POVERTY IN SMITHERS
SOME FACES; SOME FACTS

Prepared For The Bulkley Valley Healthy Communities Committee

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT

1.1 Bulkley Valley Healthy Communities Committee & The Determinants of Health

The Bulkley Valley Healthy Communities Committee (BVHCC) is part of a national and global network of organizations committed to achieving health for all citizens. The local committee has been active since the late 1980's, with the support of the Town of Smithers. BVHCC functions with the following key principles in mind:

- health status is determined not only by the health care system but also by factors such as education; economics; culture and the environment (known as the *determinants of health*)

- the determinants of health include other factors such as:

- peace
- shelter
- education
- food
- income
- a stable eco-system
- sustainable resources
- social justice
- equity

- one approach to promoting health is effective community action through public participation in

a) identifying needs
b) setting priorities
c) making decisions
d) planning and implementing strategies to promote health

- this approach builds on the strengths of individuals and communities and uses the talents and resources available in every community
- every human being has value and should have a voice in decisions which will impact him/her (*empowerment*)

1.2 Activities Of The Bulkley Valley Healthy Communities Committee

BVHCC has held a series of community visioning sessions at which community members identified priority problem areas. At community meetings held in June and September

1994 one of the issues which community members felt should be addressed locally was poverty.

In June 1995 two BVHCC Coordinators were hired to address the priority issues identified by the community: youth; poverty; mentoring; housing. As far as poverty is concerned, the role of the BVHCC and Coordinator has been to increase community awareness around poverty issues and to begin coordinating a community-based planning process around poverty in which people living in poverty, or who have experienced poverty, were included.

Poverty is obviously an ongoing concern, but this has been a timely year to attempt to bring more attention to it: the United Nations has designated 1996 as the *International Year For The Eradication of Poverty*.

Inclusion of people living in poverty in this process is particularly important from a Healthy Communities perspective as empowerment is a basic premise. Many people living in poverty feel isolated, powerless or forgotten. They should be heard in planning processes as they will be impacted by many decisions made by others. As well, people living in poverty often become marginalized and left out of decisions affecting their lives - they lose a sense of control. They also need to be heard as they hold many of the solutions to the conditions in which they live or have lived.

BVHCC works towards giving all sectors of the population a voice. The focus is primarily on **people**, in this case people who live in poverty. Too often labels - like *impoverished* or *poverty stricken* - supersede the fact that we are dealing with human beings. This report goes some way towards illustrating the human face of poverty in Smithers. Due to the methodology used in the research behind the report, a small number of local people who live or have lived in poverty have been given at least a partial voice. Many of the themes and ideas expressed in this report are theirs. In addition, their voices have been augmented by the voices of people representing local agencies/individuals who deliver programs connected to poverty alleviation.

1.3 Purpose of the Report

This document is intended to show some of the human experiences of Smithers residents who live in poverty. It is designed to raise awareness of some local poverty issues and to build on the positive work of local agencies. It suggests some grass roots strategies to improve the lives of all residents of the Bulkley Valley. The report is not a comprehensive picture of poverty in the Bulkley Valley. Rather, it is a tool to be used alongside other tools in the bid to provide a healthy community for all. It is not an end in itself but is part of an ongoing and long term process of community development.

The strategies suggested in the report are two-fold:

- to alleviate some of the conditions caused by poverty ("Band-Aid" solutions)

- to work towards meaningful changes and empowerment in the lives of those residents living in poverty

Note: No reader should forget that poverty is a condition in which millions of people world-wide live. The phrase "think globally; act locally" has some application here.

1.4 Methodology Used In Researching The Report

A mixture of primary and secondary data was used in the production of this report, with a significantly stronger focus on the former. Primary (i.e. first hand/original) data was gathered in face-to-face, mostly one-on-one interviews, with five local people who live in poverty currently; one person who has been in and out of poverty all her life; and one who used to live in poverty. As well, at various group meetings held by BVHCC, the Bulkley Valley Anti Poverty Group and others further ideas were discussed. One meeting was facilitated by the BVHCC Coordinator at which representatives of fifteen community-based agencies brainstormed around local poverty issues as well as some possible solutions to them (see Appendix I).

Secondary data was collected from a variety of sources and has been used to supplement the local focus.

2. POVERTY

2.1 What Do we Mean By Poverty?

Many people probably think along lines of a dictionary-type definition when they consider poverty: i.e. something like "having to live without adequate food, shelter etc." Poverty is a small word, but in Smithers it actually should conjure up many different images.

When asked what poverty meant to them, the seven informants who have experienced/are experiencing poverty (hereafter referred to as "the seven informants") gave responses such as:

- *my life story*
- *something I'd like to change but don't know how*
- *always worrying about my kids, about feeding them; just always worrying*
- *never finding anywhere decent to live; family fighting about everything*
- *I can't do anything fun with my kids because it costs too much*

In fact, poverty has a different meaning to each person experiencing it. Poverty is a state of life which may be caused by job loss; unemployment; health problems; family problems. It may involve ongoing problems such as illness, stress, inadequate food and living conditions, low self esteem, a sense of powerlessness. In turn, sometimes these problems and the fact that they seem endless may lead, in the case of some people, to substance abuse, violence, crime or a constant feeling of hopelessness. For many people living in poverty, however, it is simply that we never see their faces or hear their voices.

Few people would probably argue with the case that poverty is an unacceptable state in which to live. As well, few people would argue the point that in an ideal world, no one should lack nutritional food, warmth, shelter and a worthwhile job. Yet, many people outside the world of poverty turn a blind eye to the situation of others. The easy option is to forget that such an unacceptable state exists for many people around us. Several comments were made, by both informants living in poverty and those who are not, regarding the fact that Smithers is a relatively wealthy community and prefers to forget those who are not living in such well-to-do circumstances.

2.2 Some Facts Related to Poverty

Consider some facts of the 1990's:

- British Columbia's economy has performed well, but has <u>not</u> created the old-style jobs which require little training and pay high wages

- three quarters of new jobs created by the end of the century will require training beyond high school
- fifteen years ago most people receiving Social Assistance were considered unable to work
- today 70% of people receiving Social Assistance are able to work
- the number of families or individuals receiving Social Assistance across Canada has risen by 63% since 1990
- the numbers in British Columbia have been close to the national average
- today one in ten British Columbians and one in seven children lives in a family receiving Social Assistance
- more than a third of current Social Assistance recipients and more than half of single-parent families receiving Social Assistance have been doing so for two years or more
- a minimum wage job pays a single parent less than he/she would receive through Social Assistance
- low income working single parents do not receive benefits such as dental and drug coverage which are available to single parent families receiving Social Assistance
- in today's economy, if youth are unable to find work by the age of twenty-five, chances are they will be marginally unemployed for the rest of their lives
- over recent years, economic change across Canada has resulted in lower real incomes for families led by people under 35 years of age
- **the long term impact of this poverty affects us all through increased illness, and dependence on health care and social services, continuation of the poverty trap[1], reduced community stability and the waste of human potential.**

  (Ministry of Social Services, 1995)

[1] The poverty trap is the situation of being unable to raise the standard of living because an individual is dependent on government benefits which are reduced if extra income is gained. It is a cycle from which it is difficult to break free.

3. POVERTY IN SMITHERS: THE FACES, THE FACTS

3.1 Some Background On The Informants

The following section of the report does not deal with statistics or abstract ideas. It tells of some of the experiences of seven individuals who currently live in Smithers: five of these individuals (informants) are currently living in poverty. Two of these informants are aboriginal and the remainder non-aboriginal.

All five have been living in poverty for more than three years; in fact, four of the five have lived most of their lives in poverty. Four of the five have not had a job in the last year. Three informants have worked on and off throughout their adult lives in casual, minimum wage jobs, except for the last few years.

Of the two other informants, one used to live in poverty but has managed to change this over the last few years. The other is currently working steadily and lives above the poverty line, but has spent many years moving in and out of poverty.

Of the seven informants, five are female and two male. Of the five female informants, four are single mothers with families of up to five children. For several, however, their children are in care. One informant is a consumer of mental health services.

All seven informants live within the town of Smithers.

3.2 Poverty For Real

The idea behind this section of the report is not to focus on numbers and intangible ideas. The idea is to illustrate

1. that poverty exists in Smithers
2. some of the issues which are faced by people living in poverty

All the ideas in this section come from the seven people interviewed, as described above. Their poverty is for real as far as they are concerned. However, there is likely to be a portion of the Smithers population who thinks mainly of developing countries when considering poverty: images of shanty towns, no running water, barefoot children and low levels of literacy may spring to mind, bolstered by television coverage and other media.

Those images are a far cry from the image many people have of Smithers: higher incomes, a stable economy, a clean town, and a decent quality of life. For many people this very image holds true. For many others (and the numbers are growing), however, this image does not describe their lives.

This section will reveal glimpses of the lives of seven local residents. There are many more people living in poverty in Smithers than these seven. Each will have an individual story to tell. Each is a human being.

3.3 Seven Stories

For seven Smithers residents who have experienced/are experiencing poverty, some common themes exist in many of their daily lives. These are laid out below, as described by the informants themselves:

- Feeling alone in life; loneliness; cut off from family, cut off from society; only people in their lives are Social Workers, Advocates, Passage House staff; no one to talk to; don't feel accepted by society (one informant joined a local church looking for some security; she felt, however, that she was shunned by the congregation)

- Feeling of anger; bitterness at society for making them feel like outcasts/ignoring them; anger at previous generations in family; anger that own education suffered because of lack of family support; anger at self for not being a "better person"

- Low self esteem[2]; lack of self belief (which makes it difficult to stick at a job when one comes up); feeling of drowning in hopelessness; suicidal thoughts

- Lack of education (three of the seven informants have completed high school); feeling that life would be better with education/training/a job

- Problems with substance abuse (three of the seven informants have ongoing problems with substance abuse; one woman - a single mother - is working hard to overcome the problem. Her comment was that because sometimes life seems so hopeless "I'm scared to drink and I'm scared not to drink". Drinking is her escape from the realities of her life).
  Note: all sectors of society contain people with substance abuse problems; this is not a problem confined to any one group of people, such as those living in poverty.

- Not eating well; don't know how to cook; cannot afford to feed family properly; relies on the Food Bank, and sometimes it does not provide enough; often feels hungry; often lacks energy

- Life is not much fun; have to fight with Ministry of Social Services for every little thing, even some extra money to feed children when they come to visit (for parents whose children are in care); unable to entertain children; often too tired to play with them

[2] Several informants were able to verbalize their lack of self esteem, while others did not refer directly to it. Low self esteem, however, was sometimes evident from comments that they made about themselves, such as the comment from the informant who was angry at himself for not being "a better person."

- Fear that their own children will have to deal with the same problems that they have had to deal with[3] (for one woman who, as a child, was physically abused by her father, trying to avoid violence with her own children is a constant battle)

- Problems finding somewhere to live; it is difficult to find rental accommodation in the first place; any that is affordable tends to be in poor shape/an unhealthy or unsafe environment (one family lives in a home where there is rising damp on most of the walls and in which mice are rampant)

3.4 Some Specific Experiences Of The Informants

- One woman has spent several nights sleeping in a dumpster in Smithers as she had nowhere else to go

- One woman was physically, mentally and sexually abused by her father and suffers ongoing nightmares
  Note: violence should not be equated with poverty. Domestic violence occurs among all sectors of the population

- One man lived on Cornflakes for a week as he had no more money to buy food

- One woman ended up in a cult (before she moved to Smithers) as that was the only place where she experienced a sense of belonging

- One woman started sniffing glue at age 11 to escape the hardships of her family life; she has had ongoing problems with substance abuse since that time

- One man finds it difficult to get up every morning and face his world; he feels he is just trying to survive one day at a time

- One woman has stolen food from Smithers stores out of desperation to feed her family

These points serve to illustrate some of the situations faced by these people living in poverty. They, of course, only tell a partial story.

One element which does not emerge from these glimpses of seven different lives is the strength and dignity of each individual interviewed. **Every human being has strengths and something to offer their community**, and these seven informants are no different. From the strength to get up each day and continue the fight for survival to the strength to think about the future and making some changes in their lives, each one of these individuals has something to teach us.

[3] The inter-generational effects of poverty have been well documented showing that often children who are born into families living in poverty are unable to break the cycle.

They all agreed that elements from their lives could be used to demonstrate that poverty exists and is growing in Smithers and that it is not an abstract phenomenon. From their insights and their experiences it is hoped that work can be carried out so that ultimately no one needs to live in such conditions or undergo such experiences.

3.5 Working For Positive Change

Each informant was asked what would make their lives better. These are their responses (some informants offered more than one idea):

- Someone to talk to as a friend (i.e. not someone paid to be there)
- Someone to help with managing a family and a household; helping to sort out family arguments
- Support for dealing with alcoholism
- Someone to help advocate on behalf of the individual and family when dealing with agencies such as the Ministry of Social Services[4]
- Support in education and job training
- Being accepted by the community and not having to be fearful of everything
- Help with self esteem issues
- Educating the community so that situations such as cashiers sniggering at those people paying with food vouchers could be avoided; build respect for every individual
- Having the family together with enough to eat and a roof over our heads
- Free/subsidized passes for recreational activities
- Free workshops on self esteem, managing a budget etc.; also workshops for the community at large to build awareness ("get rid of NIMBY"[5], as one informant said)

[4] One local advocate explained that some people living in poverty locally do not fight for their valid rights as they may be frightened of losing what little they already have. Their lives are governed by fear of "the system".

[5] NIMBY is the anachronism for "Not In My Back Yard"; i.e. avoidance of the facing the fact that some "unpleasantry" - such as poverty - exists locally and needs to be addressed.

3.6 A Sense Of Community

Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making. (McKnight, 1993)

These seven informants - and very likely, many people living in poverty - feel that they are not making any contribution to their community. They also feel angry that they do not feel any sense of belonging in the community. This is largely due to a sense that they have lost control over their own lives due to poverty. Their disempowerment manifests itself through anger, substance abuse, low self esteem, or a combination of such characteristics.

Working towards the empowerment of all residents is a goal of BVHCC, and often empowerment begins with simple **communication**. Many of the informants expressed a feeling of loneliness, or of needing someone to help out in various ways (e.g. advocacy; education; practical home-making issues). Through volunteer efforts these types of gaps in the lives of others could be filled. Having mentors, friends, and/or advocates working towards helping them to help themselves may create a greater sense of community, benefit both parties and shore up the existing communication gap.

Building greater awareness in the community of poverty issues and the personal attributes and needs of people living in poverty is also part of this communication. There are a number of agencies in Smithers which are involved in poverty alleviation/aid programs. Others perform a public awareness/education role.

4. WHO CAN HELP?

4.1 Local Agencies

Below is a list of many of the agencies in Smithers whose staff may work with people living in poverty, among others (several agencies run a number of different programs):

- Bulkley Valley Anti Poverty Society
- Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre
- Legal Aid-Legal Services Society
- Northwest Alcohol and Drug Services
- Smithers Community Services Association[6]
- Smithers Human Rights Society

Ministries such as Social Services, Health, Mental Health and their associated agencies are also involved. From time to time, service clubs/organizations donate to a specific cause. As well, various individuals in the community who are not necessarily affiliated with any of the above agencies become involved. In other words, community resources exist to provide a number of services to people living in poverty.

This in itself is positive and significant. It is, unfortunately, not enough. It is not enough because:

- demand for poverty alleviation services outweighs the supply as numbers of people living in poverty in Smithers grow

- poverty alleviation services, while vital and necessary, do not deal with strategies to bring about fundamental social change to empower all community residents and eradicate poverty

4.2 Input From Community Agencies

In November 1995 an intensive brainstorming session on poverty issues was facilitated by BVHCC. Representatives from fifteen different community agencies attended (see Appendix I for notes on proceedings). Each had something valid and important to bring to the discussion.

At that session, participants were asked to briefly touch on their own experiences with poverty issues and make any relevant comments. Particularly notable responses included:

[6] In June 1996 the Bulkley Valley Housing Society was taken over by Smithers Community Services Association

- there is a 46% child poverty rate in Smithers

- there is a 0.9% vacancy rate in the rental housing market (Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation, 1995) and many low income individuals are discriminated against

- there are plenty of jobs in the world and plenty of money in the world; if the two could be better combined, we would all be better off

- in 1984 many people in Smithers were working hard on poverty issues and eleven years later, things are worse

- in 1986 20% of households had an income of around $50,000. That figure is now up to 47%. However, incomes for the bottom 20% of the population have not changed - the gap has widened.

As well, participants were asked to identify what, to them, are the most pertinent images of poverty in Smithers. The most commonly cited responses were:

- Homelessness/poor housing
- Financial worries
- Hopelessness
- Lack of food
- Cold
- Unemployment
- Disempowerment
- Isolation/Invisibility

Note: Many of the issues identified at this session mirror those issues identified by people living in poverty.

4.3 Some Potential Locally-Based Strategies To Deal With Poverty

At the poverty brainstorming session, attention was drawn to the need to distinguish between "Band aid" solutions and systemic change. Band aid solutions deal with the symptoms of poverty and are important in attempting to improve the lives of people living in poverty - they are part of poverty alleviation programs. Systemic change involves a longer term process of attitudinal shift and community empowerment, and is more preventive in nature.

The strategies below are divided into these two categories based on their approach. The strategies are based on information provided both by the seven informants and by the participants of the brainstorming session. It is not surprizing to find many more strategies under the *Poverty Alleviation/Support* heading. Fundamental social

change requires more widespread thought, planning and commitment than dealing with existing problems.

4.3.1 Alleviation/Support Strategies For People Living in Poverty

1. Continued and increased advocacy services for people living in poverty

2. Provision of workshops on budgeting and financial management[7]; achieving balanced nutrition on a low budget; cooking skills[8]; shopping skills

3. Creation of a clearing house for second-hand clothing, furniture and household items; creation of a tool lending library

4. Encouraging banks to become more accessible to low income people; encouraging the establishment of lending co-operatives for handling small amounts of money

5. Provision of literacy, education and job training with a focus on real skills and individualized programming

6. Planning for an integrated community resource centre which is community-owned, a drop-in centre

7. Facilitate an adult mentoring initiative where volunteers can provide friendship, home support, and any other desired skills to people living in poverty (ensure a positive two-way relationship)

8. Coordinate a school lunch program in the schools to ensure that children have at least one hot, nutritional meal per day.

4.3.2 Strategies to Support Community Agencies in Working To Alleviate Poverty

1. Legal Aid (and other agencies) should be more connected with other local organizations involved with poverty alleviation and to whom people turn when in crisis.
   More frequent inter-agency meetings (currently running at one annually); increased communication and improved understanding of the role each agency plays in alleviating poverty should lead to more effective responses to crises.

[7] It is important to note that for some participants, information on budgeting just "does not cut it" for if a person simply has not enough money to live on, no amount of budgeting will change that fact. For other participants, the feeling was that better budgeting skills would help to some extent.

[8] Smithers has previously had a community kitchen which was not a major success. However, Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre is planning to start one up again as the demand is there.

Some northern British Columbia communities (such as Prince George and Vanderhoof) have developed community *protocols* in connection to agency responses to violence against women. Through a lengthy process of community consultation, each agency which is involved in responding to battered women identified precisely how they would deal with a particular situation and to whom they may wish to refer clients. A protocol document was produced and has been circulated to all agencies concerned so staff of each know where they fit into the picture. The development of protocols can be applied to many different situations and may have value in the case of poverty-related crises.

2. Professionals involved in the field of poverty alleviation should be encouraged and supported in staying abreast of changing trends, needs and circumstances. Information should be shared among agencies, and support given to employees by way of workshops and other opportunities for networking and professional development.

3. For those working to alleviate poverty/deal with poverty-related crises support should be in place. Often some of the problems that arise may seem overwhelming, and strategies to help may only scratch the surface. To avoid burn-out of staff and to build mutual support and the sharing of resources, agencies should be encouraged in networking to reduce the sense of isolation.

This type of forum for mutual support could also be a strong voice in lobbying for change.

4. For many agencies in Smithers their not-for-profit status means an ongoing need for seeking funding. It is important for them to know what funding is potentially available, to share those resources and to plan cooperatively, where appropriate, to avoid duplication of service and an effective use of resources.

Currently research is being done through BVHCC with a view to finding funding for a new community resource. Computer-based inventories of funding agencies throughout Canada are now available for an annual fee, and ideally BVHCC would like to find funding for a community-owned computer, a base to house it and for the program itself, so that all not-for-profits would benefit.

5. There is a need to identify barriers to employment in Smithers and methods of breaking those barriers. Some participants of the brainstorming session felt that there has been too much local emphasis on employer needs and not enough attention on the needs of people who are seeking employment. Obviously both sides of the equation are important - it is a question of redressing the balance.

4.4 Strategies For Systemic Change

1. Encourage community development projects with a focus on *empowerment* instead of direct services only. End-users or people affected by development should be included in the planning and implementation processes so that their voices are heard and so that they are an effective participant in the process.

For example, in a recent down-town Victoria housing project, homeless and at risk women were directly involved in the construction (having been trained for the job) of a new women's shelter. From early on in the project until its completion they have been involved, have developed a sense of empowerment, acquired some practical skills, as well as produced a needed end product (i.e. the shelter).

2. Ongoing efforts in public awareness and education need to be made by all agencies as there is still some way to go in convincing many Smithers residents that poverty-related problems actually exist and are a serious concern in the Bulkley Valley.

As well, negative attitudes towards low income individuals need to be dispelled through ongoing efforts to spread the word that every person has strengths and something to give the community. Dispelling the fear of the unknown and the fear induced through ignorance is a long term, continuous process. Using education to bridge the ever-increasing gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" is necessary.

One former Town Councilor remarked that messages do not always get through to the Town of Smithers about local projects and local needs. Again, the need for clear communication is paramount.

3. It is a useful strategy to remind community members, agency staff and people living in poverty that we are not operating in a void. We are all part of a global system and the issues being faced in Smithers are also being faced all over the world. There is power in groups and we can all learn from each other. Maintaining awareness of the needs of the world, global issues and pressures, as well as the lessons we can learn from positive change is vital.

As one participant of the brainstorming session pointed out, it is not just poverty that is the problem. Wealth is also a problem but does not usually get identified as such. In the long run, the whole planet is in greater danger from wealth, and the over-consumption it brings, than from poverty. Therefore, we need to look for ways to help each problem solve the other.

5. CONCLUSION

This report has brought together some important strands in relation to poverty issues in Smithers. First and foremost, it has involved people who live in poverty and who do not often have the chance to have their voices heard. No matter how short the project and small the numbers involved, these voices have been heard. As well as the voices of people living in poverty, the voices of those working to make positive changes and to alleviate the symptoms of poverty have been included. There is much positive work happening in Smithers.

There is a need to build on this positive work, make better use of local resources - human, physical or otherwise - and to actually try and make some significant changes. The process of community development is slow and must be tackled over the long term: work must be done in shifting community attitudes; building community awareness of poverty issues; bringing local resources together; and continuing to reach out to, include and learn from those experiencing issues directly (in this case, people living in poverty).

Planning to make Smithers a healthier community for all residents is a goal we can all benefit from. The stories told and strategies suggested in this report are just one tool in helping to achieve that goal. What is more important in working towards empowerment and social change is the challenge faced by us all in changing the ways we use our knowledge, skills and resources.

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APPENDIX I

POVERTY BRAIN-STORMING SESSION 1
Skeena Health Unit Conference Room
November 8, 1995
11:00 Am - 1:00 PM

Facilitated by Healthy Communities Co-ordinator, Fiona Glass

In Attendance:

Elizabeth Scott, Mental Health Network
Brenda Wilson, Dze L K'ant Friendship Centre
Joanne Kovanchuk, Community Nutritionist (Skeena Health Unit)
Bea Morris, CHR, Moricetown
Lillian Lewis, CHR, Moricetown
Susie Soman, CRW Program, NWCC
Bill Goodacre, Town of Smithers
Margo MacLean, Volunteer
Debbie Schmitz, BV HIV/AIDS Committee
Sue Skeates, Discharge Planner, BV Hospital
Elizabeth Bulmer, Ministry of Social Services
Walt Taylor, Anti-Poverty Group/Smithers Human Rights Society
Murray George, Smithers Community Services Association
Susan Granton, Legal Aid
Ruth Milne, BV Housing Society/Anti-Poverty Group
Fiona Glass, Healthy Communities

The point of this meeting was to kick-start a community-based process with the ultimate aim of developing an action plan to eradicate poverty in the Bulkley Valley.

Meeting Notes

The meeting started with a round robin of each participant's involvement and/or concerns with poverty issues.

Ruth: affordable housing is a priority in Smithers. Recently the Housing Society was successful in getting a commitment from MSS to fund a men's emergency shelter, and through HOMES BC a commitment for 12 units of second stage housing for the homeless at risk next year.
There have been major provincial changes to the GAIN act, which will probably mean an increase in numbers of people living in poverty.
There is a 46% rate of child poverty in the Bulkley valley - the *Hot Lunch* program should be instituted in the schools.

Murray: Involvement with people living in poverty through his work in the fields of employment counselling; supported employment; literacy etc.

Walt: Works with the Human Rights Society and the BV Anti-Poverty Group.
1996 is the UN *International Year for the Eradication of Poverty* so we have 14 months left to do the job!
There are plenty of jobs in the world and plenty of money in the world - if the two could be better combined, all of us would be better off.

Elizabeth (Bulmer): Through position as District Supervisor at MSS, sees that times are getting tougher; branches of MSS are being asked to do more with less money.
Local decision-making discretion within MSS will also lessen due to the recent changes.
MSS welcomes community interest and input.

Sue: as Discharge Planner, sees people going home from hospital with no money for the necessary support services. What do we do with them?
Also working with *Planned Parenthood* in Vancouver towards getting a local branch established in Smithers - would mean a 2-hour/week clinic.

Debbie: involved with youth projects and with HIV/AIDS Committee. Been in and out of poverty all her life. Through involvement with AIDS committee and attendance at a recent AIDS conference, sees correlations between poverty (as a risk indicator) and HIV.
Housing issues for people living in poverty are also at the forefront.

Margo: lives in poverty and is a consumer survivor of Mental Health services. As a volunteer, involved with Anti-Poverty; Healthy Communities and the Housing Society.
Has concerns about the need to increase public awareness of mental health issues.

Bill: During the 80's, spent 5 years in Terrace working at the Unemployment Action Centre. Since then has maintained ties with Federated Anti-Poverty Group and End Legislated Poverty.
The saddest thing is that in 1984 many people were working hard on poverty issues and 11 years later, things are worse. There has been much economic growth locally but a whole segment of the population gets ignored.
As the Federal and Provincial governments are doing little to help, it is the community which must be creative and find local responses.
As Chair of the Family Court Committee, is also involved with working towards the adoption of a "zero tolerance" mandate on domestic violence; also working on a diversionary sentencing program for young offenders.

Susie: Currently in the Community Resource Worker program at NWCC and is doing a project on Healthy Communities. She has lived in and out of poverty all her life. Currently has family living in poverty in the States.

Beatrice: Wants Moricetown to be represented and involved in working against poverty.

Lillian: sees many instances of poverty in Moricetown as well as high numbers of young offenders. Interested to hear more about community efforts to help the problems.

A. Each Member Of The Group Wrote Down 3 Images Of Local Poverty

Starting with the most commonly cited images, a full list is presented below:

- Homelessness/poor housing
- Financial worries
- Hopelessness
- Lack of food
- Cold
- Unemployment
- Disempowerment
- Isolation/Invisibility
- Poor Health
- Lack Of Social Supports
- Stress
- Family Violence
- Anger
- "Derelicts"
- Trouble In School
- Pain
- Transportation Problems
- Children With Sad Eyes
- Crowded Homes
- Tightening of Social Services
- Lack Of Community Awareness
- Focus On Band-Aid Solutions

B. Each member of the group wrote down 3 solutions to/actions against poverty in the Bulkley Valley

All responses were tabled (see below):

1. Rental **housing** is difficult to find here - there is a 0% vacancy rate and many low income individuals/families are discriminated against. Race and marital status are also discrimination issues.
Housing is one of the most fundamental priorities for people living in poverty.
Advocacy work (currently undertaken by Ruth Milne) is vital.

2. In discussing measures in relation to poverty, important to **distinguish between working towards Band Aid solutions (perpetuating the system) or towards systemic change.**
E.g. a women's housing project in downtown Victoria got homeless women involved in learning construction skills and in the planning and building of an affordable housing complex. The project meant empowerment for the women participants and was a strong alternative to Band Aid projects.

3. **Financial worries** underpin life for those living in poverty.
Need for **education and workshops** to help low income individuals/families budget with an inadequate amount of dollars and make them stretch as far as possible.

4. A **clearing house would be useful for clothes and household items/furniture**.
For example, every time people move house, they throw away items they don't want to take with them. Instead, they could donate them to a clearing house. Would operate like the foodbank but would focus on clothes and items.
(People can no longer scavenge for such things in the garbage dumps - now charging for scavenging rights.)

5. **Legal Aid needs to be more connected with other organizations to whom people in poverty turn in times of crisis.**
Banks also need to become more accessible - need to lobby conventional lenders.
In certain developing countries, **lending co-ops** exist for handling small amounts. People in the co-op do not tend to fault on their re-payments as they will let others in the co-op down.

6. **Enough food and having the right type of food for decent nutrition is fundamental.** However, it is difficult to have enough food if you don't have enough money to pay for it.
Other skills around food would also be useful - **cooking skills; nutrition education; shopping skills.**
In Williams lake, there has been great success with a **community kitchen and community garden**. In Smithers the community kitchen did not do well but it may be re-visited in the future.
Possible problems here may have been the day-time scheduling and transportation.

7. **Major problem in Smithers is getting many people in the community to admit that poverty is a serious concern in the valley (community awareness).**
In 1986 20% of households had an income of around $50,000. That figure is now up to 47% - Smithers is well off as a community.
However, incomes for the bottom 20% of the population have not changed.
In Smithers we have a sizeable comfortable majority and a smaller (though still sizeable) uncomfortable minority.
Volunteers on the Family Court Committee have had their eyes opened to issues in Smithers.
However, **the message about community needs does not always get through to the Council level.**
There are lots of dollars in town (through forestry, for example) and there is room for new and more economic initiatives (diversification).

8. **Education and training that focuses on <u>real</u> skills** is needed. **Skills should focus on empowerment and should be built on an indiviualized basis.**
End-users should be included at all levels of the process.
Focus on marketable skills and empowerment at a young age (high schools should be involved).

9. **Politicians need education too** - what about playing the "Poverty game"?
Poverty game was developed through Federated Anti-Poverty Group. Makes the players "live in' poverty - give a greater understanding (**sensitivity training**).
Also a good PR technique for **raising the profile of local issues.**
In Victoria, a prominent politician lived on Social Assistance for several weeks - much media coverage and a greater understanding of the impossible task of surviving on welfare.
The "haves" and the "have-nots" do not understand each other - work towards bridging the gap.
Often the professionals are the least aware of what the issues are.
Look for ways to inform them - channels of communication; raising the profile.

10. **Would be ideal to have ~~to have~~ an integrated community resource - a central neighbourhood house; community-owned.**
Like a drop-in centre - could run different programs from there.
Think about **fund-raising** by hitting up larger corporations (e.g. airlines) and those who tend to give donations.
Donations of crown land etc.

11. **Project Mentors** (e.g. "fix it" projects).
Those living in chronic poverty often give up- they may live with broken household items, for instance.
There is probably a **pool of volunteers** who would be willing to offer **skill-building in fixing items/sewing clothes/cleaning house etc.**
Such a program would have to well co-ordinated. Volunteer Bureau has facilitated such things in the past.
"**Big Brothers; Big Sisters**" is definitely needed - could be part of Volunteer Bureau.
A **tool library** would be beneficial for some; building re-cycling program.

12. For many programs to be effective, **funding** is the key - important to know what funding sources are out there and how to access them.

13. Self esteem of those in poverty is often low - often difficult to involve them as they feel disempowered/degraded.
Need for sensitive methods of inclusion, over the long term (to build trust) and for people to become empowered through inclusion/involvement.

14. **For those working to alleviate poverty, support should be in place.**
Networking sessions; inter-agency meetings/updates/activities etc.
Often anti-poverty work is taken in small, slow steps and sense of isolation and loss of purpose can build up. Can become easy to blame the client. Must work to avoid this.
Need forum of mutual support - also strength for lobbying purposes.
E.g. At Legal Aid, community groups are being invited to make half hour presentations to the staff to spread a better understanding of who is out there and to establish common ground etc.

15. It is not just poverty that is the problem - **wealth is also a problem**, yet we don't tend to identify it as such.
In the big scheme of things, and in the long run, the whole planet is in more danger from wealth than it is from poverty!
Look for ways for each problem to help solve the other.

16. Barriers to employment help to perpetuate poverty.
Need to identify community barriers to employment and methods of breaking those barriers.

17. Link between literacy (and education) and poverty. People with low literacy levels develop good coping skills - can hide the fact that they find it difficult to read/write.
Educational upgrading/literacy training must be individualized and with an end goal - employment.
NWCC currently offers Adult Basic Education classes - waiting list for it which is a problem. Expense of some courses is also a concern. Education (and lack of it) then becomes a barrier to employment.
Two levels of education needed - individualized education for those that need it to meet their goals/get out of poverty; and education on sensitivity, empathy, empowerment etc. for the public at large.
Legal Services Society has some money for funding public education.

18. Ministry of Social Services and emergency intake - demand exceeds supply.
Emergency intake is scheduled every day and it is filled every day.
Another FAW would also help.
Those administering programs must be accountable.

19. **Waste issues should be personal as well as global.**
There is **power in groups** so people should work together more.

Instead of Christmas parties and the large expenditure on those, employers/groups should be encouraged to spend the money instead on ~~of~~ hampers/donations.

20. **Too much focus on employer needs** - another Training Needs Assessment is now underway.
Need for more focus on employees and the unemployed. There must be a way to better link the needs of employers and the needs of the community.
Budgets are too small to deal with the needs; need to co-ordinate efforts and ideas and find ways to tap into available budgets.
Also need time to jump through bureaucratic hoops.