

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Access to Resources ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

Whenever I talk to people who are new to our community, I am always happy to hear them exclaim that Revelstoke has so much to offer. It's true! The Revelstoke Poverty Reduction Strategy lists over 11 pages of local programs and free resources dedicated to assist people in need. And since we live in Canada there are also government programs intended to give people a leg up. However, while programs, services and resources exist (yes, there are gaps), we found that *access* can be a challenge. So working together to improve access to existing resources is a high priority community goal.

As Canadians, we have come to expect that higher levels of government take responsibility for assisting citizens who, for whatever reason, are in need. But since the late 1980's this 'social safety net' has been steadily eroded for a variety of reasons. And while many programs are still in place, barriers to accessing government resources can be overwhelming. On October 1st, 2002 the provincial government closed the Ministry of Human Resources office in Revelstoke. Among many changes, this closure has had the biggest impact on access. Not only do Revelstoke residents now have a geographic disadvantage, all access is now via a telephone call centre or by computer. Applications for Income Assistance and other programs like EI must be completed online. But many low income residents cannot afford a telephone or computer and some have limitations that are barriers to 'navigating the system'. Further, not only is it difficult to navigate the government website to find programs and subsidies (I tried it), service providers report that even the telephone call centres can be challenging. It makes a difference if it is a service provider on the phone calling for a client, but there are still wait times and difficulties. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of individuals being denied disability status and the time it takes to apply for disability has tripled. As well, government programs seem to be constantly changing. New programs parachute in while others are cut. Many employment support programs tend to be 'one off' programs dependent on funding.

For some, simply the stress of living in poverty can make it hard to function and make it to programs. On top of everything, one of the biggest barriers to accessing resources and programs is that people are very good at keeping their poverty hidden and believe it is shameful to ask for assistance. One woman told me, "Since becoming a single parent it's been very hard emotionally – my greatest stress is not being able to provide for myself and my child and feeling inadequate. There is both my own and society's notion of what I should be able to provide. I don't fit the 'definition' of someone who lives in poverty. I have no drug addictions or mental health issues or employment barriers." For her, separating from her husband, leaving a good job elsewhere and moving back to Revelstoke to co-parent her children, was enough to place her in poverty.

Many organizations – from churches to the school district, volunteer or otherwise – are making an incredible amount of extra effort to support residents with financial or other barriers. There is cross-referral where multiple organizations work together to help a client, child or family in need. Many service providers advocate for the benefit of clients to ensure access to government programs, including help filling out forms, time on the phone, and ensuring all the necessary paperwork in place. At Community Connections, despite funding challenges, the Social Justice Advocate position is dedicated to doing this work. A number of service providers do home visits or provide outreach to improve accessibility to services, for example, at the Food Bank or in schools. Many programs are offered at no or low cost to ensure universal accessibility. Some organizations have implemented their own transportation to ensure clients can access programs. With Community Connections as the host agency, the Early Childhood Development Committee initiated an access program to help the most vulnerable families get children to programs. The Youth Advisory Committee is in the initial stages of developing a Youth Access Program to ensure youth with financial barriers can access sports, recreation and cultural activities.

We are looking at ways to deepen this commitment, working together with others to improve access to resources for Revelstoke citizens in need. And everyone can do their part. If you are involved in a club or sport, find out if there are subsidies for participants and how to access them. Offer a free spot. If transportation is an issue, explore ways to make sure everyone can come. Above all, if you are going through a hard time and need help, don't be afraid to ask.