



VCC in action!

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2

SUMMER 2005

IN THE NEWS:

- The Alberta government has increased the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
- The Alberta minimum wage is scheduled to increase to \$7.00 per hour in September
- In January 2006, City Council will decide whether to establish a low-income transit pass for Calgarians under the age of 65

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VCC has a new home and staff!

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) is pleased to introduce three new full-time employees.

Ramona Johnston has joined VCC as the Manager, effective June 1.

Ramona comes from United Way of Calgary and Area where she has spent the past two years leading the development of VCC.

Ramona is excited about continuing to help grow broad community support for VCC's poverty reduction work.

Rion Sillito joins VCC to lead the Communications work, effective July 11.

Rion will bring his exper-

tise from a similar role with the Calgary Homeless Foundation.

Rion is looking forward to assisting VCC engage new organizations and individuals in addressing the root causes of poverty.

Jessica Leech joins VCC as the Living Wage Coordinator, effective July 25.

Jessica joins VCC following three years of human rights work with the AIDS Calgary Awareness Association.

Jessica is eager to help launch VCC's Living Wage initiative with an initial focus on implementing a living wage policy in collaboration with our partners at The

City of Calgary.

Welcome Ramona, Rion and Jessica!

To house our new staff, VCC has moved to office space in Hillhurst United Church, an historic building in the vibrant Kensington neighbourhood.

This move was made possible through the generous donations of the following organizations:

- Anadarko Canada Corporation
- Bank of Montreal
- Kensington Floor Coverings
- Marshall Forbes Transport
- Merrill Lynch Canada
- Sterling Valve Automation
- United Way of Calgary and Area

Poverty Linked with Health of Calgarians

On May 31, the Calgary Health Region released the Health of the Region 2005 report.

The report reveals several realities regarding the link between health and socio-economic status. Clear relationships were found between health, income

and social indicators across Calgary communities.

The data indicate that education, environment, food and nutrition, unemployment, affordable and accessible housing and poverty all present challenges and barriers to an individual attempting to become and

remain healthy.

The lowest neighbourhood income levels generally coincide with lower life expectancies ranging from 77 to 81 years, while the highest income levels show life expectancies from 81 to 85 years.

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VCC celebrates AISH increase

On April 15, the Alberta Government announced long awaited improvements to the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program.

Introduced in Alberta in 1979, AISH was originally hailed as an innovative alternative to welfare programs. It was meant to ensure a measure of dignity and financial support for people with severe disabilities unable to work to support themselves.

In the 25 years since the program was launched, the number of AISH recipients has grown from 1,000 to 31,500. In Calgary, some 10,000 residents receive AISH benefits.

Prior to April, benefit levels had not been increased since 1999. Over the past 10 years, base benefits climbed by five percent, while the cost of living went up 25 percent [Calgary Herald 2004].

Before April, the maximum monthly benefit available from AISH stood at \$850.

Recipients who were able to work could earn only \$200 a month before their AISH benefits were reduced significantly – for every dollar earned over \$200, they could keep only 25 cents.

Effective April 2005, the AISH living allowance has increased to a maximum \$950 per month, and an additional increase in April 2006 will bring it to a maximum of \$1,000 per month. Government committed to reviewing the amount every two years beginning in 2007.

Government will also improve the earning power of AISH recipients by increasing the employment earnings exemptions for those who work. Full exemption for employment earnings will be increased from \$200 to \$400 for singles and from \$775 to \$975 per month for couples

and families. The exemption rate will be raised from 25 to 50 percent for amounts above this, to a maximum of \$1,000 for singles and \$2,000 for couples.

In addition, Government will provide supplementary benefits to help cover additional medical supplies, special transportation, child care and special needs, which previously were not covered by AISH.

VCC is pleased with the increases to the monthly benefit rate and employment earning exemptions, and welcomes the addition of supplementary benefits and the maintenance of the \$100,000 asset allowance.

However even with these positive changes, many AISH recipients will continue to live in poverty and we hope that this is the first step towards improving lives for people with disabilities.

Extreme levels of poverty and the lack of affordable housing and services eat away at our society. It is a form of gangrene. We cannot have a democracy which accepts the exclusion of its own citizens. The true reflection of ourselves, of our society, is the one among us who has the least.

- John Ralston Saul,
Maclean's Feb 2005

Calgarians have a right to full participation in the family, social, economic and political life of their communities. Poverty limits this full participation.

One step closer to Fair Fares!

Vibrant Communities Calgary's Fair Fares Action Team is thrilled to announce that we have moved one step closer to a Universal Low-Income Transit Pass!

On June 27, City Council passed a motion to begin to implement a discounted transit pass program for AISH recipients by August 1, 2005. The monthly pass is set at \$35, half the regular rate.

City Council will now decide whether to extend this program to all low-income Calgarians by January, 2006.

VCC would like to thank our City of Calgary partners for working so closely with us on this important initiative. Members of Fair Fares will continue working in support of a Universal Low-Income Transit Pass.

Congratulations to Fair Fares on this initial success!

Did You Know?

- The 2004 before-tax **Low Income Cut-Off for an individual in Calgary is \$20,337** [Statistics Canada]
- The most common occupations—those in **sales and service—pay an average of \$20,004 annually** [Avenue Magazine]
- **Half of the 395 women surveyed at Alberta shelters** said they had also sought refuge at least once before in the previous 12 months [Statistics Canada]
- The **average household income of Calgarians is \$74,000**, compared with \$58,000 across Canada [Statistics Canada]
- **A gap of 6.5 years in life expectancy** exists between the highest and lowest income communities in Calgary [Calgary Health Region]
- Nearly **30% of single parents** are still accessing food hampers 7 to 10 years after their first time [Calgary Food Bank]
- The Alberta Government received **over 18,000 responses to the AISH review**; 58% of respondents were AISH recipients and another 20% were family members of AISH clients [Alberta Government]
- Approximately 12% of Calgarians have used the Food Bank at some time in the last 10 years. **Every month, between 1,000 and 1,500 new people access emergency food.** [Calgary Food Bank]

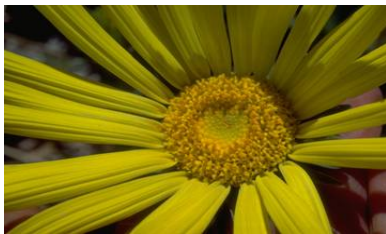
Action must be taken at a community and public policy level to minimize the impact of social and economic factors on health.

- Health of the

Poverty Linked with Health of Calgarians

(Continued from page 1)

The report finds that low income families, single-parent families and seniors face an uphill battle in their search for accessible education, nutritious food and affordable housing.



The report includes the following recommendations and calls for action to address the health gaps between communities in the Calgary Health Region:

- The health of families, children and seniors must be addressed through coalitions, communities, organizations and governments to improve the social and environmental factors that lead to health gaps among vulnerable populations.

continue to work with inter-agency partners to advocate the following:

- increased funding for early childhood development initiatives
- promotion of positive parenting methods
- support for local access to quality nutritious foods in at-risk neighbourhoods
- improved community ties and connectedness and decreased fear and isolation in neighbourhoods
- improved access to affordable shelter and housing for low income individuals and families, including seniors

The Calgary Health Region will also complete a wage review for contracted services such as home care.

For the full report, please visit: www.calgaryhealthregion.ca

The Calgary Health Region will

**Vibrant
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CALGARY



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Vibrant Communities is a Pan-Canadian Learning Community convened and supported by The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement, and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Nationally, Vibrant Communities provides a process and a working environment where diverse community leaders from fifteen communities across Canada work together to share ideas, practices and policies that strengthen their community-based poverty reduction initiatives. For more information, please visit:

www.vibrantcommunities.ca

VCC NEEDS YOU!

VCC is looking for volunteers for the following initiatives:

**Learning and Evaluation
Resource Development and Finance
Communications
Living Wage
Fair Fares
Standard Eligibility Testing**

Vibrant Communities Calgary Volunteers

Cathy Abel, *RBC Financial*
Amy Alexander, *City of Calgary*
Ryan Anderson, *Hope Lutheran Church*
Julie Ball, *Calgary Chamber of Commerce*
Andrea Blakie, *Calgary Health Region*
Donna Bonertz, *Calgary Drop-in Centre*
Greg Campbell, *Calgary Catholic Family Service*
Debra Carnat, *Alberta Children's Hospital*
Lisa Caton, *MCC Employment Development*
David Chakravorty, *Canadian Mental Health Association*
Gordon Christie, *Calgary and District Labour Council*
Murray Crosby, *Disability Action Hall Volunteer*
Caren Clouston, *Calgary Family Services*
John Currie, *Calgary Homeless Foundation*
Tasha Dobrovolsky, *Encana*
Carlene Donnelly, *CUPS Community Health Centre*
Caroline Fairbrother, *Alberta Human Resources and Employment*
Michael Fitzpatrick, *Business Volunteer*
Lorie Friesen, *The Calgary Children's Initiative*
Susan Gillies, *Women's Centre of Calgary*
Stephen Hansen, *Calgary Transit*

Elliot Hewitt, *Human Resources and Skills Development Canada*
Walter Hossli, *MCC Employment Development*
Robin Houston-Knopff, *Bow Valley College*
Samantha Hubka, *Community Volunteer*
Colleen Huston, *Disability Action Hall*
Patricia Jones, *Calgary Catholic Family Service*
Paula King, *Anadarko Canada Corporation*
Jake Kuiken, *City of Calgary*
Ruth Kohut, *Calgary Health Region*
Carolyn Koltutsky, *Governors' Council*
Darla Leard, *Canadian Labour Congress*
Sylvia Loewen, *Calgary Health Region*
Chris MacFarlane, *United Way of Calgary and Area*
Laura MacKinnon, *Calgary Homeless Foundation*
Bill McIntyre, *Governors' Council*
Neil McKinnon, *Calgary and District Labour Council*
Donna McLeod / Varina Russell, *The Calgary Children's Initiative*
Donna McPhee, *Alberta Coalition Against Poverty*
John Merriman, *City of Calgary*
Tim Moro, *Ipsos Reid*
Tanya Oliva, *Bell Canada*
Carol Oliver, *United Way of Calgary and Area*
Bonnie Pacaud, *Community Volunteer*
John Pentland, *Hillhurst United Church*

Joanne Pinnow, *United Way of Calgary and Area*
Glenn Retzlaff, *MCC Employment Development*
Fred Robertson, *National Anti-Poverty Organization*
Jenny Saarinen, *MCC Employment Development*
Karoline Sandhurst, *Calgary Food Bank*
Yvonne Schmitz, *United Way Board Member*
Paula Shaw, *Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre Calgary*
Bev Sheckter, *Jewish Family Service*
Maureen Sheppard, *Business Volunteer*
Luke Shwart, *Calgary Health Region*
Jackie Sieppert, *University of Calgary*
Shandra Smiley, *YWCA*
Carly Smith, *Kidsport Society of Alberta*
Carmen Sparrow, *MCC Employment Development*
Leanne Squair, *City of Calgary*
Tim Stock-Bateman, *CUPS Community Health Centre*
John te Linde, *City of Calgary*
Billie Thurston, *University of Calgary*
Lori Villebrun, *United Way of Calgary and Area*
Brenda Wadey, *Sunrise Community Link Resource Centre*
Stephanie Won, *City of Calgary*
Stephen Wright, *United Way of Calgary and Area*
Joy Zerke, *City of Calgary*

