

Revelstoke Poverty Reduction – Creating Shared Prosperity

~ Social Inclusion ~

by Jill Zacharias, Social Development Coordinator

When we began working on the Revelstoke Community Poverty Reduction Strategy, one of the first things we did was come up with a definition of poverty. We knew that our project had to reflect the standard of living in our community – right here, right now. We realized that an important aspect of our culture is social inclusion. To feel socially included means more than merely having our basic needs being met. It means that we have a sense of belonging to, and are valued members of, our community.

Our definition evolved: *“Individuals and families experiencing poverty lack the opportunity, financial and otherwise, to maintain a decent standard of living and to participate fully and with dignity in our community”*. Further, social inclusion became a community goal in the strategy.

For people living in poverty being socially *excluded* can be part of life. People are completely caught up in meeting basic needs, without time or personal resources to take part in programs and activities, much less volunteer or contribute to the community. Stress can make it very difficult to function. For children and youth living in poverty, it can be very challenging and stressful to ‘fit in’ at school. The older a youth becomes, the more pressure there is to fit in. So poverty translates as much more than lacking assets and having unequal access to necessities.

A second, closely related community goal in our strategy is access to affordable goods like proper clothing and footwear for a mountain climate, and services like optometry and dentistry. To be poor is to experience distance from community norms.

A number of organizations in Revelstoke recognize the importance of social inclusion and universal access to programs and services, as well as affordable goods. The School District has a policy to support all students to reduce barriers and support participation in all their programs. Community Connections services are free and the Food Bank is a key point of social connection for both individuals and families.

Through the Early Childhood Development Committee, collaborative efforts to offer free parent support groups and children’s activities, like Play in the Park, offer opportunities for parents and children to connect, without the barrier of cost. The Early Learning Resource and Lending Library at the Begbie View Elementary site is a central location for families to access information, toys and equipment, and connect with other community-based resources and programs. The recent Early Years Fair, coupled with the Children’s Toy and Clothing exchange, is another great example. The Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy offers free group activities like Family Night Out.

Seniors Association membership is only \$10 per year and the Seniors Centre offers a host of activities that promote social interaction for little or no cost. As well, there are approximately 80 volunteer-based recreation groups or organizations in Revelstoke and area.

The City of Revelstoke, in partnership with Community Connections, provides subsidies to individuals and families with low incomes for City-run recreations programs and Aquatic Centre passes. Also, the City supports the Youth Advisory Committee and the Revelstoke Youth Initiative, which is all about supporting youth to participate in community life and access opportunities. In fact, Revelstoke’s Vision Statement (1994) values the social sustainability of the community, and speaks directly to equal access to opportunities for all residents and visitors.

Over the past few weeks, our series on poverty reduction has highlighted both the complexity of issues and the impressive efforts to tackle those issues in our community. The role of the City of Revelstoke Social Development Committee is to facilitate proactive planning and action for positive social change. Our Poverty Reduction Strategy has informed community development initiatives by determining what we need to be working on to reduce local levels of poverty. In the Integrated Community Sustainability Plan completed last year, poverty reduction was identified as one of the highest priorities for action and is seen as critical to moving forward – socially and economically – through times of growth and change. Poverty reduction is directly linked to economic development.

Reduction of poverty is a desirable end for us all and is a shared responsibility requiring commitment to concrete action. No one group can do this alone. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that all families and individuals in Revelstoke have the option to contribute and participate meaningfully in community life, thereby improving the overall sustainability of our community. For more information, visit www.revelstokesocialdevelopment.org or email e.jill.zacharias@gmail.com. Other articles in the series can be found online at www.revelstoketimesreview/ourtown.