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JUNE

EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

TASK FORCE ON:

THE PUBLIC ASSISTANCE FOOD ALLOWANCE INCREASE

The results of the Task Force on The Public Assistance Food Allowance Increase, show that Alberta is making the poor, poorer, and causing them to suffer from poor nutrition.

The increase in cost of living for food, during the past 16 months, has been 12.5%. However, Public Assistance for food has increased by only 9%. All other areas in cost of living have increased, e.g. clothing 6.5%, yet the Department of Health and Social Development has not allocated any increase for those areas.

Since food costs money, and sufficient funding is not available for those on public assistance, (children 49%, female heads of families 13.3%, permanently ill 20.9%, temporarily disabled 4.1%, aged 4.6%, and the working poor 1.5%) the poor will suffer from poor nutrition and also be penalized for being poor.

The purpose of this brief is to articulate the need for government to realistically set allowances based on the cost of living. In order that the public be assured that the allowances are realistic, the bases for the allowances should be made available to the public. This is necessary in order for those on public assistance to obtain a decent standard of living.

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TASK FORCE ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE FOOD ALLOWANCE

Analysis indicates that welfare recipients have relatively much less buying power this year than they had last year. The Edmonton Social Planning Council Task Force is deeply concerned that we are making the poor poorer in Alberta, in some cases to the extent of mal-nutrition.

The Department of Health and Social Development has announced a 9% increase in the monthly food allowance for public assistance recipients, effective May 1, 1973.

This increase in public assistance must be seen in light of the rapidly rising cost of food. Between January 1, 1972 (second to last increase in welfare benefits) and May 1, 1973 (the most recent increase) the cost of food, according to Statistics Canada in Edmonton/Calgary areas, increased by 12.6%. (1)

Monthly Food Allowance Increases

Age	1972-Jan.	1973-May	Increase %	Increase $
Male Adult (in a family)	31.00	34.00	9.7	3.00
Female Adult (in a family)	27.00	30.00	11.1	3.00
Child 0-6 years	17.00	18.00	5.9	1.00
Child 7-11 years	23.00	25.00	8.7	2.00
Child 12-15 years	30.00	33.00	10.0	3.00
Child 16-20 years	34.00	37.00	8.8	3.00
			Av. 9.0	

Within the 9% increase, it is important to note that this has not been a flat 9% increase on all age groupings: children in the age brackets 7-11 years receive only an 8.7% increase and children in the 16-20 years age group receive only 8.8%. The child 0-6 years old in the most important growing period of life received the least increase of 5.9%. In the face of the present increase in cost of food at 14.6% per 16 months, it clearly indicates insufficient funds are being made available for the public assistant recipients.

What will be the effects of this gap between increases in price of food and increases in public assistance food allowances? It means that malnutrition will continue to be a characteristic given to those on Welfare by the Department of Health and Social Development, and also to the Canadian poor. "Food costs money and lack of money produces stunted diets which in turn means stunted growth." (2)

(1) Statistics Canada - Jan. 19, 1973 - Catalogue No. 11-001 p.7
Feb. 23, 1973 - Catalogue No. 11-002 p.3
Mar. 23, 1973 - Catalogue No. 11-002 p.3
April 19, 1973 - Catalogue No. 11-002 p.3
May 17, 1973 - Catalogue No. 11-002 p.5

(2) One Child, One Chance; p. 3

While food costs money, we must also realize that everything does. The price of clothing has increased by 6.3% since the last (January, 1972) public assistance increase for this necessary item. When a family presently buys clothes, they will have to get additional money from somewhere, and it is increasingly likely that it will be from the already inadequate food allowance.

The poor has been defined by the Economic Council of Canada as those who spend 70% or more of their income on the basic necessities: food, clothing and shelter. The Senate Poverty Committee felt other considerations were necessary in defining levels of poverty, such as adjustments for relative income deprivation and rises in the general standard of living. The overall poverty rate the Senate Poverty Committee established was 25.1% for 1969. (3) This means that one out of every four family units can be described as poor. With such a large amount of one's income being designated for necessities (70%), any increases in those areas, without the proportional increase in income, means that they become poorer since there is less money available for necessities outside of clothing, food and shelter.

A survey taken in 1967 (4) found that the lower the family's income, the greater the portion that food represented of the total spending, i.e. a family with an income of over $12,000.00 spent $1.00 out of $7.00 on food, that is 15%. A family with an income between $4,001.00 - $11,999.00 spent $1.00 out of $5.00 on food, that is 20%. But a family with an income of under $4,000.00 spent $1.00 in every $3.00 on food, that is 32%! The 1969 survey repeated the 1967 findings (5): the lower a family's income, the greater portion of total spending, thus any increase in food costs hits the poor far harder.

It is possible for a family to have a great deal of money and still not eat nutritionally adequate diets. The poor have less of a chance to eat nutritionally adequate diets because the lack of food dollars cannot provide the margins of nutritional safety that most Canadians enjoy by surplus eating.

In the Public Assistance Scheme, the food allowance is based on a price survey conducted by the Home Economics Division of the Department of Agriculture. This is based on buying powers from the nutritional recommendations of the "Dietary Standards for Canada" and "Canada's Food Guide". Since the results of the price survey studies are not available to the public, one cannot test the validity of the finding, nor know in fact whether or not the budget, recommended by the Home Economics Division, is being used in its recommended form. Do the prices include the limitations that the poor have to deal with such as poor transportation, poor storage, poor refrigeration and poor products? Are the figures based on comparative shopping at excellent sale prices, or clothing in off season?

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(3) Poverty in Canada; p. 11

(4) Statistics Canada, Urban Family Expenditures, 1967, March 1971, Cat. No. 62-530

(5) Statistics Canada, Family Food Expenditure in Canada, 1969, Vol. II, May 1972, Cat. No. 62-532

Only two cities have worked out specific food budgets for food allowances. The Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto worked out a basic $141.00 per month (in October, 1972) for a family of two adults and two children. The Montreal Diet Dispensary worked out a minimum budget of $108.50 per month for a family of two children and two adults for May, 1972. The Albertan allowance for the same size family is $122.00 maximum, one year later, with the new increases. Thus we see that of the two actual budgets worked out in Canada, one a year ago, quotes a budget of $14.00 less but as a minimum budget, rather than maximum as Alberta's figures indicate. The Alberta Debtors Assistance has published a general guide, and the rates are higher than those given by Public Assistance, but this guide is not used by the Department of Health and Social Development. Thus we see that the budget standards given are paper budgets, or budgets feasible under theoretically optimal circumstances, and do not reflect the "actual" living situation, as far as food is concerned, nor do they reflect the problems that those on public assistance have expressed such as: How do you get bulk buying of food home; taxi costs are not allowed for. If your children want to go on school field trips, where does the money come from? If you want to give your child a birthday party, where does the money come from? Where does money for Christmas presents come from? Where does our bottle of wine for a wedding anniversary come from? etc. etc. And another repeated question is if people are to live on this budget where do they learn how to do it?

Education in food preparation and nutrition has been extremely limited. Classes currently available at night school are limited to foreign cookery. Some classes have been provided by the Family Service Association but are limited in publicity and personnel. Also low income people don't seem to know about them or how to request that they be provided. At present, a person living on public assistance has two possible ways of coping with the present food allowance:

1. Buy as the average shopper buys including quantities of meat eaten by average Canadian families immediately after allowance is received. Run out of money towards end of month and eat very little towards end of month. Feel deprived last part of each month.

2. Buy groceries including very little meat throughout month, but feel deprived the whole month because of not being able to buy as normal people do in culture. Constantly having to say "no" to a purchase of ice-cream or meat for dinner.

Those on public assistance are being forced to eat nutritionally inadequate diets because of lack of education on nutritional buying and insufficient food allowances being made available. 49% of those on public assistance are children. For them the present budgets will restrict their healthy growth. The permanently ill or disabled (20.9%), temporarily disabled (4.1%) and aged (4.6%) will continue to suffer physically because they will not have an adequate supply of nutrients. The female heads of families (13.3%) and working poor (1.5%), besides suffering the physical disadvantages of poor nutrition, have the agony of not being able to offer their children a better way of life. Those critical of the public assistance plan and its increases point to the unemployed "living-off" the hard working Canadian. What is not recognized is that this group constitutes only 6.6% of those on public assistance. Concentrating on this 6.6% does not give due recognition to the 93.4% who, by all definitions, need public assistance. To say that those on public assistance can eat on the allowed the "average" Canadian eats as a form of punishment for being children,

permanently ill, aged or a single parent. Although the average adult only needs two ounces of protein a day, the average Canadian adult eats far more -- if he is not on welfare.

To change the present dilemma, the Department of Health and Social Development must look at:

1. Whether the amounts budgeted for food in the provincial assistance plans adequately respond to varying family size and composition. This research should be financed by the Alberta Government and its results be made available to the public. Provincial budgeting should be based on local (i.e. provincial) conditions.

2. Whether the amounts budgeted for food in the provincial assistance plans are based on realistic, available diets. This information also should be made available. Already available information should be disseminated such as the new Family Service Association Cookbook, free of charge, at public assistance interviews.

3. Whether the amounts of money provided for food are consistent with current food prices. Those on public assistance should not have to wait 16 months for a 9% increase, when the cost of living has already risen 12.1% over the same period.

4. Whether adequate provision is made for the special dietary requirements of pregnancy and lactation, since this is one of the areas mothers on public assistance feel most inadequate.

5. Whether sufficient allowance is made available for necessities (i.e. Christmas, school field trips, clothing, etc.) so that money is not taken out of the food allowance.

6. What the Department of Health and Social Development can do to fill its responsibilities to the Canadian working poor, who also live on budgets which encourage malnutrition. Implementation of the Guaranteed Annual Income, would alleviate many of these problem areas.

7. What the Department of Health and Social Development can do towards educating the public on nutritional requirements, especially for those on public assistance. (See Appendix 1 for specific recommendation on methods of education, and discussion of such programs implemented elsewhere).

The Department of Health and Social Development has announced an average 9% increase in Alberta food allowances, but there has been an increase of 12.1% in the cost of living for food during the same period. This gap in increases will continue to encourage poor nutrition among Alberta's poor. Food costs money and lack of money produces unhealthy diets which in turn means stunted growth. It is time to seriously attempt to give children, the aged and the ill and the single parent a chance to live as a healthy person, rather than be punished for circumstances beyond their control. The Task Force of the Edmonton Social Planning Council hopes that the Government will look favourable with the intent on implementing the recommendations given in this report.

APPENDIX I

A RECOMMENDED METHOD OF EDUCATION ON NUTRITION:

Training of selected women on welfare in: nutrition; shopping for food; quantity buying; ideas for meals; feeding children, sick people, elderly people; spoilage prevention; kitchen organization; minimum effort meals; low cost food preservation such as jams and pickles.

They in turn can act as Nutrition Aides to families on welfare and help mothers in their own homes to meet their own problems in food provision for their families.

Since these women would be trained and would work part-time or full-time, they should be paid to serve as Nutrition Aides.

They should meet twice a month with the co-ordinator who trained them to share experiences, discuss problems, and request further information that they need to deal with specific problems.

Families to be visited could be identified by referral and by knocking on doors in areas where assistance might be reasonably welcome.

Nutrition Aides would continue to visit identified families until the needs of each are met to the extent possible given other existing circumstances. New families would be added as previous families are deleted from the visiting list.

It is important to notice that the recommended help is provided in the home rather than at meetings women would be expected to attend. The women who need the most help are least likely to be able or willing to attend public meetings held outside their home.

PREVIOUS PROGRAMS USING INDIGENOUS AIDES:

Indigenous nutrition aides have been trained to improve the diets of low-income families through education in all fifty states.(1) In 1968 the U.S. Extension Service introduced an expanded food and nutrition education program and an evaluation of the Nebraska program concluded: The attitudes of the clients toward the aides were generally positive. The poverty participants had needs for basic food, shelter, and clothing. They looked up to the aides and appreciated them. The indigenous aides were reachable models to the clients."(2)

The Nebraska evaluation involved fourteen aides and seventy-six of the families they worked with, and eighty-six percent of these aides felt their work provided a help that was needed by most clients. Three-quarters of the aides liked the job and thought it would be "hard to find a job they liked as well".(3) Over two-thirds of the clients felt they learned from the aides. Three-quarters "felt better because the aide helped" them.(4)

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(1) Mallory, B."Auxiliary Workers in Today's Society", Journal of Home Economics" Vol. 63, May, 1971, p. 375

(2) Prichard K. and Hall M., "Attitudes of Aides and Clients", Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 63, October, 1971, p. 547 - 548

(3) Ibid, "Attitudes of Aides and Clients", Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 63, October, 1971, p. 547

(4) Ibid, "Attitudes of Aides and Clients", Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 63, October, 1971, p. 546

A number of aides working in Detroit, Michigan, described their jobs and some of their experiences on a panel at the American Home Economics Convention held in Detroit, June, 1972. One panelist commented that her clients were careless with food stamps - they looked like coupons and were treated as such rather than money. Another panelist reported a very low level of vegetable consumption among her clients. She organized vegetable taste panels to demonstrate different methods of preparation and to lure clients into trying a new experience. The natural insights these aides had into the psychological problems accompanying a low income were impressive. Their solutions were ingenious. Setting up a situation where people can share what they've learned with others in the same circumstances helps the receiver to improve her life-style and helps the giver to feel more self-worth.

The Department of Extension in Saskatchewan has carried out a somewhat similar program with Indian and Metis women. (6) A six-year Service Contract between the Extension Division and the Indian Affairs Branch from 1967 to 1973 funded the Saskatchewan project. This program included other areas as well as nutrition. Teaching was done in groups rather than within the individual homes. Guidelines from this evaluated program would prove useful in defining a program to meet the needs of Alberta's welfare recipients.

IMPLEMENTATION OF NUTRITION AIDE PROGRAMS

Since the Department of Health and Social Development is currently stating an interest in providing jobs for people on welfare, it appears to be a likely department to take the initiative for implementing the program. The Department of Agriculture might be able to supply co-ordinates to train the Nutrition Aides and organize the backup support necessary for the program. Alternately the Department of Health and Social Development could hire Home Economists directly to implement the program in close conjunction with case-workers throughout Alberta.

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(6) Colley, A., Hancock, E., and Whale, W. - Evaluation of Homemaking Courses on Indian Reserves, Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, January 1973.