

Calgary Herald

Poor falling further behind as city booms; Agencies bent on turnaround

Thursday, October 18, 2007

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Section: City & Region

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Source: Calgary Herald

Six years ago Kathleen was in a women's shelter, scared, alone and expecting her first child.

When she moved back into the community, she had nothing -- no furniture, no food, so she went to Aspen, a family services organization, for help.

"Even if you just needed somebody to talk to, they were there," said Kathleen, who didn't want her last name published.

"When I look at myself now, I've done a complete turnaround."

Aspen is just one of many social services organizations in Calgary trying to turn things around for those in poverty.

A new report by the Poverty Reduction Coalition has tried to put a human face on the problem – showing how people like Kathleen sometimes need a helping hand to get themselves back on their feet.

"It (poverty) is not front of mind," said Nancy Laird, co-chair of the poverty coalition.

Former alderman Bev Longstaff, a member of the poverty coalition, said when she was first elected in 1989, there were 23 homeless people in Calgary, compared to more than 3,000 today.

"Within the last decade, things have changed," she said.

"They (people in poverty) are falling further and further behind. It feels hopeless."

Shirley Purves, executive director of Aspen, said that after her dad died, her mom struggled to raise six kids, but she never felt "hopeless" the way some of Calgary's poorest do today.

"Rent was a major piece of the family income, but it was never increased the way it is now," she said.

Working Albertans are feeling the squeeze of the boom economy, with 60 per cent of children in poverty growing up in families where at least one parent is working full-time, the report states.

The number of children growing up in poverty is the report's most tragic message, said David Swann, MLA for Calgary-Mountain View.

"It is a pretty stark reminder that a very significant and growing number of people are suffering in a city that seems to be doing so well."

The coalition is sponsored by the United Way.

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