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**Adding it all up:
The Cost of Healthy Living in the
City Edmonton**

Project Proposal

DRAFT

Submitted to Health Canada, Population Health Fund

Submitted by:

The Edmonton Social Planning Council

in partnership with

**Canada West Foundation
University of Alberta, Department of Agricultural, Food
and Nutritional Sciences
Poverty in Action**

August, 1998

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1.0 Description of the Organization

A partnership of four organizations will undertake the project:

The Edmonton Social Planning Council

The Canada West Foundation

University of Alberta - Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Sciences

Poverty in Action

The Edmonton Social Planning Council will sponsor the project.

1.1 Edmonton Social Planning Council - Mandate and Legal Status

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is an independent, non-profit and charitable organization governed by a Board of Directors representing all sectors of the community. Since 1940, we have provided education and information on social issues and programs, social policy analysis, and management and technical assistance to community agencies and organizations. During the past 54 years, the organization has changed and grown, but remained faithful to the goals of improved human services and a healthy community.

The Council has played an important role in establishing many community service agencies in Edmonton including the Christmas Bureau, the United Way of Edmonton and Area, the Boyle Street Community Services Cooperative, the Sexual Assault Centre and The Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired.

Many of Alberta's leading citizens have close ties with the Council. Former Mayor Jan Reimer sat as a board member during the 1970s. Former alderman and Alberta Official Opposition deputy leader Bettie Hewes was a board member and Executive Director of the Council. Others have included the former provincial treasurer Lou Hyndman and current City of Edmonton councillor Michael Phair.

Much of the current focus of Council activities relates to poverty and health, and the inherent links between the two. Much of this work focuses on the needs of women, children, Aboriginal and new immigrant populations. The Council has recently completed research projects which explore the growing use of food banks in the city, the changing nature of Edmonton families which live on low incomes, and the impacts of current government social service policies on the health and well-being of individuals and families.

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Throughout its history, the Council has been supportive of self-help initiatives of various kinds. It is the organization's conviction that solutions to social problems can be effective only to the extent that they involve the people affected by those problems, empowering them to design and implement structures and services which can help them overcome barriers to independence and personal fulfillment.

For the past twelve years, the Edmonton Social Planning Council has published *First Reading*, Alberta's only social issues magazine. Recent editions of the magazine have focused on measuring social health, employment and income security, people development, child poverty and the bridging of service gaps. We also publish the occasional social-demographic fact sheets Alberta Facts and Edmonton Facts. Annually, the organization also publishes, in conjunction of a network of local partners, the Edmonton Life Report, which captures key indicators of community quality of life.

The Council is a charter member of the United Way of Edmonton and Area, and retains membership in the Canadian Council on Social Development. We also hold many other more specialized local, provincial and national affiliations.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council has been registered under the Societies Act (registration #5000096) since July 4, 1940.

1.2 Partnership Organizations

The Council will work on the project in partnership with three other organizations:

The Canada West Foundation

Canada West is a non-profit and non-partisan research and educational organization active in economic, social and public policy studies. It is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under the federal charter. Its offices are located in Calgary. Canada West Foundation is directed to accomplish three prime objectives: to initiate and conduct research into the economic and social characteristics and potentials of the West and the North within a national and international context; to educate individuals regarding the West's regional economic and social contributions to the Canadian federation; and to act as a catalyst for informed debate.

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University of Alberta, Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Sciences

Under the guidance of Kim Travers, Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Sciences, the Centre will develop the methodology for the establishment of dietary requirements and related costs. As well, the Centre will participate on the Project Advisory Committee.

Poverty in Action

Poverty in Action was formed in October 1996 by a group of individuals who wanted to bring people living in poverty together. Poverty in Action is a group of people who live or have lived in poverty. The mandate of the group is to challenge poverty and poverty-related issues from a grassroots level. Poverty in Action works to share, empower and to educate its members and the community at-large about poverty and solutions to poverty.

2.0 Project Goal and Objectives

There are three main project goals:

1. To develop two community validated cost of living levels for individuals and families living in Edmonton:
 - a basic "survival" level; and
 - a moderate "participation" level.
2. To document a framework, research design and methodology for the development of these cost of living levels that may be replicated in other communities.
3. To determine the number of Edmontonians, individuals and families, with income levels that place them at or below the two levels.

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Five specific objectives support these three goals:

- to determine and document the goods and services individuals and different family types need to live healthy, productive lives at a basic and participatory level;
- to determine and document the annual household budgets individuals and families need to purchase and access these goods and services;
- to involve a cross-section of the city of Edmonton population in the discussion and validation of family and individual household needs and requirements to live healthy and productive lives;
- to explore and document the real life experiences of individuals and families living on low incomes in the city of Edmonton and to determine the resources they access and strategies they use to live healthy lives;
- to provide decision makers, policy makers, agencies and communities with valid and reliable information on the real costs associated with living healthy lives in the city of Edmonton.

3.0 Project Description

3.1 Background

An overwhelming body of research points to an inexorable link between low incomes and poor health (Alcock, 1993; Golding, 1986; and Nolan and Whelan, 1996). People with low incomes have lower levels of health and higher rates of illness and disease than do those with higher incomes. Adequate income for individuals and families allows for the purchase of suitable housing, efficient means of transportation, quality child care, ample quantities of quality food and clothing, appropriate recreational and leisure activities, and opportunities for higher education and life long learning, all of which, in turn, increase the potential for health. Conversely, low incomes or poverty contribute to a significant reduction in overall health, well-being and social status. In short, living in poverty is literally bad for one's health.

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Despite this well-researched fact, poverty and poor health remain a continued reality for a growing number of Edmonton families and individuals. Indeed, various recent studies suggest that close to one in five Edmonton children grow up poor, with close to 70 per cent of the city's fastest growing family type - single parent families headed by women - living on low incomes or in poverty.

To date, however, much of the debate around poverty has not centred on its fundamental human impacts on families and individuals, but rather on its more detached, abstract definition and measurement. Not surprisingly, perhaps, political, social and economic commentators of various stripes have to date been unable to agree on either the appropriate philosophical framework for the development of a measure of poverty or an accompanying empirical methodology to gather information on the number of individuals who live in such a state. The result is a ongoing debate on the nature and size of the problem at hand, with a seeming disregard for the very families and individuals who struggle to make ends meet on low incomes.

As a result, there remains no agreed benchmark for determining appropriate levels for income security programs, child benefits, minimum wage requirements and other forms of subsidy and support that families and individuals need to live healthy and productive lives. Instead, proponents of what can be categorized as absolute or relative approaches to the measurement and reporting of poverty and low income levels merely throw numbers and statistics back and forth concerning the income level required to live a healthy, productive life and the associated number of individuals or families who fall below these levels, without ever agreeing to focus on the real issue at hand: the lives and health of the families and individuals themselves struggling to get by on limited or low incomes.

The aim of the current project is to address this challenge through the development of two parallel cost of living measures for the city of Edmonton which reflect the real experiences of individuals and families who currently live on low incomes, as well as the views, perceptions and understandings of the broader community at large who may or may not have experienced poverty first hand. The development of these two measures, a basic survival measure and a participatory measure, will form an important first step in beginning to address poverty related issues in the city. In essence, it will enable political decision-makers, policy makers and other community groups and organizations to move away from the discussion of numbers towards the more needed focus on people and solutions.

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3.2 Detailed Project Description

The project will result in the development of two community validated and supported cost of living measures for the city of Edmonton: a basic survival measure and a social participatory measure. These two measures will help establish the annual income individuals and families in the city actually need to live healthy and productive lives, and will thus provide useful information for policy makers and community groups and organizations struggling with questions around appropriate income security policies and practices.

The two measures will reflect the real costs associated with the purchase of and access to the broad array of goods and services individuals and families need and use on an annual basis. The components of this array of goods and services will be developed through reference to past research; consultations with key informants and experts knowledgeable in specific aspects of family and individual health, nutrition and lifestyle needs; detailed discussions with individuals and families who live on low incomes; and broader discussions with families and individuals, community groups and business representatives from across the city.

Thus, for example, in the area of nutrition, the project will research and clearly document the required diet for a range of family types, as well as the strategies families and individuals can use to meet these dietary needs (for example, buying in bulk, accessing low-cost food retailers). This research will draw on the real life experiences of individuals and families who live on low incomes, as well as research findings and the views and perceptions of a cross-section of community members and representatives. Expert contract staff in the area of nutrition will guide this portion of the work.

This approach, replicated for the major areas of a family's or individual's basic and lifestyle needs such as housing, health and recreation, will result in a comprehensive, community validated listing of goods and services which will then be costed on an annual basis. This costing of goods and services will, where appropriate, take into account the opportunities individuals or families have to reduce household costs through specific cost-saving strategies, as well as the barriers they may also face in accessing low cost goods and services despite their apparent availability (e.g., transportation, inability to buy in bulk).

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The two proposed measures, a basic survival measure and a social participatory measure, will give the research a breadth which previous studies lack. In turn, the substantive involvement of community members in the determination of basic and participatory needs, as well as the discussion of strategies to meet these needs, will give the research an empirical and community validated basis also lacking from previous studies.

As a critical outcome of the project, it is anticipated that participants in the research will gain a greater understanding of the issues and concerns that affect people who live in poverty, while decision and policy makers will receive a key tool to help them begin to address poverty.

Project Approach

The success of this project will rest in the active participation of a broad array of Edmontonians in the determination of appropriate cost of living measures for the city of Edmonton. Three overall approaches will support this active participation of Edmontonians in the project:

Health promotion: the process through which individuals increase control over their lives and improve their own health;

Community development: the process whereby a community works together to attain and sustain a comprehensive, effective and valid network of supports and capacities to support and strengthen individuals who live within the community; and

Collaboration: the process whereby agencies and community groups work together sharing resources, ideas and strategies for jointly agreed goals and objectives.

Determinants of Health

Consistent with the above approaches, the Cost of Living project will address the following determinants of health:

I. Income and Social Status

Income, or level of income, remains the most important single determinant of health. Living on low incomes or living in poverty increases the likelihood that individuals and families will have lower overall levels of health with higher levels of morbidity and

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mortality. Central to the current initiative is the attempt to determine the true cost of living in Edmonton, as the first critical step in addressing broader income security needs. The determination of widely supported, valid and reliable cost of living levels for differing family types will enable decision-makers to make informed decisions on the allocation of resources.

2. *Education*

The Cost of Living initiative will, as part of its determination of appropriate levels of income for individuals and families, summarize the average costs of education. These widely supported and community validated costs will provide decision makers with key information on the current ability of individuals and families to access educational opportunities.

3. *Employment and Working Conditions*

The Cost of Living initiative will, as part of its determination of appropriate levels of income for individuals and families, provide key insights into the current impact of wage rates, pay equity issues and pension concerns on the health and well-being of Edmontonians.

4. *Physical Environment*

The Cost of Living initiative will include considerable focus on the cost of appropriate housing options and alternatives for individuals and families. These community validated findings will provide decision makers and consumers with useful frameworks to assist in the allocation of resources to support housing needs.

5. *Healthy Child Development*

Research clearly shows the increased negative lifelong health affects associated with low birth weights and poor infant nutrition. The development of community supported and validated cost of living measures for the city of Edmonton will provide community leaders and decision makers with key information on the costs associated with ensuring healthy birth weights and healthy child development.

6. *Gender*

Increasingly in Edmonton, as within the rest of Canada, poverty and the challenges of living on low incomes confront young, single parents, the vast majority of whom are women. In Edmonton, seven out of ten single mothers and their families live in poverty,

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with little or no opportunity to increase their household incomes in the short and medium terms.

Life Stage Priorities

In reference to the Population Health Fund Priorities for 1998 - 1999, the Cost of Living measures project is relevant to the three identified *Life Stage Priorities*: Childhood and Adolescence, Early to Mid-Adulthood and Later Life.

Within these priorities, the project addresses the following needs and concerns.

Childhood and Adolescence

- Creating optimal conditions for the healthy development of young children;
- supporting families;
- creating safe, supportive and violence-free physical and social environments;
- fostering healthy adolescent development.

Early to Mid-Adulthood

- Creating healthy work and social environments.

Later Life

- Addressing factors leading to illness, disability and death;
- strengthening the capacity to support healthy aging;
- enhancing personal autonomy and independence.

4.0 Project Work Plan

An advisory committee made up of representatives from the project partners will help to guide the project. Edmonton Social Planning Council staff will chair the committee and support its work and operation.

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4.1 Project Phases

The project will involve five main phases:

1. Research And Conceptual Formulation Of The Two Proposed Measures (September to October, 1998)
2. Research of the Specific Content and Structure of the Two Measures (October to December, 1998)
3. Validation of the Two Measures (January to February, 1999)
4. Costing of the Two Measures (February to March, 1999)
5. Dissemination of Project Findings and Results (March, 1999)

Phase 1: Research and conceptual definition of the two proposed measures

The initial phase of the project will center on the conceptual definition of the two proposed cost of living levels:

- Basic household level (survival);
- Inclusion/Participation Household level (supports participation/membership in society).

This will involve the review of secondary data sources which comment on or critique existing measures or definitions of basic survival needs, as well as the concept of a participation in society income level. Appropriate secondary data sources will include the large body of literature on relative and absolute measures of poverty which may provide a starting point for the formulation of participatory and basic cost of living levels.

This initial project phase will generate a brief background paper on the conceptual basis for the two levels, as well as a summary overview of the essential component areas of the two levels.

Phase 2: Research of the Specific Content and Structure of the Two Measures

Following the conceptual formulation of the two levels, the research focus will shift to a detailed exploration and examination of the specific items to be included within the two household levels, consistent with the above conceptual basis, as well as some consideration

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of the various "other" resources available to families and households to support these budgets (e.g., transportation resources, access to large "super stores", etc.).

Expert staff will guide the proposed research which will involve both primary and secondary data sources:

i) Primary Research

- Interviews with individuals and families living on low incomes, and families living on middle to moderate incomes;
- focus group discussions with families living on low incomes and families living on middle to moderate incomes;
- interviews with key informants knowledgeable in major areas of household budgets (e.g., Food and Nutrition, Housing); and
- potential telephone survey of structured sample of families, individuals and households.

ii) Secondary Research

- Review of current materials on household budgets including Statistics Canada's family expenditure profiles;
- detailed review of existing measures of poverty (absolute and relative) in terms of specific household items and expenditures;
- review of academic and gray literature on key household (family and individual) needs and requirements.

The second phase of the project will conclude with the documentation of the specific elements to be included in the two levels (basic and participatory). This will include an extensive list of goods and services for each of the two proposed levels, as well as a consideration of the other non-financial resources available to individuals and families which support the two levels.

Phase 3: Validation of the Two Developed Household Budgets

The project partners will validate the detailed proposed budgets (items and services) with low income individuals and families, middle income individuals and families and key

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informants. This phase of the project will help ensure that the two levels have broad community support as realistic measures of family and individual needs. In addition, the participatory nature of the research will enable participants to gain a greater understanding of poverty in the city of Edmonton and the challenges and lost opportunities associated with living in poverty.

Based on the results of this validation, the researchers will make appropriate revisions to the goods, services and strategies for accessing goods and services to be included as part of the two cost of living levels.

Phase 4: Costing of the Two Household Budgets

Phase 4 will focus on the detailed costing of the two household cost of living levels taking into account both the nature of items in the household budget, as well as strategies available to differing households in the purchase of goods and services.

This phase will conclude with the detailed documentation of the two community validated cost of living levels.

Phase 5: Dissemination of Project Findings and Results

The project will conclude with the broad distribution of the major project findings and results.

The project partners will share the two cost of living levels with a broad group of stakeholders including the local (and national) media, representatives of the three levels of government, as well as local groups and organizations.

In addition, the partners will look to present the project findings at a regional or national conference and consider the possibility of publishing appropriate portions of the project report/findings.

Further copies of the final report, including the detailed cost of living levels, and the associated methodology for the development of the levels, will be available at cost to interested parties.

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4.2 Project Staffing Requirements

The following staffing and volunteer positions will support the project work.

Project Advisory Committee

As detailed above, a project advisory committee drawn from the project partners will guide the project.

Project Manager

The ESPC Executive Director will assume overall management responsibilities for the project. This will include attention to all financial matters and reporting requirements for the project funder(s).

Project Coordinator

A project coordinator will assume overall responsibilities for the implementation of the project. These responsibilities will center on the day-to-day administration and operation of the project. The coordinator will work closely with the Project Advisory Committee and will manage the work of the expert contract staff assigned to the specific areas of family budgets (e.g., nutrition, housing and shelter, etc.)

Additional Staffing Resources

Staff from the Edmonton Social Planning Council, Canada West Foundation, Poverty in Action, as well as faculty and students from the Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutrition Sciences will act as specialist resource consultants to the project. These staff will assist in the implementation of the project providing content area support and expertise in the areas of research and development. These staff will be familiar both with the specific areas of family budgets (e.g., nutrition, housing and shelter), as well as research designs and methodologies. Staff from Poverty in Action will help ensure that the research process substantively involves individuals and families who live on low incomes.

Community Volunteers

Community volunteers will play an active role in the development and validation of the two cost of living measures. Focus groups of community participants will discuss and debate the key family household items included in the major budget areas for the two proposed measures. In this way, a broad group of Edmonton residents will form the major resource for the development of the cost of living measures, ensuring that the final measures

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developed will be valid and reliable constructs of public needs relating to survival and participation in the community.

5.0 Project Evaluation

The project evaluation will be undertaken by a sub-committee drawn from the project advisory committee with the active participation of the inmate populations. The ESPC Executive Director will work with the evaluation sub-committee to ensure that the evaluation guidelines are valid and reliable.

The evaluation design will include the following elements informed by the Guide to Project Evaluation: A Participatory Approach resource:

- a consultative evaluation model;
- a case study design approach;
- formative and summative orientations;
- the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data.

The evaluation will assess the project across three related perspectives:

- project design and implementation;
- project process and structure;
- project outcomes and results.

A variety of methods will be used to collect evaluation data:

- the review of project materials and background documents;
- participant observation of the project phases;
- interviews with project participants;
- assessment of the validity and reliability of project findings and outcomes.

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Quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis will inform the evaluation findings with the emphasis placed on the former. These will include qualitative descriptions and case analyses, and the use of descriptive statistics.

The overall evaluation design will remain flexible, developmental and analytical. A final evaluation report will be prepared for submission to the federal funder.

6.0 Dissemination of Project Results

Project findings will be shared with the three levels of government, community groups, agencies and organizations involved in poverty-related issues and concerns on an ongoing basis and in the form of the final project report. Where appropriate, the project will also use local media contacts both to raise the profile of the project and as well as to highlight the broader issues and challenges families and individuals face relating to poverty.

The ESPC quarterly social issues magazines, *First Reading*, will also form a potential vehicle for disseminating the project results and findings.

One national conference will be selected at which to present the project findings to a wider audience.

7.0 Project Sustainability

The proposed project is intended to be sustainable in the short, medium and long terms. The partnership of agencies who have come together to work on the project are committed to ensuring that poverty-related issues are addressed within Edmonton and beyond. It is anticipated that the project will not only stimulate new discussions of poverty in the provincial capital, but will also provide an agreed definitional starting part for monitoring and responding to poverty issues.

In addition, the project partners will work to support the replication of the project model and approach in other centres across the country. Provisionally, it is hoped to conduct similar research initiatives in each of the Western provincial capitals to similarly inform discussions of poverty and the formulation of policies relating to poverty within these jurisdictions.

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8.0 Project Budget

Budget Item	Total Costs	Income from other sources	Health Canada
1. Personnel Costs (for 6 months)			
Project Manager (0.1 FTE)	3,750.00		3,750.00
Project Coordinator (1.0 FTE)	20,700.00		20,700.00
Admin. Support (0.25 FTE)	3,450.00		3,450.00
Contract Staff (5 FTE)	71,000.00	45,000.00	30,000.00
University of Alberta Centre for Health Promotion Graduate Student	4,000.00		
2. Support Costs			
Office Space/ Equipment Rental	6,600.00	6,600.00	n/a
Research Costs	2,500.00	1,250.00	1,250.00
Materials/Supplies	4,250.00	2,000.00	2,250.00
Communication Costs	1,750.00	1,000.00	750.00
Travel Expenses	2,500.00	1,250.00	1,250.00
Meeting Expenses	5,000.00	2,500.00	2,500.00
TOTAL COSTS	125,500.00	59,600.00*	65,900.00

*Funding from other sources will be provided through the Edmonton Social Planning Council and the other project partners, as well as through applications to other funding bodies.

The funding requested from Health Canada is in the amount of \$65,900.00