

Listen To Me

the final report of

the

Quality of Life Commission

March 1996

Quality of Life Commission

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Quality of Life Commission

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executive summary

Since 1993, Alberta has undergone a period of sweeping social policy reform and government restructuring. The scope and depth of the change has been unprecedented. The speed of the change has left Albertans wondering about its effect on people and their families. A group of citizens concerned about the lack of attention being paid to the consequences of social policy reform came together to talk about the effects. The result was the formation of the Quality of Life Commission.

The Quality of Life Commission's mandate is to listen to Albertans in the Edmonton region to discover how the changes and cutbacks have affected people's lives. From what it heard, the Commission has articulated the elements of "quality of life" and how those elements have been affected, positively and negatively, by changes to government social policy.

The Commission established a process for hearing from Albertans that focused on establishing an atmosphere for open, frank discussion. From October through December, it held a series of 21 small, informal group discussions in numerous locations around the city of Edmonton, with a cross-section of Edmontonians. It held a public hearing on December 5, 1995 to hear a number of formal presentations and to receive comments and stories from members of the public in attendance. The Commission also distributed a questionnaire to individuals around northern Alberta and accepted written submissions.

Hundreds of Albertans, from businesspeople to seniors to single parents to youth, told the Commission what they believe is important to their quality of life, and how Alberta's social policy affects it.

Major Findings

Albertans believe there are six elements contributing to quality of life: to meet basic necessities, hope, self-determination, health and well-being, security and community. The six elements are interconnected, and do not exist in isolation from one another.

The Commission also heard how social policy decisions have a very real and profound effect upon the six elements of quality of life. Albertans identified a series of trends or themes in their quality of life arising out of the decisions. They also specified which policies and issues most affect it

The themes identified were:

- a sense of increased polarization, a growing gap between the rich and the poor.
- a lack of opportunity in Alberta, especially in the job market and education.
- feeling trapped in a cycle of dependence.
- a feeling of powerlessness over the decisions that affect their lives.
- increased stress.
- increased fear and insecurity.
- feeling burdened by numerous small demands on time and money, all resulting in a large and unreasonable burden.
- increased handing off of government tasks to unequipped family members and cash-strapped non-profit organizations.

The issues of most concern for participants were:

- Health care is being dismantled. Changes are resulting in poorer quality care, increased costs to average Albertans, and reduced public confidence. Albertans are concerned about the consequences of two-tier health care.
- Seniors are confused about the changes to seniors benefits. They are increasingly worried there will not be enough support available to allow them to remain independent.
- Increased class sizes, increased user fees and parental costs, and a sense of hopelessness of attaining employment are breaking down confidence in the education system. Advanced education is seen as out-of-reach, out-of-date and not sensitive to the new demands of society.
- Poverty is increasing dramatically, especially among women, aboriginal people and children. Wages and the availability of jobs are not keeping up with the cost of living.
- Jobs are more scarce, and of lower quality and lower paying. The job market is becoming more insecure.
- The social services system has become punishing and rigid. It has itself become a barrier to achieving independence.
- As times become more insecure, prejudice, stereotyping and blaming are on the rise. Albertans are becoming more inward looking as they look for causes for their situation.
- Children and families are being left out of the social policy calculation.

A *lbertans understand and agree with the need to eliminate the deficit. Social policy requires reform to meet the new challenges of the 1990s and beyond. They believe many of the things happening are positive. They feel, though, that in the area of improving essential quality of life, the government has misplaced its priorities. It has forgotten what quality of life means.*

The government of Alberta has misplaced priorities. People have ceased to be the top priority in social policy. Short term deficit reduction has become the most important consideration.

The government has forgotten what the essential mandate of social policy is: to ensure equitable opportunity to all members of the community. This is an abdication of its moral responsibility.

The social policy decisions made during the past two years reveal a marked short-sightedness in the Alberta government. Reforms have had the short term effect of cutting costs and increasing revenues today, but Albertans have grave concerns about tomorrow. There is a growing underclass alienated from social and economic life in Alberta. There are groups of Albertans, many of whom are children, no longer receiving the support they require to become independent. The result will be increased costs in the future, and a severely destabilized society. In the long run, all Albertans will pay a heavy social and financial price for inadequate support today.

The Commission heard many ideas from participants for repairing holes in social policy and redirecting social policy gone astray. The Commission makes a series of recommendations to provincial decision makers on how to make social policy enhance quality of life. Many are large, sweeping reforms which the province requires. Others are small, administrative changes that will help foster independence among Albertans.

In keeping with what it heard, the Commission also makes recommendations back to the community and to the corporate sector. All Albertans have a role in improving quality of life and building stronger communities.

The key recommendation, and one the Commission believes has the potential to create hope for Albertans, is that the government replicate the process used by the Commission to hear directly from Albertans. No more roundtables or whistlestop tours of rural Alberta. It is time to truly listen to Albertans. And from listening will come stronger social policy, and with that comes hope.

preface

In one of the small discussion groups, a woman presented the Commissioners with a poem expressing her perspective. She is enrolled in an adult literacy program, and shared with the Commission her new power of expression through words.

Who We Are

We are the forgotten
the unwanted
the rejects
the bum
the slum.

We come from all walks of life
some married
some not
some with children
some not
some with grandchildren
some not.

The only difference is
when our young ones ask us
what does life hold?
We have no choice but to answer
put up with the insults
the labelling
the accusations
the jeers
the persecution
the sneers
you come from the wrong side of town
you're a bum
you have no rights
you're not rich

When a crime is committed
from the wrong side of town
the whole world hears about it
loud and clear
that's OK you're a bum
you come from the slum
you have no rights
you're not rich

but let the shoe be on the other foot
that's OK we'll cover up
you're not a bum
you don't come from the slum
you have rights
you're rich

Oh freedom where are you?
Oh equality when are we going to see you?
When are we going to be equals
living in peace and harmony
no matter what race, creed or education
that's who we actually were meant to be.

- Marge

Introduction

Alberta in the 1990's

In the early 1990s Alberta's situation was not unlike many other provinces and countries. Our economy was shaky. Unemployment was stubbornly high. Government finances were marked with red ink. Social programs and people services were feeling the strain of increasing financial pressure and limited resources. Albertans were in a sour mood.

At the beginning of 1993, Alberta elected a new Premier with a promise for a new kind of government. What followed was a degree of change and reform never before seen in Alberta or Canada. Some called it the "Klein Revolution". Regardless of its name, it presented Albertans with a sweeping redefinition of what government is and how it operates.

In 1993, Alberta's annual budget deficit stood at \$3.8 billion and its accumulated debt had risen to \$23 billion. The new government moved swiftly to slash spending to reduce the deficit. By March of 1995, the government deficit had been turned into a \$432 million surplus. To achieve this turn-around, the government reduced its spending by over \$1.3 billion and increased its revenue by over \$3 billion.

These are massive changes. They are not achieved easily. To achieve its spending cuts, the government began by announcing a 20% reduction in every department's budget. This meant every department had to rethink how it did its job. Some of the results were:

- every government employee was forced to take a 5% pay cut.
- over 12,500 public employees were laid off.
- services such as licensing, liquor sales and highway maintenance were contracted out or privatized.
- funding for kindergarten was cut in half.
- a number of hospitals were closed and health services reduced.
- waiting lists for surgery were allowed to grow.
- optometry and other health services were de-insured.
- physiotherapy, lab tests and other services were drastically reduced and privatized.
- rates for social assistance recipients were reduced. A single employable person now receives \$394 per month, compared with \$479 in 1992 (a 14% reduction).
- Seniors benefits, such as Blue Cross and Seniors Housing Benefit, were reduced.

In addition, the government raised its revenues. It hiked tuition for post-secondary institutions by approximately 40%. It has raised health care premiums by over 26%: a family pays \$816 per year, up from \$648 in 1993. It increased user fees and licensing fees. It redirected its alcohol tax toward higher consumption beverages like beer and wine. It found many ways to recover the direct costs of providing services to Albertans.

But the past two years have been about more than dollars. The changes in social policy have been about revamping the role of government. Government social policy touches all aspects of the community. As government changes both its focus and its role, the shift will have profound consequences for the community.

The Reforms and Quality of Life

The deficit has been successfully eliminated. This is an important achievement. Yet policy decisions like reducing the number of individuals eligible for welfare, longer waiting lists for surgery, less access to kindergarten or to university, affect more than the government's bottom line. Social policy decisions also change people's lives. A policy's impact upon quality of life is equally important as its impact upon the deficit.

The Quality of Life Commission's task is to evaluate the effect of policy on quality of life. It was established to find out how the reforms have caused changes in Albertans' lives.

The Commission was not appointed by any government, private agency or non-profit body. The origins of the Commission can be found with a group of concerned Albertans who got together early in 1995 to discuss the reforms and how they were shaping Alberta. They began approaching well-respected individuals in Edmonton to serve as Commissioners.

Nine individuals agreed to act as Commissioners. Each chose to volunteer their time and energy because of their personal commitment to Alberta and the people who live here. One of the Commissioners was unable to complete the hearing process due to personal matters. Biographies of the eight Commissioners can be found in Appendix A.

The group also approached the Edmonton Social Planning Council, a non-profit research organization with 50 years experience in social policy, to assist in the organizing and coordinating work of the Commission.

The Commission was given the name "The Quality of Life Commission" to reflect its primary goal and focus: to discover how quality of life has been affected by social policy reform.

Quality of Life Commission

The Commission was established with a responsibility to hear from Albertans directly and without a pre-conceived agenda. Its mandate is to:

1.
Act as WITNESS to Albertans' experiences and ensure their voice is not lost.
Its first task is to listen and record.
2.
Remind decision-makers how social policy affects quality of life.
Its second task is to carry the voice of Albertans forward.
3.
Discover the unity within different voices.
Its third task is to articulate the principles Albertans hold to be a part of quality of life.
4.
Create a process that will contribute to a renewal of support and hope.
Its fourth task is to begin the process of community renewal.

Hearing from Albertans

The Commission realized the key to accurately hearing from Albertans was to ensure the hearing process was inclusive, accessible and unbiased. The Commission chose to work in the Edmonton area, to hear from Edmontonians and people living in the surrounding communities, as it lacked the resources to hold hearings province-wide. It also thought Commissioners should live in the same community as the people they are listening to

It designed three ways to hear from people in the community:

1. **Small Discussion Groups:** In groups of one to three Commissioners, the Commission held 21 small discussion groups in all areas of the city and with a wide diversity of participants. It made efforts to hear from a cross-section of Edmontonians, from businesspeople to social assistance recipients, from seniors to newcomers to Canada, from working families to youth and children. A breakdown of the groups is found in Appendix B.
2. **Public Hearing:** The Commission hosted a large public hearing on December 5, 1995. It received 9 scheduled oral presentations from community representatives and heard stories from members of the public in attendance.
3. **Questionnaires and Written Submissions:** The Commission received written submissions and distributed questionnaires for those who did not wish to speak out publicly or in a group setting.

Building Trust

To speak openly about their lives, Albertans need to trust that they will be heard and that the listener is sincere in their request. In recent years, Albertans have experienced an avalanche of commissions, roundtables, committees, inquiries and examinations of all shapes and sizes. Most of these roundtables and committees appear to approach Albertans with an agenda already pre-determined with no real opportunity for discussion. This approach to listening has made many Albertans cynical of such processes. The Commission realized it must take active steps to create an open atmosphere for discussion and to build trust with the participants.

To build trust the Commission:

1. Focused on hearing directly from individuals, rather than through agency representatives.
2. Did not have an invitation list. Information was sent to the community, and anyone who wanted to participate was allowed to come.
3. Guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of all who spoke to the Commission or made a written submission.
4. Designed the 21 small groups to be informal and responsive to participants.
5. Did not direct the topic of conversation. The participants told the Commissioners what their priorities were and led discussion themselves.
6. Asked questions that did not lead to one answer or narrow the scope of response.

The questions, which were the basis of discussion, were an important element in building trust. The Commission asked four open and unbiased questions:

1. What makes up your quality of life?
2. How has the quality of your life changed in the past two years, and what has caused it to change?
3. What can be done by community and by government to improve your quality of life?
4. What can each person do to improve their own quality of life?

Most importantly, each Commissioner came to the hearing process with a strong and sincere desire to truly listen to people's experience and to carry that experience forward.

Consequently, participants were open and frank. The Commission thanks everyone who participated for their willingness to speak openly and to allow us into their lives for a few moments.

What was heard

The Commission entered the hearing process with an understanding that social policy affects quality of life. The Commission was surprised at the depth of the effect. For many, social policy decisions not only affect quality of life, they influence the very SURVIVAL of life.

Decisions that seem inconsequential and small, like a \$12 per month increase in health premiums or the elimination of government paid eye examinations, in reality result in a substantial effect upon people's quality of life. Their ability to control their lives and move forward can be hampered and made more difficult by even small social policy decisions. Larger decisions, like early release from hospital, can sometimes mean life and death.

The Commission also found the participants shared a courage and determination to survive. Despite barriers, despite setbacks, they continue to struggle to do what they can to find a better life for themselves.

How People Define Quality of Life

The Commission spoke with hundreds of people from all walks of life. Each person brought their own unique perspective and situation to the discussion. The diversity was one of the joys of the hearing process.

Each person told the Commission what they believe makes up quality of life. From their words, a definition of quality of life became very clear.

1. Meeting Basic Necessities

"Quality of life is knowing where my next meal is coming from."

small session participant

This is the primary element to quality of life. The Commission heard from men and women who do not have enough food to eat each day, or are worried about where the money to pay the rent will come from at the end of the month. When an individual's most basic needs are not met, there can be no discussion about quality of life. Only when they are secure in basic necessities can a person consider fulfilling other parts of their life.

2. Hope

"I want to see a community where the largest part of the population has an opportunity or at least some hope to get beyond where they are today. I see a lack of hope in Alberta."

small session participant

People need to believe that the future will be better than the present. It is the basis for moving forward and trying to build one's life. People told the Commission it is becoming more difficult to keep hope. Without hope, individuals fall into inactivity and discouragement.

3. Self-determination

"I want to have a say in my future."

small session participant

People need to feel the actions they take will have some influence over the course of their life. To feel this, their actions must be followed by some change in their situation. The Commission heard that people are increasingly feeling that their personal actions make no difference. Without a sense of control, individuals fall into helplessness.

4. Health and Well-being

"Good health is everything to me."

-small session participant

Quality of life depends on good health. If someone is ill or feels unhealthy, it brings down their sense of themselves and of the world around them. Knowing there is adequate health care available to prevent illness and cure illness is an integral part of quality of life.

5. Security

"The statistics say crime is going down. But there are doubts in the minds of some. They see more people on the streets with hands out. They just don't feel safe on the street."

small session participant

People need to feel safe. They need to know that no harm will come to them in their home or their community. The Commission heard that people are feeling less safe in Alberta. Feeling less secure in our community breaks down our connection to the community. We separate ourselves off from our community.

6. Community

"My courage to keep going comes from the people here, [in this room]. We all stick together. ... It comes from that sense of community where people truly care and trust one another."

small session participant

"Sometimes it is not a job that needs to be provided, but some encouragement, someone to stand and talk with you a while."

small session participant

People need to feel a part of a broader community. Support from their neighbours and those who share similar situations is an integral part of quality of life. Having access to the recreational and cultural opportunities in the community is also an important part of feeling a part of the community. The Commission heard how individuals strive to find a community where they feel included. It also heard a growing sense of alienation from community, a sense that as community members we are becoming more closed and entrenched. Opportunities to share activities with community members are becoming closed to many people in Alberta.

*Government is not the lone guarantor of an individual's quality of life.
A person needs more than good social policy to have a high quality of life.
However, poor social policy can by itself diminish quality of life.*

The Quality of Life Commission heard how the six elements of quality of life can and are affected by social policy. Poor social policy can undermine a person's ability to achieve a satisfactory quality of life. Good social policy can create an environment where individuals can build each of the six elements of their life.

The Quality of Life Commission believes that social policy must be assessed by its effect on the six elements of quality of life.

In Their Own Words

The Commission heard many examples of how social policy influences quality of life. Many of these examples were compelling statements of the different dimensions of quality of life. The following are just a few samples of what the Commission heard during its listening process.

At the public hearing, a man compared the deaths of two close family members and the care they received:

“In 1993, my father was terminally ill. After doing what they could for him in the hospital, they found a space for him in Youville [a unit that cares for elderly and dying individuals]. He spent his last few weeks of life there. He was comfortable and received the best of care. He died in peace.

This September [1995], my grandfather broke his hip. He was taken to the Royal Alex [Hospital], had his operation and they didn't know what to do with him. So they shuffled him off to Youville. He spent four weeks in Youville and they said, well, that's the maximum. What can we do with him? So they said, we'll take him back to the Alex. But they couldn't take him because they were overbooked. So they took him down to the extended care at the General [Health Centre]. The day he was admitted, I went with him. He sat in a diaper for four hours waiting to be admitted. My aunt came to visit him that day and he wasn't feeling very well. He passed away that night. I phoned the next day to find out what happened. They said 'he came in sick.' Why wasn't he treated for something?

The sad thing about the whole situation is that in 1993 my father had a chance to die with dignity and my grandfather didn't. And that is very, very sad.”

.....

A well-educated mother living on social assistance called the Commission to tell of her situation:

She and her three children have been receiving social assistance on and off for the past few years. Recently she developed a business idea to make herself more independent. She would offer workshops to small groups of people on how to juggle home and family life with holding a job. She began to work very seriously on building contacts to establish a client base. In the first few months, she did not earn much income, and what income she did earn, she reported to her worker. The business was slowly growing and she was optimistic. She was also very thankful for the social assistance benefits she received to support her and her children. After six months, it looked like with a couple more months work, she could turn it into a full-time activity with enough income to support her children. At this time, her worker approached her and informed her that social services was going to classify her as self-employed and cut her off social assistance. She explained that the business was not yet at a state of self-sufficiency but that it would be in a couple more months. There was no flexibility. She had the choice of keeping the business and losing her financial support or give up the business and stay on social assistance. Fearing not being able to provide for her children for three or four months, she chose to give up the business. “I am resentful that I was forced into that decision.” she said. “With a little flexibility, I could be on my own now. Instead I'm still sitting on welfare.”

.....

At the public hearing, an inner city minister told the Commission what she sees every day:

“Over the past two years, we’ve seen dramatic changes. ... We operate a food bank in the inner city. Two years ago if we distributed to 100 people in a week, that would be a busy week. Today we distribute to 3000 a month. And that is regular. People are having to choose between food and shelter. And this being the inner city, they naturally choose shelter for safety and warmth. We have young mothers hooking to pay rent.

On top of the 3,000 we serve at the food bank, we provide a hot meal everyday to 250 to 300 people. Two years ago we served a meal once a week, today we do it Monday to Friday. These people come because they are hungry and have nowhere else to go.

We also have a clothing bank. Two years ago it was open one day a week. Now it's open everyday and takes up a whole floor of the church.”

.....

A young native mother who recently moved to Edmonton to escape an abusive husband told the Commission in a small session what it is like to try getting by:

“My courage to keep going comes from my kids. I’m their mom. ... I’m new in Edmonton. I don’t know anyone. If it wasn’t for my kids pulling the blanket from my head I wouldn’t get out of bed. Yesterday at five o’clock in the afternoon I realized I hadn’t had a shower, I hadn’t got out of the t-shirt I woke up in. You have to get up and make yourself have a shower and look like a human being. You don’t feel like going anywhere. My babies are one and two. You gotta get them bundled up, so to get from my apartment to the bus stop is a big thing. ... I want to work, but can’t find anyone who understands what it is like to struggle just to get through the day.”

.....

A man living with HIV told the Commission in a small session about his life before and after getting HIV.

“Before I got HIV, at one time I was making \$6,000 a month on a seasonal basis working in the oil fields. I always worked since the age of 15. As a bartender, in a restaurant, road crew, farming, cattle trainer, you name it. Now I can’t go near it. ... I’ve been declared unemployable and untrainable. I haven’t been able to take courses for upgrading. I only have grade 11 education. However, I have been taking computer courses, so I can upgrade and better myself. Because someday I’m going to beat this disease and I’m going to be able to go back to work. I hope.

The roof caved in on my whole house. In May the house was hit by lightning and the roof caved in, so I moved to the garage. On June 20 the house burned down completely. I tried to get the place condemned so I could move. I couldn’t get anyone to come and look. I started a bonfire, it was humungous. It was there for three days. I live four blocks from a fire hall. It was burning, yet nobody came. I was trying to get the attention of somebody and nobody came. Probably because the word had gotten out about me being HIV positive.

So I live in the garage with a wood stove. Insulation is stuffed into the walls, with no drywall. I did it because the weather turned cold. I have materials to rebuild the house, but can’t get anyone to help me. I can’t move because I can’t get a damage deposit.”

.....

A newcomer to Canada told the Commission in a small session how immigrants are feeling isolated from the community and are getting discouraged:

“I know five families who went back to Chile. The economy there seems better. Of 15 families who came from Lebanon last year, 10 are going back to the homeland. Another man came from Peru five years ago. He is thinking of going back. He got English language certificates, but can’t find a job. The people who come here come for a better life. For a better life. If they can’t find it here, it is better to go back home and have own family, own support, own language to speak, own country to live in. They come for stability, safety, security, happiness.

Why are they leaving here, why are they going back to Lebanon? It shows things are not so great. Canada is perfect, but for whom? For very few people who are sitting above the invisible ceiling. For example cutting the jobs. Whose jobs? Not those who earn thousands a month."

.....

A family told the Commission at a small session of how things have changed for them.

The husband had steady jobs in the furniture industry. Well paying. In the past two years he has had three jobs. He lost all three because the companies went into receivership. Now he finds himself unemployed. He will work anywhere for anything. He took six weeks of classes to help find a job. He applies to five or ten jobs a day in his job search. All he can find is jobs offering \$5 an hour. They have two children. And before he can even accept a \$5 an hour job, he has to find childcare.

.....

A young single mother going to university told the Commission in a questionnaire response of what she wants from her life:

"I am presently in my fourth year. I will graduate, but because of cutbacks I do not know if I will find a job. My student loan is enormous and cause for anxiety if I do not find a job. ... I would like to have my children be able to go to the refrigerator and have a glass of milk without being yelled at. I would like them to be able to have a snack or treat occasionally. I would like not to have to worry about how I'm going to clothe them and provide for them. I would like to not worry about running out of toilet paper and female hygiene products. I would like to know that I can go to the hospital and receive service for health needs."

.....

At a small session, a young woman illustrated what can happen to families when community breaks down. She related a story about a friend at school:

"This family used to be totally rich. Like they had everything that you could actually dream off. Both parents got laid off. They have two kids, a daughter and a son. They had to sell their house, they had to sell their car. They just couldn't afford anything after a year of no work. So their son decided to go and steal stuff and the police started getting on his case. So obviously the parents turn their attention to him. They were always scolding him, giving him all the attention, and all of sudden the daughter started feeling left out, feeling no one cared about her. So, now the whole family has fallen apart - the son's in jail, the daughter's run away and now they have nothing left. Families do break up without some sort of support from the community."

.....

The Effects of Social Policy Reform

The Commission asked participants how their quality of life had been affected, and what they believed to be the causes. The response to this question was remarkable. Participants possessed a very clear sense of what influences the quality of their life.

The Commission heard how specific issues and particular policy decisions changed people's lives. It also heard how many of the changes address more than one issue, seeming to form a variety of themes to unify the different concerns expressed.

Consequently, the Commission believes it is important to articulate the themes of change as well as the issues of change.

themes

1. Polarization

"The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Those who support what is happening are the one's with money. Everyone should share [in fixing our problems]. Not only poor people should share, the rich should share too."

small session participant

People are sensing that the gap between the haves and the have-nots is widening. They believe government policy is encouraging the widening of this gap. The Commission heard the concern that cuts and burdens of deficit reduction are falling disproportionately on children, the poor, minorities and women. Cuts to social assistance and education are burdening the poor more than the wealthy. The growth of a second tier of health care provides better access to the rich, and weakens access for everyone else. Increased demands on families to accomplish tasks fall disproportionately on women. Youth are being locked out of the employment market by lack of jobs. Seniors face the effects of reduced health services more than younger Albertans. The Commission heard a desire to ask those who have benefited most from society to share equitably in the burdens of deficit reduction.

2. Lack of Opportunity

"I've never found it so hard to find work. This is the first time I haven't been able to find anything, not even retail help."

small session participant

The changing nature of Alberta's economy is being felt. The Commission heard an alarming frustration at the lack of opportunity in today's economy. A large portion of Alberta's population is being left behind. People are finding it harder to find a job, and when they do, the job is more likely to be low paying and part time with no benefits. People thought the government was not giving priority to creating jobs.

3. Trapped in a Cycle

"Social assistance pushes you onto a job training program. Go to work for five months on this program, and then back on UIC. UI runs out, then back to assistance. And she starts again."

small session participant

Due to the lack of opportunity, participants reported a feeling of getting caught in an endless cycle. This feeling arose from the sense that there were many government-sponsored programs in existence, but that none of them focused on building independence. As a result, people shift from program to program, without moving forward. Participants felt this arose from the fact that the programs were not designed with the individual needs of people in mind.

4. Powerlessness

"We haven't got the right set of ears to listen to us. We have to get heard so people know what we need and what we will do. But the ears aren't listening; they're interrupting."

small session participant

As a result of the endless cycle of programs and the lack of opportunity, people expressed an increased sense of powerlessness. They felt unheard and increasingly cut off from the people who make the decisions. Their own personal initiatives fail to bear fruit, and instead they find themselves stuck in a cycle of no opportunity.

5. Stress

"The stress of living in poverty is too much, resulting in my becoming deeply depressed, almost to the point of suicide."

questionnaire response

The Commission heard, especially from businesspeople and from people who continue to hold well-paying jobs, that levels of stress are increasing. Many policy changes have not affected pocketbooks directly, but instead have increased the amount of stress under which people must live.

6. Fear

"I'm thankful I have my job but I had better run like heck because more want my job."

small session participant

"I don't speak out openly because I'm afraid of retribution, afraid I'll lose what little care I get."

small session participant

Combined forces of the changing economy and the new instability of social programs are creating new levels of fear among Albertans. People are more afraid of falling into poverty, losing their job or not finding enough to eat. They are becoming more afraid of crime and of ending up in isolation, with no community support. This is a sign of a social contract breaking down.

7. Cumulative Effect

"School is changing. They keep coming back to me asking for money - for field trips, for books, for supplies. And the worst is that they keep making me admit I can't afford it. It's degrading."

small session participant

Many of the social policy changes have been small: a small increase in premiums or user charges, or the elimination of a secondary service, or a cap on the amount of service provided. Each by itself takes only a few dollars out of people's pockets. Cumulatively they end up costing individuals more than they can afford. Participants expressed great frustration at the constant demand for "nickels and dimes". This makes it harder to make ends meet and results in greater fear and stress.

8. Reliance on Non-government Support

"There have been changes in the number and type of requests [for assistance] our Rotary Club receives. More of them and for things the government used to provide. Now we provide it."

small session participant

"I was sent home the day after my baby was born. Let your husband or parents help you, I was told. Well, I don't have a husband."

small session participant

A clear trend identified by participants was the need to turn in greater frequency to non-profit agencies, neighbours, family and friends. They are appreciative of what support they receive, and thankful the support exists, but feel frustrated that they must scrounge for what ever they can find. Then there are those who have no family and cannot access agencies. They are left with no support. Organizations working with increasingly inadequate resources to meet demand and family members under increasing stress cannot and do not provide the same consistency of support. It has created a new patchwork of services accessible to some, but not to all.

issues

Government acts through specific programs and policy initiatives. As a result, much of the discussion about social policy focused on specific programs and issues. The Commission highlights the issues raised by participants below.

1. Health Care

Two years ago, Albertans were confident about their health care system. They trusted it to provide the care they required when it was needed. Today, their confidence has been shattered. The Commission heard that two years of cutbacks has seriously depleted our system's ability to respond to health concerns.

"My grandmother was feeling ill. We took her to the hospital emergency. At 3:00 AM they called and said she was asleep and 'could sleep at home'. We picked her up and she died in front of us three hours later. We need health care. Without health care I don't want to look into the future"
small session participant

- The quality of care has been compromised. Fewer hospitals and hospital beds and inadequate staffing ratios have resulted in longer waiting lists, shorter hospital stays, and more inconsistent care. More mistakes are being made and more conditions being inadequately responded to. For the first time in 25 years Albertans are afraid of getting sick.
- Albertans recognize the financial and emotional benefits of increased community care and home based care. People are not afraid of receiving their care at home instead of in the hospital. Unfortunately, homecare programs are woefully underfunded. The increase in demand is seriously outstripping resources. Quite simply, Albertans are not receiving the level of care they were promised when hospitals were closed. In addition, increased use of homecare adds to families' expenses, as they must pay for medications and supplies which previously were provided without charge in the hospital.

"Homecare used to be 24 hours a day. Then the government cut it to \$3,000 a month. Now it is \$2,000 per month. Families are expected to pick up the slack."
written submission

- Cutbacks in health have forced families to carry a greater burden for care. Untrained and unassisted family members are being expected to do the work of registered nurses and practical nurses. This burden weighs heavily on women in particular. Alberta families have not been properly equipped to adequately handle the increased responsibility.
- Health care premiums have risen dramatically since 1993. Increased use of homecare results in numerous costs for individuals previously covered by the hospital. Even the cost of flu shots has risen, placing undue stress and hardship on many Albertans.

"Even at 80% coverage from my private plan, I am going to have to sell my house to pay for the medication from this disease (HIV)."
small session participant

- Albertans foresee the eventual growth of a two tier health system, where the rich receive top quality care for a price and most Albertans receive far less than they deserve. Albertans are scared of this prospect.

2. Seniors

"The cuts to the Alberta Seniors Benefit Plan mean I need to find cheaper accommodation. We'll manage, but it's hard. I wish they had consulted us."

small session participant

- Seniors are particularly concerned about health care cuts. They feel they are the most affected by reductions in the level of care.
- Seniors are confused and worried about changes to provincial seniors benefits. The speed and size of changes leaves seniors unsure what they are entitled to. Many seniors have lost benefits entirely and many others have had their benefits reduced. Confusion and uncertainty are leading to anxiety about the future.
- Seniors want to remain independent and self-determining. They do not want to become dependent upon family or public institutions. They expressed the need for certainty about their future benefits and pensions. Current levels of confusion and insecurity are undermining their sense of independence.

3. Education

"Large classes make it impossible for teachers to spend enough time with each student to get to know each other. Class sizes are increasing, making the teachers' job more difficult. My daughter's class contains 29 pupils split between two grades. The older students are expected to help teach the younger students."

small session participant

- Parents and students are seeing the result of cutbacks in the quality of teaching they receive. Class sizes are growing and teachers are becoming more stressed and overworked. This is undermining the quality of education students receive.
- Parents are being asked to directly cover the costs of education. User fees, book fees, field trip fees, fundraising drives are all increasing. Many parents find this prohibitive and difficult to manage. More school energy is being spent fundraising, taking away from focus on instruction.
- Schools are being asked to perform tasks traditionally not within their mandate. They are finding they need to feed their students through snacks and hot lunches and even dispense medication. The teachers and administrators have neither the training nor resources to take on these additional burdens.
- Students are feeling hopeless. A sense of "why learn if there are no jobs available afterward" is appearing. This is a particularly troublesome trend. Participants believed it is resulting in increased violence and other problems in Alberta schools.
- Advanced education is becoming less accessible. Tuition and other related costs have moved beyond the reach of most Albertans. Many Albertans who three years ago would have returned to school to improve their situation have now given up on the possibility. It now seems out of reach.
- Related to this, the Students Finance Board (SFB) is perceived as not meeting the needs of Albertans in the 1990s. It has become too rigid and remained stuck in a 1970s vision of school and work. Students cannot receive assistance for night school or part time school. Rates are set at amounts that make it difficult for all students, but especially single parents, to make ends meet. Debt loads are becoming prohibitive. \$40,000 is not uncommon, and this is perceived as too hefty to handle.

4. Poverty

"I happen to have an office that overlooks a couple of dumpsters. I'm getting to know the people who visit them. I know how they work. Hooks, bags, shopping carts. We're becoming more like the country to the south. The first time I saw [homelessness] was on a business trip to Washington D.C. What we have seems to be slipping away."

small session participant

- Quite simply, poverty is growing dramatically in Alberta. This poverty is not only among social assistance recipients and the marginally employed. Poverty is also growing among working families and among previously middle class families.
- The situation of aboriginal people in Alberta is of particular concern. They experience poverty and the social problems associated with poverty (addictions, suicide, crime, sense of hopelessness) at levels well above that of non-aboriginal people. The Commission heard of the entrenching of this poverty during the past two years.
- Child poverty is becoming critical in Alberta.
- Wages are not keeping up with the cost of living. Job security is reduced.
- Cuts to social assistance payments have placed recipients not just below the "poverty line" (which they were before), but below the "basic necessities line". These Albertans cannot meet basic requirements for life like food and shelter anymore.
- At the same time Albertans are witnessing increased poverty, they are also witnessing increased affluence for some. The Commission heard very clearly that Albertans see the gap between the rich and the poor widening. The past two years of reform have been whittling away at the middle class and pushing those living in poverty further down. Albertans feel the benefits are being felt solely at the top.

5. Jobs

"This government likes to pay for job clubs, but not for jobs."

small session participant

- Albertans are finding it harder to find jobs. What jobs they are finding are of a low-paying, low quality variety. This is breeding insecurity, frustration and hopelessness. It also is creating an imbalance of power. Employees are in a vulnerable position relative to employers, and some employers are abusing the vulnerability. Workers are being forced to perform unpaid overtime, work longer hours and are being cheated on their paycheques. Anyone who attempts to speak out is fired. Participants realized the government is not solely responsible for these changes, but believe decision-makers have not done enough to address it.
- The minimum wage is too low to live on. Currently it is \$5.00 an hour, the lowest in Canada.
- People who are holding jobs are afraid of losing them. Consequently they are working harder and longer for less money. Many are holding down two jobs. This creates stress, fear and burnout.
- New forms of employment such as self-employment, casual jobs and part-time work provide less protection for employees than traditional jobs. This is increasing stress among these workers and leaving them more vulnerable to economic shifts.
- Participants focused much attention on the inadequacy of job training programs. They feel they do not help build employability. They merely create a cycle of Unemployment Insurance, Social Assistance, temporary training placement and then back to UI. They fail to connect participants to real jobs or address real issues in employability.

6. Social Services

"We are forced to do three loops this week, two handstands next week, four somersaults the week after, just for money that doesn't even buy enough food."

small session participant

"We are trying to change our cycle, but they keep pushing us back."

small session participant

- Participants involved with the social services system had a lot to say about how it works. General sentiment was that it operates contrary to its purpose and to the rhetoric of the minister. It acts as a barrier to real independence and individual responsibility.
- At the root, the system does not provide enough in financial benefits. People cannot live on what is given to them. Consequently they are taking from food budgets to pay for other essentials and going without adequate clothing or nutrition.

"My choice is feed my kids or feed myself. I choose my kids."

small session participant

- Recipients are frustrated by the system's impersonal nature. They believe increased caseloads, increased use of computerized telephone systems and reduced access to workers makes the system too distant and unresponsive.
- The system has become too rigid. It looks simply at dollars and how to save them. It has ceased to look at the people it serves and how to get them back on their feet. Consequently, its services have become counterproductive.
- "Essential" entitlements are not being communicated. An unofficial "no tell" policy has been implemented for case workers. Recipients are not told what they have a right to receive, but must ask directly for it.
- It has become extremely difficult for clients to receive "non-essential" items or one-time requests. Such so-called "luxuries" as phones, damage deposits, bus passes, baby diapers and laundry have been virtually cut off. People must now provide these items for their families from their "standard allowance", which is in reality their food money or rent money.¹
- There is no recognition of what is required to find a job today. Again it has become near impossible to receive money for bus passes, work clothes or tools, flexible child care arrangements, or clothes suitable for job interviews.

"I got a job. But I needed some work clothes. I was going to take a letter from my employer to my [social] worker, but was told to forget it because welfare doesn't pay for that any more. I lost that job."

small session participant

- Recreation, even for children, is not regularly provided. There is no recognition of the need for some basic recreation to allow for the psychological strength to find work.

¹ Officially, "supplementary benefits" are still available under Supports for Independence (SFI) policy for special circumstances or as a "last resort". In practice, workers have been ordered to apply the "last resort" requirement very stringently. Consequently, most items, such as child care, diapers, work clothes and phone hook ups are practically impossible to receive. Workers are telling clients to have family pay for them or go to the Bissell Centre or another non-profit agency.

7. Attitudes

"Stop the immigrants! They get more than I do."

*small session participant
receiving social assistance*

"I came here, I found a job. Why can't they?"

*small session participant
newcomer speaking about welfare recipients*

"Natives are classified as bums, good for nothing assholes. ... There's nothing wrong with them."

small session participant

- Participants told the Commission they are experiencing an alarming increase in stereotyping and prejudice. They identify the cause as increased fear and insecurity running throughout the community. People are turning inward and trying to find scapegoats for our community's problems.
- Alberta is witnessing group turning on group. Seniors and youth are blaming one another. Men and women are blaming one another. Rich and poor are blaming one another. Particular targets are aboriginal people, minorities, newcomers to Canada and people living in poverty. They are receiving the brunt of the scapegoating and stereotyping.
- All Albertans are feeling more isolated from their community. A sense of "we're in this together" is breaking down. This contributes to the scapegoating.

8. Children and Families

"The worst part is that the kids are the real victims."

small session participant

"With children we can pay now or pay later. This government wants to pay later."

small session participant

- Participants told the Commission they believe kids are being forgotten in all the changes. In trying to cut corners we are paying the mother or father lower wages, or cutting back their benefits and asking them to do with less, forgetting that they have children who in turn must do with less.
- Increased stress, insecurity and instability breeds family breakdown. Families are experiencing more difficulty in staying together due to social policy changes.
- There is inadequate child care support for families. Spots are available, but many are too expensive for lower income and middle income families to afford. There is insufficient funding for families in need. Families can't find information about resources available for child care. The child care system lacks flexibility. There is little childcare available for evenings or for short term needs.
- Too few opportunities exist for young adults and teenagers, especially native youth. The lack of opportunity threatens to grow into entrenched social problems for these young people. Of particular note are the lack of jobs and the lack of leisure time or recreational activities for Alberta youth.

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Analysis

A government that refuses to pay for diapers for families on social assistance or that makes seniors wait nine months for hip surgery has forgotten what makes up quality of life. A government that asks young people to mortgage their future for an education with little chance of a job at the end has forgotten what creates hope. A government that allows workers to work twice as hard for less pay has forgotten what creates security.

Albertans told the Commission that the government of Alberta has the wrong focus for its reforms. It has forgotten about people. It has forgotten about community.

The Alberta government's approach to social policy has been one-sided. There has been a focus on the bottom line, on ensuring social policy fits within fiscal policy guidelines. Concern for how social policy shapes people's lives gets pushed down the priority list.

Consequently, the effects of social policy do not receive appropriate measurement or assessment and people begin falling through the cracks.

Burden of Cuts

The government has asked Albertans to share in the burden of reducing the deficit. It has chosen to try to cut costs in most areas of government activity, which it says will evenly distribute the sacrifice.

Looking at the results of the cuts, however, reveals a different picture. The most vulnerable in our society are paying the highest price for deficit reduction. As money becomes tighter and as services are reduced, privatized or removed, it is Albertans beginning with the least who feel the greatest pinch.

The Quality of Life Commission found social policy changes hit hardest on the poor, women, minorities, aboriginal people and youth and children. This disproportionate burden must be noted and analyzed.

These Albertans are more likely to access services and programs. Newcomers to Canada require language training and support to adapt to Canadian culture. Women require access to quality child care so they can remain employed. Young Albertans look toward the education system to establish their hope for the future. As services become less reliable and more difficult to access, it is these Albertans who will fall backward first.

Disproportionate effects result from misplaced priorities. This happens because the consideration of what individuals and communities need has taken second place to the drive to eliminate the deficit.

Misplaced Priorities

The decline in quality of life observed by the Commission can be directly attributed to the lack of priority given to education, health and social policy. When priority for these items declines, social costs like family breakdown and poverty increase. The past two years have seen a marked shift in the priorities of the Alberta government. The shift is causing a great deal of suffering and struggle for hundreds of thousands of Albertans.

"I came from Manitoba to Alberta because it was supposed to have more jobs. That was two years ago. I've been on social assistance since I got here. I want a profession. I want to become a group home worker. There are jobs in group homes, but I need to complete my CPR course. They won't give me a job until I train for CPR. I have asked welfare if they would pay for a training course. They said no."

public hearing participant

Essentially, people have stopped being the priority in decision-making. Consequently decisions are being made that do not reflect the true needs of individuals. This makes for poor social policy.

The government has forgotten that each person who turns to the community or to government for assistance is an individual with a unique path out of their crisis. It seems to believe that if people find a way to cope and that if they continue to struggle to survive, then people do not need the support of government. This could not be more untrue.

People are capable of surviving, even under the most difficult of circumstances. This is a testament to their desire to be independent and self-determining. Yet, there are many things an individual cannot accomplish on their own. And that is where government must take a role.

Only government can properly ensure adequate health care and quality education for all, or protect the most vulnerable from destitution, poverty and homelessness. By setting its sights solely on the priority of deficit reduction, the government has allowed these essential and critical areas to wither.

Only government can ensure all members of the society have an equitable opportunity to share in the life of the community. In the past two years, government policy priorities have ceased to reflect that essential mandate. This is a moral abdication of its responsibility.

The Alberta government has made a clear and unequivocal statement about where its social priorities lie. Unfortunately, it is not with individual Albertans.

Shaping Society Undermining Community

Basically, social policy priorities come down to a decision of what kind of society we want in Alberta. Social policy reflects what we want our community to look like.

No matter which decision we make, there are always consequences. If a society chooses to spend all its resources on arms and weaponry, it will have an arsenal unparalleled anywhere, but will also have people with no food to eat and no schools. If a society chooses to put all its resources in hospitals and none in public health, it will have hospital beds full of people who have caught preventable diseases.

There are always choices to be made in shaping a society. The key to good policy making is balancing the consequences that come with each choice. We must be careful to ensure we are not creating irreparable harm to one part of our society while we focus on another part.

The Alberta government has made the choice to unravel the web that made up the social support system in Alberta because it is "unaffordable". They have also made the choice to leave the threads dangling, and to encourage unfettered individual initiative. These are choices designed to remake Alberta society with a very different face.

The Commission has already indicated its agreement with the undesirable and dangerous existence of deficits. However, the Commission realizes there are a number of ways to achieve the same goal. The choices of the past two years betray a short-sightedness in government, one that will ultimately render those choices ineffective and costly.

We have already begun to see the consequences of the decisions. The gap between the so-called "haves" and the "have-nots" is growing. Participants perceived that those who already possess some level of wealth and status have found the new Alberta to provide them with greater freedom to increase their personal quality of life. As for the

"have-nots", their range of opportunity is narrowing as they increasingly scramble to find a job, keep a job, or find food for tomorrow.

As the gap widens, and increasing numbers of "have-nots" find their community support has withered or been cut away, we find a trend toward an alienated class, isolated and disconnected from their community. They lose connection to community because the community offers them nothing; why become a part of something that does not acknowledge the reality of your life? People with no sense of belonging to community are more likely to experience family breakdown, suffer from addictions and resort to crime and other non-social activities.

The growth in Alberta of an alienated class has negative consequences not only for the individuals who fall into the class, but for all Albertans, for it makes our communities less safe, drains potential from the community and spends resources on repairing rather than building (addiction programs or maintenance enforcement rather than recreation programs or community centres).

Alienation and growing disparity develops into animosity between groups. As people grow more afraid for their own future, and see another group being treated differently, their intolerance rises. As people become more isolated from their community, there is less opportunity and desire to learn from other members of the community. And when we stop learning from others, we grow intolerant of them. Alberta is seeing an increase in racism, sexism, homophobia, stereotyping and blaming.

Allowing people to live in poverty, without jobs and in social distress costs everyone dearly. It costs the individuals themselves in innumerable ways. But it also costs every Albertan.

For every unemployed individual, the Alberta government pays twice. First they pay for services and assistance to keep the individual and their family alive. Then they pay in lost revenue. A person with a job pays taxes and contributes to the government coffers. Permitting long term unemployment at high levels only serves to destabilize government finances and add to our deficit worries.

It is true government cannot make jobs appear from nowhere. There are many global economic trends beyond the reach of a provincial government. But that does not mean the government is totally powerless. Providing the tools to people to connect to the jobs that are available and finding creative ways to allow communities to create new jobs can and will contribute to reducing the deficit.

The growth of an alienated class also destabilizes Alberta society. Albertans need to be clear with themselves. Poverty, family breakdown and alienation come with consequences. Families who do not get proper nutrition are sicker more often. This costs us more in health services. Families who experience long term unemployment are more likely to break down, causing more poverty and isolation. Alienation increases the risk of addiction, which has a high human cost and a high financial cost in health services and addictions counselling. Young people who come from troubled families are more likely to fall into crime and other non-social activities. This costs us through the justice system and the penal system.

And probably the greatest and most tragic cost of all is the price paid by children. Children who do not have enough to eat, or who see little hope for their future do poorly at school. Children living in poverty cannot afford to go to university. These children who do not get what they need today will continue to cost us for 40 years.

*Let us be clear. Cutbacks to welfare, education, health do not save us money.
Refusing to give priority to job creation does not save us money. We still pay.
It is a question of how we pay and when.*

*The Commission is of the opinion that the Alberta government has not realized the different ways that it inevitably pays. Consequently, the choices that have been made are short-sighted and will ultimately prove counter-productive. They have chosen to cut corners today.
The sad reality is that our children will pay tomorrow.*

*"There once was a farmer who owned a mule who could plow 40 acres a day on a bale of hay. One day the farmer decided to cut the bale in half and see what the mule could do. It plowed another 40 acres the next day. So the farmer cut the bale in half again. The mule did another 40 acres. He was so excited by this, he decided to do the 40 acres with no hay. The mule died.
How can we expect people to work on nothing?"*

fable from public hearing presentation



Recommendations

When the Commission began its work, it set out to find what Albertans considered important to the quality of life and what the government, community and they themselves could do to improve it. The commission believes responsibility for quality of life cannot lie solely with the government, for they are not the only ones responsible. The government and social policy play an important role in shaping quality of life, but equally important is the role an individual and their neighbours play.

With that understanding in mind and based on the desire to build quality of life for all Albertans, the Commission wishes to set out recommendations not only to decision-makers within the province of Alberta but also to the corporate sector and to all Albertans.

In keeping with its mandate, the Quality of Life Commission makes recommendations based upon what it heard during its listening process. The recommendations are intended neither to be exhaustive nor to respond to all the trends identified by the Commission.

In the interests of accuracy, whenever specific claims were made by participants about a government policy or program, the Commission attempted, to the best of its ability, to confirm the accuracy of the claim. Consequently, while certain details may differ, the Commission is confident its analysis accurately reflects how the policy is being implemented and how Albertans are experiencing that policy.

Challenges to Community

1.

To reduce isolation, individuals must come together in small, informal groups.

Albertans need to take active steps to meet their neighbours. Connecting to community, building a community, begins with talking with one another, and learning from one another. The Commission has heard how Albertans are feeling isolated, disconnected from community and how this isolation is feeding intolerance and inequity. Government and non-profit agencies often ask people to talk with each other in large, structured, formalized meetings. This is intimidating and counter-productive. The small sessions organized by the Commission demonstrated how a small group of people coming together in a safe, informal, trusting environment can learn from one another and build energy to create new initiatives. These small sessions need to be repeated in every community across Alberta, organized by the people who live in these communities.

2.

Albertans need to support existing small scale, local initiatives aimed at making incremental changes in life situation. They also need to create more of these types of initiatives.

Government social policy, no matter how well designed, will always have holes and people will always fall through the cracks. The Commission saw many examples of local initiatives aimed at filling in the holes, such as the food co-op and small informal support groups for mothers in poverty. These initiatives need to be replicated, for they demonstrate the power a small group of people working together can possess. Young mothers with child care difficulties could decide to join together to share baby-sitting. Or some unemployed workers could teach one another their personal skills to make all of them more employable. The size, shape and nature of such local, small scale projects is boundless. What is certain is their effectiveness at making small changes in a corner of someone's world.

3.

Albertans need to build upon their determination to speak to decision makers with one strong voice.

Decision makers respond to strong voices. The Commission has heard how the voices of individual Albertans have become lost. It also heard a desire from Albertans to be more effective at speaking together with one voice so that voice will be heard. This is essential. The route to speaking with one voice lies in coming together in small groups and working together cooperatively. These activities need to be encouraged and be continued.

4.

Albertans need to think and act "to build healthy communities" rather than "to respond to crises in communities".

The Commission heard that people want to start building communities again. To do this, they must begin to think about social problems in terms of how to prevent them, rather than how to solve them. Just like good brushing and keeping sweets to a minimum prevents cavities (and costs less than a trip to the dentist), ensuring every member of the community has proper food, clothing, shelter and real opportunities for a job prevents family breakdown, illness and other social problems.

5.

Middle class Albertans and Albertans with relative levels of security need to become involved in more than charity. They need to become involved in justice.

Some Albertans, such as many seniors, wealthy and middle class Albertans and others, are more fortunate and enjoy a greater quality of life. These individuals have, over the years been very good at giving money and time to charity. This is good and admirable. They can contribute many things to society. As well, they possess a greater responsibility for ensuring our society remains just. The Commission wants these individuals to maintain and strengthen their commitment to charity. Yet there is a need to also become involved in justice. Charity will help one person one day in the year. Justice helps every person every day of the year.

Challenges to the Corporate Sector

6.

The corporate sector needs to begin accepting its share of social responsibility in Alberta. It needs to begin designing and articulating what role it plays in Alberta communities.

The corporate sector in Alberta benefits from doing business in Alberta. A well-educated workforce with good health and relative levels of stability and security helps to make Alberta businesses successful, competitive and profitable. Allowing social instability to build and quality of life to fall undermines Alberta business and their profitability. Poverty and health care are not simply "government problems". All Albertans, including the corporate sector, must take on a piece of the task of building strong communities. Business in Alberta cannot afford to restrict its activities to making profit. It must also make a commitment to making healthy communities.

7.

Alberta businesses need to adopt more flexible and modernized workplace policies. Greater opportunities for flex time, job sharing, continuing education and other flexibilities are required to match workplaces with the new demands of family and community.

The nature of family and of community is changing. Albertans are juggling home, work, school, family and community with greater frequency and intensity. Alberta employers need to recognize the shift in people's lives and adapt their policies to fit with new realities.

Recommendations to Decision Makers

8.

The government of Alberta should clearly renew its commitment to universal, publicly-funded health care. It should reject any move toward a second tier of health care.

Albertans support our Medicare system. Two years ago, their confidence and trust in the system was unmatched anywhere. Today they are worried. They see the system breaking down and are gravely concerned they will not have access in the future to essential health services. Good health is a key principle of quality of life. If all Albertans are to share in good health, our Medicare system must remain intact. Creating a second-tier creates two classes of health recipients, with most Albertans receiving inadequate care.

9

Health decision-makers must place a moratorium on cutbacks in acute care and begin a comprehensive review of health spending. The mandate of the review will be to address long waiting lists, inadequate staff levels and service rationing.

The cuts in health services have undermined the quality of care. Waiting lists have grown to unacceptable levels; staff ratios are at dangerous levels; essential services such as optometry and physiotherapy have become inaccessible. If these cuts are not addressed, the health care system will continue to break apart. The government needs to act swiftly to prevent this result. Recent announcements to reduce waiting lists for hip and heart surgery are not adequate to mend the damage in health care. A comprehensive review of health needs is required, and a planned approach to renewed investment in health is central.

10.

The move toward increased community and home based care, such as homecare, community living, mental health services and addictions services, should continue.

The increased demand for these services must be matched with enough resources to return to 1993 per user ratios.

The government is to be commended for its attempts to move to home and community based care. If adequate support is present, they are cheaper, more effective and more comfortable. While there have been no direct funding cuts to these services, the demand is far outstripping available resources. Consequently, the homecare system is falling apart. Properly funded, homecare will be perceived as a preferable option to institutional care. Inadequately funded, families are unable to provide home support. Successful transition to home-based care is crucial for the success of health reform.

11.

Costs for medication and medical supplies covered in hospitals should be provided free-of-charge to homecare patients.

Families of patients receiving homecare must pay for many medications and medical supplies. If the patient remained in the hospital, those needs would be covered. For homecare to be successful, it cannot be a cost burden on families. To make it a desirable option, services which are free in hospitals need to be free in the home.

12.

The devolution of the Provincial AIDS Program to the Regional Health Authorities should be postponed and reviewed. Before any devolution occurs adequate and comprehensive provincial standards and guarantees of access to services must be implemented and communicated to the community. The mandate of the programs should be amended and expanded to address the social, emotional and physical needs of the "whole" person.

The Provincial AIDS Program is being shifted to the Regional Health Authorities. How each of the Authorities chooses to handle the services of the program remains a mystery. This has people living with AIDS/HIV concerned. They fear becoming lost in the bureaucracy. They identify their needs not as "health" needs, but as a matrix of social needs to assist them to live with their condition. The Regional Health Authorities, with their primary mandate to deliver health services, are not well-placed to provide a more "wholistic" approach to the needs of people living with AIDS/HIV.

13.

Health care premiums increases of the past two years should be reversed and other "user" costs eliminated or minimized.

In the past two years, health care premiums have increased. Other user fees, such as flu shots and charges for completion of medical forms have also increased in price. These regressive and prohibitive costs affect the poor and the sick disproportionately. They have grown to a level which makes it difficult for families to pay. Many of the costs are in the area of preventive services, making those services less accessible, which leads to more health problems down the road.

14.

Policy priority, accompanied with financial resources, should be placed in preventive services and health education.

The government has been moving in the direction of preventive health and better health education. The Commission applauds this move. From hearing from participants, it has become clear more needs to be done. Information about services, and elements for better health is spotty and inconsistent. Of particular concern is the lack of information for groups most in need of greater health education.

15.

Alberta Seniors Benefit Program rules and application must be simplified, with program goals and requirements stated clearly. It must have an independent and comprehensive appeal panel with authority to review all facts of a case.

Seniors are feeling confused by the new Seniors Benefit Program, which recently replaced a number of programs for seniors. The transition has left many seniors lost and unsure of what their rights are. For any program to be effective, the users must understand it and what they are entitled to and responsible for.

16.

A long term funding strategy for the Seniors Benefit Program should be implemented and communicated clearly to Alberta seniors.

Most seniors live on fixed incomes. They depend on their income sources being reliable and stable to plan for their future and to retain their independence. Recent cuts and changes have left many seniors feeling insecure and worried about becoming dependent on their families. They require a longer term contract with the government, stating what their benefit levels will be over the next 5 to 10 years, so they can plan and work to maintain their own independence.

17.

Financial and communication support for programs such as Headstart and School Lunch Programs, which are aimed at equalizing education opportunities for children, must be expanded to allow for greater access in all areas of Alberta.

Children at a disadvantage due to poverty or a broken family do more poorly in school. They quickly enter a cycle which leaves them behind and unprepared for today's economy. If we do not ensure these kids have the same opportunity to learn as any other child, we risk paying for their lack of early success for decades. Headstarts and School Lunch programs are inexpensive, simple, effective solutions to this problem. They work at a community level and do not require layers of administration to achieve their goals. They need to become a priority for decision-makers.

18. Student/teacher ratios in schools must be reduced to pre-1993 levels.

When a teacher must work with too many students, the students do not get the education they need and the teacher becomes stressed and overworked. This is not the way to build for the future. The government has made great strides at reducing administration costs in the education system. It should use that cost savings to supplement instruction resources to reduce class sizes.

19.

More "co-operative" programs in schools and advanced education institutions need to be implemented to increase effective interaction between school and work.

"Co-operative" programs incorporate real job placement as part of the curriculum. Students intersperse classroom instruction with hands-on education in the workplace. These programs effectively bridge the school-work gap, provide tangible work experience and skills to students, and link employers with their prospective employees. Many participants in the listening process expressed positive experiences with co-op education and urged an expansion of such programs.

20.

Detailed guidelines must be developed for user fees, student charges and parent fundraising for school boards across Alberta, outlining what is permitted and laying out requirements for protecting families living in poverty from prohibitive expenses.

User charges, book fees and other expenses are growing at a rapid pace in Alberta. There is no consistency from school to school or even grade to grade. Parents do not know what to expect and cannot plan for such expenses. For many families, the extra costs are simply unaffordable. Alberta decision-makers must acknowledge this trend. If extra charges are unavoidable, then they must be applied consistently and protection for lower income families must be ensured.

21.

Tuition and other educational fees at post-secondary institutions need to be returned to affordable levels.

Albertans are voracious learners. They want to learn and receive higher education. Unfortunately, the cost of getting that education has taken it beyond the grasp of most Albertans. The Commission heard over and over again how individuals' desire and economic need to return to school was thwarted by the excessive costs of tuition. Loans are not acceptable options, for these Albertans cannot afford \$40,000 to \$50,000 in debts with little prospect for a job afterward. To prevent post-secondary education from becoming an option only for the rich, decision makers must take steps to reduce the costs of higher learning.

The rules and regulations of the Alberta Students' Finance Board (SFB) and post-secondary institutions must be revamped and modernized to recognize the changing nature of the Alberta economy. Specifically, these bodies need to become more flexible to allow and encourage part-time study, night time study, staggered study, compressed or elongated programs and so forth.

The economy works differently than it did in the 1950s, yet rules and criteria in the SFB and post-secondary institutions have not changed to meet the new realities. Students are not just young, single recent high school graduates anymore. Older adults with attachment to the labour force and with families are increasingly returning to school. Families try to juggle school, work and children. People want to do part time school while continuing to work. These new realities demand new responses from institutions. Currently the SFB does not recognize night time study or part time study. Institutions do not permit flexible course schedules to allow parents to meet family responsibilities. To keep education accessible, changes must be made.

23.

Job creation must become a key government priority, for it is the key to addressing many other issues. The government must take active steps to encourage small, community based economic initiatives and the creation of long-term employment.

Governments cannot make jobs appear out of nowhere. A complex combination of forces determines how many jobs are available in a community and their quality. Yet governments do possess some powers at their disposal to focus economic energy and encourage local community development. Passive solutions, like lowering the tax base and dropping labour costs are counter-productive and serve to undermine the revenue base of the government and reduce people's quality of life. Financing mega-projects is risky and has dubious effect on job creation. Small, community initiatives create jobs and build stronger communities simultaneously. More active measures need to be made at a local level.

24.

The government should raise the minimum wage to a livable level and index it to the cost of living.

Alberta's minimum wage is not enough for families or even single people to support themselves. It also acts as an economic barrier to people trying to enter or re-enter the workforce. If social support payments provide more than the minimum wage, causing people to turn down work, the problem is not that support payments are too high, but that wages are too low. The costs of raising the minimum wage are outpaced by the social and economic benefits of providing a wage to people that allows them financial security. A one-time increase is not enough, for it will quickly fall behind the cost of living. Hence, the wage should be linked to the cost of living and be raised at regular intervals to meet the realities of living in Alberta.

25.

Enforcement of employment standards laws must be stepped up, particularly in the areas of hours of work, paid overtime, workplace safety and protection from undue dismissal.

High levels of unemployment and workers desperate to keep their jobs places employers in an advantageous position. Some employers have chosen to abuse this position by demanding longer hours of work, unpaid overtime, cutting corners on safety and other illegal demands on the threat of dismissal. Particularly vulnerable to this abuse are young workers and newcomers to Canada. All the laws to prevent these acts are already in place. Unfortunately, the laws are only being enforced passively, awaiting a formal complaint from an employee. This process misses most of the abuse that occurs. A more active campaign to inform employees of their rights, and to protect the identity of whistle blowers must be taken to crack down on this horrendous form of abuse.

26.

Employment standards laws require amendments to provide protection to self-employed workers, at-home workers and part-time workers, as well to extend benefit and security rights to temporary and part time workers.

The nature of work has changed. More people are self-employed, working from their home, on temporary contracts or other flexible forms of employment. Currently, these types of employees receive no protection against abuse, job loss, or unsafe working conditions. No protection means greater vulnerability. The changing nature of the economy suggests in the future more and more people will take this route of employment. We must act now to ensure they have access to the same rights and obligations as salaried and wage employees.

Training and job placement programs sponsored by the government require complete overhaul. Programs need to be individualized, changing from case to case to respond to individual needs and abilities.

Job placements and on-the-job training need to be tied to longer term employment commitments.

Participants were highly critical of the network of job training programs and job finding clubs available. They are ineffective, frustrating and lead to a cycle of dependency. Their sole effective purpose is to provide low-cost, short term labour for employers. The biggest failing of current programs is their inability to assess each person's abilities and needs. Instead, individuals feel herded into generic courses. Programs need to meet the needs of the clients to be of any value. In addition, six months or less of a training placement with no job at the end of it is a destructive pattern to set. Programs need to focus on establishing longer links with the work force by requiring employers to make longer commitments to the clients.

28.

Social workers' caseloads need to be reduced. In addition current "financial benefit workers" must be replaced with accredited social workers who possess training and experience in dealing with families in need.

To save money, the Department has allowed caseloads per worker to increase and has replaced front-line social workers with lower-skilled, lower paid financial benefit workers. Consequently, there is little "social work" occurring within the department, and therefore no assessment of each individual's case to determine best methods to regain independence. Clients are simply sent cheques without receiving support for achieving independence. This is not a productive method of reducing dependency.

29.

Communication between worker and client requires renewal. The "no tell" policy, where workers are forbidden to provide an entitlement unless the client directly asks for it, must be rescinded. Clients access to and contact with their social worker needs to be enhanced.

It has become virtually impossible for clients to talk with their workers. When they call they get voice mail. Their messages are rarely returned. If they go in person, they wait for hours in a waiting room. If they do get lucky enough to speak with a worker, the worker is forbidden by an unwritten policy and the threat of discipline to tell clients what they are entitled to². If the client can't guess, they don't get it. This is unfair and breeds high levels of frustration. This is not the fault of the workers; they are caught in the middle. Yet, lack of communication is causing the system to break down.

30.

The government must increase Supports for Independence (SFI) and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) rates to a level that meets the basic requirements of food, clothing and adequate shelter in their community. Rates should be calculated using realistic estimates of local conditions.

Simply put, social assistance recipients cannot make ends meet. They do not receive enough on social assistance to pay for the necessities of life. This is unconscionable. No one expects social assistance to be luxurious or even comfortable living, but there is a basic human expectation that everyone should be able to have the basic necessities. It is a basic social responsibility. This is not happening in Alberta.

² The "no-tell" policy is not official policy of the Department. However, the Commission heard repeatedly from social workers, service providers and social assistance recipients about its existence. The Commission is convinced the policy exists, and believes the evidence supporting that conviction is strong.

31.

The government needs to end the practice of denying so-called "extras", such as bus passes, glasses, telephones, laundry, children's supplies, and diapers. Financial support to ensure access to a basic level of these items must be available and unreasonable requests to find sources elsewhere must come to an end.

Social assistance recipients no longer receive additional support to pay for telephones, bus passes, diapers and many other necessities of life. Policy has classified these as "extras" and individuals must find other sources for them. If a person requires something beyond food and shelter, it comes from their food allowance. These items are not "extras". Phones and diapers are as necessary as milk or toothpaste.

32.

Flexible policies are required permitting social workers to provide clients with what is needed to remove barriers to employment. Increased support is particularly needed in four areas:

- More active support for job searches. Support should be regularly provided for clothing for job interviews, transportation money to and from prospective workplaces, money to pay for child care during job interviews. Every client should have a right to have a telephone so employers can contact the individual.
- Support to offset the extra costs of accepting employment. Money for work clothes or tools, transportation assistance, or child care should be provided upon proof of need.
- A period of partial eligibility for services even after employment has been secured. Partial entitlement should include the medical card, child care and extraordinary expenses related to employment and should continue for six months after employment has been found.
- Recipients should be permitted to retain a greater portion of wages from part-time or temporary employment as an incentive to take temporary employment opportunities.

The social assistance system demands intensive job searches from clients and expects them to take any available employment opportunity. Unfortunately, it does not work with clients to create more productive searches and opportunities. It does not address the very real barriers that lay between a client and employment. A person cannot find a job if they have no clothes appropriate for a job interview or tools to fulfill the job. Jobs come with extra expenses, such as child care and additional transportation. If it is a low paying job, then the client will not be able to afford the extra expenses. Often clients are afraid to take jobs because they will immediately be forced to pay for prescriptions or some other expense covered when they are on assistance. Finally, part-time and temporary employment are excellent stepping stones to better employment, but clients are unwilling to take them because almost all the money is taken away. These barriers are real. If Social Services truly wants to get people back to work, then these barriers must be addressed before any effort will succeed.

33.

The government needs to replace the Alberta Community Employment program (ACE) with a new job placement program that makes longer term connections to the employment market. The new program must build in requirements for longer term employment from employers.

ACE offers six month work placements for social assistance recipients to help them re-enter the workforce. Unfortunately, what has occurred is the recipient works for six months and is immediately let go by the employer, who then proceeds to hire another ACE placement. The recipient then applies for Unemployment Insurance, and begins a cycle of dependency. ACE has not been successful at reconnecting individuals to the labour market. To be successful, it requires a longer term connection and a commitment from the employer to not simply use the program as a way to reduce payroll costs.

34.

Child care provisions and allowances must be rethought to meet the new economic needs of families. Some of the initiatives required are:

- A simplified application for the child care subsidy process. Turn around time from application to approval must be shortened.
- Detailed, easily accessible information about child care choices and options for parents needs to be available and actively provided to families.
- Flexible child care alternatives should be encouraged and provided with adequate funding. Of particular note are evening child care, flexible hours of care, on-call child care service.
- Subsidies to working families need to be expanded and broadened to become more accessible to a greater number of families.

Parents told the Commission they do not know what services are available or where to access them. Even if a service is available privately, the government does not recognize it as eligible for subsidy or funding. An example is evening child care. The government expects family members to cover evenings, should the parent need to work then. The economy is changing. Families are being required to be flexible regarding work and home. The government needs to ensure that families taking on non-traditional work are not caught in a child care struggle. For some working parents, their struggle is intensified because government subsidies are focused toward the lowest-income families. Subsidies need to apply to a variety of child care alternatives. Parents also require more easily accessible information about where to go for child care.

35.

More recreational activities must be created for teens and young adults, especially in lower income areas.

Young Albertans who come from difficult socio-economic situations hold little hope for their own future. When there are no programs to focus energy and time, the result is bad for the community. Addictions and crime become more likely. There are some recreational activities available for young people. They prove very successful at providing a focus for these individuals. Yet too many youth still fall through the cracks. A stronger commitment must be made to local activities aimed at teens.

36.

There is a grave need for greater economic and social support for women and children escaping violent situations. Specifically, programs aimed at providing short and medium term economic stability for women who have left abusive marriages or relationships need to be developed.

It takes a great deal of strength and courage to escape an abusive relationship. Doing so leaves the women drained, scared and vulnerable. The Commission heard many women talk of considering returning to their abusive husbands because it was more economically secure and they knew they at least would have some money. Women's shelters have proven excellent initial support for these women, but they require more assistance to be on their own. They need some job opportunities, and many need time to heal in financial security before rebuilding their life. This requires a program for women from abusive relationships that provides financial stability for a few months, without the stringent requirements of Supports for Independence (social assistance), and which includes comprehensive assessment of their social and emotional condition and appropriate counseling where necessary.

37.

The Alberta government should ratify the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

Alberta is the only province in Canada to have refused to ratify the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child. This declaration is a commitment to protecting children at risk and to ensuring no child unnecessarily suffers from abuse, poverty, illness or neglect. It is a sad testament to the government's commitment to children that it refuses to ratify this document. It is an important symbolic statement, and one that speaks strongly about this government's concern for children.

38.

The government should initiate a series of active education campaigns focusing on the benefits of Alberta's diversity. Examples of issues would be: the economic and social benefits of immigration, breaking down stereotypes of poverty, highlighting accurate portrayals of people's lives (e.g. blue collar workers, farmers, single mothers, gays and lesbians, different cultural communities).

In many ways, Albertans have forgotten who each other are. We have fallen into the dangerous traps of stereotypes and isolation. What is needed is a way to re-introduce Albertans to one another. A series of campaigns aimed at destroying stereotypes, and more importantly portraying "real" Albertans may be a method of reminding Albertans about the joys of diversity. It would only be a beginning. The results of such campaigns would be somewhat intangible, but the consequences of not doing such campaigns is clear. We must begin somewhere.

39.

The government should host programs for government employees who deal directly or indirectly with social assistance recipients, pensioners, people with disabilities and other clients of government to educate on the stigma and dehumanization of accepting benefits and on the realities of living in poverty. Part of the program should include direct contact in a non-office setting with members of the client group.

People who approach the Alberta government for some form of public assistance speak of how they feel dehumanized and stigmatized by the system. It may prove helpful to clients and workers to have an opportunity to step away from roles and find out what things are like for each other. It may help re-introduce some humanity into interactions with one another.

The government should undertake a comprehensive, province-wide process similar to the one initiated by the Quality of Life Commission to sincerely listen to the perspective of Albertans. The process must be designed to prevent selective participation, biased questions and pre-determined agendas.

Key elements in the process must be:

- Enter the process to listen, not to speak.
- Hold many small, informal sessions, rather than larger hearings. The smaller the group, the greater the opportunity to truly hear what they have to say.
- Hear directly from individuals, rather than through agency representatives or community leaders.
- Make efforts to ensure a wide cross-section participates in the process. Make sure businesspeople, single mothers, seniors, teenagers, farmers, social assistance recipients and many others are able to participate.
- Do not have an invitation list. Send information to the community, and open the session to anyone who wants to participate.
- Guarantee the privacy and confidentiality of all who participate.
- Do not direct the topic of conversation. Allow participants to determine the priorities.
- Ask questions that do not lead to an answer or narrow scope of response.

Beyond everything else the Commission discovered an overwhelming need among participants to feel heard by decision makers. The Commission believes a way to address this need is for the government to embark on its own "quality of life commission". Our process works. It works in building trust among the participants, which enables them to be open and frank. It works because the listener cannot avoid being profoundly moved by what they hear. It works because people connect at a human, not a policy level. It works in sprouting a renewed sense of being heard. In and of itself the process does not guarantee change, but it acts as the necessary starting point for change.

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Conclusion

Quite simply, Alberta is in a state of social upheaval. The magnitude of change during the past two years has left many Albertans uncertain about their future and many others struggling for survival.

Social policy in Alberta has the wrong set of priorities. Consequently, Alberta risks unraveling the social fabric holding communities together. The next few years threaten to bring a marked rise in poverty, fear, crime, stress, intolerance and family breakdown as elements of social policy stop working in the interests of Albertans.

The Quality of Life Commission believes the effects of social policy reform cannot remain unaddressed. Now that the deficit has been eliminated, it is imperative Alberta refocus its energies on minimizing the negative effects of the past two years. We fail to do so at our peril.

The Commission believes addressing rising social concerns requires the equitable effort of all society's partners: government, corporate sector, non-profit sector, local communities and individuals. No one partner can solve the problems, but working together, the problems are solvable.

The Commission has made 40 recommendations it believes are necessary to rebuild Alberta communities. They are aimed at all partners in society, not solely the government. Yet, recognizing the central role government plays in determining social policy, the greatest share of recommendations are focused on government policy.

Many of the recommendations made by the Commission cost no money to implement, or have minimal cost. Others will have an initial additional cost, usually offset down the road by cost-savings. The Commission makes recommendations not to increase government spending, but to address pressing and concerning trends arising in Alberta.

The need for new priorities is great. The Commission is hopeful this report will serve as a start for Alberta's search for new priorities.

hope for the future

The Commission believes the task of establishing new priorities begins with listening. The power of listening can overcome many other initial barriers. Consequently, the Commission wishes to highlight the final recommendation, #40, for particular attention.

The strongest and most hopeful part of the Commission was not what it heard, but that it heard at all. The Commissioners come away from the listening process with a respect for its power. Once people feel heard, they begin to think about moving forward. They begin to develop hope again.

The Commission encourages the government to hold its own commission because the Commissioners are convinced of the effectiveness of the process and its ability to lead to stronger social policy.

To build hope, the commission would need to be designed as the Quality of Life Commission was designed. It must go to Albertans in small groups and talk about what Albertans want to talk about, creating an open and frank atmosphere. Finally, the government must be prepared to listen to what is said and act to the best of its ability upon what is heard.

That the Quality of Life Commission exists is a sign of hope. That people wanted to talk with this Commission is a sign of hope. It shows Albertans are still concerned about quality of life and want to make their lives better.

If the government takes up the recommendation to do its own commission, it will be a great sign of hope, for it will show that the government is just as committed to quality of life as its citizens are.

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Biographies

of the Quality of Life Commissioners

Sudha Choldin

Sudha Choldin is a chartered psychologist in Edmonton. Ms. Choldin works as a therapist in private practice and as a student counselor at the Alberta Vocational College (AVC). Ms. Choldin is also an instructor at the University of Alberta's Department of Extension in the Counseling Women Certificate Program.

Ms. Choldin has extensive research and counseling experience in the area of violence against women. She has conducted many workshops and presentations in this area, including to the staff and Board of WIN House and to dentists in Red Deer, Fairview and Medicine Hat.

Ms. Choldin has worked with First Nations peoples in Assumption and St. Paul. She has also assisted in establishing self-help groups for survivors of sexual assault in Edmonton.

She is a member of the Indo-Canadian Women's Association, American Women in Psychology and the International Council of Psychologists.

Ms. Choldin's research focuses on the effect policy, ideology and religion have upon the lives of women. She has made many presentations to psychology conferences in Canada, the U.S. and Europe on these topics.

Lois Hole

Lois Hole is a successful businessperson, media commentator on horticulture and lifelong resident of the Edmonton area.

Ms. Hole and her husband started Hole's Greenhouses and Gardens Ltd. in 1960. The company has grown and prospered during the past 35 years. The Holes continue to operate the business with their two sons.

Ms. Hole is also very active in educational issues. She was a School Trustee in the Sturgeon School Division for 13 years, including 3 years as Chair. Presently she is School Trustee for the St. Albert Public School Board, first elected in 1983 and re-elected in 3 successive elections. She was a Member of the Athabasca University Governing Council for 11 years.

She also served on the Rural Safety Council for 18 years, acting as Chair for 6 years. She was a Board member of Alberta Hospital for 3 years.

Ms. Hole was awarded an Honorary Degree from Athabasca University and was presented with the President's Award from the Alberta School Boards Association for her contribution to education in Alberta. She was named the St. Albert Citizen of the Year in 1995.

Virindar S. Lamba

Virindar Singh Lamba is a businessperson in Edmonton who is active in issues related to human rights.

After coming to Canada in 1956, Mr. Lamba received his B.A.Sc. in Electrical Engineering from the University of British Columbia in 1961. He went to work for Canadian National Railways and held various positions from Design Engineer to Assistant Regional Engineer. During his 16 years at CN, he had the opportunity to live in many Canadian centres, including Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Edmonton. In 1980, Mr. Lamba left CN to start his own business, which he continues to operate.

Mr. Lamba has been very committed to human rights and dignity. He is the Chair of the Alberta Interfaith Council on Human Rights, is a member of the Planning Committee of the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action Society. He is also a member of the Executive Council of the newly formed Dignity Foundation. In addition, Mr. Lamba is the Membership Secretary for the Edmonton Chapter of Amnesty International.

Mr. Lamba has also been active in the Sikh Community. He was Secretary of Sikh Society of Alberta and served on the Executive Committee representing Sikhs of Edmonton nationally. He is a past-president of the Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha Society.

Mr. Lamba has given several lectures at schools and colleges on social issues, human tolerance and the Principles of Sikh religion.

Lois Loyer

Lois Loyer is an experienced counselor and life skills coach who specializes in addictions and health promotion within aboriginal communities. Her diverse background includes work in health care administration, social development and public relations.

Ms. Loyer has Grant MacEwan College Certificates in Psychology and Native Communications and has extensive training in family therapy, addictions counseling and life skills coaching.

Since 1989, Ms. Loyer has been a Trainer and Assistant Director (1994) at Nechi Institute on Alcohol and Drug Education. Previously, she has been a consultant with the aboriginal community. Her contracts have included the Fort McKay Tribal Administration and the Alberta Native Women's Network. Ms. Loyer has also worked for the Federal government in social development and program development.

A Canadian Metis, Ms. Loyer has a strong commitment to the aboriginal community. She was president of the Alberta Native Women's Network (1983-84) and was a member of the Alberta Women's Council. In 1982, Ms. Loyer was awarded the Michael Luchkovish Alberta Heritage Scholarship for Outstanding Career Achievement.

Rev. Donald E. Mayne

Reverend Donald Mayne is a retired United Church minister and federal government official who is active in issues relating to aging and seniors.

Rev. Mayne received his Masters of Sacred Theology from Boston University. He served as the minister for Wesley United Church from 1963 to 1969, at which time he became the Field Secretary for the United Church's Board of Christian Education. In 1973 he moved to the Department of Health and Welfare Canada to work on the New Horizons program. He was named Regional Manager in 1981, a position he held until his retirement in 1993.

Since retiring, Rev. Mayne has become very active in seniors issues as well as remaining active in the church community. He is the Treasurer for the Alberta Association on Gerontology, is a former executive member of the Canadian Association on Gerontology, and is President of the Alberta Interfaith Coalition on Aging. He is also Chair of the Edmonton Interfaith Network.

Rev. Mayne is a former Chair of Jellinek House, a recovery centre for men with alcohol addictions, and of Worth Centre, an alcohol and abuse treatment program for women. He is also a Director of the Vietnamese Canadian Friendship Society. In 1992, Rev. Mayne was awarded the Canada 125 medal.

Rev. Bruce Miller

Reverend Bruce Miller is Minister at Robertson-Wesley United Church, as well as a lecturer in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Alberta. He has over 25 years pastoral experience in Canada and the United States. Rev. Miller received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1976. He has worked as Minister in

a number of centres, including Kansas, St. Paul, Hamilton, St. Catherines and most recently Edmonton, where he has lived since 1982.

Rev. Miller has been active in linking church to community. He has been a member of the United Church Interfaith Committee, Church and Society Committee, and National Social issues and Justice Committee. He was Chair of the Edmonton Presbytery from 1986 to 1988.

He has also been active in the community, serving as Chair of the Edmonton Learner Centre (1983-85) and Coordinator for Edmonton Ploughshares (1983-86). He is currently a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, an international group of scholars doing research in to the historical Jesus.

Recently, Rev. Miller's sermon "Do Albertans Have Any Compassion?" was published in the Edmonton Journal and tabled in the Provincial Legislature.

Chinwe Okelu

Chinwe Okelu is an economic policy analyst and long time community activist in Southeast Edmonton.

Mr. Okelu received his Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at the University of Nigeria in 1971. He came to Edmonton to study his Masters of Arts from the University of Alberta, receiving it in 1974. Mr. Okelu remained in Edmonton as Lecturer in the Department of Romance Languages (1974-76). In 1976 he joined the Housing Department of the Alberta government as an economist, a position he held for over 13 years. During this time, he took the opportunity to complete his Masters of Business Administration at Idaho State University (1982). In 1989, Mr. Okelu moved to Alberta Municipal Affairs as an economist. Most recently, Mr. Okelu has joined Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs as a Senior Intergovernmental Officer.

Mr. Okelu has devoted much of his time and energy to his community. He served as the President of Knottwood Community League from 1982 to 1985. He has been a Board member for Students Union and Community Daycare, and Chair of the Millwoods Multicultural Board. Currently he is Chair of the Millwoods Community Leagues Presidents' Council. Mr. Okelu has also coached his community league's children's soccer team and coordinated the Alberta Provincial Employees Soccer League (1990).

In 1992 Mr. Okelu was awarded the Governor General's Commemorative Medal for contribution to compatriots, community and Canada. Last year he was presented with the International Year of the Family Certificate of Appreciation and the Citation for Citizenship.

Douglas Roche, O.C.

Douglas Roche is a parliamentarian, author and diplomat who has worked extensively in the areas of peace and security.

Mr. Roche was the founding Editor for the Western Catholic Reporter (1965-72), leaving this position upon his election as a Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament in 1972, which he held until 1984. At that time, he was appointed Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament (1984-89). In 1989, Mr. Roche became Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta, Department of Political Science.

Mr. Roche is author of 12 books on the United Nations, peace and global security and international development.

Mr. Roche continues to be active with the United Nations and development issues, serving as the Chair of the Canadian Committee for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations, as Chair for the Global Education Associates and Chair of the Reconciliation Process Implementation Committee (for victims of sexual abuse). He is also past Chair of the United Nations Association of Canada and past Chair of the National Advisory Committee on Development Education (1989-92)

Mr. Roche was awarded Honorary doctorates of Divinity from St. Stephen's College in Edmonton (1977), and of Law from Simon Fraser University (1985) and from the University of Alberta (1986). He is a Distinguished Fellow at the Canadian Centre for Global Security. In 1992, Mr. Roche was admitted as an officer to the Order of Canada.

APPENDIX "B":

Outline of *Small Discussion Groups*

Participants in 21 small discussion sessions organized by the Quality of Life Commission during October and November 1995:

1. Low income families in Northeast Edmonton who gather once a month to bulk buy food together to save money.
2. Adults and families who use a drop-in centre in Northwest Edmonton. *Most are lower income residents of the neighbourhood.*
3. Middle class residents of South East Edmonton, *who come from a mixture of cultural and faith backgrounds.*
4. Immigrant women from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural communities. *Participants gather to support one another and practice English.*
5. Teenage women who have experienced pregnancy or who are teen mothers who come together to take a life skills course. *They come from all areas of the city.*
6. Low income women in Northeast Edmonton. Many participants were aboriginal. *Many were single parents, and others were young single women trying to find employment.*
7. Students at a literacy education centre. *Most are low income individuals who come from all areas of the city.*
8. Recent newcomers to Canada from a wide variety of countries who have recently completed an English as a Second Language (ESL) course. *Participants come from all areas of the city.*
9. Small business people from Central Edmonton.
10. Parents of children enrolled in Headstart programs *who live in Central and West Edmonton.*
11. Seniors from West Edmonton who have lunch together once a month.
12. Young Albertans between ages of 14 and 21 who meet to talk about opportunities for youth. *Participants come from all areas of the city and from a wide variety of income levels and cultural backgrounds.*
13. Women taking job preparation and career search courses. *Participants come from all areas of the city and all income levels.*
14. Members of a local Rotary Club *who live in West and Southwest Edmonton.*
15. Survivors of sexual assault and volunteers who work with survivors of sexual assault. *Participants come from all areas of the city and from a wide variety of backgrounds.*
16. Seniors who use a recreation centre in Southwest Edmonton. *Participants come from a mixture of income levels and backgrounds.*
17. Adults and families who use a drop in centre in North Central Edmonton. *Most participants live in the area and most are low-income.*
18. Young women who have recently left abusive marriages and meet to support one another. *Participants come from all areas of the city.*
19. Adults who use a drop-in centre in the inner city. *Most are aboriginal people and many are transient and exist on the margins of the economy.*
20. A group of aboriginal men and women who meet to support one another. *Participants come from all areas of the city.*
21. Men and women living with HIV or AIDS. *Participants come from all areas of the city and from a wide variety of backgrounds and income levels.*

Presentations To Large Hearing December 5, 1995, Santa Maria Goretti Community Centre

Isabella Gorodetski, *Newcomer to Canada*
Leslie Regelous, *Mustard Seed Church*
Ella Paul, *Community Member*
Otto Mestinek, *Principal, Norwood School*
Louise Zoerb, *FACT (Families Against Cutbacks Together)*

Irene Apon, *Neighbourlink*
Sandy Osietko, *Community Member*
Hazel Wilson, *Alberta Council on Aging*
Liz Reid, *Social Justice Commission*