

- Offer training and support to social service providers regarding the complexities and challenges that low-income women face in caring for their families, and how to build effective working relationships with women.
- Ensure that processes are in place to evaluate and monitor all government service and client communications, and ensure that the information and interactions are consistent and respectful.
- Provide more information and resources in clear and concise language to the people who use government services, to inform them about their options and their rights.

Build Partnerships

“Sometimes it seems like the systems are set up to perpetuate people to stay within the system but just to find better ways to negotiate through it.” --study participant

Family Resource Centres are particularly effective in supporting low-income women with children; however they are only part of the solution. Building partnerships among community agencies, government and low-income women with children is essential for positive policy and program change.

In carrying out these recommendations government should develop processes that make including low-income women with children a priority in all stages of policy and program change. Meeting arrangements should take into account time, location, transportation and compensation for childcare and how to make sure that low-income women can participate. Language should be clear and concise.

- Ensure that initiatives to transform programs and policies for low-income women include their input and participation at all stages of the change and implementation.

- Regularly consult with social and health service users regarding the efficiency and value of health and social programs.
- Ensure that gender and cultural analysis are factored into the policy-making and program development process so that services are more responsive to the unique needs of diverse women.

Effective program and policy development requires attention to gender, ethnicity and place and the ways in which these factors influence health and income status.

Increase Public Awareness

“There is such a false negative stigma about people on social assistance: ‘Oh they don’t want to work, they’re lazy’.”
--study participant

- Expand the societal view of productivity such that women raising children are treated equally, with respect and dignity. Raise public awareness of the social and economic value of raising children and building a healthy and productive community.

The productive value of raising children should be recognized. The presence of children is one of the biggest factors in the earnings gap between men and women and alleviating women’s poverty is an impossible task without significant attention to this key issue.

- Develop initiatives that address the stigma experienced by women living in poverty.

The stigma attached to being poor, whether it is directed at women on social assistance or working in low-paying jobs, is real and harmful and permeates all aspects of society. Government and public service leaders should consider what tangible role they can play in changing social perceptions about poverty.

**The full report is available on the web at: www.pwhce.ca
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Including Low-Income Women with Children

Notes for Policy Makers and Program Planners

Based on the project “Including Low-Income Women with Children: Program and Policy Directions”

Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life . . .
-- Nelson Mandela

Overview

- 56 Women at four Family Resource Centres participated in focus group interviews for this qualitative research report which highlights important issues in the everyday lives of low-income women and their families and the contributions of Family Resource Centres.
- This report presents six key areas where program and policy change is required, as identified by research participants, and the recommended actions derived from these findings, for improving social and health services so that they are better able to support low-income women and their families.

Summary of Key Findings and Policy Implications

Currently, policies and programs often perpetuate the cycle of poverty and adversely affect the health and well being of low-income women and their families in both rural and urban areas.

Access to Programs and Services: In this study “access” is a broad term that involves many factors. Access includes increasing the number of available health programs and services identified as being in high demand such as for mental health and addictions. Accessible programs and services include frontline workers who are equipped to understand the unique needs of low-income women with children, and who provide services and information through interactions that are respectful and non-stigmatizing. Accessibility includes the availability of reliable and affordable transportation and telephone services to low-income women and their families. Accessibility involves being aware of resources and rights. Accessibility includes integrated programming, continuity of service and communication between agencies. Programs are not helpful if women cannot get to them, are not aware of what they do or that they exist, and if they are treated disrespectfully by service workers.

Housing: Unaffordable or unsafe housing can necessitate frequent moves, which are disruptive and stressful for low-income women and their families. High rent or utilities costs can result in families having to forgo basic necessities such as food, toiletries and school supplies. Low cost private rentals are often of substandard quality and utilities in these dwelling can be very expensive, which ultimately makes them unaffordable. Stable housing in safe neighbourhoods near to community centres is critical to the well-being of low-income women and their families. More public resources should be dedicated to increasing the number of safe, affordable, good quality public and collective housing units. Public housing strategies should take into account the unique needs of low-income women and their families.

Childcare: Reliable, available, affordable childcare is essential for women to participate in the paid workforce or go back to school, and supports care giving. It is also important for time to take care of financial matters, health care needs and participating in community life. Good childcare and healthy child development are top priorities for low-income women and many women do not have a reliable form of non-parental childcare. The current system of childcare and subsidies for childcare do not meet the needs of low-income women with children. A good system of childcare is essential to exiting poverty and more affordable, high-quality licensed childcare spaces are needed.

Food Security: Food insecurity is a significant issue for low-income women with children. Charitable organizations such as Food Banks and Emergency Food Services cannot adequately meet the demand for services and should not be required carry the bulk of the responsibility. Government social assistance programs should include strategies to address food security issues.

Education: Low-income women understand the importance of a good education and practical skills upgrading. However the financial and childcare supports needed to participate in education programs are lacking.

A Safe and Nurturing Place to Go: Family Resource Centres (FRCs) have been consistently identified as places of safety, support, encouragement and strength. FRCs offer health promoting resources from practical skill-building programs to acting as sites for developing strong support networks. FRC staff and volunteers connect meaningfully with low-income women and their families. Stable and adequate funding is essential for FRCs to carry out their mandate. FRCs are a solid investment!

Family Resource Centres (FRCs) are community-based not-for-profit organizations dedicated to strengthening families and building healthy communities. FRCs similar to those that participated in this project, operate in urban and rural communities throughout Manitoba and Canada. Programs and services vary somewhat among the centres but typically include parenting education and support groups, food sharing, children's play groups and skill-building workshops (such as job search or budgeting). FRC members are often involved in developing and operating programs and services designed to meet unique community needs and goals. FRCs also function as a place for community members to connect, share resources and build social support networks. These are the four family resource centres that participated in this project and their mission statements:

**Andrews Street Family Centre
Winnipeg, MB**

Mission Statement: ASFC's mandate is to be a family resource centre that builds on its community's strengths and encourages its individuals, children, elders, families and youth to reach their full potential through support, friendship and positive experiences.

**Anna's House Family Resource Centre
Steinbach, MB**

Mission Statment: The Mission of Anna's House is to have a place in the community where families and their children can access information and support to facilitate spiritual, mental, and physical wellness, while maintaining cultural integrity.

**Mrs. Lucci's Resource Centre
Lac du Bonnet, MB**

Mission Statement: Hoping to foster the development of a healthy community.

**Wolseley Family Place
Winnipeg, MB**

Mission Statement: WFP offers holistic community-based services to help bridge the gap between existing services and the needs of the at-risk community.

Summary of Recommended Actions

Including low-income women in all stages of policy and program change is essential for creating policies and programs that are effective and efficient.

Strengthen Public Resources

“You should have seen the houses I had to live in: ants biting my babies; ants crawling in our beds; mice running over, because I get \$310 for rent.” --study participant

Poverty is a health issue and is multi-dimensional. Key factors associated with poverty, such as social exclusion, housing, food, education and childcare should be analyzed both individually and in terms of how they relate to each other. Strategies to improve the well being of low-income women with children require attention to the complex interrelationships between these determinants.

- Develop social programs that support the transition of low-income women to more financially stable living situations, rather than reinforce a cycle of dependency on social supports.
- Expand supplementary health and dental coverage benefits for women working in contract, part-time or low wage work.
- Ensure that affordable housing is available and that living conditions are conducive to raising healthy young children. Increase the number of public and collective housing units.
- Ensure that childcare is available for women who choose to explore the job market or participate in education programs to upgrade their employment skills.
- Ensure childcare support is available for women who are full-time parents and require respite from time-to-time.
- Federal, provincial and territorial governments should work together to re-introduce a strategy to implement a national system of accessible childcare and ensure that it is appropriately funded.

- Improve the availability of formal and practical education and skills training to women in poverty.
- Develop social assistance programs that support food security for low-income women and their families so that they do not have to rely on charitable organizations.
- Increase and strengthen programming in the areas of mental health, addictions and domestic violence.
- Develop health and social policies that address the need for all citizens to have access to reliable and affordable transportation and phone services.
- Provide consistent and substantial funding to Family Resource Centres to support valuable programs and services that enhance the capacity of communities and families.

Family Resource Centres are places where women and their families feel safe and respected. They foster support networks and are often one of the few places that women can go to get needed information, practical resources and basic necessities. FRCs work because they involve community members at all levels of operation, and should be provided with stable and sufficient resources to meet the demands of the community.

Improve Programs and Services

“They (government services) do not provide you with enough information about what your rights are and what you should have access to.” --study participant

- Regularly review government social services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of those they serve and are well integrated.
- Review the performance of government social service providers to ensure that they are respectful and supportive.