

What Families First Edmonton Families  
Had to Say About the  
End Poverty Edmonton Strategy  
2015

## Who we talked to

In the fall of 2015, the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) and the Centre for Public Involvement (CPI) reconnected with past participants of the Families First Edmonton (FFE) research project. Earlier in 2015, the Quality of Life Commission (a community action and advocacy group) approached CUP about reconnecting with FFE families for the purpose of providing feedback on the End Poverty Edmonton (EPE) Strategy. FFE families were invited to attend 1 of 3 focus group sessions or to provide input via an online survey. In all, **65 families** (including 20 focus group participants and 45 online survey respondents) provided feedback on the EPE Strategy.

## What we heard

Overall, FFE families voiced support for the End Poverty Edmonton Strategy. They were appreciative of the Strategy's definition of poverty and that it focused on more than just household finances. Families did note that the goals of EPE are ambitious and that implementing the *Strategy* will be hard work.

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*"Poverty is defined as when people lack, or are denied, economic, social and cultural resources to have a quality of life that sustains and facilitates full and meaningful participation in the community."*  
(End Poverty Edmonton Strategy)

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*"I found finding resources for low-income families was not easy and I felt embarrassed to ask for help."*  
(FFE parent)

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*"I agreed to participate in Families First and found out that I qualified for a rental subsidy and health benefits for the kids. I also received funds in the form of student grants and loans. This saved me."*  
(FFE parent)

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## Which priorities are most helpful?

The End Poverty Edmonton Strategy lists 28 priorities essential to poverty elimination. For both focus group and survey participants, FFE families were asked to use their own poverty experience to rate the priorities in terms of helpfulness.

While all 28 were considered helpful by families, there were 8 that garnered almost total support (over 90% of families believed the priority to be "very helpful"). They were:

- #10: Advocate for **livable incomes** for Edmontonians.
- #11: Make **transit** reliable, accessible and affordable for Edmontonians.
- #12. Improve and expand **transit** services.
- #15. Improve **skills training** to help people gain sustainable employment.
- #17. Reducing barriers to **getting information** and accessing City programs and services.
- #18. Help people **navigate systems** in order to access resources and opportunities.
- #20. Grow **social enterprises** to build sustainable livelihood and assets.
- #26. Advocate to the provincial government for sustainable, predictable and adequate funding for school-based “**wrap-around**” services.

**Movement building.** The final EPE priority on movement building also resonated with FFE families, particularly those who attended the focus group sessions. It is important to FFE families that community leaders and decision-makers hear their voices. Ways in which FFE families would like to be involved in the future include participating on sounding boards and receiving invitations to future focus groups.

## What is missing?

Families were also asked to consider whether there was anything missing from the priorities identified in the Strategy.

One suggestion from FFE families pertained to **increased financial support** for low-income families, particularly the “working poor”, for education, health and legal expenses. Expenses commonly cited by families as difficult/impossible to afford include:

- Dental care
- Prescriptions
- School fees for children
- Post-secondary education
- Legal costs

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*“For children living in poverty there is never any hope for university or higher learning. Why would a child strive for university when there is no chance of the parent being able to pay for it?”*  
(FFE parent)

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According to FFE families, the Strategy could also be strengthened by focusing more on the following few **key contributors** to poverty:

- Mental health and addictions
- Trauma histories
- Maintenance enforcement
- Access to student loans

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*“It seems ridiculous to be punished for having a car or some savings in the bank when you are applying for a loan for school. It puts people in a predicament where they have to choose to give up on the few things they have worked so hard for and attained, for a potentially brighter future”* (FFE parent)

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An increased focus on **newcomer and refugee experiences** with systems was also identified by FFE families as an area to be strengthened. Some of the participants described their own experiences moving to Canada and the types of supports that would have been helpful at the time (e.g., increased access to literacy and employment training programs and supports).

## Advice for implementation

Families also offered advice on implementation.

**Accountability.** In addition to wanting to know how EPE was going to ensure accountability, families described the need for increased accountability of programs and supports, especially housing supports. Families expressed concerns with how landlords and management companies respond to housing-related health and safety issues (e.g., unit and building maintenance, criminal activity on site).

**Change eligibility criteria for recreation supports.** Families who have household incomes just above the cutoff point for recreation supports struggle to afford core household expenses and recreation opportunities for their children. A graduated financial support system would see more children from lower-income/working poor households benefiting from recreational opportunities.

**Improve systems.** Families were very vocal about the need for systems improvement through **increased staffing** and **improvements to staff training**. In the experience of FFE families, certain programs (e.g., social housing) are understaffed, contributing to frustrations for workers and families. High staff turnover further aggravates an already strained system. Families also called for extended hours for essential services (child welfare, housing); potentially making these services available 24/7. Families also spoke of mistreatment by frontline workers when seeking assistance. Often families felt like they had to fight for everything, and routinely had to go over the heads of frontline workers.

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*“Our home is in need of total repair with pieces of our walls and ceiling falling off because of the mold growing in the walls and the house is shifting. It is creating health problems for us. My manager knows of the amount of repairs this place needs but head office keeps saying there is not enough money.”* (FFE parent)

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*“I now earn just over the cut-offs for programs like leisure access/YMCA/Kid Sport, so my kids do not participate because I don't have the extra money for these things. It is a crappy cycle, earn a little less and use food banks and get access to some of the programs, or earn more so you can buy food and be independent of the system, but no extracurricular activities for the children”* (FFE parent)

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**Increase social assistance amounts.** FFE families commented that while food and housing costs have increased dramatically in recent years, income support subsidies have not.

**Support community-building.** A number of families commented on the isolation they experienced when they were not working and the lack of community in social housing complexes. A suggestion for community-building includes designing information sessions in individual complexes, tailored to the needs and interests of residents. Sessions might offer neighbours networking opportunities. FFE families believed the following to be topics that many would be interested in: parenting strategies, mental health, addressing stigma, and information on the process of going back to school. Other activities residents might engage in include: collective kitchens, community gardens and youth nights. A strengths-based approach to engaging families would include social workers or housing staff asking residents questions like, “What would you like to learn about?” and “What is something you would like to know?”

## Closing comments

This report summarizes the feedback of FFE families on the End Poverty Edmonton Strategy. It is our sincere hope that EPE will take their ideas into consideration as the initiative heads into implementation. It was an honour to listen to the comments of FFE families and to share their feedback.

The stories of FFE families reinforce the importance of the Strategy’s vision of **eliminating poverty in Edmonton** within a generation. What we heard is that families with lived experience want to be part of that change. We are all in this together.