

## **Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity**

### **~ Income Security ~**

*by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator*

Income security is about how much money you make compared to how much it costs to live in our community. It is also about stability – does your income fluctuate seasonally? Are you at risk of having less money in the future? When doing research for the Poverty Reduction Strategy, we found that some populations in Revelstoke have lower income security and are at much higher risk of living in poverty. In 2010, the average annual family income in Revelstoke was about 12% below the provincial average. Since 2008, median incomes have dropped, particularly for men. Despite women gradually closing the gap, the median income of women is still just less than half that of men. And in the past few years, the number of Revelstoke residents receiving Employment Insurance and Income Assistance has been on the rise.

When you compare people's income to the cost of living in Revelstoke, a real picture emerges. Using an affordability 'snapshot', we found that the total cost for a single person to live in Revelstoke (modestly), is about \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year depending on if they have a car or not, live in shared accommodation or by themselves. To put this into perspective, a single person receiving Income Assistance makes about \$7,000 a year, and someone receiving Disability Assistance (and unable to work), makes just under \$11,000 a year. For a single parent with one child, including child care we found it cost at least \$46,000 a year to live, but in 2010 the median annual income for single parent families (who may have more than one child), in Revelstoke, was \$37,340. The bare minimum cost of living for a family of four was \$66,000 a year. This meant that both parents had to be working at least 35 hours per week, making \$17.75 per hour. You can see why improving income security for all residents is an important community goal.

Despite Revelstoke's diverse economy, this is a challenge. Perhaps the biggest challenge (and we are not alone) is the rising cost of living compared to the ability of many businesses to pay a living wage. Lots of people want to live here because it's such a great community and the lifestyle suits them, but it is hard to find meaningful work where they can earn enough to make ends meet. But many try. Some bring their jobs with them. Many work 2 or 3 jobs. Others, particularly those with very little, are ingenious about budgeting and employ strategies for getting by, like finding roommates to help cover the cost of housing and food, walking or biking instead of driving, shopping at Thrift Stores and garage sales, not using a credit card, sharing babysitting, or for seniors getting a part-time job to supplement their pension. For some, volunteering is a stepping-stone to higher-level employment.

Ironically, the Poverty Reduction Strategy found that those who were most vulnerable and destitute in our community – and so have the lowest income security – were people who cannot work and are receiving government supports. Even for a single person with modest needs, \$7,000 to \$11,000 a year isn't near enough. For many years, BC has had the highest child poverty rate in Canada. Provincially, advocacy groups like the BC Poverty Coalition are calling for the BC government to create a poverty reduction strategy to address these concerns. In June this year, there was great fanfare surrounding the announcement of the province's Accessibility 2014 plan. Unfortunately, in the plan there was no mention of changing disability rates – the most burning issue for those unable to work. Nevertheless, the first step towards income security for anyone – even if you have no income – is to file an income tax return. This will open doors to any government supports that exist. In Revelstoke each spring the Volunteer Income Tax Program helps lower income residents to file income tax returns. Over the years this program has given many residents a helping hand when in need.

Elsewhere in our community, the local WorkBC office is up to date on wage subsidy programs, training and self-employment options, among the provision of many other services. Community Futures offers business development support. Okanagan College offers a variety of upgrading and certification programs to improve employment options. The Columbia Basin Trust has student works programs. This list goes on. Recently, the City's CED Department and WorkBC partnered on a project that will look at the seasonal nature of different industries from forestry to tourism as well as the changing nature of Revelstoke's 'potential employee' pool. A younger, more mobile workforce has different needs and expectations of their employers. Yet many local industries, like forestry, need a committed workforce. It is hoped the project will help determine the current and future labour market needs of each sector in our local economy, and develop a strategy to match the skills of the new, mobile workforce with the needs of local employers.

As well, the continuing efforts of local business and the Chamber of Commerce to support building a diverse economy in our community, are critical. Among many other areas of our lives, income impacts health – not only for individuals, but also for the community as a whole. The more we work together to close the gap between incomes and the cost of living, the better off we will all be.