

The background features several overlapping circles in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark. Thin, light blue lines intersect across the page, creating a geometric pattern. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Single Parents Affected by Poverty:

A Community Profile

The objective of the Straight Talk project is “to hear the voices of single parents in Red Deer [who are] affected by poverty, to understand factors that contribute to the cycle of poverty, and to identify possible solutions.”

Straight Talk Team
5/31/2011

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MEDIA RELEASE

Team Straight Talk: Hearing the Voices of Single parents affected by poverty!

May 27th, 2011- to be released

Leadership Networks Participants reveal community profile report on single parents affected by poverty.

In September of 2010 a group of participants from all walks of life and careers, set out to realize their goal of improved leadership through their participation in the "Leaderships Networks Program." delivered by the Leadership Centre of Central Alberta. As part of this program participants were divided into teams taking on different group projects. From this came the creation of the team of six people known as "Straight Talk" with the assigned project title of "A Community Profile on Poverty in Red Deer." This was later focused down to a more specific group of "Single Parents Affected by Poverty."

The project team, "Straight Talk", is working with the newly formed Central Alberta Poverty Reduction Alliance (CAPRA) and the City of Red Deer Social Planning Department to initiate a community discussion and raise awareness of poverty issues in our community.

The overall rationale and goal of this project is to directly focus in on the issues of overall poverty in Red Deer by taking a truly personal look through the real stories of actual people affected by poverty. Emphasis on understanding the factors that contribute to the cycle of poverty and to identify possible solutions were part of the criteria. Straight Talk made the decision to hold a one day focus group discussion and interview session.

The very exciting and successful day was held on April 16th, 2011 at the Victory Church in Red Deer where childcare, food/refreshments and door prizes for all were provided as part of the days exercise. Extensive preparation and work was completed previous to this day and was critical in forming the basis of the factors and issues that were identified for use during this focus session.

The five main areas of focus discussed were:

- **Family Background**
- **Community and Government Support Systems**
- **Income**
- **Education / Skills and Training**
- **Personal Support Systems**

After the completion of the April 16th, 2011 session, the "Straight Talkers" went to work to complete a report that could be a centre-piece for use in a community discussion facilitated by CAPRA. It is the hope of the group this will launch a much greater conversation about poverty in Red Deer and will be of assistance to CAPRA in truly motivating the community as a whole to a higher involvement.

The Report on "Single parents affected by Poverty" will be released:

Friday, May 27, 2011

Red Deer, Alberta

Presenters / "Straight talk" team members:

Monica Slobogean	Abey Idicula	Diane Goodwin
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1.0 STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY PROJECT

The objective of the “Straight Talk” project is “to hear the voices of single parents in Red Deer [who are] affected by poverty, to understand factors that contribute to the cycle, and to identify possible solutions.”

“Straight Talk”, worked in conjunction with the newly formed Central Alberta Poverty Reduction Alliance (CAPRA) and the City of Red Deer social planning department determined the scope and purpose of this project. Originally, there was a desire to profile several unique demographics affected by poverty. In the interest of creating realistic project parameters, however, it was decided to focus exclusively on the single parent demographic.

In April 2011, Straight Talk held a focus group to hear the stories of single parents who are currently, or have been, affected by poverty. This data was used to create a report for use in a community discussion on poverty facilitated by CAPRA. Straight Talk hopes to achieve, through this report, a place to begin a conversation about poverty in Red Deer. CAPRA will be responsible for using the data in such a way that ideally motivates the community to get involved in creating solutions.

2.0 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This report shares the stories of single parents in Red Deer affected by poverty. Straight Talk (a team of the 2011 Leadership Networks Program) worked with CAPRA and the City of Red Deer Social Planning Department to determine the scope of this project. The final report represents a profile of single parents affected by poverty in Red Deer. CAPRA intends to use this report to launch a community discussion on poverty.

By completing phone interviews and assembling a focus group of six single parents, Straight Talk sought out single parent’s views on the role that the following five critical areas have played in their experiences of poverty:

- Family Background
- Education / Skills and Training
- Income
- Community and Government Support Systems
- Personal Support Systems

2.1 Impact of Family Background

Poverty is often cyclical, although it does not have to be. Families of origin play a key role in every person's life.

Straight Talk asked the single parent participants in the focus group the following questions:

- What circumstances from your childhood affect you today?
- What are you doing differently than your parents?

Below are the stories shared by those participants:

“I was exposed to an abusive father when I was young. When my daughter was born, I realised that I did not want her to share that experience. I made the choice to remove both of us from an abusive situation much earlier than my own mother ever did, even though it means I'm choosing to be a single parent.”

“After leaving my dad, mom was forced to work up to four jobs at a time just to make ends meet. I want to get an education that will allow me to make ends meet with just one job. Having to work so much, she wasn't around most of the time. That was especially hard on me during puberty; mom didn't even take the time to explain the changes that were happening in my body. I was alone and confused. I will spend time with my kids one-on-one; I'll take time to have fun with them and I'll tell them I love them every day.”

“Maybe if I'd grown up somewhere different, I would have had the opportunity to get a better education. College was not strongly encouraged in the small town where I grew up; I was never taught about things like student loans and how they worked. I just assumed that school must be paid for up front; I knew I could never afford that, so I didn't pursue it. I wish I'd been given more guidance.”

“My parents treated me and my siblings just as they had been treated. Since they were basically left to fend for themselves, so were we. We also moved around a lot; I want my kids to have the stability of staying in the same place as much as possible. I remember feeling very alone most of the time growing up; I was not close to my parents. It did not help that Dad was an alcoholic and a gambler. I've made a very conscious effort to keep my kids away from these things. I'm also doing whatever I can to protect them from the many kinds of abuse that I experienced.”

“I’m going to take personal responsibility for my finances and personal responsibility for my parenting. I don’t want to depend on the government. Unlike my parents, I’m choosing to take parenting classes. I can make good choices to move ahead.”

2.2 Education / Skills and Training

Education is a key factor to success in life. More now than ever before, the need for a high school diploma is generally assumed and some form of post secondary education is often sought. It is often assumed that the majority of people living in poverty have a limited education, having failed to obtain a high-school diploma. In reality, many of the participants in our focus group had some form of post secondary education, but faced the dilemma of lacking experience to go along with their education. This is a dilemma common to all young graduates, but single parents can rarely afford to get the experience at less than average wages that dual-parent families or singles without dependents may be able to absorb for a period of time.

On a more positive note, many of the participants shared experiences that confirmed there indeed was a support system to assist them in completing or continuing education to a higher level. The fact that many of the participants were fairly young explains their lack of experience relative to their education and training. Some also admitted to a certain amount of impatience when looking for work that utilizes their education and skills. Again, this is a struggle common to all young people entering the workforce, though it may affect single parents to a greater degree.

Straight Talk asked:

- What opportunities (in education/skills & training) would improve your situation?
- What barriers keep you from pursuing these opportunities?

This is what the participants said:

“Through the education process the expense of childcare is a huge burden even when subsidized, this often holds people back from taking or completing further studies.”

“I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into with student loans, now I have this huge debt and my job doesn’t pay enough to pay it off.”

“I can’t find a good paying job because I lack experience” and “I got my degree but it is not the kind of work I want to do or can make enough money at.”

“The agencies directing me are unsure or miscommunicating to me how I get assistance for education or for upgrading and there are so many hoops you have to jump through.”
“I think it is because some people aren’t legitimate in the assistance programs so all of us suffer because of it.”

“Government should help us more with education.”

“Language is a barrier and although I have education from my original country, there is reluctance in hiring me due to language challenges”

“Money is always an issue”

2.3 Income

To better understand the impact of income on the participants, Straight Talk asked the following questions:

- What are the greatest challenges in providing for your family?
- What would help you provide for your family?

This is what the participants said:

“I am a single mom with little education and I have two kids. My income is not enough to meet our basic needs. I would not be able to meet all my family's needs without community support programs. I do make use of support programs such as Income assistance, child tax credit and universal child care. The government offers help but I'm not always sure which programs to take advantage of. Prior to getting government support, I had to work 14 hours/day.”

“I am a single mom with little education and one kid, but I cannot go to work as it does not pay for my kid's day care. My biggest challenge is that I am not making a consistent amount every month. On months when I don't make enough money to pay the bills, I manage with my credit card which increases my minimum monthly payment from that month onwards.”

“I am a single mom with a kid and making just enough to cover the bills and child care. I budget my spending each and every month and balance expenditures with my income. I have been careful not to incur any bad debts. I've lived under the poverty line for so long that I've learned to budget well on what I do have, but I know a lot of people would struggle to make it work with what I have. I think it has made me stronger. I learned a lot from my mom about budgeting/making ends meet, and I had to figure out a lot of stuff on my own when I moved out at 15. I like watching the show "Till Debt Do Us Part"- it still gives me lots of good ideas. The single worst stressors in my life are financial ones.”

"I'm a single mom with a decent education, but I believe I am not getting a full time job due to language barriers, as I am an immigrant. I have a part time job, and I'm talking to as many agencies as I can to find a full time job. I will continue searching until I get a full time job. This will definitely improve my financial situation."

"I am a single mom with one kid, and living with my parents. I'm currently completing my post secondary education with student loans. I make more money going to school than I do when going to work; the government is paying for 2 full years of my school through the "skills investment project."

2.4 Community and Government Support Systems

There are many community and government support programs available in Red Deer. We wondered if single parents were benefiting from these programs.

Straight Talk asked:

- What is valuable to you about the support you have received?
- What's missing in terms of community support?

This is what the participants said:

"I am a single parent trying to find what services are available to help me and my family. One of the challenges I face is that I do not know what services are available to me and if I do find out about a service, not understanding what that service can offer me. This creates a situation where I do not know the "right questions to ask" to get the most benefit from the program. I find that most of the advertising for these programs is on the internet, but if I don't have regular access to the internet I miss out on a lot. There really needs to be more advertising using other forms of media.

"When I try to access a service or program, I am counting on the administrators to guide me through the process so that I can make the most of what is offered and truly get the help I need. I have found that there are mixed messages coming from the people administering the programs. This confuses and frustrates me, and also causes me to miss out on vital assistance. Unfortunately, the administrators running some programs have been difficult to deal with and have not been very courteous. I already feel isolated and alone and experiences like this just add to those feelings. I need the help so badly but I sometimes wonder if it would just be easier to get through it on my own than to have to put myself through that situation."

"There are some really great programs out there that support me and try to let me know of other services that I may be able to access. When I got divorced, I really needed

someone to help guide me through that process and I luckily found a program that offered a family law service. This was a life saver for me through such a difficult time!”

“Now, the services that I need and find most useful are counselling for both me and my children, having a drop in service available to me, a daycare service, and providing a “playtime” so that my kids can have some fun with other children and not just be babysat. Programs for kids like “Tools for Schools” as well as “R-own food Co-op” programs have been helpful. While all these services do make things easier, sometimes the most helpful thing for me is just being able to go where someone will listen to me and give me support.”

“Subsidized housing is a real need for me, but quality subsidized housing is more important. It would be great if there was a rent-to-own program or something similar so that I can invest in my family and not just throw my money away in rent every month. Owning property is so important in being able to make a stable environment for my family; not just by being able to finally put down some family roots, but also financially. As a single parent my starting point to provide for my family is very different than a two parent family, especially if both those parents work. Without a rent-to-own program I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to afford my own house.”

“There are clearly plenty of services that I need to support my family, but it leaves me wondering “When is there any time for me?” Having “me” time is critical for me to be a good parent and to be good at my job. I really wish that there could be “single parents night out” offered (with daycare provided) so that I could meet others in the same situation as me.”

“Having that interaction and being able to share our experiences and form a group of support would be a huge step in fighting the loneliness and isolation I feel. Fighting these feelings may be my biggest challenge of all.”

2.5 Personal Support Systems

The time constraints on single parents are significant, often affecting their ability to maintain supportive relationships or even to have a healthy level of self-care.

Straight Talk asked:

- What do you do to nurture yourself?
- What do others do to support you?

This is what the participants said:

“The most challenging thing that I deal with is having the funds to go and do those extra things for myself such as getting my nails done, going to the hairdresser, shopping for clothes. So, I look for things to do, that are not so expensive. My favourite thing I like to do is go for a walk on the trail system here in Red Deer, it is so peaceful; and we can enjoy this as a family. The Red Deer Library is an excellent source to borrow books, CD, videos, audio tapes that I can enjoy after the children go to bed. I cannot afford go to the gym but I do exercises at home and usually follow along with a fitness video that I picked up at the library. Sometimes, I spend a little extra and buy myself some bubble bath, light some candles, turn on some soft music and soak in the tub. I do attend a Bible Study class once a week with other single parents and we take turns looking after the children. This offers me hope and I will continue to pray for a better life for myself and my children.”

“The Pregnancy Care Centre has given me peace of mind; knowing that there is support has really helped me emotionally, that I'm not in this alone. I have attended a number of their programs, which has supported me substantially, also connecting me with other single parents in the same situation. Talking to friends has been a great comfort to myself knowing that I'm doing the best I can for me and my family. There are a few other community resources that I have used through Family Services. The challenge seems to be finding other programs in our community, and how to access them. The biggest support is Family; this is Huge! They watch the children for a couple of hours so I can go shopping, clean my house or just have some quiet time; this is so helpful. My family has limited resources so they are unable to help me financially, but I really don't know what I would do without them.”

3.0 DESCRIPTON OF THE COMMUNITY PROJECT PROCESS

In the beginning when our team was first formed and our project assigned we began to build our process by defining the individual team player roles and responsibilities. The roles were divided up and we chose Monica to be our Team Lead and Agenda Planner. Diane offered to be the note taker, Ingrid, Abey and Brians jobs were to keep the group focused and be the peacemakers. Michael took the scheduler role and updated us at every meeting on our progress.

Next, we established our team values, set our ground rules and chose our team name...Straight Talk. The team values that we felt were important included respecting and supporting one another, listening, being open and honest, participating and sharing the work load, completing tasks and being on time for meetings.

At our first meeting we had a discussion about the Project Objective, including how to involve the community. Our Community project was given to us as A Discussion Paper on Income Disparity in Red Deer and a community profile on Poverty in Red Deer. These 2 efforts would benefit our sponsor CAPRA to determine the best way to go about implementing poverty reduction strategies to citizens. Given the time we had to complete the project and the limited value that we placed on developing another report, we decided to focus our project on the Community Profile.

The process to gather the stories for the Community Profile was difficult to define. We met with representatives from Capra a few times before deciding on a path forward. The first process we proposed included interviewing 6 different target groups for which we had brainstormed a draft of questions to use for interviewing. In the end we came to the realization That to be successful we had to narrow our focus to one target group. We decided by consensus that the best group to target our interviews with would be Single Parents.

It felt like we really got started on our process at this point in our project. We decided to go ahead with a forum setting to complete our interviews with single parents. We brainstormed the tasks that needed to be done and then a process to accomplish our objective. The tasks included finding a venue, choosing a date, modifying the interview questions to suit the audience, making a budget, deciding on food, and drafting letters to service providers and to businesses in Red Deer for donations of door prizes. Brian also drafted up a telephone interview to use once we identified interviewees.

The next part of the process was to get in touch of the service providers for single parents to help us get volunteers to interview. Capra and Amanda forwarded the names of agencies to contact and Monica sent letters to each of these agencies. Each of us followed up the letters with phone calls to identify 2-3 clientele that would be open to participating in our project. We decided to offer babysitting to make it easier for participants to come. We talked about interviewing 20 to 30 single parents but in the end only nine women accepted our invitation to be interviewed.

The methodology used to collect the stories was a little harder to pin down. We brainstormed ideas but did not finalize the plan until the beginning of April. We first contacted the interviewees by telephone to collect some initial information. Then we sent a formal invitation by snail mail. On the day of the forum we met each single parent at the door, if they had kids we took them to the kids room where we had 5 high school volunteer students to babysit.

We kicked off the forum with an ice breaker which helped to make everyone feel comfortable. From there we split into 2 groups and conducted a gallery walk where we asked questions pertaining to the 5 areas of concern that the participants had identified as contributors to the cycle of poverty. The gallery walk worked out very well, the participants were very open and honest with their stories. After the gallery walk was complete everyone sat down again and we closed with a couple of final questions. All the participants received some nice door prizes for participating and we all left feeling good about the outcome. The final part of the project includes assimilating all the stories that we heard and presenting a report to Capra.

4.0 CONCLUSION

There appears to be a correlation between the relational/social atmosphere of our participants' families of origin and their current situations as single parents. Themes of abuse and marital instability/breakup were common, with several of the participants repeating these themes in their own relationships. Many who grew up in poverty also find their children growing up in poverty.

“Where there is a will, there is a way” aptly describes Red Deer's community and government efforts to reduce the burden of poverty on families. Each person's situation is unique, and each individual must find their own unique way to get free from the clutches of poverty. Programs provided by various agencies help make life situations better. Those programs are utilized to different extents, depending on need. Awareness among the people interviewed about the programs seems adequate.

All participants were particularly concerned about the uncertainty of their future. “How long will it take for me to get out of poverty?” or “When can I own a house on my own?” are some of their questions. Their inability to get a mortgage is frustrating and a source of stress in their lives.

Everybody tries to give the best to their kids, but they are worried about their kids getting stereotyped (as the ones who must always depend on support programs). They worry about not being able to provide more than the basic necessities for their kids and they worry about how their life situations will impact their children's future.

One positive thing we noticed is that every one of our participants has a strong desire to get out of their situation as fast possible, and each one has a plan in place. Help offered by various agencies plays a huge role in alleviating the difficulties (mostly financial) that the single parent in poverty faces. These agencies play a very positive role in making communities stronger.

Suggested improvements based on answers from participants:

- All government subsidized or government assisted education programs should have a job placement component. This would ensure that participants understand the field they will be working in, while giving them experience and confidence. They may also provide them with additional income while ensuring taxpayer money is being well utilized.
- Some participants expressed concerns about abuse of the system affecting legitimate users, and that without controls in place, the abuse will continue. As with all programs, there must be accountability within the system.
- Educational mentoring would help young people make better informed choices about things such as: What area of study to go into, how much the field will pay, the reality of student loans, how long it will take to make the “big bucks”, and the reality of sacrifices required to get the education desired.
- There is room for agencies to work together even more for better communication and coordination of services.

