



HungerCount 2012 Alberta Provincial Report

Prepared by the Alberta Food Bank Network Association, Member of Food Banks Canada

Overview

In Alberta in March 2012:

- Food bank use was 59% higher than in 2008, before the start of the recent recession;
- 41% of food banks reported an increase in usage;
- 23,616 of those assisted were children and youth;
- 58% of households assisted were families with children;
- 1 in 3 households helped had income from current or recent employment.

Many Working Albertans Continue to Need Help from Food Banks

As the economy continues to recover, the employment rate is steadily increasing but job growth is notably softer than the previous year. With an unemployment rate of 4.4% in August, Alberta remains one of the best provinces to find a job. Unfortunately, it is also true that Alberta food banks serve a higher percentage of households with employment income than in any other province. Though the provincial economy is in relatively good shape, Albertans faces a number of challenges including a meagre minimum wage, rising inflation, and a shortage of affordable housing.¹

The number of working individuals who are turning to food banks for help indicates that employment is not a ticket out of poverty. In Alberta, just over one in eight workers, or 234,200 people, earn less than \$12/hr. Incredibly, almost half of these earn less than \$10/hr.² Although these numbers are above the current minimum wage, Alberta has the second lowest minimum wage rates in the country but some of the highest rental rates, with Fort McMurray topping the charts as the most expensive city in Canada to rent a home.³ As of September 1, 2012 minimum wage was increased by \$.35 to \$9.75 for most employees and remains at \$9.05 for those employees who serve liquor.

Cost of Living Increasing Rapidly

The combination of low minimum wages, high housing costs and inflation in the prices of food and transportation creates a huge barrier for many Albertans to get by, let alone get ahead. Many low-income people would not be able to make ends meet without assistance from the food bank. As the disparity between the minimum wage and a living wage grows, more and more people are having to make choices about the basic necessities of life, and for most people food is a variable whereas shelter is a must.

Due to Alberta's unique working environment and climate, individuals seeking employment in Alberta, especially in the oil and gas sector, are more likely to have to relocate to find work. Along with moving

comes many additional and upfront costs including: first and last month's rent, a damage deposit and transportation costs. Then there is the added stress of when the first paycheque will come. Many food banks report an increase in newcomers to their community accessing the food bank while they struggle to get back on their feet. Because the job climate in Alberta can be so volatile and unpredictable, food banks are noticing changes in food bank usage seasonally and regionally as well.

Progress on Addressing Homelessness

The province has seen some positive progress in the past year. For example, soup kitchens and other meal programs in Edmonton reported serving 105,084 fewer meals in March, compared to 2011. The Government of Alberta devoted \$110 million in the 2012 Budget, to address homelessness. This includes investing in outreach support services, housing for about 1800 homeless and more than 3100 emergency/transitional shelter spaces. The Government of Alberta also introduced a new Interagency Council on Homelessness which will lead the implementation of a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Alberta. ⁴

Reflection

It was a year of challenges for food banks across Alberta, but it was also a year of successes. Nearly half of food banks in Alberta are run entirely by volunteers. Without dedicated volunteers and supporters, Alberta food banks would not be able to help as many individuals and families as they do.

Alberta contains many various-sized communities, including large urban centres like Edmonton and Calgary, mid-sized cities like Lethbridge and St. Albert, and vibrant rural communities. Local food banks in these communities reflect this diversity in the nature of their programs and activities. One common thread seen in these organizations is that even in the delicate economy, communities around the province continue to be generous – donating time, money and food.

Although Alberta is one of three provinces without a poverty reduction strategy, progress is being made. With the support of Premier Redford, the Minister of Human Services has begun the development of a social policy framework for Alberta. The goal of the framework is to re-examine current policies and programs and identify gaps or changes that need to be made while acting as a guide to support all Albertans to attain a higher quality of life. "Poverty is so much more than just not having enough money to make ends meet. There will always be a place for charity but we need to find ways to build the resiliency of individuals in order to achieve long term systemic change" says Calgary City councillor Gael MacLeod. A developed framework is anticipated by fall 2012.

The Edmonton Gleaners Association, more commonly known as Edmonton's Food Bank, received its official charter of incorporation on January 16, 1981 – and Canada's first food bank was formed. Since then, food banks in Alberta have responded to hunger while seeking solutions to its root causes through a variety of programs, services and activities. It is our hope that this year's HungerCount will shed some light on the ever changing issue of hunger and food insecurity in Alberta and what we can do to stop it.

NOTES

¹ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (August 2012). Labour Market Monitor: Alberta.
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/labour_market_information/monitors/ab/ab-lmm-201208.shtml

² Open File (April 18, 2012). *A Living Wage: How to Eliminate Poverty in Alberta*. Joe Ceci.
<http://www.openfile.ca/calgary/calgary/text/living-wage-how-eliminate-poverty-alberta>

³ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (Spring 2012). *Rental Market Report: Alberta Highlights*.
http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/esub/64483/64483_2012_B01.pdf?fr=1350332504018

⁴ Fiscal Plan 2012-2015. *Responsible Spending: Alberta Budget 2012*.
<http://www.finance.alberta.ca/publications/budget/budget2012/fiscal-plan-spending.pdf>