Public Policy Program 2014 in Review

INTRODUCTION

Momentum's Public Policy program was initiated in July 2012 to support Momentum's strategic direction to expand its Community Leadership work. Momentum believes that its already successful programs with people living on low incomes can be amplified through systems work to increase the scale of our impact. Momentum has engaged in Community Leadership work for many years, and due to staffing resource limitations, much of this work used to be 'off the side of the desk.' The Public Policy program has dedicated staff working on systems-level interventions at Momentum. This report overviews the Public Policy Program activity in 2014.

Building on the first full year of public policy work in 2013, the Public Policy Program exceeded its goals on all policy issues in 2014. This past year the Public Policy team conducted advocacy in several areas across all three orders of government.

THE PUBLIC POLICY PROGRAM

The Public Policy Program consists of two full-time staff members and a Board Committee. Staff are advised and supported by members of the Public Policy Committee, a subcommittee of Momentum's Board of Directors. This committee includes Momentum staff, board members, and community volunteers.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

A municipal election occurred in October 2013 with four new Councillors being elected. In 2014, Public Policy staff worked in partnership with other stakeholders to develop good working relationships with all City Councillors. Several meetings were held on the topic of FCSS funding to ensure that the City maintained its funding share in the program and continued supporting advocacy efforts with the Government of Alberta. Momentum also advocated at the municipal level on the topic of payday lending, poverty reduction, and secondary suites.

Significant change at the provincial level took place with three Premiers holding office in 2014. Change also occured in all Ministeries where Momentum had developed relationships. Due to political changes, the planned provincial poverty reduction strategy has not yet been approved by the provincial government. In 2014, Momentum participated in several consultations and government meetings across six ministries. This has expanded the list of government contacts. Momentum's Public Policy program has received recognition by provincial staff as an engaged and positive stakeholder on many policy files.

This year, at the federal level, Public Policy staff were involved in Momentum's advocacy efforts in response to the new Canada Jobs Grant program and its potential negative impact on the funding for Momentum's Trades Training and Self-Employment programs.

Public Policy work by the Numbers

- **19 Meetings with elected officials at the three levels of government**
- **Advocacy efforts across 6 provincial ministries**
- **2 Policy Briefs completed**
- **2 Notices of Motion passed by City Councils on payday lending reform—Calgary & Lethbridge**
- **935 supporters of Action to End Poverty in Alberta**
- **1 front page Calgary Herald story**
- **13 presentations delivered**
- **4 conferences attended**

2014 RESULTS

Payday Lending

The Public Policy Program released two reports on payday lending in 2014—The Real Cost of Payday Lending and Opportunities for Municipal Action on Payday Lending. The first report summarized the issue of payday lending and proposed policy reform measures. This report received front page coverage in the Calgary Herald and was subsequently endorsed by their Editorial Board. The second report, focusing on municipal action, was used to inform a Notice of Motion that was successfully passed by Calgary City Council to explore options to regulate payday lenders through licensing and land use. Other Alberta municipalities including Lethbridge and Grande Prairie have also pursued municipal actions on this file. A report will come from city administration on this topic in March 2015. The provincial government is also scheduled to conduct a regulatory review of payday lending in 2015.

Canada Jobs Fund

The Canada Jobs Fund is a tripartite labour market agreement between the provincial and federal governments, in partnership with employers, to support skills development, training and employment. Programs that were funded under the old Labour Market Agreement are at risk to lose their funding, as the federal dollars are increasingly allocated to the Canada Alberta Job Grant (CAJG). This includes the skills training programs at Momentum, Trades Training and Self-Employment. In 2014, the funding for Momentum's Trades Training program was reduced by $200,000 due to the funding reallocation to the CAJG. This funding was restored until 2014, but the future of funding for the program remains uncertain.

Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP) & Alberta Centennial Education Savings (ACES)

Momentum has a successful track record of promoting RESPs. Momentum's StartSmart program has encouraged parents to open RESP accounts on behalf of their children to receive the available government grant money. In 2013, the Alberta Government announced the phasing out of the $500 ACES grant for RESPs. Momentum has worked since then to maintain the grant. The program is under review and advocacy will continue.

Momentum learned that applicants to social housing are required to have less than $7,000 in assets in order to qualify. RESPs (and RDSPs) are considered as assets counted towards this limit. Parents are forced to liquidate RESPs to qualify for social housing. The Government of Alberta Seniors Ministry was made aware of this by the Public Policy Program and will likely amend this policy in 2015.

Family & Community Support Services (FCSS)

Advocacy efforts at both the municipal and provincial levels resulted in the City of Calgary confirming an increase to FCSS funding in the base budget. This means that the City of Calgary is funding FCSS at $3.4 million above the minimum mandated by the provincial-municipal funding agreement. At the provincial level efforts are ongoing to seek an increase to provincial FCSS dollars which have remained stagnant since 2009.

Action to End Poverty in Alberta (AEPA)

A provincial poverty reduction strategy was expected in 2014. Its release is now scheduled for Spring 2015. Throughout 2014, AEPA prepared to launch a campaign to support and raise awareness of the provincial poverty reduction strategy.

Media Outreach

Public Policy has had some success with media outreach. The program helped draft and release five media releases over the course of 2014. These releases had varying success with some garnering no media interest and others getting significant media uptake. Releases were sent on the following topics:

- **Momentum's response to provincial budget (March): 3 media hits**
- **Payday lending report (July): 3 media hits**
- **Spent: Looking for Change film and forum showing (November): 1 media hit**
- **Education Savings Week (November): 1 media hit**

Looking ahead

In 2015, the Public Policy team will continue advocacy on all the files listed above. Several new opportunities to influence policy will become available, such as they provincial review of the Pay Day Loans Regulation. It is expected that 2015 will present significant opportunity on the issue of payday lending with both the municipal and provincial governments' assessing and potentially initiating action on these files.

The Public Policy Team is also planning to attend a national poverty reduction summit taking place in Ottawa in early May. It will be the largest gathering of its kind in Canada and Momentum will participate in several panel presentations.