



# Living without food:

“ You don’t realize how important food is until you don’t have it. ”

Stories from people who live without food in  
Edmonton, Alberta

Bissell Centre  
March 2007



## **Living without food:**

“ You don’t realize how important food is until you don’t have it.”

**Project coordinator – Jacqueline Fayant**

**Report prepared by Donna Kerr**

**Thank you!**

For project funding by Healthy Alberta Communities.

© Bissell Centre

March 2007

# Contents

<b>Real-life stories</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>What is it like to go hungry?</b> .....	<b>4</b>
It wears on the body.....	4
It wears on the mind .....	5
It wears on the soul.....	6
<b>Going without food</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Not enough money .....	7
Lack of knowledge.....	7
Addictions.....	8
No access to places that provide food .....	8
<b>Safe housing</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Access to refrigerator/stove/hotplate/microwave .....	9
<b>Can you get healthy food?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Special needs/health issues .....	10
<b>Strategies for getting food</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Getting food is a full-time job</b> .....	<b>12</b>
The full-time food job prevents people from getting and keeping paid work.....	13
Walking and waiting.....	13
It's an unsafe job.....	14
<b>Resiliency in the face of adversity</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Caring and sharing .....	14
Positive attitudes.....	15
Pride and knowledge .....	15
<b>What would help?</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Serve 3 meals a day at the same place.....	16
Better access to agencies that provide food.....	16
Affordable housing .....	17
Garden for fresh vegetables .....	17
Go mobile .....	18
Improve the social income support systems.....	18
Clean up the drugs .....	18
Increase support for agencies .....	19
Walk the talk .....	19
Other ideas .....	19
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendix :Interview questions</b> .....	<b>21</b>



## Real-life stories

We know many people are living with chronic hunger and poor nutrition. But what does that mean for each person? What does hunger really look like and feel like? The purpose of this project was to go beyond the statistics, beyond the stereotype of the long line-ups for food and talk to the people doing the waiting in the lines. We wanted to gather the stories of people who are going hungry—to let them speak for themselves so that other people and organizations will better understand what is happening every day in our community.

Individuals and families accessing services through community agencies are among those living in the deepest levels of poverty in our community. Over half the families living in the neighbourhoods directly surrounding Bissell Centre live below the poverty line. The long line-ups wherever food is served in the inner city are a testament to the depth of the problem of food security.

The people interviewed were a cross-section of community members who access agencies or soup kitchens to get by. They were from the inner city, the west end and the south side. All interviewees are anonymous to protect confidentiality.

48 people (19 females and 29 males) were interviewed. Four people had children living with them (one male and 3 females). The children ranged in age from 2 months to 16 years. Geographically, 35 respondents lived in the downtown/inner city area, 5 in the Whyte Avenue area, and the rest lived in the Westend or Northeast. Two-thirds were homeless. 10% were aged 21-30, 33% were 31-40, 38% were 41-50 and 19% were 51-60.

The interviewers were low-income community residents who had recent or related experience of living in poverty. They received training in how to conduct and record the interviews. The interviews were conducted between September and December of 2006.

This report summarizes the findings from the interviews. The quotes are the words of the people we interviewed. In some cases, we have edited the wording a bit for ease of readability. We have not made any edits that would change the meaning or intent of what people told us.



“ You don't realize how important food is until you do not have it. It would be even worse if I had children and I could not provide for them. ”



“ I’m losing weight and not feeling healthy. I have no energy and it puts me in a negative mood. You just want to give up. It’s depressing and it’s hard to get out of it. ”

## What is it like to go hungry?

The constant struggle to get enough food takes a heavy toll. It wears on the body, mind and soul. Food is literally the fuel for life—when there isn’t enough, all areas of life are affected. For many people, the impact wears on all three areas, as reflected in the quotes.

### It wears on the body

The physical wear and tear is from not having enough to eat and what that does to the body, especially over time, and in the actual daily physical work required to obtain food.

“ You feel hungry all the time, depressed and tired like a car that ran out of gas. You need fuel to run. Once you start eating again, you don’t eat too much because you don’t want to get used to eating.

The hardest part is all the walking. I am 7 months pregnant. My ankles are swollen and sore. I must walk around 5 miles a day to get to various places for food and shelter.

I don’t feel good enough because I can’t build energy. Your self-esteem goes so low and my self-confidence because I can’t provide food for my kids.

You get sick more or faster because of the lack of healthy fresh food.

It’s hard getting there and back [food bank]. I have bad eczema on my hands and it stops me from being able to carry food.

Some of us are naturally thin, but it’s worse on the street. Join us if you want to and then you won’t ask.

The hardest part is the hunger pains, sickness with no food. You feel emotionally defeated.

Standing at the lines is hard. I have a bad back.

I’ve been 3 months without a job. I’m too sick to work right now. I’m supposed to rest—it’s hard to do. You have to keep moving to get to places to eat and sleep.

When the kids don’t have enough food, they get cranky. When they’re not fed properly, they get sick more often and have more health problems in general. They’re not as active. I really do think it affects attitude.

It has affected my weight and how I feel about myself. Lining up for housing and shelter affects when you can get to food.

The hardest part is packing up the baby all over. I don’t have bus fare, so you can imagine going all over carrying the baby around, looking for food and carrying it.

”

## It wears on the mind

Living with the uncertainty of never knowing if you'll have enough food affects confidence, self-esteem, motivation and a sense of safety. Being hungry often leads to depression and can make it worse if depression is already present.

“

When you're not eating right, you don't have energy to get up and go. It's depressing when you wonder where your next meal is coming from—total uncertainty.

I'm not healthy from the foods I eat. It's depressing and I already have enough to be depressed about. I have HIV and if I eat healthy, I could live longer. But I'm not getting any healthy foods.

Hunger accents my loneliness. I am physically weak and it makes me more weak. It puts me in a grumpy mood—I lash out at people here.

It's very stressful. I am always worried about my partner not having enough food.

I could have found food if I wanted to. There are lots of places to get food. Sometimes it's depression, just giving up.

Last night I hardly had any sleep—kept wondering how my life got to be this way—just worried and couldn't sleep.

My son was embarrassed that we used the food bank. He doesn't always understand there is little or no money. It affects my mood and ability to sleep.

I feel guilty because I'm on low income, but again that is why we have family and these soup kitchen places which were made for people like me.

I get so depressed at all of this. I just break down and cry.

It's very miserable on the streets. You just become depressed.

If I don't eat right I get depressed and have nightmares. If you don't treat the body and mind right, it goes haywire—I experience it, I know it for a fact. It's true.

My cat would cry when her dish was empty and I would cry with her. You appreciate food when you get it.

My children cry. They have no motivation to play sports in school. I can't focus on work.

”



“ The hardest part is the way people view you. They look at you and don't say anything. Some people don't want to hang around you when they find out you bin. ”



“ You have no more self-respect. Can you have it begging for everything in life? ”

## It wears on the soul

Not being able to provide enough food for yourself or your family hits hard on a person's pride, dignity and self-respect. In addition to a person's own feelings, they also have to deal with other people who can be harsh and judgmental.

“

I'm embarrassed at digging in garbage cans and bins.

You feel like a failure. You watch people coming in with groceries when you don't have any. When you're hungry and you're thinking what they choose and you come home with green beans. I used to panic when the cupboards were bare. Once I had a cupboard full of groceries, I felt my pride and dignity.

When you're on the dumpsters, there's no dignity. I'm a counsellor. I lost dignity at birth. I'm a Native, you know.

People on the street are more aggressive. People judge you when you are homeless.

I'm embarrassed that I can't provide all that the babies need.

Hunger pains are hard. It's embarrassing when someone hears your stomach growling. Self-respect. Depression sets in.

I have worked all my life, 35 years, and yet right now I'm injured and I can't work. I live at the Herb and I am so disappointed at how life is here. I have lost my dignity having to get stuff from others.

I'm from Canada, Indian status, and I have to live on the streets. That's life. It's always like that.

I felt like a real bum. Ashamed, unrespectful. I was embarrassed when company came over—nothing to feed them. Pride, a lot of pride.

When you are bottle picking, people call you down a lot.

”

## Going without food

Going without food is a common experience among the people interviewed. Two-thirds of the people interviewed had gone without food for 24 hours or longer in the last 30 days, 38% had gone without in the last 6 months and 38% had gone without in the last 12 months. The reasons for going without food are complex and interrelated.

## Not enough money

9 people said they did not have enough money to buy food.

“ Before I was on the streets, I had two jobs and couldn't afford to feed myself. I'm not able to afford food once the bills are paid. I had housing with a slum landlord; gave money for rent then got kicked out 14 days later. I'm going to court. ”

People were asked if there was any money left after rent and utilities. Only 6 people stated they had enough money left to buy food after paying rent and utilities. 7 sometimes did—it depended on how much they were able to make during the month.

For most, it wasn't a relevant question as they were homeless.

“ I do not pay rent or utilities and no, I'm not on welfare, so I don't have a chance to pay for anything. I don't pay rent, no place to stay. I have no money, no income. I've been six months on the street. ”

For those who did have some form of income, it was usually insufficient. Several respondents stated they had incomes in the past that were not enough to live on and were now on the streets.

“ Once bills and rent were paid, I had \$30 for the month for groceries. I have no income and if you were on SFI then you would not have money because you need to pay rent. I have just enough funding to pay rent. That's why I use soup kitchens, food banks. I am planning to apply for medical welfare. I'm an oil patch worker, but I didn't save a penny. I'm lucky if I am able to make \$10 a day picking bottles. I have no income at present. When I had income, it went towards my rent. There wasn't enough money for food. ”

## Lack of knowledge

3 respondents did not know where to go to get food or how to budget.

“ I did not know the places that give out food, but now I know. I did not know how to budget and honestly the money was so little. I had just become homeless and was not aware of free food places. I was basically abandoned. ”

## Addictions

One quarter of the people interviewed said their addictions got in the way of their ability to feed themselves.

“

It is a regular occurrence. I owe the pawn shop all of my money after I pay my rent/utilities. I do some cleaning to get money for beer and cigarettes. Beer and cigarettes come before food.

I do without food while I drink. The Mustard Seed won't let you in if they smell alcohol or suspect that you're drinking. The Herb Jamieson, same thing, same policy. So, I don't eat until the next day. Or they are closed.

Addictions took control of my life.

When I was on drinking binges, food was not reachable. You know what it's like when you get drunk.

I was doing lots of cocaine and meth so lack of appetite. Sometimes there was no food at all. I was always lost in the stuff at times.

Drug addiction—I'd spend money on that rather than food.

I lost my room in the rooming house. I was drinking too much. I drank more after losing the room, because I was frustrated.

”

## No access to places that provide food

Some people (8) said they could not get to places where food was available.

“

I'd get to places where they serve meals too late. Some days, it's just too overwhelming—I don't even try to get to places for food.

Travelling in and out of the city, I could miss meals at times or places were closed before I got there.

I was injured and could not get to downtown or where they serve food. I could not look after myself.

Around holidays, soup kitchens and drop in centres are closed all over the city. There are people that drive around with food but there is not enough to go around.

There is not enough food in the city. Some places allow you once a day to eat and some serve only three times a week.

I was turned down at the food bank and had no transportation to services downtown. There are no services on the Southside.

There is no worse time than Christmas time for homeless people. Everything is shut down, no food, yet those with money enjoy.

It's easier in inner city, but in the outer parts of city there is no access. At the food bank, you need to wait certain days for food when you apply.

”

## Safe housing

The presence of safe housing has a tremendous impact on the ability to have enough food. Those interviewed who had housing were generally able to eat healthier meals. This was due to having enough money for housing and food and also to being able to store and prepare food.

14 people had safe housing. However, “safe” is a matter of definition. One person stated they had safe housing even though she lives in a tent in the river valley. 5 people (2 females, 3 males) said the shelters they stayed at were not safe.

29 people did not have safe housing. The homeless either lived on the streets, in shelters, or a combination of both. Two lived in tents.

Those with some form of housing usually stayed with other people.

“ I don’t have any housing this month. I’ve been staying here and there—usually with acquaintances. Last night, I stayed at the Hope Mission. Right now, I’m sleeping on someone’s floor—prior to that, I was sleeping in a van [homeless for 6 months]. ”

Some who had housing felt unsafe because of the neighbourhoods they lived in.

“ I did feel safe when we first moved there but recently some kids broke in the house and my son has been followed. This area is getting a little rough—I would like to move—there’s a lot of dope addicts now. ”

It wasn’t possible from some people’s responses to judge if they were safe or not.

“ I am good at finding hiding spots in buildings to sleep. I have been living on the streets off and on for the past 15 years. ”

## Access to refrigerator/stove/hotplate/microwave

Food storage and cooking appliances are tied to housing—if people have housing they are much more likely to have food storage and preparation facilities.

For those who did not have housing, the only access to cold storage was placing food in a refrigerator at shelters or storing food outside in the winter. When stored in a communal fridge, food security from theft can be an issue.



“ I have an electric frying pan in my bag. I don’t have a problem with food. I feel I can survive. All I need is a stove or just somewhere I can plug in my pan. ”

“ Winter months help keep whatever food we have. We can only keep certain foods because we tent it. We make a fire to cook noodles. I could put things in the fridge here [shelter], but people steal it. Vegetables and milk don't last. You have to give it away. ”

The most common cooking appliance available to those without housing was a microwave at shelters or agencies.

One respondent with housing was not able to use either her refrigerator or stove due to the presence of mice.

## Can you get healthy food?

Most people interviewed are sometimes able to get healthy food from the agencies they visit. While most of them said food was available, opinions varied on the quality.

“ Most of the soup kitchens try to provide healthy foods. Being pregnant, they will give me extras to make sure I get enough for the baby. I usually try and pick tinned food that I can keep or something I can eat readily. I can get veggies, but not all the time. Yes, you can healthy food. It's not an everyday thing, but you can get it. No dairy, no meat, no eggs. Lots of donuts. I can't always get healthy food. You always get what they serve. Lots of pastas and there is no milk. When I had my apartment, I could balance up my meals. Now I can't. People in jail get fed better than street people. ”

Fresh fruits and vegetables, and sometimes milk, can be hard to get.

“ There is good food but not fresh or raw. It depends on the days. Mostly milk is hard to get, but others you can. Again, moving around will help to get good stuff. You get a lot of starches. No fruit, few vegetables. The food's good except for fresh vegetables. At times, we haven't had any fresh stuff at all. ”

## Special needs/health issues

Health issues that impact what foods people need or their ability to get food included addictions, mental health, diabetes, HIV, Hep C, heart condition, and pregnancy.

“

I'm pregnant and have morning sickness. I'm lactose intolerant. I have a crack addiction, but I haven't used in 5 months.

I have Hep C. I get quality hampers more than most people. I am also pregnant. Mustard Seed gives you 2 litres of milk every two days. Streetworks gives sweets for coming off drugs.

For my mental health, I need a protein diet; agencies do not provide it. My doctor prescribed Ensure protein drink.

I'm almost blind, I have seizures, sciatica, arthritis. I had brain surgery and lots of back surgeries in the past.

I have a mental health issue and I need extra calcium, fibre and protein. Sometimes they will give extra when asked.

I'm HIV positive and I should be on a better diet. I take lots of medications. No vitamins from my food, nothing, just something to fill your tummy but no nutrients.

I have Hep C. I can't get a high protein diet.

”

## Strategies for getting food

There are two main strategies people use to obtain food: the first is to obtain it directly in the form of eating at agencies that offer food/meals, going to food banks, dumpster diving and digging in garbage. The second strategy is to get money to buy food. People use a variety of ways to get food money: social assistance, panhandling, stealing, borrowing from friends and family, bottle and scrap metal picking. Most people use a combination of both strategies.

“

I work the streets to support my habit, shoplifting, dumpsters, borrowing money from friends and family, pay day loans, Money Mart.

I go to places that serve meals around here. The Marian Centre, the Mustard Seed, the Friendship Centre. Food is always there, but you have to work hard for it.

I have stolen to eat. I have gotten caught and told them I needed to eat. I have eaten “dumpster food.” I can't ask people for money.

At times when I'm in need, I go to the food bank. I try and get a job if I see that I no longer have food. I go to places that serve food.

I beg and ask on the street. I depend on the Food Bank, soup kitchens, Co-op across from Spady's, and whatever.

I walk to soup kitchens. I can only access food banks twice a month and have no transportation to get there.

You wouldn't believe the things people throw out!

”



“ It is stressful to line up for food. There is no dignity. It's so sad. ”



“ I hate being treated unfairly wherever I go because you are on the streets. I’m not a thief. I do not steal. Treat me well. ”

“ Guys will dumpster dive behind the Subway and get day-old subs.  
I get SFI (\$812 month). I go to the food bank, soup kitchen. Bottle picking, panhandling, scrap metal picking.  
I had enough money for groceries for two weeks only. Sometimes I would use family and friends. Sometimes the food bank. I would panhandle to raise money to buy groceries.

I buy meals, because I don’t have a place to store groceries. I don’t access the food bank because I have no place to put it. Some people do get food from the food bank and take what they like and discard the rest. If you know where to go, you won’t starve. Within a 10 block radius, there are places everywhere.  
You can visit friends that don’t drink and they feed you.



A number of people interviewed made it clear that, even though their circumstances are difficult, they do not steal. For others, their sense of pride and dignity would not allow them to beg or steal.

“ I beg or panhandle. I buy food. Dumpsters for sure. I don’t steal, I beg.  
People give. I have never stolen anything. I earn and share.  
I am not a thief. Neither is my husband or buddies.

Parents are a great support and family. Sometimes I go to soup kitchens. I borrow only from family. I don’t steal and I have never begged on the streets. I use family and the agencies.



It is a blow to pride and self-respect to have to resort to stealing to get food.

“ The hardest part is that I had to spend yesterday here. That I had to stay in a shelter. That I had to steal food.



## Getting food is a full-time job

Getting food when you don’t have money to buy it is a full-time job. You have to walk between agencies where food is offered at different times, and then wait in line. Because most free food is offered in the inner city, it exposes people seeking food to unsafe environments. In addition, the limited times that food is available make it difficult to access food if you are working. These factors can form a vicious cycle that keeps people locked into the “getting food routine” instead of moving on to paid work, school or other activity.

## The full-time food job prevents people from getting and keeping paid work

Because of the limited hours that agencies serve food, people who work full-time often cannot access food.

“

I chose to work part-time so that I do not miss meals so that I can eat. A full-time job will make me miss meals since I do not have a place to stay and cook. So a part-time job is the way forward, not to miss meals.

I could not get to the food place on time. Most of them close at certain times. So if you are late, no food. A full-time job finishes late, so no food.

”

## Walking and waiting

The “2 W’s” of getting food dominate the lives of the people interviewed. Walking to the various agencies that provide food, waiting in lines and waiting for the serving times takes up most of the day.

“

It's hard walking around to reach those places. If you are late, you do not get food, so early, early is the way.

I go to Bissell at 10:30, Salvation at 2:30, Mustard Seed at 7 p.m., and Herb Jamieson at 5 p.m.

The Northside did not have services. Had food banks, but no more. I could not walk to the inner city because I have HIV and I have bad legs. Too far to walk, so you just go hungry.

There's lots of pounding the pavement. Churches farther away make good meals once a month.

We suffer from one place to another trying to find food, how tiresome. We need a lot of places to get food from.

You are always in line ups, no privacy, you don't have privacy at all. Can't cook, watch TV or do anything. You deal with addicts and people with mental health problems.

I get tired out. When you miss breakfast or lunch you have to wait seven hours or so before you get another meal, so you can imagine being hungry and just waiting for the time to get to your next meal.

You're forced to walk; you are not allowed to sit anywhere or you are not allowed to sleep anywhere. You can't stop walking. You walk from 7 to lunch, walk to supper till you find a place to sleep and you wake up and start walking.

The hardest part is to keep moving. I'm sick. I want to rest.

”



“ The hardest part is the line-ups and walking to places that serve food. They are out of the way from where you are. ”

## It's an unsafe job

Exposure to unsafe people and situations is part of the food-getting job. There is a lot of fear around having to wait in the food lines.

“ Lots of line ups, lots of bad influences of people doing drugs, inviting you to join them. Too much influence. You just fall for it.

I don't like standing at the lines. People fight. I don't like it, but I have to do it. I can't go hungry for self-respect. You turn into an animal.

In the line-ups you deal with addicts and people with mental health problems.

It's not safe downtown. Even here in the west end I like to be in a group, a small group. It's safer.

There are lots of places to eat in the downtown, but it's the people that you meet there who bring you down.

I'm very afraid of downtown.

It's pretty violent out there.

The line ups for food are horrible, bad manners, oh man.

”

## Resiliency in the face of adversity

The people interviewed were among the poorest in our community, yet many were strong and resilient. They share their limited resources with others and try to maintain positive attitudes in the face of daily adversity.



“ Sometimes sharing, you end up with not having anything. I gave a lot at times and forgot about myself. ”

## Caring and sharing

People with few or no resources still care about each other and share what they can, even to their own detriment.

“ You become a little more generous with the street people; you'll go hungry to help them.

I want to help people get off the street and I try and help them off the street. I want people to be happy—there is crack cocaine—that's what sucks money out of them and they don't have healthy food.

We get as much food as possible to help each other out. Soup kitchens will give extra if you go back in line. It's an unspoken agreement among the homeless.

I haven't needed to [go to agencies for food] because I was working. I knew that there were people without food, so I wasn't about to take food out of their mouths.

I borrow money from friends to get something to eat. Friends help feed each other.

I have a grandson who works, so he does help, and my roommates.

Having my grand-daughter has helped me—I used to have episodes of over drinking.

”

## Positive attitudes

Some people are able to hope and persevere in the face of daily struggles.

“

The hard part is to get out of bed and get to it. I make sure to eat, to be wherever I need to be to eat.

I'm a survivor. I have to survive and be strong. Who else can take care of me? The government does not even care.

I struggle through everyday and keep going, hoping for the best.

I just hope I stay clean for the rest of my life. To be sober and safe and take care of myself. I have been sober three years and I did it on my own and my family is my greatest support ever.

Some days I have been depressed a bit, and then told myself that maybe tomorrow will be different, I might get something different.

”

## Pride and knowledge

Others are proud of their ability to feed themselves and their knowledge of where and how to get food.

“

Most people do as well as they can to get food. You have to keep positive. You have to put back in.

I have never been with no food you know. I look around you know.

There are a lot of places to get food. You have to take some responsibility and find out where these are.

Nothing hard about it—go to soup kitchens.

I have always found a way to get food here and there.

If people find it hard to access food then they don't want to eat. Have patience, the lines are long and it's going to get worse with the cold weather.

I always have enough to eat—there is no excuse to be hungry if you make up your mind to know about food sources. You can also make money everyday through temp agencies.

I have said all I have to. It's not much, but I try to look after myself.

”

## What would help?

People were asked, “Other than money, what would help to make things a bit easier for you to be able to eat regularly and have enough to eat?” This didn’t mean that money wasn’t part of their answers, as it was mentioned frequently. A lot of concrete suggestions were offered.

### Serve 3 meals a day at the same place

Most people have to walk between several agencies to get different meals—they get breakfast at one agency, then wait for dinner at another, etc. Most felt it would help to have agencies serve 3 meals a day so they do not have to roam.

“ Make sure there is a place to eat 3 meals a day, everyday. ”

### Better access to agencies that provide food

It would help to have more agencies that serve food. It would also help if they had expanded hours that food is available. People also felt that more agencies should be located outside of the inner city. Another common request was to make the places smaller so there are shorter lines and less chance of unsafe situations.

“ More places to provide food and easier access. Instead of one big line-up, have 2 or 3 lines for faster service, so people don’t get frustrated waiting in line.

Agencies and churches should get together and coordinate food times better.

If you live at the Herb and you are working, they serve at 5 till 5:45 so it’s hard. Change times to give workers a chance for food.

More places to eat. All over the city. Everywhere. More access.

More food or soup kitchens open during the day. More stuff for couples—like a shelter.

More access to soup kitchens and food banks. You need an address to access the food bank, so they should not make you have an address.

Soup kitchens open 7 days a week – 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on each side of the city.

What would help is if everyone was more open, 24 hours, where you could go to get a sandwich, bowl of soup or coffee. A 24/7 facility should be available to help inner city low-income families.

More, smaller places to eat.

Build a shelter on the south side and the north people are on the north and keep those damn people off the south side. ”

## Affordable housing

Having a place to live is another important requirement for food security. It gives a place to store and prepare food while hopefully providing safety, privacy and dignity.

“

A regular roof over my head would really help much.

It would be nice to have a place to go and cook, to have a good cooked meal, a place of my own with a sink, stove, fridge.

We need low rental housing where you can have your own things, cook your own things. That's important. Shelters don't allow you in until certain times and you spend the whole day roaming aimlessly. So, it's low rental housing.

If I had affordable housing, then I would be able to cope. The agencies still would be handy to help when you had no food.

Safe, cheap accommodation to do my own thing, cook what I want at my own time and not be forced to eat at someone else's time or whatever is forced on me.

We need affordable housing. My wife is a good shopper; she knows how to look for deals. Safe housing would help us maintain a good life.

”

Housing means a lot more than food to many people.

“

I just need the basics. Shelter, shower, a place to sleep, the basics. Washer and dryer. I would like to have a kitchen to cook macaroni and cheese.

I'd like privacy, a cheap place of my own where I can close myself in. I miss privacy, having my own place. Just to close your door and not see anyone. Privacy. I know I will never know that.

I don't have a job, I can't work, I don't have a place to stay. It's hard. No dignity. I would like to watch TV.

If there could be a kind of halfway house where I could be with people or not. It was good when I was living in the hotel, but I can't afford it now.

”

## Garden for fresh vegetables

Several people suggested gardening as a way to increase access to fresh food.

“

Growing a garden and planting fruit trees in City parks, provided by the City. That way it benefits everybody.

Could people that already own property and grow gardens donate their produce to shelters?

”



“ I need to be safe out of the inner city. Once you're stuck in the habit, it is hard to get out of. When you're homeless, you just keep existing. When you're stuck in addiction, you lose jobs and do not have food or anything. Affordable housing will help me benefit and then I can buy what I need to maintain my life. ”

## Go mobile

Rather than make people come to agencies to get food, bring the food to the people.

“ Start a “kitchen-on-the-way” for a small fee. Go to the grocery store and get sale items; then prepare meals in a trailer onsite. Deliver hampers with food that lasts a long time and that is easy to cook. ”

## Improve the social income support systems

Most people felt the systems that are supposed to help them were not helping. Government income supports do not come close to covering the cost of housing and food. The application process was hard for many and required more waiting.

“ They should increase SFI income supports to make it easier to live on. To provide the basic necessities to live. When moving into a place, setting up for the first time, welfare should give a little more “start up” food money. SFI (\$812) is not enough after rent and bills; I’m left with \$68 for the month. Not enough affordable housing for low-income people. Right now I’m trying to get on to medical welfare and then AISH. Last night I slept in the river valley. It was -20 degrees. When welfare or AISH rates are increased there should be no publicity—the landlords increase the rents. I’m trying to get on AISH. It’s hard. I have been trying. ”

## Clean up the drugs

A lot of the unsafe situations and people encountered in the search for food are a result of drug abuse. There is a perception that nothing (or too little) is being done about the rampant drug problems, particularly in the inner city.

“ I don’t see the major issue here; we need people to be taken in for treatments so that it’s safer at the shelters for other people who are not on addictions to live. So clean up the city. We are afraid, some of us. The street person situation, shelters are all pathetic. Can the government do something please. We are dying on the street. People are forcing us to use crack—they force it on us. Shut down crack cocaine. We are dying. Please help us. It’s hard to get off but help us, get it away from us, arrest the sellers. ”

## Increase support for agencies

The people interviewed said that the agencies serving them need more government support.

“ Mustard Seed and the Breakfast Club desperately need funding. It’s a ridiculous situation, a city with such money has a big crack addiction and it is sending more and more people to homelessness.

Edmonton needs to open more soup kitchens for the people. More food lines please. More shelters for homeless people please.

Government should help these places a lot more. More donations.

”

## Walk the talk

There is a strong perception that the government and the larger community do not care at all about the homeless and hungry. There is lots of talk of the need for food and housing, but the people interviewed are not seeing enough action.

“ Services are not out there to help the people. Address the issue. Realize that the food situation is more of a problem. Poverty leads to crime and mental health problems.

Nothing seems to be working right now. Systems seem to be failing right now.

The government does not answer our letters for help. We have to change government, change the system, the justice system too. Jails are full; there is no reason for that.

People do not want to see what is happening in their own backyards. People need to become more aware of others’ needs.

In Edmonton, instead of giving out \$400 cheques, put the money toward making the homeless more comfortable.

I feel so bad with what’s going on, it depresses me. What’s going on is bad; can’t those people who rule ever sleep in a dumpster? No respect for some of us. We’re forgotten.

”

## Other ideas

The people interviewed came up with some other ideas not mentioned above. These included:

- For agencies to serve healthy snacks such as fruits and vegetables.
- Low budget cooking classes.
- Give out vitamins.
- As panhandling and bottle/scrap metal picking are key sources of income, people said it would help if they are not outlawed.
- Find ways to employ people at the street level.



“ No, I won’t say what could help. Who would listen anyways, so I would rather be quiet. It’s the same old story—I’m an addict and I need help and who cares? ”

## Conclusion

We are thankful to the people who shared their stories with us. Their voices let us see and feel how it really is to be hungry.

In a province with billion dollar surpluses, it is even more discouraging to live with the fact that the systems to help people are failing. There is not enough funding to adequately serve the need for food and shelter. It makes a lot of press, it gets a lot of talk, but the reality for the people we talked to is that nothing has changed and it is getting worse.

Long lines for food are the norm and these lines are not safe places. Exposure to drugs, violence, and attitudes that “bring you down” are a normal part of waiting in food lines. There is food available, but it’s not always healthy and fresh fruits and vegetables can be difficult to get. It takes a lot of effort to get 3 meals a day and if you work full-time or have other things to do, you’ll likely miss out on food.

A key issue tied to food security is the lack of affordable housing. There is simply not enough of it. Without housing, you can’t store or prepare food. You are then forced into buying prepared meals or relying on social agencies for meals.

Income supports are inadequate to cover the costs of housing and food. They were inadequate before the boom and now it is worse. The increasing numbers of homeless people make it more difficult for people to earn money for food. There is more competition for panhandling, bottle and scrap metal picking.

Not getting enough to eat affects every area of a person’s life. Hunger, combined with the full-time job of getting food, makes it very difficult for people to work, care for themselves and their children, go to school, or do any of the activities most people take for granted. It impacts mental health and makes existing conditions worse or contributes to new conditions.

The people we talked to are discouraged and depressed. But they are also strong and resourceful. Many are able to maintain pride, integrity and hope in the face of daily struggles. It is a testament to the strength of human courage. We hope you have been challenged and moved by the stories in this document. We hope that you are moved enough to take action to ensure a healthy community for all.

## Appendix :Interview questions

Male or Female

Age: Under 20 \_\_\_ 21-30 \_\_\_ 31-40 \_\_\_ 41-50 \_\_\_ 51-60 \_\_\_  
61-70 \_\_\_ 71 & over \_\_\_

Number of children living with you \_\_\_\_\_

Ages of children \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_/

Other dependants?  
\_\_\_\_\_

In what neighbourhood do you live in now?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you have safe housing?  
\_\_\_\_\_

If not living in a house or apartment with appliances, do you have access to:

Refrigeration?  
\_\_\_\_\_

A stove/hot plate/microwave?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Have you and/or your family gone without food for 24 hours or longer in the last

30 days? \_\_\_\_\_ 6 months? \_\_\_\_\_ 12 months? \_\_\_\_\_

What was going on for you at the time that this happened?  
\_\_\_\_\_

After rent and utilities are paid, do you have enough money to buy groceries for the month?  
\_\_\_\_\_

If yes, how much do you spend on groceries each month?  
\_\_\_\_\_

If not, how do you manage?

Prompts: (*SFI, food stamps, food bank, soup kitchen, agencies or churches, family/friends, school hot lunch/snack programs, panhandling, shoplifting, dumpsters, borrowing money*)  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the hardest part?

Prompts: (*dignity, self- respect*)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are you able to get good healthy foods (*fruit, vegetables, meat, grains, milk*)?

---

Do you have special needs or health issues that impact how you get food or what foods you need?

Prompts: (*disability, diabetes, heart condition, mental health, addictions*)

---

How have you and your children been affected by not having access to enough food or healthier foods?

Prompts: (*physically, emotionally, mentally*)

---

Other than money, what would help to make things a bit easier for you to be able to eat regularly and have enough to eat?

---

Is there anything you would like to add?

---