

First Circle - Uniting for Children

The **OTHER** Children's Forum Report
**Poverty & Physical Needs:
The Missing Action Steps**

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'edmspc' written in a cursive, handwritten style. The letters are connected and fluid, with a long tail on the 'c'.

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Foreword

The Alberta Children's Forum took place in Edmonton, October 5-6, 1999. Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) Executive Director Brian Bechtel saw the forum as an opportunity to work together for Alberta children and therefore accepted the invitation to sit on the forum steering committee.

From the start, the Government of Alberta promised the forum would result in "action steps with measurable outcomes and results to improve the lives of children and families."

The ESPC worked with the steering committee to plan the forum, believing that government promise of action for children. But in the end, the final report ignored earlier promises of action, measurable outcomes and results. The final report gives us 87 pages with 145 recommendations. The report fails to provide any core recommendations or action steps to lead us into a better future.

The ESPC, along with hundreds of delegates, invested time and resources to improve the well-being of children and families and ensure future programs and policies meet children's basic needs. We worked with the Government of Alberta, believing the final report would contain a concise list of action steps. But the final report is only a rough list of recommendations. It avoids the easy next step of condensing the raw material into core recommendations or action steps. It avoids any commitment to action.

In response, the ESPC has developed the *Other Children's Forum Report*. It includes the core recommendations or action steps we expected to see in the final report.

The Children's Forum dealt with several streams. The *Other Children's Forum Report* focuses on Poverty & Physical Needs because we must meet physical needs before we can deal with other issues. Children who do not have their basic needs met cannot participate in school and community and live healthy, safe lives.

The Missing Action Steps

During day two of the Children’s Forum, 350 delegates drafted 145 recommendations. Twenty-six of those recommendations dealt with Poverty & Physical Needs. The Edmonton Social Planning Council has drafted the following core recommendations or action steps from the 26 recommendations relating to children in poverty. The 26 recommendations relating to poverty appear on page 5 under Workshop Recommendations.

To be complete, a final report must provide direction for the future. The standard process is to draft a set of core recommendations that reflect the intent of the workshop recommendations—not a difficult process, particularly when the delegates agree about what must be done.

1. It is recommended that in the next year the Government of Alberta:

- establish a comprehensive meal program for children in high-needs schools
- strike a government-community taskforce to review selected Supports for Independence (welfare) policies with a view to:
 - indexing benefit levels to reflect the real cost of living
 - reinstating access to benefits for youth unable to live with their parents
 - allowing employable parents to remain at home with their children beyond the current “youngest child six months old” limit.
- establish a housing subsidy program for working poor families
- move to eliminate school curriculum fees.

2. It is recommended that in the next year the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada:

- co-operate to raise the basic personal tax exemption to make sure that workers making minimum wage pay no income tax
- restore funding for the construction of affordable housing.

3. It is recommended that in the next year Alberta Municipal Governments in co-operation with the Government of Alberta provide more subsidized recreation and after-school programs for children living in poverty.

Next Steps

The Children's Forum report notes that the provincial government does not have all the answers and cannot meet all the challenges alone. The report quotes Premier Ralph Klein and remarks he made during the forum. "He encouraged all stakeholders to work together to find better ways of meeting the challenges faced by children." Unfortunately, government—not stakeholders—has control over government policy and program funding.

During the Children's Forum, the Government of Alberta asked stakeholders to speak out about children. The stakeholders saw the forum as an opportunity to talk to government. They asked government to take action, increase welfare rates and improve welfare policy. They asked for school lunch programs and better housing policy.

A poll by Advanis market research for the Edmonton Social Planning Council found that nine out of 10 Edmontonians—88 per cent—say government has a responsibility to make sure all children have their basic needs met. When the government asks the community to speak out, it has a responsibility to listen. And when stakeholders ask for government action, then the next steps belong to government. Government must find better ways to meet the challenges faced by children.

Workshop Recommendations

On day two of the Children's Forum, 350 Albertans attended facilitated sessions and developed recommendations that would improve the lives of Alberta children. The following recommendations are from the Poverty & Physical Needs stream. Some are from the Families, Learning & Community and Health - Mind, Body & Soul streams.

The following recommendations are listed as they appear in the actual government report. The Edmonton Social Planning Council has not edited or reworded any of the recommendations.

1. That governments take action to deal with child poverty.
2. That in the next year, child maintenance and tenant laws will be made more accessible and effective, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
3. That within the next year, action will be taken to increase public awareness of poverty, in order to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
4. That in the next year we will educate Albertans about what works and what doesn't work, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
5. That the media be invited to carry programming which reflects the reality of children in poverty.
6. That in the next year, affordable or subsidized recreation and after-school programs will be offered to children and parents, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
7. That anyone living below the low-income cut-off thresholds (working poor) should be entitled to free dental, medical, and optical

benefits.

8. That anyone making minimum wage should not be required to pay taxes.
9. That in the next year there will be an improvement in shelter costs, supply and condition, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
10. That an investment be made in affordable housing for low-income families.
11. That safe, adequate and affordable housing be provided by:
 - Increasing the number of subsidies available to low income families
 - Providing damage deposits for those on public assistance
 - Developing a plan for long-term housing needs.
12. That in the next year, child care subsidies will be available universally to all children aged 0-12, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
13. That single parents on social assistance be permitted to stay at home for a period of at least one year after the birth of a child in order to facilitate/promote healthy child development.
14. That the Supports for Independence shelter allowance must meet the cost of food and other basic needs. The Supports for Independence allowance should include money for school fees, damage deposits, bus passes, etc.
15. That Supports for Independence rates and accessibility be increased for youth.
16. That a government/community resource group be established to review Supports for Independence policy, regulations and the appeal process.
17. That age-appropriate income supports be provided for youth at risk.
18. That in the next year, income for low-income families will be increased.
19. That in the next year, benefits will increase comparable to the cost of living in communities, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.

20. That in the next year, more money will be put in the hands of needy Albertans to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
21. That an assessment be carried out to determine those schools most in need; and that a meal program be provided immediately for the children in these schools.
22. That within the next year, lunch programs will be implemented in schools, with training and nutritional information, to effectively address the impact of poverty on children in Alberta.
23. That every child have access to a daily nutritional lunch at school.
24. That the basic needs of each child be met, in terms of hunger and a home.
25. That within the next year, additional costs for going to school be eliminated for all Alberta students.
26. That within the next year, full, free, funding for public and separate schools be provided to ensure that no school-related fees will be charged to Alberta students.