

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Food Security ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

Food security is essential to the well being of both adults and children. According to some, after housing it is the second most important area where efforts should be directed to reduce poverty. Food security exists when “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (United Nations). You would think that in a developed, wealthy country like Canada, food security wouldn’t be an issue. And yet, it is.

In 2011, while doing research for our poverty reduction strategy we found that food costs in Revelstoke were about 14% above provincial averages. At that time, estimated food costs for a family of four were \$1000/month and represented just over 20% of monthly costs. To dig a little deeper, we turned to the Community Connections Food Bank. Food bank usage is a good indicator of financial hardship as well as the rising cost of food. In 2006, the Food Bank distributed a total of about 1500 hampers to 200 households. In 2013, 7410 hampers were distributed to 289 households. This tells us that in recent years, the number of repeat visits to the Food Bank has increased substantially. Clients are requiring food bank services for longer periods of time, rather than turning to the Food Bank to tide them over for a short period. As well, there are an increasing number of working people having to access the food bank, once again pointing to a gap between what people are earning and the cost of living. Revelstoke is not alone. Across Canada, in 2013 Food Bank use was 25% higher than 5 years ago.

To be food *insecure* is to lack secure access to one of our most basic needs. There is a wealth of research that shows that this is directly related to poor physical and mental health outcomes, child development, and altered family relationships. The stress of running out of food or having to go without something else in order to put food on the table is very hard. So ‘community-wide and individual food security’ was an important community goal in our strategy.

Without question, the efforts of Community Connections Outreach Services Program Director, Patti Larson, and Food Bank volunteers, are to be commended. The role these services play in alleviating hardship for vulnerable citizens in our community is critical. This year, with Patti at the helm, the Emergency Services Food Drive rallied nearly 400 volunteers. Revelstoke citizens contributed about 11,500 pounds of food, and over \$5000 in donations to the Food Bank.

Further, in the past year, there has been a lot of momentum in the community around food security. A group of local advocates, with key leadership from both the North Columbia Environmental Society (NCES) and Community Connections Outreach Services, crafted the Revelstoke Food Charter. The Charter was adopted by Revelstoke City Council in February 2014, and has since been endorsed by local organizations and businesses. The Charter states that “For Revelstoke, food security means that all community residents have access to nutritious, safe, affordable food that meets our needs, supports our cultures, and is produced in ways that are environmentally sound, socially just, adaptable to change and supportive of self-reliance and collaboration” (see http://northcolumbia.org/th_gallery/food-resilience-charter/).

The NCES’s Local Food Initiative Committee has taken the lead on a number of projects that promote local production and preservation of food, like the community gardens and the Garden Guru series, which is all about sharing knowledge. A highlight has been the publication of the book “Mountain Harvest – Revelstoke Senior Gardeners Share their Secrets”. Other organizations, like the School District and Child Care Society, also have programs that ensure all children have access to healthy food.

Last fall, acting on a key recommendation in the Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, the City’s Department of Community Economic Development acquired funding to complete a Food Security Strategy. The purpose of the strategy is to understand our community’s current food security situation, identify opportunities and challenges to becoming more secure down the road, and come up with recommendations that will move us forward. Underlying this is an understanding that as a relatively isolated community, it is important to become more independent and less affected by things we don’t have any control over that impact the cost and availability of food, like the price of oil.

As part of the Food Security Strategy, a Food Security Vision was crafted. The Vision takes us all back to our roots and brings it home. “Revelstoke will have a secure food system rooted in the community and centered on good food – food that is healthy, sustainable and affordable. Revelstoke will have a culture that supports local food production where possible, and recognizes the importance of food in bringing people together through growing, cooking and eating”. My great-grandparents were Mennonite farmers and my father grew up on a dairy farm. Their lives revolved around food production. Does our past hold the answer to a ‘food secure’ future for us all? What can each of us do to improve our own food security as well as for us all? For more information contact the NCES Local Food Initiative at revelstokelfi@gmail.com.