

91,000 paper prayers offered to end child poverty ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The more than 91,000 paper dolls presented on the steps of the legislature Tuesday were more than a protest, says organizer Carolyn Pogue.

"These are prayers made visible."

Each paper doll represents one child living in poverty in Alberta. For a protest Tuesday, Pogue received dolls from kindergarten children, from families who made dolls after Thanksgiving dinner, and from a woman who works to protect children.

"She wrote a message on each of 40 paper dolls. They were little messages like, 'I'm six years old and I've had three dads,' (and) 'none of the kids like me because I smell.'

"One was about a girl who tried to help her mom make money but it hurt too much," said Pogue.

The child was probably 12 to 15 years old. The stories were all anonymous, "but we know these things happen," Pogue said. This front-line service worker didn't know what to do with the stories of pain, so cutting paper dolls became an outlet.

Alberta has 91,000 children living in poverty, and more than half are from working families, according to the most recent data available from Statistics Canada.

That's using a poverty measure called the low income measure after tax, an international standard. Under that measure, a family of four earning \$38,000 or less in Alberta would be considered poor. A single person would make less than \$19,000.

Several local agencies hosted a forum Tuesday at the University of Alberta to publicize those figures and devise solutions. The numbers are from 2010 and represent a 12-per-cent decrease from 2009, mirroring a slow strengthening of the economy.

The numbers also tell a story about the working poor. More than half of children in poor families have one parent who works. In a province with a high cost of living, a single wage doesn't always stretch far enough to put food on the table, said John Kolkman, research and policy analysis co-ordinator with the Edmonton Social Planning Council.

The agencies called the new report *Achieving the Promise*, reflecting Premier Alison Redford's promise during the spring provincial election to end child poverty within five years.

The province expects to have its social policy framework ready for Human Services Minister Dave Hancock's review by the end of this month. A poverty reduction strategy will be ready for cabinet to review by the summer of 2013, Hancock's chief strategy adviser Lana Lougheed told the gathering.

"The intended result ... is really to help people live in dignity and contribute to our communities and our economy," said Lougheed.

Pogue volunteers with her church in Calgary, organizing volunteers to give homeless families a safe night's sleep. The churches take overflow from the homeless shelters, and last month at Hillhurst United Church, 13 of their 23 guests were children.

"This constitutes an emergency," Pogue said.

No six-year-old should have to sleep in a car; no child should have to go through a school day on an empty stomach. "It's easier to build strong children, than it is to repair broken women and men," she said, quoting American social reformer Frederick Douglass.

"The child well-being initiative wants to remind government of this wisdom."

"Of all places, Alberta can actually achieve this promise," said Bill Moore-Kilgannon, executive director of Public Interest Alberta, which urges community members to maintain public pressure on the provincial government.

Other jurisdictions in Canada have already had success, and existing programs in Alberta have, too. "We know what we need to do," said Moore-Kilgannon. Staff are stretched thin and need more resources, he said.

Social agencies are calling on the government to create a provincial child tax benefit, increase low-income supports and change the rules so those on welfare can start working and build basic assets to raise themselves out of dependency.

The province needs to raise the minimum wage to help low-income working families, and better support front-line workers, he said.

Finally, all citizens need to keep this issue top of mind and make sure Redford follows through on the election commitment.

-reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

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