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## POVERTY AMIDST PLENTY

Calgary's corporate oil and gas community is stepping up to push back against hunger and homelessness

Despite a vigorous and healthy economic climate, more Albertans than ever are experiencing the pain and alienation associated with homelessness, hunger and poverty. It would seem as though Alberta's economic growth has created a double-edged sword: a lifestyle of kings for those working in the province's thriving corporate sectors, and for others—the single moms, the new Canadians, the working poor—the skyrocketing costs of living have ostensibly eroded the ability to obtain the basic necessities.

The statistics are staggering. In 2011, 388,145 Albertans lived in poverty as defined by earning less than the low-income cut-off (LICO), which is the necessary income level to cover basic needs at the same proportion that an average income-earning family does. Even more shocking, 73,000 of those are children, and 34,000 of those are below the age of six.

However, there is hope for change. In poetically magnanimous fashion, Calgary's haves—in particular, the oil and gas sector—have come to the rescue if you will, stepping up to the plate to make a difference, to change the disparaging statistics for the better. Robin Hood would be pleased.

"There is a great expectation from those who are more fortunate," says Lorenzo Donadeo, president and chief executive officer of Vermilion Energy Inc. "I believe that we have the ability and a responsibility to help address the issues of homelessness and poverty where our people live and work."

To this end, Vermilion recently redesigned its community investment program, extending its charitable giving almost exclusively to assisting with the issues of homelessness, hunger and poverty.

"We really wanted to make an impact and see a tangible return in the community," says Kia Pycrz, Vermilion's community investment and internal communications

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advisor, explaining that Vermilion dips its charitable arm into a number of initiatives from a \$4-million partnership with the YWCA Skills Training Centre, to sponsorship of the Hockey Helps the Homeless Tournament and Project Homeless Connect, just to mention a few.

"Everything that we do is family-focused. Our goal is to help people out of poverty and into full sustainability," says Pycrz, adding that key poverty reduction strategies include investment in early child education and in skills training for women, who are unemployed or underemployed.

"We are really proud of the Vermilion/YWCA Skills Training Centre," says Pycrz. The centre launched in 2008 and to date 230 women have graduated from the intensive 20-week program, learning the hard skills of carpentry, plumbing, and electricity, in addition to key communications skills, interview skills, fitness, and resume skills.

Women like 24-year-old Samantha Hilyer, who was laid off from her office job and wanted an opportunity to learn a new skill that would provide her with a living wage. "It's really been life changing," says Hilyer.

According to Pycrz, this initiative was a perfect fit with Vermilion's objectives and corporate mandate. The project's long-term goal is to eradicate poverty

for women in Calgary through education, training and support.

"When we impact women, we impact the family: spouses, children and community. So supporting women in this initiative is the most direct path to having the biggest impact," says Jane Cooper, manager of the Vermilion Energy/YWCA Skills Training Centre.

There is no doubt that the costs of poverty are huge, not only in economic terms, but also in social ones. According to a joint report by Vibrant Communities Calgary and Action to End Poverty in Alberta, poverty costs Alberta \$7.1 billion—\$9.5 billion every year in health-care costs, costs attributable to crime, intergenerational and opportunity costs. Not to mention the more complicated and long-term effects—homelessness, hunger, social isolation, violence, substance abuse, underemployment, school drop-outs, deteriorating mental and physical health, and on goes the list.

Add to the mixture the recent dramatic escalation of family homelessness and the brew becomes even more toxic.

"We are seeing record demand for our services," says Bonnie Elgie, spokeswoman for Inn from the Cold, an emergency family shelter in Calgary. "As of today [Oct. 9] the shelter has been at or over capacity for 245 days."

According to Elgie this is an unprecedented upward trend. "We have been around for 15 years and we have never seen a demand like this."

One of the causative factors is the lure of jobs enticing record numbers of people to move to Calgary.

"We see so many families moving either from within the province or across the country thinking, 'Oh, I have a job lined up and I will just find a place to stay when I get there.' What they are not realizing is that the affordable-housing vacancy rates are extremely low."

In fact, current vacancy rates in Calgary are less than one per cent, while the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment—assuming one can be located—hovers around \$1,150 per month.

Mike Forgo, vice-president, business services and stakeholder relations at Encana Corporation, notes that in Alberta two dichotomous scenarios exist creating challenges with shelter and hunger.

"In Calgary, high industrial activity is driving the cost of living up, and at the other end of the scale in some areas in Alberta, not enough people have good employment," he says. "The key to our programs is that we want to touch as many people as we can and basic needs are key."

Encana's Race Against Hunger Campaign, a partnership with the World Professional Chuckwagon Association, the 4-H Foundation of Alberta, Encana staff and stakeholders in key Encana communities, is a fun-filled event that takes place during the summer months to raise funds and food for local food banks. The event has exponentially increased in popularity since its inception in 2010 and this year 11,536 pounds of food and \$103,246.49 was raised for local food banks.

Chad Harden, professional chuckwagon driver (left), joins Mike Forgo, Encana Corporation's vice-president, business services & stakeholder relations; Darcijane McAulay, Encana's group lead, community relations & investment; and Mark Sutherland, chuckwagon driver and community relations advisor for Encana, at the company's Race Against Hunger BBQ this past summer. Another food-related initiative, Husky Energy Inc.'s annual Help the Hungry Food Drive in June, raised more than \$180,000 in cash and food donations for local food banks, including \$150,000 for the Calgary Food Bank.

"We believe that supporting the communities where we live and work is all just part of being a good neighbour," says Clare Sheerin, senior advisor at Husky. "One of the fundamental ways we do this is

by helping people take care of their most immediate needs—food and shelter. If these basic needs are being met, people are then able to focus on other areas of their lives."

Pierre Alvarez, vice-president, corporate relations, at Nexen Inc., would agree that supporting those in need of the basics is tantamount.

"Our community investments reflect the needs and priorities of the communities in which we work and operate," says Alvarez.

With this in mind, Nexen recently donated \$750,000 to the Calgary Drop-In and Rehabilitation Centre (DI) to pay down the mortgage on the Sundial building, an affordable-housing complex located next door to Nexen's head office in downtown Calgary.

Debbie Newman, executive director of the DI, explains that the need for corporate support is at an all-time high, due to a lack of affordable housing.

"We are having to diversify," she says. That translates to greater capital expenditures—purchasing buildings, paying down debt on mortgages and all the while, maintaining day-to-day operations in the shelter. "The oil and gas corporations have been amazing. There is tremendous support."

Most oil and gas corporate giving is three-fold: corporate gifting, including cash donations and sponsorships;

matching of charitable contributions made by employees and by encouraging employee volunteerism.

The fuel to fire these corporate do-good initiatives seems to be generated from within, grassroots style. It is really about the people, from senior management who wholeheartedly support the initiatives to those employees who actively participate through volunteering, whether it is feeding the hungry at the Drop-In Centre or Inn from the Cold, volunteering at a school or putting together Christmas packages for the less fortunate.

"Our whole strategy is built around employee engagement," says Vicki Reid, director of community affairs at Cenovus Energy Inc. "When we give back to those really basic human needs, it is really about quiet philanthropy. There is no great big news story. It is something that we just do all year long."

Avid volunteer Darlene Desharnais, senior advisor, knowledge sharing, at Cenovus, sees this kind of commitment in the corporate culture as the way of the future.

"It seems wrong for us to just take and take and not to be putting back," she says.

Desharnais has volunteered at Ronald McDonald House, the Food Bank and at Inn from the Cold for Cenovus Energy's Thanks & Giving initiative. "My 11-year-old daughter participated as well. It was a great opportunity to open up a conversation about how lucky we are and how we need to take care of everyone, not just ourselves."

Corrina Bryson, director of planning in Nexen's oilsands division, says that in 2011, when it came time to organize a team-building event, the consensus was that the group wanted to incorporate an activity that had meaning. "We volunteered at the food bank and originally we were only going to do it as a one-off, but everyone who was there enjoyed it so much and got so much out of it, that when we talked about team building for 2012, we decided to do it again. So far, we have been back four times."

Mark Barnes, senior geologist at Vermilion Energy, spearheaded the company's volunteer commitment with the Drop-In Centre.

"I just thought that it would be a great thing for us to do here," recalls Barnes, who has been with Vermilion for just over two years. "Everyone embraced it in such a big way. It has really taken off and now Vermilion is a sponsor," he says, adding that he feels proud and thankful to work for a company that is supportive

of these kinds of endeavours. "It just makes you feel good."

Which seems to be a common statement amongst those working in the oil and gas sectors. Research shows that giving not only helps others but leads to increased physical and mental well-being for those doing the giving. Those who give of their time and their money walk away with full and happy hearts knowing that they have done something to make a difference.

"That giving feeling is powerful and it permeates," says Desharnais, who notes that she is always thinking how she can take it to the next level within the context of corporate team-building activities. "Doing good does a person good. It makes everybody feel like they have gotten even more out of the experience."

And on a corporate level, that sense of pride is important to having an engaged workforce. It's really a win-win for everyone. "When you are excited about where you work, you are going to do better work," says Cenovus's Reid.

## ACTIVE RIG COUNT IS DOWN BY 12

Oilfield services company Baker Hughes Inc. says the number of rigs actively exploring for oil and natural gas in the U.S. dropped by 12 this week to 1,749. The Houston-based company said in its weekly report Friday that 1,316 rigs were exploring for oil and 429 for gas. Four were listed as miscellaneous. A year ago, Baker Hughes counted 2,008 working rigs. Of the major oil- and gas-producing states, North Dakota gained five rigs, Pennsylvania increased by four and Arkansas by two. Meanwhile, Texas declined by 11 rigs, Oklahoma three, New Mexico two, and Colorado, Louisiana and Wyoming one each. California and West Virginia were unchanged.

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