

Forum focused on poverty

DAMIEN WOOD - Herald-Tribune staff

Poverty is hidden in our society, according to Bill Moore-Kilgannon, executive director of Public Interest Alberta. He said manifestations of it are seen in scenarios such as people begging on the streets, but what he was talking about yesterday was a broader concept of poverty.

What he was talking about was the working person making \$12 per hour.

This is perhaps a single mother, having trouble paying the rent, feeding her children and giving them the fundamental things that are critical in a child's development, he said.

She is working hard, and she is still having problems making ends meet. To see her, she might not be readily evident as poor, but she qualifies, and she is not alone, he added.

As of March 31, 28,700 people in the Grande Prairie area – 27% of its employed population – make less than \$15 per hour. Of those people, 55% are older than 25 and 69% are women.

Yesterday afternoon at the Holiday Inn in Grande Prairie, Moore-Kilgannon, along with John Kolkman, research coordinator for the Edmonton Social Planning Council, held a forum for any interested parties to discuss a poverty reduction strategy tailored to those affected here.

“We do have some solutions. This work isn't coming out of a vacuum – I think there are things that governments are doing that are already making a difference,” said Kolkman.

“There would be twice as many living in poverty in the absence of existing programs ... (this) involves building on what's already working.”

Kolkman added that while existing initiatives are federal and provincial in origin, a local initiative is of equal importance, thus making input at forums such as yesterday's vital.

“Each city is unique (and) each community has different target populations ... it needs to be driven from a local, community basis,” said Moore-Kilgannon.

“There are lots of initiatives that have proven, with great success, to be very cost effective to really reduce poverty ... what we need to do is learn from those other areas, but then make sure that it is rooted in the local reality.”

Discussed at the forum were poverty reduction strategies established in Quebec, Ontario, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, as well as beyond Canada, in Ireland and Great Britain.

But discussion, Moore-Kilgannon said, can only be a first step. There must be more.

“What we need to do, ultimately, is move beyond the rhetoric, into reality and into real action ... the community has to be involved right from the beginning ... and they have to continue to be involved year after year,” said Kilgannon.

“The costs of ignoring poverty are so great, both economically and socially. We know this from history ... the cost of ignoring poverty is even greater than addressing it,” said City of Grande Prairie alderman Elroy Deimert.

Deimert cited mental health and crime issues as examples of the costs that come with ignoring poverty.

He said the city is working on an affordable housing plan, for which a study should be completed by year’s end. Though he also spoke of a desire to see that sooner, saying, “one can study these things to death.”

Joining Deimert in making appearances at the forum to speak with Moore-Kilgannon and Kolkman were other city representatives and front line workers in the area of poverty, as well as concerned community members.

This was the third of seven forums being held in cities across the province, sponsored by the Alberta College of Social Workers and supported by the local United Way.