
Centre City Action Profile #01

Vibrant Communities Calgary

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The Centre City is a large regional planning district comprised of the six community districts in the Downtown and Beltline, and all of Stampede Park. In *The Caring Centre City: A Blueprint for Social Action*, The City of Calgary (2006) described five areas of priority action that were needed to create a caring Centre City:

- Addressing crime, safety, and social disorder
- Helping the homeless
- Increasing affordable housing and residential density
- Fostering social inclusion, and
- Managing pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

The City of Calgary is actively engaged in several initiatives to ensure the Centre City is a vibrant and caring place where Calgarians want to live, work, and play. Many other organizations are also taking an active role in creating the Centre City that Calgarians want. This series of *Centre City Action Profiles* highlights some of the many other local projects that are underway.

As a kid growing up in the suburbs, I always saw downtown as a place where all the action happens. It is the home of international finance, power suits, the BlackBerry®, fancy cars, theatre, and fine dining. It is also home to a bohemian arts scene, hippie coffee shops, homelessness, and visible drug use. The Centre City is the place to see things that a kid from the suburbs just won't see.

Along with the two categories of lifestyle represented, one might think there are also two different work ethics and ways of living. Well, I grew up and have realized that these two categories are arbitrary. A person's position in life has a lot more to do with where one starts out, how they are supported, and the hurdles they face. Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has taken on the task of publicizing the arbitrary distinction we often make between what we perceive as "lazy" and "hard working" people.

What is VCC?

Vibrant Communities Calgary was formed in 2002 as a result of a national initiative called Vibrant Communities. The goal of the initiative is to “unleash the potential of communities to substantially reduce poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all citizens” (Tamarack, 2007). Vibrant Communities Calgary acts as a convening organization for over 85 individuals and organizations in Calgary. Their partners include “Calgarians living on low incomes and representatives from government, business, labour, faith communities, non-profit organizations, health and education” (VCC, 2007e). VCC’s working groups and advisory committees provide a place for people from diverse backgrounds to address structural issues that trap people in a life of poverty.

Reducing poverty is especially relevant to the Centre City because it is where a disproportionate number of those who struggle with poverty live. When compared to average Calgary communities, The City of Calgary (2005: 6-15) reports that Centre City communities have:

- Twice as many low-income households
- Twice as many low-income seniors
- More individuals on income support
- More immigrants and visible minorities
- Twice the number of lone parent families
- More youth working and fewer going to school, and
- Four times the number of people living alone.

VCC has developed two initiatives that work toward reaching the goals of the Centre City. Fair Fares is a program that offers subsidized transit passes to low-income Calgarians. The Living Wage action team has several initiatives to raise awareness and support the development and implementation of a Living Wage policy. Efforts are strategically focused on the municipal government, private, quasi-government, and non-profit sectors. These initiatives are profiled below.

Fair Fares

Whether a person uses a car, walks, cycles, or takes public transit, living life requires getting from one place to another. Sometimes walking or cycling just aren’t appropriate. The destination may be too far or a person might have limited mobility. Fair Fares helps low-income individuals and families buy transit passes at a discounted rate.

In 1999, a number of community groups joined together to form the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes. This committee was renamed Fair Fares and joined Vibrant Communities Calgary in 2004 (VCC, 2007c). To be eligible for a Calgary Transit Low Income Monthly Transit Pass, a person must apply once a year, be 18 years of age or older, provide photo identification, have lived in Calgary for one year or longer, and provide proof of a mailing address.

To qualify, the family income has to be below 75% of Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Off. In 2007, this was \$15,584 for one person and \$28,958 for a family of four. Once the person has qualified, he or she can buy monthly transit passes for half price, which at the time of this writing was \$37.50 (Calgary Transit, 2007).

The Fair Fares program was first funded in January 2006 by The City of Calgary (VCC, 2007b) and costs about \$2.1 million annually (Laye, 2005: 13). VCC sees this program as a provincial responsibility since it helps to support low-income families. Therefore, VCC is currently advocating for provincial funding to support Alberta-wide affordable transportation.

Fair Fares helps to achieve the priority actions needed in the Centre City. Fostering social inclusion and helping the homeless are all important outcomes that can arise from subsidizing low-income transit passes. This program also serves to address pedestrian and vehicular traffic by promoting the use of public transit. As one Calgarian living with low income reports, the impact of transportation is significant (VCC, 2007a):

A Low Income Transit Pass allows me to leave my home and access the city for my employment, doctor appointments, community activity, personal needs, groceries, other shopping, visits with my children, and personal contact with my relatives. To be independent on transportation keeps my morale up to achieve things by handling them myself and keeps me sane. Thanks.

This person's story shows the role transit plays in the Centre City goal of fostering social inclusion. Being able to get to places of worship and recreation; spending time with family and friends. Volunteering, going to museums, pursuing education, commuting to work. These are all things that require transportation and if the cost makes transit unaffordable, all of these opportunities for social interaction and independence are lost. Without affordable transportation, "many low income people report that they become isolated, lonely and forgotten" (VCC, 2007b).

Many of the 10,000 registered users of the low-income transit pass are homeless people (VCC, 2007b). A study by Start Me Up Niagara (2006: 40) found that, behind mental health issues, transportation was the greatest barrier to employment among homeless people. Affordable transportation also helps the homeless participate in community groups and cultural events. It ensures that people without homes are included in society.

Over 100,000 Calgarians have low income. VCC (2007c: 1) reports that a Calgary Transit survey found 55% of low-income individuals use transit three or more times a week. A regularly priced transit pass costs recipients of Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) "8 to 10% of their monthly income. Similarly, someone working for the minimum wage of \$7.00 per hour would have to work over 10 hours to afford that same transit pass" (VCC, 2007c: 1).

These facts lead into the next initiative Vibrant Communities Calgary has taken on, addressing the larger issue of low income, and educating employers and government about the benefits of paying a living wage. This initiative is founded on the idea that people working full-time should not live in poverty (VCC, 2007b).

Living Wage

In 2003, VCC established a Living Wage Action Team to “encourage progressive workplace practice” (VCC, 2006). This is an important initiative in a city where “17% of employed Calgarians over the age of 15 earn less than a living wage” (VCC, 2007b). One myth that exists about this is the false belief that only teenagers living at home are low-wage earners. In 2006, however, 7.7% of Calgary’s workforce over 25 years of age earned less than \$10.00 an hour (Johnston, 2006: 3).

The Living Wage Action Team began their work by commissioning a research report, *Understanding Living Wage* (VCC, 2003), which provided a basis for understanding how a living wage strategy can fit into an effort to reduce poverty. The report concluded that poverty is growing in Calgary and the economic, health, and social barriers that prevent people’s full participation in society are all directly linked to financial insecurity. The research found that the adoption of a living wage policy in a city can greatly increase the financial security of low-income citizens (VCC, 2003: 8).

After this report was considered by stakeholders, the group selected an appropriate method for determining a living wage for Calgary. A living wage is defined as “the amount of income an individual or family requires to meet their basic needs, to maintain a safe, decent standard of living in their communities and to save for future needs and goals.” In 2007, the Living Wage Action Team decided to annually adjust the Living Wage figure for inflation. The Living Wage Action Team has since determined that an individual working fulltime needs to make a minimum of \$12.00 per hour plus benefits or \$13.25 per hour for those without benefits. This figure is based on Statistics Canada’s 2001 before-tax Low-Income Cut-Off for an individual with no dependents, adjusted for Calgary’s rate of inflation (Hamilton, 2007).

The *Cost of Living Fact Sheet* produced by Vibrant Communities Calgary (2007a) presents a compelling analysis of the real cost of living in Calgary. Conservative, well sourced estimates are made for the costs of housing, food, utilities, transportation, healthcare, child care and education. When the costs of these basic necessities are combined and compared to the income of minimum wage workers, a considerable gap between income and expenditures becomes evident.

Taking Action on Living Wage

The Living Wage Action Team is made up of individuals that understand the impact that the cost of living and the income gap has on all Calgarians. The approach the group has adopted is to maintain a constructive dialogue to help remove barriers to increasing wages within the public, private, quasi-government, and non-profit sectors.

The Team's municipal government effort concentrated on integrating a living wage policy into The City of Calgary's ethical procurement policy. This is the policy that creates standards around the working conditions and wages paid to the producers of the goods and services The City consumes. The City has also committed to meeting the same standards it expects its suppliers to meet (City of Calgary, 2007: 1). Some popular examples of goods and services The City may consume as part of its Sustainable Environmental and Ethical Procurement Policy are fair trade shade grown coffee, No-Sweat organic cotton T-shirts, and a living wage paid to construction and cleaning workers who are employees of sub-contractors.

The Living Wage Action Team's private sector initiative is currently developing a business case for paying a living wage, as well as an engagement strategy and communications plan (VCC, 2007d: 4). The idea is to help educate employers about the benefits their businesses can experience by paying employees a living wage. Some benefits VCC has identified for employers are reduced employee theft, reduced absenteeism, increased employee retention, lower recruitment and training costs, increased employee productivity, and greater customer satisfaction (VCC, 2007d: 3).

In the quasi-government sector (i.e., health care and education), the Calgary Health Region is currently developing a living wage policy with support from Vibrant Communities Calgary. This initiative by the Calgary Health Region has encouraged discussions among VCC, the United Way, and the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations. In 2006, the latter produced a report on human resource issues in the Alberta non-profit sector. One of the issues that emerged was the need to pay workers in the sector a living wage. The next steps for VCC involve "engaging other funders and social service agencies in the dialogue surrounding human resource issues, including Living Wage" (VCC, 2007d: 4).

The Centre City is home to a disproportionately large percentage of Calgary's working poor and, as such, would greatly benefit from the implementation of a living wage policy. A living wage can help people afford housing and participate in their communities – both of which are priorities for the Centre City. There are also homeless people that work for low wages and a living wage policy across sectors in Calgary would certainly help the homeless earn sufficient wages to regain their independence. Poverty, resulting from low wages, may also be a factor contributing to crime. Implementing a living wage in Calgary is thus one more way of helping to address crime, safety and social disorder.

Conclusions

The Fair Fares and Living Wage projects run by Vibrant Communities Calgary help break down the structural causes of poverty. Publicizing these programs and the barriers that each tries to overcome not only helps low-income families, it also helps people like the kid from the suburbs realize that how much money a person has usually has very little to do with his or her work ethic. Personal choices can help explain some disparity in wealth, but not to the extent that they are given credit. Having Calgarians recognize this will hopefully create a more empathetic, socially inclusive and caring city.

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