

Calgary Herald

Count your blessings by helping others

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As I carved the Thanksgiving turkey with family and friends -- 14 around a dinner table is a veritable feast -- I was reminded again how good fortune has blessed my life. I was thankful for a wonderful partner and four healthy, active and interesting adult children (I've always believed you want your kids to be good, but bad enough to be interesting).

I was also mindful that while our table was filled with bounty and noisy energy, there were many Calgary dinner tables where families went without. Too many.

Too many Calgarians who spend so much of their household income on food, shelter and clothing that they can't make ends meet if they have to pay for school texts or rent increases or buy gifts for their children's birthdays. Too many in tough circumstances.

These people are working for a living; maybe even holding down two or three jobs. The Calgary food bank will tell you that 39 per cent of their customers last year reported wages as their primary source of income, making working families the most frequent users of the food bank.

Too many fellow Calgarians wandering our downtown streets. Men and women -- cap in hand while sitting on the sidewalk -- relying on spare change. Or huddling under blankets on the street or in city parks, or collecting bottles. Too many.

How many? Three years ago, city officials figured that 13.4 per cent of all Calgarians -- 127,000 men, women and children -- were living in poverty. Almost 72,000 families! That's an astonishing number, especially when so many think of us as a rich city.

What hits me hardest is that these aren't faceless, nameless folks. These are fellow citizens who live near us in this prosperous city. It's the guy pushing the bottle-filled shopping cart or the family of four that shows up for dinner at St. Mary's parish hall on a Sunday night. Folks suffering from mental illness. Families that can't manage rent increases and now have no place to live. These are my neighbours, and like Robert Roach of the Canada West Foundation, I'm not prepared to "write them off as losers who made bad choices or as nuisances that we wish would just disappear."

Maybe the message is getting through. Angus Reid's recent survey tells us that 38 per cent of Canadians think poverty is a serious problem, while 80 per cent say poverty is at least a moderately serious problem.

For a while now, a few of us have been involved with the Poverty Reduction Coalition. This initiative, supported by United Way of Calgary and Area, is a collaboration of business people, academics and representatives from each level of government, child services, health and the social service sectors. We've come together because we think poverty is a serious problem, one that affects all Calgarians and is at the root of a number of social issues.

We've wrestled with the question "why?" and realize families fall into poverty for many reasons, some simple and others more complex. But we all agree that people in this city are not poor because they are unmotivated. One only has to look at our unemployment rates to realize people are working and trying to maintain jobs to the best of their ability, but they still can't make ends meet.

The coalition recently released a report called *Surviving Not Thriving: The Untold Story of Struggling Calgarians*, which takes a close look at the cost of living for low-income Calgarians. Examining eight typical low-income households, the report discovers half of those families are earning less than the costs they face to secure their basic necessities (food, shelter, transportation, child care and utilities), leaving them at a deficit each month. The full report can be found on the coalition's website: www.reducepoverty.ca.

So what can we do?

We can think about how we treat people. The next time you see a man collecting bottles, remember he's just a man. Treat him like one. Offer help or a kind word to your neighbours, to the young mother on the C-Train, to the staff who clean your office, or to the restaurant server at your next meal.

Volunteer in your community. Whether you help your neighbour organize a United Way Day of Caring with your co-workers, or get involved with poverty reduction initiatives, you can make a real difference.

Donate. By investing in United Way and other initiatives and organizations, you help to meet immediate needs for people living in poverty. You also support long-term, community-wide initiatives that will ultimately reduce poverty.

Learn more. Visit our website at www.reducepoverty.ca. Then tell us what you think.

Use your voice. You have the power to educate others about the realities and complexities of reducing poverty. Take opportunities to speak out and help raise awareness about this issue. Tell your alderman you want civic action on reducing poverty. Speak with your MLA or host a dinner party and include a discussion about poverty in Calgary. However you use your voice, don't stop with simply talking about it -- take action.

In Calgary, we have what we need to reduce poverty. We have a culture of achievement and success. We have a tradition of commitment. We have organizations and people who can influence political will and implement change. We have abundant resources to fuel community action.

For a city to be great, it's got to be great for everyone. By committing to take meaningful and measured action, we can reduce poverty in Calgary.

The Poverty Reduction Coalition's commitment is to reduce the 2004 poverty rate of 13.7 per cent to 10 per cent by 2010.

Ten by Ten. Please join us.

Jim Dinning is co-chair of the Poverty Reduction Coalition, a community coalition initiated and supported by United Way of Calgary and Area