

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Sharing Information ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

Revelstoke has a strong vision and desire to be a great place to live, work and play. Part of this vision is being inclusive of all citizens regardless of income. Yet in the last few years, the rising cost of living has become a challenge for many residents. And what impacts citizens, impacts our community. As a result, the Social Development Committee has targeted poverty reduction as a high priority for action. But tackling poverty is a daunting task. It has been called one of the most complex issues of our time. In Revelstoke, much work is going on behind the scenes to support individuals and build community. This article is the first in a series that will highlight many aspects of poverty reduction in Revelstoke - what is going on, what we are doing about it, and what we could be doing better.

In 2012, the Social Development Committee completed a community-wide poverty reduction strategy. Little did we know that for a community of our size, taking this first step was ground breaking. The report put together ten years of stats from a variety of sources, focusing on income, housing and food security. As well, we looked at local affordability using the 'market basket measure'. When we compared the actual cost of living to people's income, we found that just over 30% of Revelstoke households are struggling to meet basic needs – no frills, no savings. We interviewed service providers and – most importantly – people living in poverty, to find out what were their biggest challenges. Many were working more than one job just to get by. Housing and the high cost of food were at the top of the list. Lack of well paid, secure, year round employment and the cost of things like medication and optometry were major challenges. Ten community goals emerged, each with a number of recommended actions. We've been chipping away at it ever since.

"Improved information sharing, networking and communication on poverty reduction goals and strategies" is our first community goal. This is important because everything else follows. Not only do we need to raise awareness of what is going on in our own community, but also learn what is working in other places across Canada. Linking in to the 'Vibrant Communities Canada - Cities Reducing Poverty' initiative, we became part of a nation-wide action team that created a national Poverty Reduction Charter. So far, cities across Canada from Surrey to Charlotte County New Brunswick, have signed the Charter. As well, Revelstoke is one of 13 cities across Canada reporting progress to a Municipal Monitor on Poverty Reduction, based in Toronto.

In April, we were invited to Nelson to share our experience in developing a poverty reduction strategy and to 'kick off' the same process for Nelson. In May, presentations were made to our local Chamber and Rotary club. This September, Revelstoke has been invited to present alongside the Cities of Surrey and Victoria at a workshop on "Tackling Poverty at the Community Level" at the annual Union of BC Municipalities convention in Whistler. For a community of our size, Revelstoke is taking the lead.

Locally, we have formed a working group to make sure we are moving forward. Poverty is best addressed by working together, involving business, government and non-profit leaders as well as people with first hand experience in living in poverty. We must build on local assets, of which we have many. Rather than trying to alleviate symptoms of poverty, it is important to focus on the interrelated cause-and-effects, working on many different areas over time. There is no 'silver bullet'. We are in it for the long haul.

The working group's purpose is to track progress on what we are doing; support community-based organizations to implement programs and projects directly related to poverty reduction; build community-wide awareness and support for related issues in Revelstoke; act as a 'think tank', brainstorming ideas and building community partnerships to act on those ideas; apply for project and program-based funding; and measure, evaluate and report on outcomes.

Sharing information is about learning. As well, it is about advocacy – what we can do from the ground up, working together to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity, financial and otherwise, to maintain a decent standard of living and to participate in our community. Interested in joining the working group or finding out more? Contact Jill at 250-814-3875 or email e.jill.zacharias@gmail.com. Find the strategy online at www.revelstokesocialdevelopment.org.