

***EDMONTON SOCIAL
PLANNING COUNCIL***

**BACKGROUND PAPER:
FOCUS ON URBAN ABORIGINAL ISSUES**

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EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING
COUNCIL**

JULY 1991

Edmonton Social Planning Council

Focus on Urban Aboriginal Issues

Background

The Edmonton Social Planning Council was founded in 1940. It is an independent, non-profit, charitable organization committed to improving the social welfare of all Edmontonians. The Council is controlled by a volunteer Board of Directors of fifteen, elected by our membership, which numbers in excess of three hundred. There are seven staff.

Activities of The Council

The work of the Council can be divided into several categories:

- **Research and analysis of social issues.** In the past few years, much of our activity in this area has been around Provincial social assistance rates and regulations. Our research has formed the basis for community and media pressure on government to provide liveable social assistance rates. In the fall of 1990, government responded to years of pressure with social assistance reforms addressing some but not all of our concerns. Another example of our research and analysis activities is in the field of child welfare. Over the past ten years, we have prepared and presented a number of briefs to government and opposition taskforces on child welfare issues. Currently, we are carrying out a review of government services to 16 and 17 year-olds.

- **Community Development.** The Council recognizes that the solutions to social problems must lie in the hands of the people affected. But disadvantaged people frequently lack the connections, confidence, and skills necessary to effectively represent their concerns. The Council encourages socially oppressed people to act collectively, through helping form self-help groups, service organizations, and lobby groups. Recently, the Council has assisted in the formation of groups such as Single and Divorced Speak Out (currently fighting for equal pension treatment of single and divorced women in comparison with married and widowed women), Moms On Minimal Income (a group of low-income mothers; we arranged for them to speak this spring to a House of Commons Committee on Poverty), Unemployed People's Support Group (a group of unemployed workers which lobbied for retraining programs and assisted each other in finding work), etc.

- **Public Education.** General public prejudice against disadvantaged groups plays an important part in maintaining social injustices. The Council devotes a considerable part of its resources to public education activities. Each issue of our quarterly magazine, *Alberta Facts*, highlights a social concern, providing facts to counter popular myth. The most recent edition addressed myths and realities of poverty, while the upcoming issue focuses on the economic and social circumstances of urban aboriginal people. *Alberta Facts* is distributed very widely, especially to schools, churches, government, and social agencies. The Council's official journal, *First Reading*, provides in-depth analysis of current social issues, and is geared to our members and social policy decision-makers. Its focus is currently being reviewed with the aim of making it accessible and attractive to a wider range of readers. In addition to producing our own publications, the Council also provides an information service to the media, agencies, and the general public. We frequently assist journalists preparing feature stories on social questions (a recent example being an *Edmonton Journal* feature on the costs of raising a family), and also help various coalitions develop media campaigns (for example, we have worked extensively with the Child Poverty Action Group to promote Headstart programs through media events, etc.).

- **Assisting Voluntary Organizations.** The Council carries out many program and organizational evaluations for not-for-profit organizations of various kinds. Currently, evaluations are being conducted of the Development Education Coordinating Council of Alberta, as well as Big Sisters Lifechoices Program. Typically, we complete about five evaluations per year. The Council also offers tailor-made workshops to individual agencies on a variety of issues, including future planning, board-staff development, lobbying techniques, etc. In addition, provide generic assistance to not-for-profit organizations through various workshops and publications. Welfare advocacy workshops are held regularly in Edmonton and elsewhere in Alberta, and we offer a *Board Development Workbook*, which allows organizations to examine and renew their own decision-making structures and guidelines. Edmonton Social Planning Council has taken the lead in bringing together service agencies in various coalitions formed to address causal issues, including the Income Security Action Committee, Child Poverty Action Group, etc.

Aboriginal Initiatives

The Edmonton Social Planning Council has long recognized the unacceptable social and economic conditions faced by aboriginal people living in Edmonton and other Canadian cities. Indeed, over the years, we have participated in a number of initiatives to address the problems faced by Urban Natives. In 1962, the Council formed an Indian and Metis Study Committee, which concluded among other things that "the Indians and Metis who come to Edmonton .. are essentially rural. Therefore, they have all of the adjustment problems that confront rurally-oriented people as they face urban living".

Over the next ten years, the Social Planning Council worked with the Native community to help develop political structures, including the Native Brotherhood Society. Given that many or most urbanized Natives in the 1960's found themselves in the inner city, we worked with Native political and non-Native social organizations to develop inner city services which would help in the transition to urban life. The Native Friendship Centre was created as a direct result of the concerns articulated by the Indian and Metis Study Committee. Another of the products of this initiative was the Boyle Street Co-op, which continues to work mainly with aboriginal people, although it is no longer a Native-led project.

For various reasons, the Council's involvement with aboriginal issues declined from the mid-1970's. To begin with, the political organizations which Indians and Metis developed in the 1960's proved effective in addressing their concerns, and the aboriginal community no longer felt it was necessary to have the support of 'non-Native' organizations. In addition, the social awakening of the 1960's did not last, and it became more difficult to initiate creative responses to social problems. Finally, the Council itself retreated from community development initiatives, retrenching into 'safer' activities such as encouraging inter-agency collaboration, preparing briefs to the government, etc.

Over the past couple of years, the Council has awakened to its responsibility to address Aboriginal concerns. We cannot claim to be addressing society's most serious social problems while we ignore the poverty and racism faced by Edmonton's aboriginal people.

Carolyn Pettifer, Executive Director of Metis Child and Family Services, was elected to our Board in 1989. In 1991, Rocky Sinclair, formerly of Apeetogosan Development Inc., and Jackie Fiala, Native Programs Co-ordinator at the Edmonton Young Offenders Centre, were elected. Staff changes brought to the Council people with interest and experience in aboriginal issues.

Staff and Board have agreed that the Council can play a useful role in a number of areas of work with the aboriginal community. These include:

- Helping to bring to the attention of the social service community and the general public the economic and social realities of Native people. The Council has begun to work on this priority through the research and publication of *Edmonton's Urban Natives* (1991), a statistical analysis of the circumstances of aboriginal Edmontonians, which was released in conjunction with a successful public forum. However, much work remains convincing the authorities and the public of the many barriers to success facing Native people.
- Using our influence as a social policy organization in convincing the non-Native community to work together on innovative projects in areas such as employment and education.
- Working with the Native community on specific community development projects, particularly to encourage the very large Native populations in some neighbourhoods to develop their own effective neighbourhood organizations.

These initiatives are all at a very early stage of development. The Council is well aware that many initiatives to 'help' the Native community have not been successful because they were not designed and operated by the Native people themselves. Therefore, the aboriginal members of our Board have assumed the lead role in designing, directing, and implementing our focus on aboriginal issues. We are now attempting to expand aboriginal representation within the organization, as well as defining more clearly our workplan for the next period.

JM
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