

When Everything is Essential, What Do You Go Without?

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It feels as though autumn has arrived. For many Calgarians, that means watching leaves change colours and planning a Thanksgiving meal around the kitchen table.

Now picture a different kitchen table in Calgary. On it sits a grocery list, a late rent notice, an expired bus pass, a childcare invoice, and a reminder that the children need warm coats and boots. The monthly budget simply cannot cover everything.

Something has to wait. But what? How do you choose?

For many women and their families, this is what poverty can look like: Necessary expenditures all arriving at the same time, and simply not enough money to meet them all. And poverty does not stop at the pocketbook.

October 17 is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, a reminder that poverty is more than income, whether someone has a job, earns enough, or falls above or below an income line. Poverty also takes an emotional and spiritual toll, it can affect stability, participation, dignity, belonging and hope.

At WINS, we see this reality every day.

Since the beginning of 2026, more than 4,300 women have turned to our House to Home program for clothing, furniture and household essentials at no cost. Behind that number are immediate, concrete needs: a mother who finally has a home but still needs beds for her children, a woman starting a new job without transportation or appropriate work clothing, or a family reaching the middle of the month with little to no food left in the cupboards.

The emotional toll can be just as significant. Living with constant uncertainty and repeatedly having to decide which essential need can wait, creates enormous stress and exhaustion. Over time, that pressure can affect a person's sense of stability, dignity and hope

At WINS we are seeing pressures intensify. In July and August, the average number of emergency food hampers WINS provided to women experiencing housing instability was roughly double what we had seen from January through June. For us, this is one more sign of what we are seeing across Calgary: more women and their family members are struggling to meet even their most basic needs.

The broader numbers reinforce what we see firsthand. In 2024, the City of Calgary estimated that more than 211,000 residents were living on low incomes. Nationally, about 4.5 million Canadians, or 11 per cent of the population, lived below the official poverty line that same year.

Housing costs shows how quickly financial breathing room can disappear. In 2025, the average rent for a two-bedroom home in Calgary was \$1,914 a month, leaving many families with very little room for other essentials. . Nearly half of women-led lone-parent families experience food insecurity, and Statistics Canada has found that 40 per cent of single mothers living above the official poverty line still struggle to afford enough food.

Being above the poverty line does not necessarily mean being secure.

Employment can change the trajectory of a family, but a job alone does not make financial pressure disappear overnight. Getting to work still requires transportation. Parents still need childcare. Starting a job may mean needing appropriate clothing before the first paycheque arrives. Employment matters enormously, but so do the supports that help women get to work, stay employed, and build lasting stability.

At WINS, our role is to create breathing room and help women move forward. That may mean providing essential goods, connecting someone to services, or helping her prepare for employment and greater financial stability. It also means creating a place where women are welcomed, listened to, and connected with the support they need.

That breathing room matters.

No one sector will solve poverty on its own. Meaningful progress requires thoughtful public policy, employers who understand the realities facing their workforce, community organizations responding to immediate needs, and donors and neighbours who recognize that we all have a role to play in building a stronger Calgary.

This October, many issues will compete for our attention. But around kitchen tables across Calgary, families will continue to do the same math: rent, groceries, transportation and childcare. For them poverty is not a policy discussion, It is the reality they wake up every day.

As Thanksgiving approaches, perhaps the question is not only what we are grateful to have on our own tables but what each of us is prepared to do so fewer families are forced to decide what essentials must be left off theirs.

Poverty costs more than money. Addressing it will take all of us.