



# BUREAUCRAZY

Navigating Health and Social Services in Alberta

A Guide for Discussion

This guide is designed to be used with the *BureaucraZy* film  
available at [www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca](http://www.familiesfirstedmonton.ualberta.ca).

## BUREAUCRAZY

- A documentary film based on the Family First Edmonton Photovoice research project.
- Profiles four single mothers with low income who volunteered to share their experiences in accessing health and social services in Alberta.
- Designed to be used as a tool for policy and decision-makers, service providers, students and others interested in improving the provision of health and social services in Alberta.

## BACKGROUND

One of the biggest challenges of effectively delivering social and health services in Alberta is that most public funding is directed towards specific issues. As a result, most programs geared to Albertans with low income are fragmented, with little integration across systems.

In order to improve service integration, it is important to understand the personal perspectives of the Albertans who experience these obstacles. This was the goal behind the **Families First Edmonton (FFE) Photovoice Project**, which began in April 2007 (for a description of the entire FFE study, see p. 7). The research set out to gather insights from low-income Albertans on how to improve service integration and delivery, and family health outcomes.

Photovoice is an innovative action research method that enables people to identify and represent their experience through photographic technique. Ten mothers with low income chronicled their experiences in pictures



and words. The process highlighted specific health and social service practices that actively discourage the participation of mothers and reduce the likelihood of them returning to the service, despite continued need.

Photovoice involves communicating the findings of the project to people with the power to make change. In 2007 and 2008, the participants presented the project numerous times to various groups including a number of health care professionals, service delivery specialists, program managers, students, and high-level government and community stakeholders. Their stories were so engaging that the mothers were unable to keep up with the requests for presentations.

In order to deliver the message to a broader audience, our government and community partners, along with the Photovoice mothers, suggested creating a film and accompanying discussion guide that could be shown—anytime and anywhere—by and to decision-makers, supervisors/frontline staff, and educators/students. BureaucraZy (featuring four of the ten mothers participating in the research project), as well as this guide, are the product of those recommendations.

## MEET THE WOMEN APPEARING IN THE FILM



**Connie** is a single mother who has raised her two children on her own. "I am at the age now when I want to make a difference. I want to feel like when I go to work, I am doing something to help people." Connie hopes to return to school to pursue a degree in social work.



**Nikki** is a single parent of two children with severe disabilities. "I think that a lot of people have the perception that people that are on welfare are lazy, and in it for a free ride." Nikki had to give up her career due to the lack of specialized child care required for her children.



**Brenda** is a single mother of six children and two grandchildren. "Even though I've been going up and down on the rollercoaster, I am doing good, I think." She is currently employed in the early childhood education field.



**Judith** is a single mother of two teenaged children. "If I am capable of doing things on my own then I don't abuse the system. I leave it to the others who really need it. But if I am walking in through these doors, I REALLY need that help." Judith has an administrative background and has been actively looking for employment.

## THINK ABOUT...

The complexity of issues faced by families with low income are often rooted in social, economic, and political conditions that extend beyond the control of any one family unit or one service system. "Bureaucrazy" features four families who are determined to improve their lives, despite the bureaucratic obstacles they face as they attempt to meet basic needs, advance their education, secure employment, and care for their children.

Maggie Hodgson references the importance of abiding by a set of beliefs and values to ensure that social service programming and practice is administered in a 'human way.' What beliefs and values underpin Alberta's health and social service system? How do these values and beliefs affect the provision of services to families with low income and consequently, the lives of these families? What are some different values and beliefs that could improve the provision of services to families with low income?





One of the film's main underlying messages is ensuring clients are treated as individuals with their own stories, experiences, struggles, and hopes. How can we better support frontline staff who are caught between the requirements placed on them from their system (e.g., accountability for public funds) and the requests for support from families?

A major feature of the women's stories is their ongoing struggle to meet the needs of their families. For example, one woman received a total of \$1668 in income support (medical assistance) and other benefits. Her rent was \$1200, so she is left with just over \$400 for the rest of her family's needs (e.g., groceries, utilities, transportation, clothing, etc.). A common understanding in government is that social assistance is provided as a patch over program meant to temporarily support low-income Albertans experiencing hardship. How is this belief reconciled with the reality that the amount of income support is insufficient to meet basic needs?

## FAMILIES FIRST EDMONTON

**Families First Edmonton (FFE)** is a research partnership that is conducting a longitudinal, community-based, randomized controlled trial (RCT) of four models of delivering health and social services to low-income families. Funded by several agencies (CIHR, CHSRF, AHFMR, and others), FFE includes 15 funder, government (provincial, regional, municipal), service delivery, community, and university partners. By developing the partnership (2001–2005) and by implementing interventions and studying outcomes (2006–2012), FFE has generated strong and extensive data that is being used to address FFE partners' pressing questions through three main projects:

The **Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) project** studies the health and well-being of over 1100 children and their families over three years, with 1400 variables--including demographics, social determinants of health (e.g., ethnicity, immigrant status, aboriginal status, educational attainment, training programs, labour market attachment, housing, community participation, social support, access to services/ community programs), and health outcomes (e.g., school achievement, adult mental health, child mental health, quality of life).

The **Service Delivery Practices project** describes the service delivery dynamics for low-income families (e.g., family strengths and challenges, awareness and knowledge of health and social programs, engagement with preventive health and social services) and service integration practices (e.g., working from a strengths-based, family-centred, and diversity perspective).

The **Intersectoral Collaboration project** tracks and documents the intersectoral collaborative process (e.g., leadership, governance) as 15 partners from three different sectors work together to implement a research project.

Three Main FFE Projects			
Projects	Randomized Controlled Trial	Service Delivery Practices	Intersectoral Collaboration
Examples of Knowledge Translation Products	Reports on low-income families in Edmonton	User's handbook on service integration model	A documentary film BureaucraZy and this accompanying discussion guide

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