

Check Against Delivery

United Way of Calgary and Area President's Breakfast

April 4, 2013, Calgary

Hon Dave Hancock

It is a distinct pleasure to be able to speak with you today.

In political life, one often finds oneself speaking to groups and organizations that have points of view, priorities and objectives that are very different than that of government.

A lot of precious time is spent trying to reach common areas of agreement before we can even begin to deal with whatever task or issue is at hand.

That is not the case with the United Way of Calgary and Area. I would like to thank the board for its support in the development of Alberta's Social Policy Framework.

I was particularly pleased that board chair Art Korpach took the time to come and show his support when we launched the Framework in Edmonton.

We needed the leadership of non-profits and volunteer organizations to engage with their communities to make the Framework discussions meaningful and leaders like Art stepped up to the plate.

If you were to ask Art what the United Way's priorities are and then asked me what the social priorities of the Government of Alberta are, you would hear much the same response.

We would both talk about the need to ensure our children and youth are safe, healthy and can take advantage of the opportunities Alberta offers.

We would talk about the need to eliminate poverty in Alberta and the right of every person to live in dignity and respect.

And we would focus on the need to create strong, safe and caring communities.

Our common point of view was readily apparent during the development of Alberta's Social Policy Framework.

Art and the board, Lucy Miller and United Way staff, and supporters were instrumental in helping us develop the Framework and guiding us on how best to approach a number of social issues.

For that, I am truly grateful.

One of the strongest points of connection government and the United Way of Calgary and Area share is the belief that social programs must be evaluated based on outcomes rather than intent.

We must ensure that every precious dollar is being used to produce the results communities want and need.

Alberta's Social Policy Framework is a tool that will help in doing that.

It is important for me to remind the community that government does not own the Framework.

It was developed through extensive consultation with Albertans and it will be Alberta's communities that own the Framework.

Government will not be directing what needs to be done where and by whom.

Communities in Alberta will make those decisions.

Government's role is as partner and enabler rather than director and controller.

I have made that statement numerous times during the past few months.

Some people have chosen to hear it as a statement that Government is going to offload responsibility for social issues onto Alberta's communities.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

What we are in fact creating is a system by which communities can readily upload their information, experience, expertise and ideas to government.

This will allow government to help them facilitate the approaches that are most likely to result in success.

For the government, it is particularly important to keep our eyes focused on Alberta's Social Policy Framework's three main goals:

1. To clarify what we are trying to achieve as a province, what we are going to do to get there, and who should do what.
2. To coordinate activities within and among government departments, partners and stakeholders to ensure there is policy alignment and consistency.
3. And to use Alberta's Social Policy Framework as the lens through which we look when determining our overall direction for our planning and decision-making.

The principles and components of the Framework will create policy shifts that will drive the renewal of social policy in Alberta for the first time in 30 years and help it respond to today's issues and realities.

Alberta has changed a great deal during the last three decades and we need to take a different approach to social programs and supports.

Where in the past, policy and delivery have often been crisis-oriented; we will create policy that balances prevention and intervention.

Rather than address symptoms and deficiencies, policy will support citizens by providing the resources for success.

And as I said earlier, government has been a service provider, funder and legislator; it will now be an influencer, convener and partner.

Silos of need and service will be replaced by integration and coordination of resources.

Where policy has been used as a tool to control and regulate behaviour, it will now be used to empower, facilitate – and most importantly – create opportunity.

It has been said that rules come into play when brains stop working.

With that in mind, we will shift from a focus on inputs and rules to outcomes, quality, values and dignity.

That is just the briefest of overviews of Alberta's Social Policy Framework.

Much more is online and I encourage you to go to the Human Services website.

As I have already indicated, the United Way of Calgary and Area and the government share another common perspective when it comes to the elimination of poverty in the province.

The United Way and the city of Calgary have made many positive contributions to do that in the past few years and government will continue to support their activities at the community level.

However, poverty isn't just an issue for Calgary – it is an area of concern across the entire province.

Government continues to be committed to eliminating child poverty in five years and reducing overall poverty in 10 years.

I wish that we could say we are leading in this area, but with the exception of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, all Canadian provinces have implemented or are developing poverty reduction plans.

On the other hand, we know that work is happening at the local level.

All of Alberta's seven major urban centres are either developing or have developed local poverty reduction strategies.

We need to further engage them in the process and to build on the good work that has already been done.

To create a provincial poverty elimination strategy, we will begin a pan-Alberta process of community engagement.

The goals will be:

- to identify a range of options for eliminating child poverty;
- to identify an appropriate governance structure; and

- to build on the goodwill and trust that was created through the development of Alberta's Social Policy Framework.

A key element of this engagement will be to engage those who have actually lived in poverty.

Their insights, successes, failures and learnings will be invaluable in determining how best to eliminate poverty.

I expect to meet with many of these people during the engagement process.

We expect to launch the engagement process this spring and carry through into the fall.

As with Alberta's Social Policy Framework, I will be travelling around Alberta speaking to community groups and organizations.

I would look to people like you to help identify where and to whom it would be worthwhile speaking – in particular those outside the usual realm of engagement.

I will also be encouraging my MLA colleagues to be part of the process – as they were with Alberta's Social Policy Framework.

Understanding what poverty looks like and hearing local challenges and solutions are important for elected officials.

There is certainly a role for local United Ways to play in achieving that goal.

It is important for all segments of the population to recognize and accept that poverty is a growing issue in Alberta and one that affects all of us either directly or indirectly.

One of the challenges we face when discussing poverty is to come up with an adequate definition of what we mean by the term.

In the past, we have used a definition related to income level.

This has often led to the proposal of a quick fix such as increasing the minimum wage.

But poverty is a complex issue that involves more than income level. You can have what appears to be adequate income and still be living at an unacceptable standard.

Our current approach is to see poverty as encompassing a range of personal, cultural and social factors that must be addressed if we are truly to eliminate poverty.

In essence, we see the issue as a poverty of opportunity.

Because someone is above the Low Income Cut-off or LICO doesn't mean he or she can take advantage of the opportunities Alberta has to offer.

Because someone can meet the Market Basket Measure of the cost of the specific goods and services required to have a modest, basic standard of living, doesn't mean they can be engaged and productive citizens.

In the future, we will use a more holistic approach when identifying what it means to be poor in Alberta.

Eliminating poverty will mean creating improvement to the quality of lives of the poor.

Programs must be capable of moving individuals out of poverty rather than making living in poverty easier.

Right now, we see four major root causes of poverty that must be addressed.

We need to look at individual deficiencies that make people less able to meet the demands of society.

One example of that would be those with long-term disabilities.

We also have to look at whether we are dealing with an entrenched culture of poverty or one that is passed on from generation to generation and how we can disrupt that continuum.

Situational poverty can be caused by a series of negative events such as sickness or homelessness.

We need to examine the kinds of community supports and services that will enable someone to return to productivity and engagement.

As employers in a growing economy, you have a vested interest in ensuring that the pool from which you can draw employees is as deep as possible.

And perhaps most importantly we need to look at structural poverty that prevents people from having access to resources and the opportunity for success.

That is particularly important for the Aboriginal community that represents the fastest growing segment of our population.

It is my intention to actively engage Chiefs and elders early on in the process and to make sure their ideas form part of the discussion.

I suspect that I may have been providing you with some information that you already know.

You are here today because you, and the businesses you represent, are actively engaged in helping create a stronger community.

I think it is your work with, and support of the United Way, that helped contribute to Calgary being named the best large city in Canada in which to live.

You have accepted that change really does begin here – and you have been instrumental in bringing about positive change.

Even though you have done a lot for your community and for the province, I am going to ask you to do more.

It is important for the United Way to continue its good work and I am asking you for something equally as important.

I am asking you to contribute your leadership abilities to the transformation of social policy in Alberta.

You are key influencers in Calgary and area.

You can take the message of transformation to your friends, colleagues and employees and help them engage in the process.

We need people like you to champion transformational change in social policy.

We need you to help people understand that we are not talking about charity, but about developing programs and supports that will enable all Albertans to have the opportunity for success in life.

We need you to help explain why all Albertans have a vested interest in addressing social issues.

How those social issues determine the health of our economy, the strength of our labour pool and the safety of our communities.

Becoming actively engaged in the Poverty Reduction Strategy is a good place to start.

Eliminating poverty in this province will be a daunting task.

I believe that with the active support and collaboration of people such as you, we are up to the challenge.

Thank you for your support of the United Way of Calgary and Area.

Thank you for your interest in the social future of Alberta.

And thank you for being the kind of people that can get things done.