



HungerCount 2011 – Alberta Provincial Report

Prepared by the Alberta Food Bank Network Association, Member of Food Banks Canada

Overview

In Alberta in March 2011:

- Food bank use was 75% higher than in 2008, before the start of the recent recession;
- The province experienced the second highest level of food bank use on record;
- 44% of those assisted were children and youth;
- 53% of households assisted were families with children;
- 1 in 3 households helped had income from current or recent employment.

Many Working Albertans Continue to Need Help from Food Banks

Thanks to the gradually recovering economy, Albertans saw a welcome increase in employment in 2011. With an unemployment rate of 5.4% in September, Alberta remains one of the best provinces to find a job. Unfortunately, it is also true that Alberta food banks serve a higher percentage of households with employment income than in any other province. Though the provincial economy is in relatively good shape, Alberta faces a number of challenges including a meagre minimum wage, rising inflation, and a shortage of affordable housing.

The number of employed people who need help from food banks shows that not every job is a ticket out of poverty. Public Interest Alberta recently published *Statistics of Low-Wage Workers in Alberta*, a fact sheet which showed that 234,200 Albertans are earning less than \$12 an hour, while the basic cost of living for a single person working full time requires a wage of \$12.25. Nearly two-thirds of those earning less than \$12 an hour were women – and the cost of raising a child is much higher than what the minimum wage can cover. Though the Government of Alberta recently increased the provincial minimum wage from \$8.80 to \$9.40 per hour for general workers, and to \$9.05 for workers who serve alcohol, the province still has one of the lowest minimum wages in Canada.¹

Cost of Living Increasing Rapidly

The low minimum wage coupled with last year's high inflation rates created a huge financial obstacle for many Albertans. The more the cost of utilities and food increased, the more low-income Albertans had to try to stretch what little money they had to pay for essential items. Many low-income people couldn't make ends meet without assistance from the food bank. As



some clients struggled with both the minimum wage and high inflation, others struggled with the costs of moving to another city.

Due to the low unemployment rate, immigrants and those from other provinces alike moved to Alberta looking for work. Food banks often see those new to the province due to the fact that on arrival, many are faced with a difficult situation: in order to secure a place to live, a prospective tenant usually needs to pay a damage deposit and the first month's rent up front. Many newcomers struggle to pay for these costs. Furthermore, it usually takes at least a few weeks to find a job, and even longer to receive a paycheque. Those who lack sufficient English skills face additional challenges, as many employers look for candidates who have a strong understanding of spoken and written English. Additionally, newcomers may not know where to go for services like translation assistance or Alberta Human Resources, or how to access them.

Progress on Addressing Homelessness

The province has seen some positive progress in the past year. For example, soup kitchens and other meal programs in Edmonton reported serving 155,075 fewer meals and snacks in March, compared to 2010. This change is to a large extent due to the increase in the number of affordable permanent residences that have become available in the city. The Government of Alberta has committed to a plan to end homelessness by 2018 and, as of 2011, has budgeted \$54 million towards this goal. As of May 2011, 956 permanent residences have been established for 1,352 individuals, and the number homeless people in Edmonton decreased by 21% from 2008 to 2010.²

It was a year of challenges for food banks across Alberta, but it was also a year of successes. Without dedicated volunteers and supporters, Alberta food banks couldn't have helped as many individuals and families as they did. "The volunteers are the ones who do the meat and potatoes. We absolutely could not function without them," says Thelma Henry, Operations Manager at the Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank.³

Alberta contains many various-sized communities, including large urban centres like Edmonton and Calgary, mid-sized cities like Lethbridge and St. Albert, and vibrant rural communities. Local food banks in these communities reflect this diversity in the nature of their programs and activities. One common thread seen in these organizations is that even in the delicate economy, communities around the province continue to be generous – donating time, money and food.



“I have been really impressed with people’s generosity,” says Christine van Hal, who single-handedly ran a food drive in the Calgary neighbourhood of Glendale.⁴

The Edmonton Gleaners Association, more commonly known as Edmonton’s Food Bank, received its official charter of incorporation on January 16, 1981 – and Canada’s first food bank was formed. Since then, food banks in Alberta have responded to hunger while seeking solutions to its root causes through a variety of programs, services and activities. Hopefully the information collected this past year through the *HungerCount* has brought us closer to understanding hunger – and how to stop it.

NOTES

¹ Public Interest Alberta (2011). *Statistics of low-wage workers in Alberta*. Edmonton: Public Interest Alberta.

² Edmonton Homeless Commission (2011). *News release: Edmonton homeless commission celebrates big successes with the 10-year plan to end homelessness and urges community support*. www.marketwire.com/press-release/edmonton-homeless-commission-celebrates-big-successes-with-10-year-plan-end-homelessness-1516554.htm

³ Calgary Food Bank (2010). Volunteers make the operations department work. *Word of mouth*, newsletter of the Calgary Food Bank, October-December 2010.

⁴ Calgary Food Bank (2010). Food bank spotlight – Christine van Hal. *Word of mouth*, newsletter of the Calgary Food Bank, April-June 2010.