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Comments on an Alberta Social Policy Framework

Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness

- ⤴ Founded in 1986 as part of the UN Year for Habitat, ECOHH works to promote awareness, advocate, and take action on housing security issues, to enhance community life. It sees Edmonton as a city with safe, appropriate, affordable housing for all, a city that makes housing a priority, where housing is provided according to needs and choices.
- ⤴ In the past it had a key role in the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing and created the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund, the two organizations now merged as Homeward Trust.
- ⤴ It has presented the Homefest concert for the past 10 years and an annual memorial service for the lives of people who have died due to housing insecurity and homelessness for the past seven years. It is also responsible for the sculpture near City Hall that commemorates the importance of housing.
- ⤴ Through regular meetings, research, a website, and an email list service it continues to provide information and support community action to ensure all Edmontonians have safe, affordable, appropriate housing in communities of choice.
- ⤴ www.ecohh.ca and www.homefest.ca

Introduction

ECOHH compliments the Government of Alberta for the current initiative to develop a social policy framework. This is prudent work that can support legislation, policy, and budget decisions being made in a more effective and efficient way over the long term, with results beneficial to those who may requires services or supports, who develop and deliver them, and to all Albertans who will benefit from the best stewardship of public resources and from stronger, healthier, safer communities.

A social policy framework provides a structure so decisions can be tied to measurable outcomes, ensuring what government is doing is making a positive difference.

A social policy framework functions as a reminder that housing security for all and other social goods are part of the infrastructure of a strong healthy province and need to be valued similarly to how we value capital assets such as roads, schools, and hospitals. It enables us to look at social policies and investments in a fuller and more accurate way.

Housing and social policy

From the perspective of human rights and from the practical implications for areas such as health, safety, and economics, attention to housing security is a major aspect of a social policy framework.

Having affordable, appropriate, secure, healthy housing is essential for creating a home, a place where people have control of their lives and a safe place to create and sustain comprehensive personal well-being and relationships, and to exercise independence and choice.

Housing is perhaps the largest single expense in the lives of most people and families and difficulties in relation to it affect ability to manage most other areas of life, so it is an area where government has a significant level of responsibility, on behalf of the whole society.

ECOHH believes one key implication of this for social policy is the need for a **comprehensive housing plan** as a key policy area for the province. A policy framework needs to be explicit in affirming this and supporting the need for **funding** and an integrated web of **programs and procedures** to put such a plan into action. Aspects of such a plan will describe capital investment and aspects will describe programs and services. Canada is the only OECD nation that does not have a national housing policy and Alberta has yet to create a provincial policy.

ECOHH appreciates the commitment of the Government of Alberta in developing the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness, but without a comprehensive housing plan that involves the full continuum of housing matters this plan cannot solve the diverse and substantial housing challenges that face many Albertans, and may even contribute to housing insecurity becoming more severe for some. If most attention and funding is dedicated to ensuring the success of this plan, that only targets a small (but important) fraction of people experiencing housing challenges in their lives, then the plight of others may become more severe and the potential of them falling into the homelessness the 10 Year Plan addresses may actually increase. The current approach with the Housing First model, without a full plan in relation to housing, may result in a two-tier situation where abundant resources are available to a small number while others have fewer options than in the past. The 10 Year Plan is a good first step but a fuller approach is needed. ECOHH has a particular concern that research shows dangerous long-term consequences for children who live in housing insecure situations.

Inadequate assets to become homeowners in the manner most Albertans enjoy will continue to be a barrier for many Albertans, so a social policy framework needs to look carefully what can be done for them. How can **those who rent be more able to have good housing, especially affordable housing?** Current legislation sets regulations for frequency of rent increases but none for the size of increases. Rent regulations that are fair to landlords/owners but also offer more protection to tenants need attention. This would ensure that in boom times there is not a sudden crisis around rent increases as happened a few years ago. An entire review of how rent supplements are provided should flow from a good policy framework so that public money spent on this is adequate, but also used in a responsible way that is appropriate for public money-- to ensure people can maintain adequate housing, but without being an indirect way to subsidize landlord profits.

Social policy in the area of housing needs to be designed to encourage other models too. For example, the history of Alberta is full of proud evidence of the positive role of cooperatives, and the social values on which they are based have been part of what has built community life in every corner of the province over the decades. Currently there is little policy that encourages a viable role and opportunity for **cooperative housing**, yet this is an alternative that has proven its value to ensuring a healthy housing market over time. There are housing co-ops established decades ago with public funding that continue to be successfully providing affordable housing to those with low incomes while projects by the for-profit sector at the same time that also received public funds have long since been moved into the higher-end market, and the developers have returned for more public funds.

ECOHH also encourages the social policy framework to require a **longer view of housing**. Because of the cost of developing housing and the complexity of building up expertise in relation to support services, government policy needs to ensure the needs for every variation of housing, including seniors, supported units (including mental/physical/addictions-related issues), transitional models, and large-family, are identified for a long enough number of years that organizations can plan and undertake development properly. When government programs come and go with two or three year time lines it can be a challenge to even keep up with what is available, let alone research and prepare good plans. Both those delivering housing and services and those living in it will benefit from this.

Many other social issues impact housing security

A shift from responding to social problems to preventing them arising and providing structures and services in advance that allow people to maintain health and safety themselves as individuals, families, and communities is an important focus for a social policy framework.

Because housing is the major expense in most Albertans' lives, it is difficult to ensure housing security for all without attention to social policy that relates to ending poverty. Housing security can be seen metaphorically as the hub of a wheel of social issues or the foundation on which strong social building can take place. But however viewed, a social policy framework that addresses housing security must do so in the context of a carefully integrated attention to many other social, economic, and health issues

ECOHH believes it is appropriate for a social policy framework to describe priorities and not to take the position that all policies should be designed or delivered the same for everyone. Two age groups - **those at the beginning of life and those in their senior years**-- are of particular concern. A framework needs to consider how to address these populations through such measures as more affordable high-quality childcare (day care and after-school care), availability of early-intervention and child development services, aging-in-place programs, and innovative transportation services. Other groups disproportionately experiencing poverty, such as indigenous people, newer immigrants, and families with a single female parent should also receive focused attention in a policy framework, as should the broad issues of discrimination and inclusion.

The social policy framework needs to provide a comprehensive approach to the **dramatic changes in Alberta's demographics seen in the large increase in immigration from non-European places of origin and of indigenous people**. With greater cultural diversity, a good framework will ensure this

is addressed well in every area of public activity, especially health, education, and labour. Everyone loses from inequity in opportunity and services and when efforts to address it are a patchwork of actions by municipal governments, provincial departments, local charitable and community organizations, and businesses. The creation of a social policy framework provides a chance to do what almost no place in the world has done-- to address this reality in a proactive innovative way.

Most importantly perhaps, the social policy framework should address Alberta's **growing economic disparity**, where we have both the most wealthy Canadians and those living with the least in economic capacity. The more **Albertans who have the financial resources to ensure the quality of their own lives**, the less demand there will be for public services, supportive/supplemental or corrective, and the more independent people will be to exercise their talents and energies in ways that make positive contributions.

The social policy framework process provides opportunity to consider issues such as minimum wage, adequacy and delivery of income support programs, a strong labour union movement, the place of temporary foreign workers, and others matters that affect this. This might include a commitment to the concept of a living wage rather than a minimum wage.

It should pay attention to how the **diversity of learning opportunities throughout life** can contribute to personal economic success. For example, too many highly educated, skilled, experienced immigrants come to Alberta and are never able to use the wealth of backgrounds they bring fully, ending up in low-skilled jobs, perhaps only because of inadequate support to develop English language proficiency to be successful in careers for which they have superlative qualifications. Whether being "trapped" as a Level One child care worker because of inadequate proficiency to handle the material to gain accreditation for Level Two, or being a specialized engineer working in the service industry because of not having the professional language instead of having a \$100,000/year job and buying a nice home for one's family, or having grown up in a remote First Nation community and leaving school in junior high and always being the first one laid off in times of work shortage, there are many ways all Albertans are losing out from the lack of a comprehensive approach to life-long learning.

A good social policy framework is a measure of a prudent government

Government ministries and programs often operate with **inadequate integration, or even communication or information** about each other. This is a challenge to an effective policy framework. As the work on a framework for Alberta continues, ECOHH encourages the Government of Alberta to recognize it will be important the framework result in:

- ⤴ implementation and monitoring of the framework in action being the responsibility of the most **senior level** of bureaucracy and rest directly with deputy ministers expected to stay in continuing communication with each other and to report to ministers and the Alberta public often and clearly;
- ⤴ the framework being easily **available to all Albertans**, always current and linked with all related legislation, fiscal, and policy/program components wherever located in government that demonstrates how the overall vision is being enacted in practical terms;

- ⤴ a commitment to make **fiscal implications of the framework a top priority** when annual budget work is underway;
- ⤴ deliberate attention to **research and study innovative ways** to deliver on excellent social policy and action (for example, considering the model of the role of social co-operatives in delivering services used in Italy that involves people in delivering services and not just being service “users”);
- ⤴ a clear balance between the duty of **government to provide leadership on social policy and involving all sectors of society** in developing, evaluating, and revising all social policy that flows from the framework;
- ⤴ an understanding that there are important aspects of social policy that must be enacted directly by government but that when action is given to the not-for-profit sector it must be done with **adequate resources being available** to provide stability and dignity to the people and organizations working in this sector so they are not depending on charity and bake sales to underwrite their work; and
- ⤴ the Government of Alberta active in **encouraging and urging the federal government** to fully accept its responsibilities in relation to social policy.