable, accessible, and quality child care is of crucial importance for parents to be able to find and keep employment. Individuals shared concerns over the lack of quality child care spaces as well as the lack of spaces for children requiring supported child development and parents who work shift-work or untraditional hours. It was acknowledged that child care providers struggle to attract and retain qualified employees and this can be a barrier to relationship building with families, can reduce child care quality, and can be costly for child care centres.

Ideas for Solutions

Many participants discussed the need for an increase in public and government understanding of the importance and value of child care and child care providers. Government investment in child care was frequently noted and examples given were the \$15/day child care plan and increasing daycare cost subsidies. Policies related to extending parental leave, flexible work hours, and providing parents with the option to stay home while children are young were noted as important. Also mentioned was the creation of daycare options in the public school system, onsite daycare for large employers, and programming that reflects the reality of shift work. Reducing silos and additional collaboration between programs was brought forward as a way to reduce barriers that parents face as they juggle demands.

Concepts Across Themes
Conversations reflected the increased stress that families in poverty experience as they cope with burdens on their finances and time and how this can affect parents’ physical health, mental health, and substance use and abuse.

4. Transportation

Challenges

The need for an affordable, accessible, and reliable transit system that reflects the large demographic nature of our community was frequently mentioned. Participants noted that service is very limited in rural areas making it difficult and time consuming to transport food home, as well as limiting access to all services and programs within the region.

Conversations closely linked housing with transportation, as housing costs decrease further from city centres, the increase in transportation costs can negate any savings, including school bussing costs. Discussion surmised that the lack of affordable and appropriate transportation encourages car ownership in the Central Okanagan.

Ideas for Solutions

Suggestions to support transportation for families included a public transit system with affordable fares and low income bus passes along with increased access in rural areas. Transportation partnerships with community programs were also seen as an idea that could ease the struggle for families when transporting food or other goods home.

Concepts Across Themes
Across conversations many participants suggested that creating a sense of community through well-connected neighbourhoods and opportunities for connection between individuals and families to develop strong relationships and informal support networks.

5. Food Security

Challenges

Individuals recognized the main barrier to healthy nutritious food for families is affordability. Many conversations also centered around limited access and land-use available for families to grow their own gardens, whether that was due to limited community gardens, or no space for their own garden at a rental or within a strata unit.

Concepts Across Themes

Through a variety of conversations, participants noted the importance of early intervention especially for young children. They acknowledged the brain development that takes place in the early years and how a quality, caring, healthy environment can provide all children with a healthy start and better long term health and social outcomes.

Ideas for Solutions

Solutions centered on increasing access to adequate healthy food for families, for example having edible landscaping around the city. As well, increasing neighbourhood or community gardens which may require new or changed policies around vacant or shared lot usage or providing tax incentives for donating land for food production.

Individuals saw the importance and need for programs such as emergency food hampers and low-cost healthy food boxes for pre/postnatal women and young children. They also had a desire to empower families through opportunities to increase education about healthy and thrifty food preparation. Examples of opportunities such as food sharing and recipe sharing programs, and community kitchens to take advantage of bulk buys and learn new skills were also recommended.

6. Access to Services and Support

Challenges

Participants acknowledged a lack of awareness by families of what services exist and how to access the services. Individuals discussed the disjointed patchwork of services that work on the symptoms of the problems and the complexity of the system which is difficult to navigate and intimidating for families. Participants discussed examples of some of the policies that create additional time and costs for families to be able to apply or access supports.

Ideas for Solutions

Recommendations for an education and awareness campaign about what services can be accessed as well as improvement of a central database of services. It was also acknowledged that service professionals must be more aware of literacy barriers and online access may be reduced for those living in poverty. Participants recommended having more advocates and navigators for those needing support and well as supporting families by bringing services to agencies and programs that provide housing and places families already gather. People saw value in convening a cross-sectoral collaboration with solution-based thinking and planning to provide opportunities to communicate between and across agencies that provide services and supports to families.

Concepts Across Themes

Amongst conversations, the stigma that families face when accessing services arose. Participants mentioned that families fear the consequences that can come from reaching out for help. There was also dialogue about the stigma that services perpetuate. Additional education for service providers may be helpful to decrease the stigma for those who may feel discriminated.

Next Steps

The Central Okanagan Early Years Partnership is planning a Community Gathering in November 2016. All community stakeholders will be encouraged to join us to explore the findings in this summary and possible next steps that may include:

- Opportunities to talk to parents about their experiences with poverty
- Choosing strategic priorities from solutions identified by participants during the Community Conversation
- Exploring poverty reduction strategy work in similar communities
- Opportunities for collaborative action for the upcoming Provincial election

Many ideas surfaced during the Community Conversation on Child and Family Poverty in the Central Okanagan. Now it's time to take the next step – convening all community sectors and delving deeper into these issues and ideas to create the most effective options for actions. Together, we can take action for building a more inclusive, healthy and vibrant community for families and children.

Please contact Myrna Kalmakoff at myrna@catchcoalition.ca or Amanda Turner at Amanda@unitedwaycso.com with any questions or suggestions.

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