



## **A Legacy of Commitment to Community:**

### **The Edmonton Social Planning Council After Fifty: 1990 - 2010**

*An addendum to Wealth of Voices written on  
the occasion of the Edmonton Social Planning  
Council's 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*

This historical overview is based on research from the Edmonton Social Planning Council archives, a collection of Council publications housed at the Edmonton Social Planning Council. Any external sources are cited.

*A Legacy of Commitment to Community* serves as an addendum to *Wealth of Voices*, the book written by Marsha Mildon and published in 1990 to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

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## The Edmonton Social Planning Council After Fifty: 1990 – 2000

The 1990s kicked off with a new burst of energy, hot on the heels of the Council's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Longtime Executive Director Peter Faid, who joined the Council in 1981, resigned in the fall. Jonathan Murphy took Faid's place and led the Social Planning Council into the beginning of its 6<sup>th</sup> decade.

An external evaluation of the Council's activities in 1987 showed that the community strongly supported the activities of the Council and wanted it to provide continued leadership in the area of social policy and community development. Some of the Council's priorities in the late 1980s included community development and urban planning, welfare advocacy, and child care services. In partnership with several community agencies, the first *Tracking the Trends* was published in 1989. This document would continue to be published through the 1990s, confirming the Council's reputation for strong research.

Michael Phair, President of the Social Planning Council in 1990, contributed the following message for the 1990 Annual Report:

For the Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1990 was a year of retrospection and transition. We began the year by looking back on:

...fifty years filled with women and men searching for ways to improve the lives of Edmonton's citizens: children, youth, the unemployed, persons on welfare, single parents, seniors.

...fifty years of struggling by the Council's Board, committees and staff to identify and address the issues faced by the people of this city: poverty, civic growth and development, hunger and homelessness, inadequate government programs and funding, family violence, single parent families, environmental concerns.

...fifty years of hard work by the Council and its staff to support and initiate responses to the issues: analyzing information and data, providing information and educational programs, advocating, initiating new organizations, developing coalitions, bringing people together.

Among the questions facing Edmontonians in the 1990s are:

What is the role of the community in the ever expanding, ever more powerful institutions we have created?

How can we ensure that more and more groups of people like urban Natives, the working poor, gays and lesbians and the unemployed do not become marginalized in Edmonton?

Will human rights, specifically the protection of minorities and the elimination of racism in our society, be supported in our city?

Is the elimination of child poverty attainable?

What methods of public education can the Council use to support its goals?

The task facing the Council, indeed the task facing all of us, is daunting. Please join and support the Council in its transition from its first fifty years to its second.

## Poverty and Welfare Advocacy

Much of the Edmonton Social Planning Council's work throughout its history has been on behalf of those living in poverty. As the federal government cut transfer payments in the 1990s, the provincial government remained confident that welfare recipients could be transferred to training and employment programs to relieve financial burdens on social services. ESPC Executive Director Jonathan Murphy voiced concerns over this strategy to the Edmonton Journal: "My fear is that in Alberta, it won't be a matter of moving people into training programs, it will be a matter of cutting people off welfare".<sup>1</sup>

In 1997 the Council conducted a study on these welfare reforms that had been implemented earlier in the decade, assessing the impact of reforms on the number of people living in poverty and assessing the capacity of the labour market to reduce the number of people living in poverty. The main conclusions drawn from this study were that low income families with children in Edmonton were becoming poorer and that the labour market would be incapable of replacing income lost through cuts to government income support programs. This study noted that Alberta children in single parent families received less government support than the average Canadian child. These conclusions stirred up controversy with Minister of Family and Social Services Lyle Oberg, who questioned the research methods used in the study. This sparked a touchy relationship between the Council and Oberg that would continue to entertain the media.

The Council was active in a coalition of social service agencies which launched the STOP and Start Over campaign to fight welfare cuts to AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) recipients in the late 90s. The coalition was composed of the Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities, the ESPC, the Alberta Association for Community Living, the Alberta Quality of Life Commission, the Canadian Mental Health Association and Poverty in Action. The reforms would have effectively disqualified many AISH recipients, but the coalition's campaign against benefit cuts was successful and Minister Oberg promised that AISH would continue at the same levels for the same number of recipients.

## Child and Family Poverty

A 1991 submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women pointed to child poverty as a cause for incomplete education, which in turn would cost the economy hundreds of millions of dollars as a result of reduced workforce participation. This brief advocated for social supports that would allow children and their families to fully participate in society, asking such thought-provoking questions as,

"Should a 'welfare mom' have enough money to pay for child care and bus fare to attend a community league meeting, or not? Should a low income family be afforded an income which covers school field trips, or a Ninja turtles lunchbox?"

This report called for a universal system of child benefits with reduced stigmatization for recipients, as well as improved access to better employment options for parents. These priorities drove many of the Council's child poverty initiatives through this period. The 1992 *Family Budgeting Guide*, an update of editions from 1985 and 1987, reflects the Council's belief that low income should not restrict families

and children from fully participating in society. It allocated money for many categories related to physical and mental health and was inclusive of transportation and recreation needs. As explained in the 1995 edition of the *Guide*, allocations were based not on prescribed basic need allocations but on “actual family expenditure needs, as required to enjoy a healthy but basic lifestyle”.

As part of its focus on poverty in the 1980s, *The Other Welfare Manual* was released in 1986 to guide Albertans through the Welfare system and to help them understand their rights and responsibilities with regards to income security programs. This manual was revived in the 90s, with updated editions published in 1990, 1993 and 1994. Notably, *The Other Child Welfare Manual: A Teenager’s Guide to Child Welfare in Alberta* was also released in 1994. This was the first published guide to the child welfare system, explaining clearly to teenagers how they should deal with the child welfare system and where they could find help. In connection with these efforts, the Council also offered welfare advocacy workshops to provide direct instruction on how to navigate the system.

### **Success by 6**

By participating in the Child and Families Initiative, a collaboration aimed at raising awareness and promoting long term change for Edmonton children living in poverty, the Council became involved with the pilot project of Success By Six in 1994. Success By 6 Edmonton is now an independent United Way member agency with a mission of “ensuring that all Edmonton children from 0 to 6 years have the supports they need for a lifetime of healthy growth and development”.

### **Alberta Children’s Forum**

Towards the end of the decade, the Council was invited to sit on the steering Committee for the Alberta Children’s Forum. The Forum anticipated dealing with school violence, child prostitution, and safe and healthy learning environments for all youth. The Government of Alberta promised that the Forum would result in “action steps with measurable outcomes and results to improve the lives of children and families”. In anticipation of the Forum, the Council advocated three action steps to move towards a solution for children living in poverty: a comprehensive school lunch program, a rent subsidy program so that no child would become homeless, and matching welfare shelter allowances to the cost of rent to protect children in welfare families from hunger and homelessness.

Executive Director Brian Bechtel was disappointed that the Government’s final report from the Alberta Children’s Forum did not include any core recommendations for action. Other attendees were equally frustrated; sessions were described as “a poor use of time and expertise”<sup>2</sup>. Bechtel refused to sign the report, and controversy erupted when his signature was printed on the final copy without his consent.

The ESPC published the *Other Children’s Forum Report* in response to these events, focusing on recommendations and action steps to deal with poverty and the physical needs of children. This publication provided a venue for proposals the Council had brought to the table at the Forum but which had not received recognition in the final report.

## Quality of Life Commission

Social policy reforms in the early 1990s left many people wondering about the consequences of these reforms on the well-being of Albertans and their families. A group of concerned citizens came together to listen to the voices of Edmontonians whose lives had been affected by policies in health, education and social service. Core members of the new Quality of Life Commission included Lois Hole, Douglas Roche, and Don Mayne, and the Edmonton Social Planning Council was also heavily involved in its creation.

Through focus groups, the Commission gleaned feedback on essential survival tools as well as necessary extras required to maintain a decent quality of life. They learned how declining access to health care and increased job loss impact lives. The Edmonton Social Planning Council offered financial and human resources support for the publication of *Listen to Me: the final report of the Quality of Life Commission*. This report was presented to Ralph Klein's government and offered recommendations for the government, corporations, and individuals within communities. It recommended that the government reject a two-tiered health care system, match increased demand for mental health and addictions services, and reduce health care premiums. It also recommended that individuals act to improve their own quality of life by meeting their neighbours, initiating local projects to make their communities better places to live, and becoming involved in promoting justice in society.

The Quality of Life Commission conducted a second study in 1999 on the experience of children living in poverty. It was also involved in several other community initiatives related to improving the quality of life of Edmontonians and Albertans, including Families First Edmonton and the Vibrant Communities project.

## Seniors Issues

A 1990 Council report commissioned by the Alberta Association of Homemaker Services entitled *Trends for the 1990s: Keeping our Fingers on the Pulse* projected greater cultural exclusion of the elderly. This trend was explained by rapid technological developments that leave elderly citizens without participating roles in their communities. The Council pursued this concern with the publication of several articles on the possibilities for a Seniors Bill of Rights, the obstacles faced by immigrant seniors, isolation among single senior women, and key issues of housing, health, and finances.

This attention to seniors' issues remained through the second half of the decade with a study on the transportation needs of the frail and elderly, as well as research on seniors gambling. A direct result of the latter study was the development of a treatment framework for gambling addictions among seniors. Educational resources were developed for Chinese seniors with gambling problems in partnership with the Edmonton Chinese Community Services.

## Voices From Within Conference

The *Voices From Within* conference in 1992 was a multi-provincial gathering for inner-city seniors. The goal of this event was to discuss recommendations for ways to improve living conditions and to provide a report to politicians and bureaucrats. Jonathan Murphy, the Council's Executive Director, presented a

workshop on “Housing for Inner City Seniors in a Time of Restraint”. He put forward suggestions to make inner-city housing for seniors more comfortable: improved maintenance programs, and housing layouts modeled around traditional rooming houses that inner-city seniors are accustomed to.

## Health Issues

External agencies provided impetus for the Council to study a wide variety of health-related issues in the early 1990s. The Westlock Interagency Council contracted the ESPC in 1992 to complete an assessment of mental health needs in the area in order to inform development of appropriate services. This may have influenced a focus on mental health research by the Council in 1995, as evidenced by a *Tracking the Trends* feature as well as *Alberta Facts* and *First Reading* issues on the subject. This research noted that government support for mental health programs was in decline, placing a greater burden on the community to provide mental health services itself. It noted that, while support service agencies were creating a wide variety of programs and solutions, these services were also becoming more difficult for clients to access.

The Edmonton Board of Health contracted the Council in 1993 to investigate effective means for creating and implementing community health goals. The resulting report highlighted the need to come up with universally accepted community health indicators in order to set goals and measure progress. It also emphasized the importance of stable, long-term funding.

The Edmonton Board of Health drew on Council resources again to conduct an evaluation of the “Health for Two: Mother and Child” program in 1993. This program coordinated services from several community agencies to provide support for pregnant women in Edmonton. It aimed to make participants more aware of the programs and services available to them. The majority of participants were exposed to multiple risk factors, such as poor nutrition, and alcohol, drug, and physical abuse. The Health for Two program increased links between community service providers, allowing them to better support clients by referring them to appropriate services. It made women more aware of supports outside the formal service system, and it increased willingness of pregnant women to seek out pregnancy supports from community agencies. A major conclusion from this evaluation was that community partnerships can be highly successful when well designed.

A variety of other health issues received the Council’s attention. A 1991 study on teen sexuality in Edmonton highlighted that the city had much higher rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases than Calgary and the rest of the province, and it pointed out the high personal and public costs of these trends. It recommended better health education programs and early intervention, improved access to services, long-term support programs, and increased funding.

Other program evaluations involved the Council in projects aimed at improving the health of vulnerable and marginalized Edmontonians. Evaluations were conducted of programs designed to educate Aboriginal youth about harms related to tobacco use, and for reduction of HIV/AIDS transmission among female inmates. In 1998, the Council voiced its support for a program to extend medical and dental benefits to the working poor.

## Edmonton's Food Bank

In 1996, the Edmonton Social Planning Council began a long and fruitful partnership with Edmonton's Food Bank to research food bank use and users. *Two Paycheques Away: Social Policy and Hunger in Edmonton*, one of the first and largest studies of its kind, resulted from several months of study and was released in December 1996. Interviews with over 800 food bank recipients revealed serious problems with government income support programs. As a result of this study, the Council released a magazine, fact sheet and calendar to educate the public on problems associated with low income living. *Two Paycheques Away* received national attention and resulted in talks with the Minister of Family and Social Services in an effort to amend policies.

From these conversations with the Minister, a joint working group was formed to review issues identified in *Two Paycheques Away*. They studied five key areas related to low income living, support programs, and employment. In the summer of 1997, the Council followed up on its original study with *A Return Look at Two Paycheques Away*. This report was based on surveys of 200 food bank users and took a closer look at benefit denial and child welfare involvement.

The Council and the Food Bank produced a third report in 1999 entitled *Often Hungry Sometimes Homeless: A Look at Edmonton Families Turning to the Food Bank*. This study was based on 100 interviews with food bank users. Among other highlights, the report noted that 54 percent of families turning to the food bank lived on less than \$1000 per month, and that 55 percent of families had a female lone parent. 28 percent had been homeless at some point during the previous five years, and 75 percent had been late with their rent payments.

Alberta Human Resources Minister Clint Dunford reacted to the report by remarking that he believed people were using the food bank "because it's a service that's become available ... there are people who can afford food who are going to food banks".<sup>3</sup> After meeting with Council and Food Bank representatives to discuss the findings in their study, Dunford retracted his comments and voiced support for Alberta's food banks.

## Prostitution

The City of Edmonton suggested in the fall of 1992 that street prostitution could be "fixed" with a dramatically increased police presence in affected areas. In comments to the Edmonton Journal, Jonathan Murphy explained that these "scare tactics" would not deal with the root causes of the problem.<sup>4</sup> After a three day consultation with Jane Runner of Prostitutes and Other Women for Equal Rights – Winnipeg, the Council developed a proposal for a street prostitution project. The 1993 report *Street Prostitution in Edmonton* describes the importance of a support system that does not judge the lifestyles of prostitutes. It highlighted the need for a resource centre, emergency accommodations, and substance abuse programs.

This proposal led to funding from Justice Canada in 1993 for an organization to target prostitution in Edmonton. Kindred House opened in 1995 under the administration of the Boyle McCauley Health Centre. It was created to be a safe house and resource centre for women and transgendered individuals

involved in street prostitution. Kindred House continues to operate today under the roof of the Boyle McCauley Health Centre. Clients can visit Kindred House to enjoy a good meal, find information and health resources, and relax in a safe, non-judgmental space.

## Aboriginal Issues

While many of the Council's priorities remained the same during the 1990s, exciting new projects also emerged. The Council began to focus more on Aboriginal issues, likely as a result of the election of two Aboriginal members to the board in 1991. The 1990 edition of *Tracking the Trends* highlighted an emerging trend of Native and Métis families moving to larger urban centres in the province. In 1993, *Tracking the Trends* included a special feature on Aboriginal peoples. It identified that Aboriginal migration to urban centres was mainly out of a desire to upgrade education. It also noted that Aboriginal unemployment rates were well above average, and that average income levels for Aboriginal individuals were below average. Significantly, Aboriginal professionals were beginning to enter the workforce in greater numbers and the visibility of Native professionals and other positive role models was on the rise.

The needs of inner city Aboriginals were identified in a 1992 report, *Inner City Service Improvement for the Aboriginal Community in Edmonton*. After analyzing the issues at hand, the report makes recommendations on housing, the legal system, support for Aboriginal professionals, and substance abuse services. It recommends that Elder involvement be expanded throughout the education and service systems, and that talking and healing circles be more available to urban Aboriginals.

In 1994, the Edmonton Aboriginal Community Services Demonstration Project was initiated to hold consultations with existing service agencies and community groups with a goal of prioritizing strategies for crime prevention. An Aboriginal Program Development Officer was hired as a resource point for the development of projects with a focus on crime prevention through social development. The final report of this project, issued in March 1996, provides recommendations on how to prevent Aboriginal peoples from coming into conflict with the criminal justice system. It concludes that "the long term solution to crime means investing in approaches which work to prevent problems in the first place".

## Youthworks II

The Council also initiated a project to prepare Aboriginal youth for future education and career opportunities. In 1994 the Council received funding for Youthworks II from the Youth Service Canada program under the federal government's Youth Employment and Learning Strategy. Youthworks II aimed to provide youth with skills to integrate into the community, create learning opportunities based in community service projects, foster an environment for learning about traditional Aboriginal values, and set participants up with career counselors who could help them create long-term career goals. Youthworks II was guided by an advisory committee made up of community partners including Big Sisters and Big Brothers, Edmonton Parks and Recreation, Ben Calf Robe and Alberta Justice. Twenty Aboriginal youth were accepted as participants. Only seven had completed high school; fourteen had a history of involvement with the criminal justice system. By the conclusion of the project in January 1996, seventeen youth had completed the program. The program was considered a great success,

especially considering that any program aimed at career training for at-risk youth has considerable long-term benefits, given the role that unemployment and poverty play in youth crime.

## **Immigration and Multiculturalism**

Edmonton has had a diverse cultural makeup since the days when early settlers arrived from various parts of Europe. The 1991 *Tracking the Trends* included a feature on immigration. It noted that Edmonton received about 42 percent of Alberta's newcomers in any given year, and that about one quarter of these were refugees. Over half had no working knowledge of French or English. The publication concluded that the number and diversity of newcomers to Alberta would increase over the coming years, and that service providers would be faced with increasingly complex situations. Among the major concerns were cultural sensitivity, adaptation of programs and services, and personnel training for service providers. It recommended the prioritization of ESL programs, as well as provision of diverse language programs for immigrants with a wide variety of technical and educational backgrounds.

The *Tracking the Trends* feature also discussed barriers to employment for immigrants as a result of inefficient restrictions on accreditation and recertification. These barriers to employment created high unemployment in the immigrant community, leading to long-term poverty and increases in health and social problems.

## **Racism in Edmonton**

Conclusions and recommendations in the 1991 *Tracking the Trends* also picked up on racial tension in Edmonton as a result of increases in the number and diversity of immigrants. With projected downturns in the economy through the 1990s, concerns were expressed that immigrants would be used as a scapegoat for economic problems. Intolerance of traditional cultural values was also noted, resulting from divided public opinion on the degree to which immigrants should be expected to integrate into society. In 1992, the Council formed the Intercultural and Race Relations Committee of Northeast Edmonton. The following year, the Council participated in the Intercultural Education and Race Relations Resource Fair, which aimed at bringing together individuals interested in sharing resources and ideas to promote cultural understanding and to fight racism.

A March 1992 issue of *Alberta Facts* entitled "We Are Not Racists But..." looked at some of the key racism issues in Edmonton in an attempt to dispel local racism myths. Among these unhealthy myths were the beliefs that multiculturalism destroys Canadian unity, that immigrants create a burden on welfare and education systems, and that immigrants take jobs from Canadians. This *Alberta Facts* was updated for a December 1994 re-issue.

The Council's anti-racism work continued with "Because of the Color", a 1992 study on racial tension in northeast Edmonton. Over 140 people and organizations contributed their thoughts on racial tension in these neighbourhoods. The majority expressed that they had witnessed racial tension and discrimination in their communities, and they believed that this created strain in the local population. Recommendations from the report include a call for the City of Edmonton to set up a task-force on racism throughout Edmonton, suggestions for promoting ethnic diversity among community

organizations and service providers, and sensitivity training for officials within the law enforcement and education systems.

### **Promoting Multiculturalism**

Following up on its own recommendations, in 1995 the Council published *People, Jobs and the Changing Workplace: a training manual to facilitate multicultural development in organizations*. This set of eleven modules included exercises to appropriately deal with various ideas and principles surrounding multiculturalism. These ideas included the value of multiculturalism within the workplace, an understanding of Canada's immigration system, the reality of diversity in Alberta, and the presence of racism in Edmonton and Alberta.

The Council turned its attention to immigrant youth later in the decade, working with the Edmonton Chinese Community Services Centre in 1998 to create a youth team of new Canadians. Their focus was to review the recreational opportunities available to new immigrant youth.

### **Edmonton LIFE: Local Indicators for Excellence**

The Edmonton LIFE project kicked off in 1996, marking the beginning of a focus on quality of life indicators that would shape the direction of the Council's work in years to come. The goal of Edmonton LIFE was to identify a set of quality of life indicators for the city of Edmonton relating to people, the economy, the environment and the community. To accomplish this, the project aimed to develop a 'made in Edmonton' definition of quality of life, select indicators that fit with this definition, determine local standards of excellence and set targets to reflect these standards, and establish a structure for producing an annual update for the indicators. Edmonton LIFE hoped to define quality of life in a way that would allow for an integrated response to challenges faced within the community, as opposed to previous approaches taken by various sectors of the community which focused on domain-specific indicators. A steering committee was composed of individuals from many community sectors.

At the May 1996 launch of the Edmonton LIFE project, Executive Director Brian Bechtel brought together business, academic, environmental and social organizations, explaining that the project would help them all analyze where the city was falling short and where its energies should be directed. Mayor Bill Smith noted that "quality of life is an attraction for industries when they want to move here and it's an attraction when they want to transfer people here."<sup>5</sup>

The Edmonton LIFE project distinguished itself from the Edmonton Quality of Life Commission, which studied the effects of social policy changes on quality of life, by working to develop a definition of what quality of life for Edmonton is and measuring efforts to enhance community life.

The quality of life definition settled on by the project, as documented in the 1998 Edmonton LIFE report, is as follows:

Edmonton is a caring, safe, attractive community in which all people are valued. Edmonton is socially and environmentally responsible, and has a vibrant, flourishing economy.

Indicators were established and first measured in 1997. The September 1997 Edmonton LIFE report provided a baseline for future statistical measurement. Approximately ten indicators were provided in each of four areas: economics, community, environment, and people. Among other measurements, the report noted that Edmontonians purchased an average of 1,200 litres of gasoline per year, and that 6.1 percent of babies born in the city were underweight. A decline in these numbers in future years would indicate improved quality of life in Edmonton.

The 1998 Edmonton LIFE report makes comparisons to these indicators one year later. It shows that, while labour force participation had increased, new business development was down. 6.3 percent of babies born in the city were underweight, an increase from previous measurements, but the number of individuals using the food bank decreased from 217,151 in 1996 to 192,067 in 1997. These measurements, among the wide variety of other indicators measured in the report, were useful for informing decision making across all sectors.

While the Edmonton LIFE project originally planned to issue a report with updated measurements each year, the project lapsed after the 1998 report. In 2000, the Edmonton Social Planning Council received renewed commitment from the project's funders. The City of Edmonton Community Services department and the United Way of the Alberta Capital Region indicated their willingness to continue supporting the project for another three years. Research and writing re-commenced, with a report issued in the spring of 2002.

The 2002 Edmonton LIFE report included updates for indicators measured in the 1997 and 1998 reports. In addition, a new section was added to the report including measurements of some of these indicators in other communities, to provide a wider perspective on Edmonton's quality of life and to support the value given to these indicators in Edmonton.

The 2002 report shows a continued decrease from 1996 to 2000 in the number of new business in Edmonton. Labour force participation rates were slightly below original 1996 levels, but the percentage of full-time employment had increased by 2.2 percent from 1996 to 2000. The most recent available data on underweight births was from 1999, when the number of low-weight babies in the city had decreased to 6.0 percent after two years at 6.5 percent. Food bank use had continued its decline to 165,572 users accessing its services.

2002 marked the end of work on the Edmonton LIFE project, but the Council's focus on quality of life indicators did not end there. In 1998, the Council submitted a proposal for the creation of a quality of life index for Alberta. This project was inspired by the Edmonton LIFE project and the 1997 Quality of Life Project of the Ontario Social Development Council. It also stemmed from the realization that, while the Government of Alberta had established 240 performance indicators for its programs and services, no effort had been made to create a composite index of these indicators or to tie them to a definition of quality of life. This project developed a quality of life index for Alberta which allowed for examination of the quality of life based on indicators across regions and across time, and it informed quality of life research and advocacy in the decade to come.

## Connecting with the Community

The Edmonton Social Planning Council has always played a key role in the wider community, whether by supporting other agencies and programs, by initiating new organizations and pilot projects, or by completing contract projects for external groups. As part of its mandate for supporting the community through research and coordination, the Council published revised editions of *Doing it Right: A Needs Assessment Workbook* in 1991 and 1993, based on the original 1988 publication. *Get On Board! the Nonprofit Board Development Workbook* was published in 1992.

Through the 1990s, the Council was a key player for programs such as Head Start, Success by Six, Performing Arts North and Nobody's Perfect. It completed evaluations and other projects for Kara, the Sexual Assault Center, and the Alberta Community Development Board Development Program, as well as a strategic plan for the Grant MacEwan Day Care. The ESPC helped organize a food policy conference in 1993 and was part of a legal advisory committee to study the legal needs of low income Edmontonians. It was involved in broader projects and collaborations with groups including Campaign 2000, the Quality of Life Commission, and the Children and Families Initiative. The Council also completed an analysis of the role of the charitable sector in Edmonton in *A Profile of Edmonton's Charitable Sector Service Agencies*.

In partnership with Citizens for Public Justice, the Council co-hosted a conference titled "Beyond Economic Growth: Building Healthy Alberta Communities" in September 1997. The goal of these two days of speakers, who included Jan Reimer, Kevin Taft, Robert Theobald, Linda McQuaig and Mel Hurtig, was to look past economic growth as measures of success in communities. Sessions focused on whether or not GDP growth increases quality of life, and whether diverse communities are enhanced by economic growth. Participants voiced skepticism over whether government could be trusted to deal appropriately with pressing social issues, and the conference gave them the opportunity to turn to each other and themselves in a search for appropriate, community-based solutions.

On a completely different note, the Council collaborated with the Siberian city of Yakutsk to introduce social planning policies and practices to that region. Officials from Yakutsk visited Edmonton and, upon returning home, received government funding for two projects which the Edmonton Social Planning Council agreed to evaluate.

## The Face of the Edmonton Social Planning Council

Brian Bechtel replaced Jonathan Murphy as the Council's Executive Director in 1995, marking a shift from quiet advocacy to a more outspoken voice on community issues. These two possible faces for the council, as a behind-the-scenes advocate for change or vocal campaigner, have conflicted throughout the council's history. Each Executive Director, and indeed each Board of Directors and Board Member, has had different views of the Council's role in the community. Regardless of the stance it has taken, the Council has gained support from various organizations and individuals in the community throughout its existence.

## Moving into a New Decade: 2000 and Beyond

Brian Bechtel would serve as Executive Director for the remainder of the 1990s, but internal turmoil caused Bechtel to leave in 2000 and Board Chair Arlene Chapman stepped into his place. Nicola Fairbrother then took over as Executive Director in September 2003. As a result of the Council's organizational instability, United Way put its funding under review, indicating a vote of non-confidence. This marked a dark time for the Council. The United Way's response in this situation was proof of the Council's deep connections within the community, as any internal conflict was noticed and felt by its partner organizations. While the Council continued to produce valuable work, these conflicts unfortunately undermined some of its credibility.

### Inside Perspectives

Bryan Sandilands began his involvement with the Council's Board of Directors in the early 2000s and remained with the organization for approximately six years, culminating in two years as Board President. He describes becoming involved with the Council out of respect for its causes and the phenomenal representation it received from individuals such as Peter Faid and Jan Reimer. He also highlights the difference in the personalities that have led the Council: those who provide quiet and effective leadership versus those who focused on turning the Council into an iconic, outspoken force. Despite these changes in the way the Council has been represented, Sandilands reflects that the ESPC has maintained its focus on the systemic drivers behind important issues. He recalls successful board recruitment processes that provided proof of the community's respect for the Council. In a move to bring fresh faces to the organization following personnel changes in the early 2000s, exciting new candidates came to the Board. The Council had new aboriginal representation on its Board, an element that had been absent for some time. Following concerted board reorganization, representatives sat down with United Way officials and began re-establishing good a good relationship with this important partner.

Terry Anderson, a board member from 2003 to 2006, explains that he lived in Edmonton on and off for 20 years and that the Edmonton Social Planning Council had always been on his radar within the community. He followed the Council's publications and, as a professional researcher and academic, he became involved with the Council because it provided an outlet for his interests in social development and social justice. While he reflects on the fluctuating degree of public profile that the Council has had, he notes that it has always been recognized as an important advocate.

### Moving Forward

Aside from changes in personnel, the dawn of the 21st century marked the beginning of work on several important new projects. Strategic planning in 2003 garnered feedback from the community which confirmed that there was still a niche for the Council's work. While many key issues from the 1990s continued to play a role in the work of the council, new projects also took shape. Among these were the Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice, the Sacred Heart Collective, and the Inclusive Cities Project

## Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice

In 1999, the Council published a report on the need for legal services among low income Edmontonians titled *The Legal Needs of Low income Edmontonians: A Needs Assessment*. In addition to assessing current needs, it also evaluated the ability of current services to meet those needs. The report highlighted that only fifteen percent of low income Edmontonians received the legal help they needed. The circumstances of low income individuals' lives often lead to a need for legal assistance, but a lack of affordable and accessible legal counsel creates a barrier to aid. The report recommended the creation of a legal clinic which would empower people by educating them of their rights and would improve access to legal services.

In this instance, in addition to doing background work on the community's need for legal aid, the Council also stepped up and created a service to fill this need. The Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice opened its doors in January of 2002, providing pro bono legal assistance, outreach and education services. In its first year of operations the Centre provided assistance to over 500 clients, providing services in the areas of landlord and tenant disputes, income security, human rights, debtor/creditor conflict and immigration issues. Services were expanded in 2003 to include evening legal clinics, and the Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice formally separated from the Council in January 2005.

Terry Anderson recalls the effectiveness of this project's implementation in the manner in which the Edmonton Centre for Equal Justice was created and then, at the appropriate time, turned over to its own independent administrative structure. Bryan Sandilands credits Executive Director Nicola Fairbrother for the success of this organization. While Arlene Chapman was Executive Director in the early stages of the Centre's development, Sandilands recalls that Fairbrother excelled at incubating other organizations and demonstrated these abilities with the cultivation of the ECEJ, keeping it afloat through conflict both within the Council and in the wider community as to what the role of the Centre would be.

## Sacred Heart Collective

The closure of several inner-city Edmonton schools at the beginning of the decade led to discussion of how communities could make good use of empty school space. In November 2002, the Council moved its offices into the building of the former Sacred Heart School, joining with seven other nonprofit organizations in the Sacred Heart Collective. The Council took an administrative role in this project, leasing space from the Edmonton Catholic School Board and sub-letting it to other organizations at a low cost, organizing office equipment and resource sharing, and providing research assistance to groups in the collective. It also facilitated community use of space in the school; through 2005, over 40 groups used the school's space. The Council left the Sacred Heart Collective in 2006 when the School Board requested the space back.

As a result of the Council's involvement in the Collective, two reports were published on the use of community space and the needs of community groups. The 2005 publication *Sacred Heart Collective: An Effective Use of a Closed School* was followed up in 2006 with *Community Use of the Sacred Heart*

*School.* These documents prove the usefulness of shared community space and highlight the need for low-cost facilities in the Boyle McCauley neighbourhood, where the Sacred Heart School is located.

The Council's role in the Collective, as what Terry Anderson describes as a "direct action" project, led to strategic planning regarding the Council's place in the community. It was decided that the Council should play more of a meta-level role, helping front-line groups by focusing more on research and data collection, and avoid program implementation and administration.

Bryan Sandilands seconds this opinion, questioning whether the Council should have taken on a landlord role. General opinion at the time of the Collective was that the Council needed to be closer to organizations, but Sandilands points out that the Council has always been a think tank, not a service provider. He saw the project as an opportunity that was seized in the moment as it became available, an opportunity that was a "well intentioned attempt but not very methodical, ...reactionary rather than a planned transition".

As the City of Edmonton witnessed further school closures in 2010, the Council's publications on use of community space and its documentation of the Sacred Heart Collective as a shared facility project have received renewed attention.

### **Inclusive Cities Project**

During 2003, plans for the Inclusive Cities Project were developed in partnership with four other social planning councils and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The project aimed to explore local and national dimensions of inclusion, to enhance Edmonton's understanding of inclusion through research and dialogue with local leaders, and to ultimately create a national inclusion framework. Over the course of 2004, 200 Edmontonians provided feedback on how inclusive they believed Edmonton was. In 2005 the Council took part in the National Symposium on Building a New Canada: Meeting the Civic Challenges of Inclusion, and the report *Inclusive Cities Canada – Edmonton: Community Voices, Perspectives and Priorities* was released.

The Edmonton report used a definition of social inclusion as:

the capacity and willingness of our society to keep all groups within reach of what we expect as a society – the social commitment and investments necessary to ensure that all people are within reach of (close to) our common aspirations, common life and its common wealth.<sup>6</sup>

Working from this foundation, the report's recommendations for Edmonton included institutional change to foster inclusion, implementation of a living wage, availability of adequate and affordable housing, and safe and affordable transit.

The Council continued its focus on inclusion in 2006 by participating in the Philia Dialogues on Social Inclusion and the Alberta Community Development Conference on Social Inclusion.

## Social Determinants of Health

When the Inclusive Cities Project wrapped up most of its work in 2005 after the publication of the Edmonton report, the Council continued to work with Inclusive Cities Canada on related topics. After carefully examining the many factors that contribute to inclusive communities, focus shifted to factors that contribute to the well-being of Albertans. This renewed interest in social indicators of health reflected back to a trend within Council research begun by the Edmonton LIFE project from the 1990s. The 2005 report *Creating Social and Health Equity: Adopting an Alberta Social Determinants of Health Framework* returned to the Council's previous focus on quality of life indicators. It was followed in 2006 by a landmark publication for the Council, *Social Inclusion and Health Indicators: A Framework for Addressing the Social Determinants of Health*. The publication of this report was supported by funding from Inclusive Cities Canada.

The renewed focus on social determinants of health reflected a growing realization that health care and modern medicine were not enough to create healthy communities. Rather, any attempt to move towards a healthier society must account for the numerous socio-economic factors that contribute to health and well-being. The Council's work on this topic was further promoted in 2005 by a fact sheet and two issues of the *fACTivist*. A further *fACTivist* issue on social determinants of health was released in the fall of 2007.

Philip O'Hara, author of the Council's 2006 report, remarked to the *Edmonton Journal* that Sweden, used by premier Ralph Klein as a model for Alberta's health care system, had widely accepted the concept that eradicating poverty would solve many burdens on the public health care system. O'Hara pointed out the drain of both poverty and lack of education on health care, and expressed disappointment at the government's lack of interest in the Council's work on social determinants of health.<sup>7</sup>

While conversation about social determinants of health has become trendy in recent years, the Council's report brought up issues that were new to many in Alberta at the time of its release. Bryan Sandilands, Council board member at the time this research was being conducted, emphasizes the hard work that O'Hara put into this project and states that he hasn't received nearly enough credit for this research. "He was writing about the social determinants of health before many were really catching on to the concept," explains Sandilands. "It's interesting that today, finally, Alberta Health and Wellness is recognizing publicly that health has social determinants included in that. And that housing is a health issue. Education is a health issue. Financial support is a health issue."

In 2010, *Social Inclusion and Health Indicators: A Framework for Addressing the Social Determinants of Health* remains one of the Council's most-cited publications.

## Other Aspects of Health

Throughout the decade, the Council participated in a number of health-related projects. As noted above, initial research on quality of life indicators in the 1990s was renewed in the Council's publications on social determinants of health in 2005 and 2006. Earlier in the decade, in an effort to raise awareness

of income as a social determinant of health, a one day symposium on “Healthy Incomes, Health Outcomes” drew participants from across the province.

The Council served as the coordinating body for the Alberta Consortium for Health Promotion Research and Education from 2001 to 2002. This coalition of University and Health Region professionals was organized in the mid 1990s out of a commitment to the further development of the health promotion model. In 2001 the consortium worked on a project on poverty, child health and rural communities. In 2002 they developed a written submission for the Romanow Commission on the future of health care in Canada. The Consortium has now lapsed, but it continues to be held up as an example of collaboration for development of best practices in health care.

### **Tracking the Trends on Health**

The Council’s flagship publication, *Tracking the Trends*, included several health-related features throughout the decade. The 2000 issue focused on social health and the cost of health living. The preface to this edition noted that individual, family and community health are the by-product of many economic, social and political factors. In a thought-provoking conclusion, this publication states that support for adequate incomes is low in Canada but might receive greater public backing if increased social investment were advertised as a general population health strategy.

2002’s *Tracking the Trends* featured social health in Edmonton yet again. Once again, the Council used its report on economic and social trends to point out how many Edmontonians were unable to share in the economy or participate in the community. Data in this report highlighted a decrease in food bank use from 1996 to 2000, as well as an increase in the rate of child welfare caseloads since 1993.

The 2000 and 2002 editions of *Tracking the Trends* also describe a collaboration between the Council and the Canada West Foundation to develop an alternative to Statistics Canada’s LICO poverty measurement. The Cost of Health Living Threshold Project was based on the concept that there are many factors that influence the health of people but which have no direct connection to the healthcare system.

After a five year hiatus, *Tracking the Trends* returned to publication in 2007. The data in this edition was reorganized into a new format, and indicators were divided into six useful categories to allow for more focused analysis. The publication was designed to be useful as a tool for decision-makers, policy-makers, researchers and the public; its new, streamlined format made its contents easier to digest. *Tracking the Trends 2007* once again featured social health in Edmonton, but this time it included a social health index created by pulling together all of the social health indicators measured in previous editions. The social health index revealed an overall improvement in social health in Edmonton since 1993, although it noted little improvement since 2001 after recovery from a dip in the mid-to-late 1990s.

*Tracking the Trends 2009* emphasized social health again, but this edition featured neighbourhood well-being in Edmonton. Data was broken down by neighbourhood to give a picture of the greatest areas of need. This also allowed neighbourhoods to be ranked by multiple criteria. The 2009 edition was

notable because it reflected some of the impact of the 2008 economic downturn on Edmonton. It revealed that, based on the first six months of 2009, the number of Edmontonians expected to apply for employment insurance would be more than twice 2008 numbers. It also predicted that food bank use would soar to levels not seen since 1999. The Council's Research and Policy Analysis Coordinator John Kolkman pointed out that the data in *Tracking the Trends* gave evidence to the value of social spending. The publication highlighted that more Albertan young people were going to college or university, and that high school dropout rates were down. Kolkman indicated that this should convince policy makers to keep social spending high during economic tough times. "You have to see some of these as investments," he said. "If you don't make them now, you're really not saving money, certainly not in the long term."<sup>8</sup>

After its five-year hiatus in the middle of the decade, a strong return with the 2007 and 2009 editions re-established *Tracking the Trends* as a publication worth keeping on every bookshelf.

### Food Bank Study

Collaboration on three successful research projects in the 1990s was renewed when the Council once again partnered with Edmonton's Food Bank on a study beginning in the fall of 2002. The study included focus groups as well as one-on-one interviews through the spring of 2003, with a goal of examining increased food bank usage among some individuals and the systemic reasons for their dependency on the food bank.

### Continued Work on Poverty

The Council's traditional focus on issues relating to poverty and welfare did not wane in the 21st century. Support for new low income measurement tools continued along with advocacy for improved income support programs.

In December 2003, the Council invited the *Edmonton Journal's* Lorne Gunter and the *Globe and Mail's* Rick Salutin to debate whether welfare is a universal human right or a temporary bridge between jobs. This debate was held to draw attention to Alberta's new Income and Employment Supports Act which, after coming into effect in January 2004, would continue a trend of welfare reforms in Alberta that linked social assistance to work and training. Gunter took a position against welfare, stating that mass welfare programs cannot help everyone who needs help. He argued that by discouraging people from welfare dependency we improve their future opportunities. Gunter based this on actions taken in the 1990s to decrease the number of Albertans on welfare, which he stated had resulted in increased incomes by up to 173%. Salutin's position, by contrast, was that all people should have a right not to be destitute. He highlighted the trend of emphasizing economic growth at any cost to society. Salutin asked the audience whether people exist for the sake of the economy or the economy exists for the sake of the people. This debate succeeded at drawing public attention to a cause that the Council had been working on tirelessly.

## Market Basket Measure

The Council appeared in February 2004 before the Alberta Government's Standing Policy Committee on Learning and Employment to make a presentation in reaction to the 2004 Income and Employment Supports Act. The Council's position advocated for adoption of the Market Basket Measure (MBM) as the measure of low income in Alberta and the instrument to set welfare and minimum wage rates. *More Money in Their Pockets: Pragmatism, Politics and Poverty in Alberta* was published in September 2004 to further explain how adoption of the MBM would ensure that low income Albertans had more disposable income.

Remarkably, since the beginning of the development of the Market Basket Measure in the late 1990s, the positions of the Government of Alberta and the Edmonton Social Planning Council on this issue had switched sides. After originally backing the MBM, the Government abandoned it after its 2003 launch. While the Council initially protested the limitations of the MBM, which would provide lower minimum wage and welfare rates than the LICO, it came to recognize that this poverty measure would provide a better immediate solution for low income Albertans. Its adoption would allow the Government of Alberta to increase minimum wage and give more benefits to welfare recipients, and it would make Alberta the first province to adopt an official low income measure. While the Council pushed for support of the MBM, the Government continued to resist the Council's efforts for new poverty measures and for an official poverty cut-off in the province.

## Living Wage

The Council joined forces with Public Interest Alberta (PIA) in 2005 for PIA's living wage campaign. The two organizations worked together to develop a research agenda on living wage policies, and in 2006 the Council was actively involved in PIA's task force on living wage. The aim of this task force was to ensure that anyone working full-time earns enough income to maintain a safe and healthy standard of living. In the fall of 2006, PIA contracted the ESPC to produce a report on living wage for the task force. Research over the period of one year involved consultations with Albertans and included new statistics on poverty and the number of low wage workers in the province. Released in January 2007, *Working Poor or Making a Living* served as a foundation for PIA's living wage policies. Data in this report demonstrated how Alberta's minimum wage had not kept pace with inflation, making it difficult for many low income Albertans to afford the cost of living.

The Council continued to look at the high cost of living in Alberta with the release of *Standing Still in a Booming Economy* in October 2007. This report set out to answer why, with plentiful jobs and record employment levels, so many working Edmontonians were having such a difficult time making ends meet. Six focus groups contributed to the research, and a total of 75 participants described being caught in a squeeze between low paying and insecure jobs, and rising costs for food, shelter and other essentials. The report's recommendations included raising the minimum wage to a benchmark such as the low income cut-off, addressing labour shortages by improving wages and benefits for government contracted services, and improving access to quality child care.

## Child Poverty Report Cards

In 2008, Public Interest Alberta and the Edmonton Social Planning Council teamed up on another aspect of poverty: child poverty. This time the two organizations worked together with Campaign 2000s annual National Report Card on Child Poverty project. Previous collaboration with Campaign 2000 in 2004 had resulted in the creation of an Alberta poverty network.

The first fruit of this project came in November 2008 with the publication of *We Can Do Better*, an Alberta report card on child poverty. It highlighted that one in ten children were living in poverty in Canada's wealthiest province, that four out of five children living in poverty came from families where at least one parent worked full-time for part of the year, and that low income children in Alberta lived in deeper poverty than children in other provinces.

*We Can Do Better* was followed by the 2009 report card, *We Must Do Better*. This edition included feedback from seven poverty forums held by PIA and the Council throughout the province during 2009. It noted optimism surrounding projects such as Alberta's new Housing First initiative to target homelessness but expressed concern over the lack of an overall strategy to target poverty in the province. One in twelve Albertan children were still living in poverty, and one in four Albertans were working for low wages. The 2010 report card, *Time For Action: Working Together to End Poverty In Alberta*, noted that 53,000 Alberta children were still living in poverty according to the most recent Statistics Canada data. Since these numbers were from 2008, at the beginning of the economic downturn, the report speculated that numbers had increased. This report, in conjunction with other provincial report cards as well as Campaign 2000s national child poverty report card, called on provincial and federal governments to work together on creating comprehensive poverty reduction strategies. It identified six other provinces and three territories which had created comprehensive anti-poverty strategies, and pointed out that Alberta did not fall among these ranks.

## Strategic Alliance on Low Income Issues

An important partner in the fight for implementation of the Market Basket Measure was the Strategic Alliance on Low income Issues. This advisory group of representatives from the community, voluntary sector, private sector and all orders of government makes recommendations to the Deputy Minister of Employment, Immigration and Industry on low income issues.

The Strategic Alliance evolved from a 2004 presentation to the Standing Policy Committee on Learning and Employment, highlighting the need for alliances that enable collaboration between government and its partners on social planning issues. Following a meeting between the Assistant Deputy Minister of People Investments, the Deputy Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE), and the Executive Director of the Edmonton Social Planning Council, a decision was made to explore opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and to draft a proposal for a Strategic Alliance on Social Issues. In the draft 2005-2008 Business Plan, AHRE had identified a challenge and opportunity to be a leader and innovator in developing strategic alliances and networks with others to address the people, skills and workplace agendas of the department. The former ministry wanted to develop a broad range of stakeholders as potential partners and design innovative, collaborative models to work with

them. While all provinces have collaborated with community partners when it comes to delivering services, Alberta was the first to form an ongoing committee to consult on policy design. The first meeting of the Strategic Alliance on Low Income Issues was held in 2005.

Susan Morrissey, the Council's Executive Director, became co-chair of the Strategic Alliance in January 2006 and held this position for the remainder of the decade and into the following one. Other members of the Alliance include the Quality of Life Commission, United Way of the Capital Region, United Way of Calgary and Area, and the Inter-City Forum on Social Issues.

## Child Welfare

In addition to the publication of annual child poverty report cards in the last years of the decade, the Council was involved with numerous other projects focused on child welfare. It took on a voice of advocacy for children and families early in the decade, criticizing the Klein government for not matching federal extensions to parental and maternity leave despite voicing commitment to family values. As Arlene Chapman, the Council's Executive Director, noted to the Edmonton Journal, "For the past three years this government has talked about their investment in children and said they are strong on family values. Yet they're not willing to extend parental leave. I fail to see how that fits in with what they say is their commitment to children in this province"<sup>9</sup>

After collaborating with the Quality of Life Commission in the 1990s for the *Listen to Me* report, the Council was also involved with the Commission's *Listen to the Children* project and subsequent report, aimed at giving a voice to children in poverty. Thirty-two 10-year-olds from low income neighbourhoods were interviewed for the study. They were asked to identify major concerns with regards to their needs and their neighbourhoods. Overwhelmingly, the children interviewed reported that they didn't feel safe in their neighbourhoods and were constantly worried about the safety of their friends and families. They did not trust adults who were in positions of authority; children had experienced high rates of betrayed trust. Recommendations from the report asked the City to set up a task force to develop civic neighbourhoods and create target programs for children living in low income areas. As a result of the report, the City requested that City staff sit down with service providers and report back to the Community Services Committee with a plan of action. The *Listen to the Children* report garnered good attention for the Quality of Life Commission's work, and it raised public awareness of the needs of children living in poverty within Edmonton.

The Social Planning Council's research on the number of children who experienced hunger on a regular basis (as published in *Tracking the Trends*) was used to back the need for school lunch programs provided by the Edmonton City Centre Church Corporation and to advocate for more comprehensive lunch programs across the school system.

## National Children's Alliance Regional Forum

Many of the Council's projects have been a result of collaboration with other agencies or support for other community initiatives. This has, in fact, been a grounding principle of the Council's work since its inception. The National Children's Alliance Regional Forum in 2000 was another example of this principle. In collaboration with the YWCA and YMCA of Edmonton, the Council hosted this one day

provincial forum for stakeholders on child poverty issues. This gathering resulted in a set of principles for a National Children's Agenda, identification of essential community services for children living in poverty, and development of a shared vision for children's well being. The National Children's Alliance had, to this point, succeeded in bringing Canadian governments (federal and provincial) on board with regards to creating a National Children's Agenda, but the Alliance recognized that such an agenda would only be successful if the voluntary sector was engaged in addition to various levels of government. Alberta's National Children's Alliance Regional Forum was part of the process of building this engagement and visioning what it could like moving forward.

### **Nobody's Perfect**

Community coordination has been a facet of the Council's work since its early days. Nobody's Perfect was an important coordination project run by the Council from 1997 to 2003. A successful and popular preschool parenting program across Canada, Nobody's Perfect was funded by Health Canada through its Community Action Program for Children. The program was provided to parents who fit the description of low income, young, single, limited with regards to formal education, or socially or geographically isolated. Many of the program's participants were teenage mothers; one Edmonton implementation of the program was facilitated by the Terra Centre for Pregnant and Parenting Teens.

The original project funding for Nobody's Perfect ran from 1997 to 2000. Funding was renewed to 2003. In its role as provincial coordinator, the Council distributed newsletters, maintained the project database, and coordinated facilitator training. Notably, this coordinating role was taken on by provincial governments in other regions across Canada. The Council stepped up to take this role in Alberta because of a lack of interest on the part of the provincial government. Nobody's Perfect became one of the most widely used parent education programs in the province.

The Nobody's Perfect Steering Committee was exceptionally strong, and when Health Canada decided to end funding in April 2003, the Committee continued to run the program on a volunteer basis. The Council's work with this project ended when Health Canada funding was terminated.

Health Canada also funded the Centres of Excellence for Child and Youth Centred Prairie Communities, a project begun in 2001. Six Centres across the prairies focused on opportunities and challenges faced by urban prairie communities, especially Aboriginal communities, in supporting the healthy development of their children and youth. The ESPC provided administration and coordination for the Edmonton network of Centres of Excellence. During 2002, a great deal of work was done to develop a comprehensive community network that included Aboriginal groups. Original funding designations were for five years, but managerial problems at Health Canada led to the termination of funding in 2003. During the short run of this project, the ESPC oversaw research on the capacity of parenting and support programs in Edmonton to nurture resiliency in Aboriginal families.

### **Immigrants and Immigration**

The Alberta Network of Immigrant Women (ANIW) has existed since the early 1990s with the goal of researching issues that impact the settlement process of immigrant and visible minority women in Alberta. In 2000, the Council worked with ANIW on a study which resulted in *Overqualified*,

*Underemployed: Accessibility Barriers to Accreditation for Immigrant Women with Foreign Qualifications.* This study focused on women who had received their qualifications in foreign countries before immigrating to Canada. It also looked at the implications of Canada's immigration model, which assumed a traditional family structure with a male entering the country in the "independent" immigrant class and the rest of the family entering as dependents.

This study identified problems with Canada's points-based immigration system and pointed out the additional barriers the system creates for immigrant women. It recommended streamlined accreditation policies, removal of cost barriers for accreditation assessment, and creation of appropriate re-accreditation exams which focus on assessment of professional skills. ANIW continues to work towards these goals, providing a mentorship program for immigrant women as they work through the process of having foreign qualifications assessed for accreditation in Canada.

The Council was also involved in the creation of the Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council, a non-profit organization that ensures immigrants are welcomed to Edmonton and given full opportunity to participate in the local economy. A planning committee was established in 2007, and the Edmonton Social Planning Council, as a member of the planning committee, provided strong support in the formation of the operational leg of ERIEC. The organization was launched in 2008 with many projects underway, including collaborative research on foreign qualification assessment with the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and a business mentorship pilot program. By the fall of 2010, sixty percent of participants in the mentorship program had found full-time employment relevant to their skills and training, with a growing number of local businesses recognizing the value of globally trained and educated employees.

## **Rental Housing in Edmonton**

As Alberta's economy boomed in the mid-2000s due to huge increases in work on the oil fields, Edmontonians faced a crisis in rental housing. In May 2007, approximately 40 percent of Edmontonians lived in rental housing, yet the number of rental housing units available had declined steadily since 2003. Between 1998 and 2007, the cost of rental housing in Edmonton increased by 47 percent despite an increase in the Consumer Price Index of only 26 percent. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation predicted an increase of 20 percent in rental costs during 2007 followed by a 13 percent increase in 2008.

Faced by these hard facts, the Edmonton Social Planning Council hosted a series of Renters Listening Forums in May 2007 in collaboration with City Councillors Michael Phair and Dave Thiele. Individuals were given the opportunity to make short presentations for a listening panel comprised of City Councillors, Quality of Life Commission Representatives, and the Social Planning Council's Executive Director.

From this series of forums, *A Roof Over Their Heads: A Report on the Renters Listening Forums* drew together common themes and presented recommendations. Presentations at the forums highlighted that individuals working full-time for low wages were unable to pay rent and that not enough affordable housing units were available. Several groups, including seniors, immigrants, and persons with

disabilities, highlighted unique concerns. The rental housing problem was being compounded by an influx of workers from other provinces who were coming to Alberta to take advantage of the province's booming economy.

The Council used this feedback to advocate for rent controls limiting frequency and amount of rent increases. It also called for increases in affordable housing and an increase in Alberta's minimum wage.

A follow-up report was issued in 2008. *"Not Just A Roof Over Our Heads": Exploring the State of Rental Housing in Edmonton One Year Later* compiled the responses of over 700 renters to a survey administered by the Council. Almost sixty percent of respondents expressed that rental housing situations had become more difficult over the previous year. They identified increased rent, lower quality of rental housing, and reduced stability of housing as major concerns.

*"It's Time to Step Up": Recommendations to Address Rental Housing Issues in Edmonton* was produced in September 2008 as a companion report to *"Not Just A Roof Over Our Heads"*. Once again, the Council called for rent stability guidelines and more affordable housing. The Council's victory on this issue was partial: rental increases were limited to once per calendar year, but no limits were placed on the amount of each increase.

## Work in the Community

As always, the Council collaborated with numerous community organizations and service agencies throughout the decade. Communications support was provided for the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness and for Homefest, an annual concert to raise awareness of homelessness in Edmonton. The Council worked with the Legal Access Coalition in 2004 to improve legal services for low-income Edmontonians, and with Action for Healthy Communities to plan the Voices from our Neighbourhoods project in 2006. Local consultations for other organizations included the Focus Edmonton Municipal Plan and the Transportation Master Plan in 2007, and the City of Edmonton *Way We Live* plan and the Wood Buffalo Social Plan in 2009. The Council worked with Homeward Trust Edmonton on Edmonton's Homeless Count in 2006, 2008 and 2010, and played a role in planning Homeless Connect, a biannual community event bringing together community partners and service providers to provide a broad range of services for homeless people in the community.

## The End of a Decade

As the Council looked back on seventy years of work in 2010, several important new projects marked its course. Participation in Edmonton's Social Enterprise Fund, a network of community researchers and practitioners, provided a new outlet for emphasizing the value of looking at community development through a social return on investment (SROI) lens. The Council played a key role in setting up a local SROI database. A successful Lunch and Learn series to commemorate the Council's work over seven decades resulted in a positive relationship with the Edmonton Public Library and a resolve to continue this public education effort. The Council's online library was updated and expanded into a new database, being relaunched as *threeSOURCE: an information hub for Alberta's third sector* in time for 70th Anniversary gala celebrations in October, 2010.

## Looking Forward: A Plan for the Future

After successfully completing strategic planning exercises in 2003, the Council realized it was time to reflect on its vision and renew its mission for future work. After consultation with staff, board and community stakeholders, a new strategic plan was developed for 2010 – 2013. It tightened up wording in the Council’s mission, resulting in a commitment to “provide leadership within the community by addressing and researching social issues, informing public discussion and influencing social policy.”

The Council set itself five goals: to develop and articulate an inspiring vision of a more livable city; to be a recognized, independent, knowledgeable and progressive voice on social issues; to have a large, broad and diverse network of members, friends and volunteers; to have an entrepreneurial and flexible approach which would secure revenue from diverse sources; and to be an employer of choice.

At the Council’s 70th Anniversary Gala, Michael Phair, former ESPC Board President and former City Councillor, remarked that the Social Planning Council had provided inspiration for his political career. It is fitting to close this summary of two decades in the Council’s history with his words, after he opened this time period with a series of challenging questions for the Council to tackle.

Michael Phair reflected on the Council’s value to Edmonton as a community:

The most significant part of the Social Planning Council that oftentimes gets overlooked...is that it really gives a place for discussion, for information...It is a chance to talk about, to think about, and question, and think again and re-form what you were thinking about and be challenged in your thinking.

Oftentimes we see the accomplishments of the Planning Council, all of which are wonderful and really significant...the pieces they have put out and the documents, and we oftentimes don’t think about all of the thinking, the discussion, the debate that goes on and that it generates when it comes forward, and how important that is for all of us in our lives to move forward. I think that is significant for all of us in trying to make this a better world and a better place that we live in.

I have always been convinced that this is at the heart and core of what the Planning Council wants to achieve: that ability we have to think about and debate and discuss, and then to try to move forward.

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