

# BUILDING ON THE BASICS:

Impact and Insights from the Basic Needs Fund  
*Summary Report*



**United Way**  
Calgary and Area



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United Way's Basic Needs Fund enables three service agencies to provide clients who are in crisis with temporary financial support to meet their basic needs. In the Fall of 2011, United Way took a focused look at the program, its role and its impact in the community. It developed into a complete project now referred to as Building on the Basics. The project has since become a promising example of using research, collaboration and evaluation to enhance impact and gather quality data for influencing programming, funding and policy decisions. This report summarizes key insights and lessons learned from the project to date.<sup>1</sup>

## BACKGROUND ON THE BASIC NEEDS FUND AND SIMILAR PROGRAMS IN CALGARY

Since 2000, United Way of Calgary and Area has been funding the Basic Needs Fund at the Red Cross. The Government of Alberta funds and delivers a similar program, called the Emergency Needs Allowance. Several other organizations in Calgary also have small pockets of dollars they can draw on when their clients are experiencing severe crisis, resources permitting. In 2010 and 2011, these types of programs saw major funding reductions. One major funder significantly reduced its allocation to the program, while two de-funded the program entirely as a result of mandate shifts. Acting on the concern that the reductions would be detrimental to the community, United Way increased funding to Red Cross and provided Distress Centre and CUPS with annual contracts for the program in 2011.

However, doubt about whether or not these types of programs truly have an impact on people's lives exists among funders, donors and community members. In fact, the Fund has been referred to as a "black hole," alluding to the idea that dollars are invested in the Fund but nothing, in terms of community impact, emerges. The rationale for this scepticism is described further on in the report.

## UNITED WAY'S EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON THE BASIC NEEDS FUND

United Way was determined to address the scepticism surrounding its own Basic Needs Fund in partnership with the three agencies who deliver the program. Beginning in November 2011, United Way's Policy, Initiatives and Research team took a focused look at the Basic Needs Fund by conducting interviews and focus groups with non-profit and government service providers, and families living on a low income. The research resulted in three key findings:<sup>2</sup>

- The impact of the Basic Needs Fund is not adequately captured by existing evaluation and reporting practices.
- Anecdotally, the Basic Needs Fund is a critical program preventing families from homelessness, family breakdown, school disruption and deepened crisis.
- The delivery of the program could be strengthened to reduce the sense of shame individuals often experience while accessing services of any sort.

<sup>1</sup> A full report with further analysis and interpretation will be released in Summer 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Vall, Charla and Alison Thompson. From Getting By to Getting Ahead: Six Levers for Building Wellbeing of Families on Low Incomes. United Way of Calgary and Area: Calgary.

These findings drove the team to research similar programs operating across North America in terms of their service delivery and evaluation practices. This research found that few programs of this nature are evaluating the program beyond simply the number of dollars invested and individuals assisted. The research also identified service delivery approaches that would improve the program's impact, specifically that of a strength-based approach.<sup>3</sup>

A strength-based approach is based on a Developmental Approach to Practice, and is believed to lead to longer-lasting impacts. By creating a welcoming, non-judgemental environment, focusing on how the individual can build on strengths and personal capacities, and affirming the individual's ability to make improvements to their lives, the approach upholds dignity and self-determination. At the same time, the approach acknowledges, identifies and takes action towards the structural and systemic inequities that render people vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

## FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

United Way shared preliminary findings with caseworkers and managers at the three agencies delivering the Basic Needs Fund in January 2012. In June 2012, they began to develop a common evaluation framework that would simultaneously support a shift towards a strength-based approach, while pro-actively working on applying the new approach.

### **Enhancing Service Delivery Approaches**

United Way's 2012 research report, *From Getting by to Getting Ahead* found that many people accessing services feel judged, ashamed, and as though they are begging. In some cases, people described how they would avoid services in order to circumvent this experience. United Way's subsequent research on the Basic Needs Fund identified approaches to service delivery that would not only reduce this experience of shame, but serve to reinforce self-determination and dignity.

Over several months, United Way brought together agency staff to examine the approach, review resources on the topic and discuss examples from their own work. The group also received and provided input on training curriculum, which has been delivered to nearly 40 caseworkers from other agencies who refer their clients to the Basic Needs Fund.

### **Enhancing Evaluation Practices**

United Way's research also found that evaluating outcomes of emergency funds, as opposed to simply counting the number of people served and dollars invested, is limited in Calgary and elsewhere in North America. The assumption commonly held says that because of the program's short-term nature, long-term outcomes cannot be captured. United Way and its team of agencies are challenging this theory by having developed an evaluation framework that incorporates two outcomes:

- 1) Individuals and families who access the Basic Needs Fund feel a sense of dignity while seeking assistance during a crisis.
- 2) The process of accessing the Basic Needs Fund contributes to the stability of a person or family during a crisis.

<sup>3</sup> Hurlock, Debb and Bronwyn Bragg. *Possibilities and Paradoxes: An Analysis of Basic Needs Funding*. Internal Report for United Way of Calgary and Area. Unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> Hurlock, Debb and Bronwyn Bragg. *Possibilities and Paradoxes: An Analysis of Basic Needs Funding*. Internal Report for United Way of Calgary and Area. Unpublished.

The first outcome gives attention to the importance of process (the applicant's experience of service-delivery) and evaluates the impact of utilizing a strength-based approach. The second outcome relates to evaluating the Basic Needs Fund's role in preventing deepened crisis. For example, the Fund may have prevented eviction, which prevented homelessness, which prevented child apprehension, which in turn prevented depression and loss of family connections. These are the long-term outcomes that may be difficult to capture, but are certain to be true in many cases. However, this second outcome does not necessarily require that applicants are approved and receive funds. If an applicant is denied, the process of accessing the Fund should still contribute to their stability by connecting them to further resources or by supporting them to realize their own capacity to handle the crisis.

Tools were developed to implement the framework, which integrate and facilitate the implementation of a strength-based approach. First, the application form that each applicant is required to complete was significantly revised by the group. Over several months, each question was carefully scrutinized and tested against a strength-based approach, resulting in a form that is 70 per cent shorter, more user-friendly, and less intrusive or judgemental than the original application form. For example, instead of the form beginning with the question, "What do you need assistance with," the new form provides the applicant with an opportunity to self-reflect, and to identify and qualify the circumstances surrounding their crisis.

In addition, a common data entry and analysis system was developed that consistently captures the data across agencies and generates real-time analyses for each agency. This enables the agencies to learn and make adjustments to the program on an ongoing basis, while allowing the group to identify socioeconomic patterns and trends in the community, as well as policy gaps that need to be addressed. As stated earlier, acknowledging the structural and systemic causes is a critical aspect of a strength-based approach. This trend analysis helps surface what needs to be addressed at this level.

Additionally, a trained facilitator supported the caseworkers to develop their skills to efficiently and effectively capture each applicant's story. The written narrative identifies the client's circumstances, strengths, and how the funds or referrals will assist the applicant in overcoming the crisis.

Finally, each applicant who receives funds is contacted three months later by the agency. The group developed a series of questions that align with a strength-based approach and help draw out how the process assisted the individual.

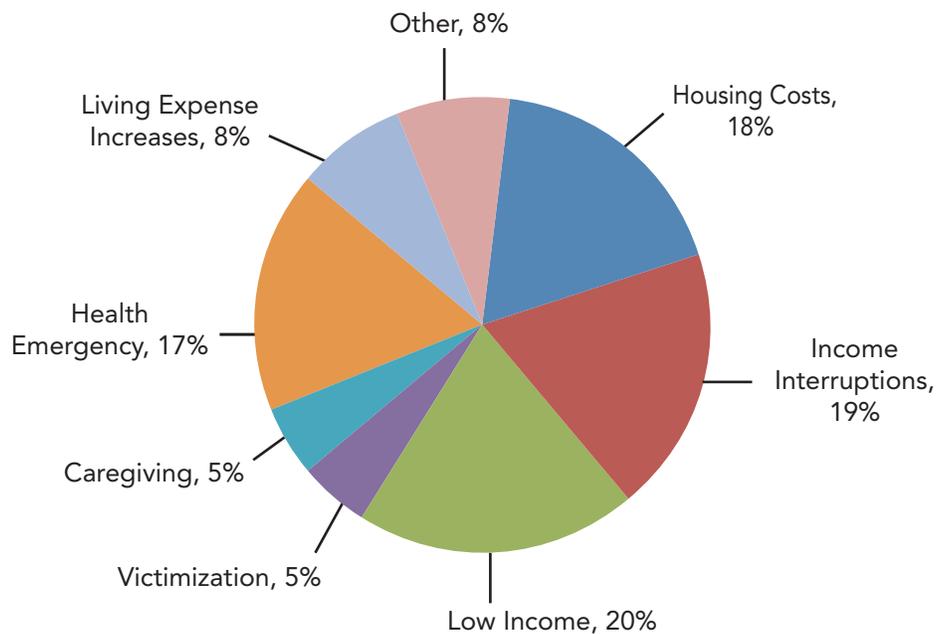
## EMERGENT FINDINGS FROM 2013 – 2014 BASIC NEEDS FUND DATA

Data collected in the application form, caseworkers' reflections, and follow-up phone-calls is being analyzed and interpreted to further understand the strengths and limitations of the program. Data analysis will also look for insights into the drivers of financial crisis in Calgary. The following represents a summary of data from 377 application forms received from August 2013 to March 2014.

### *What is Leading to Financial Crisis in Calgary?*

Grouping responses to the closed-response question, "what has led to your current crisis?" into 8 major categories, the data shows that the four most frequently reported reasons are: low income (20%), housing costs (18%), income interruptions (19%) and health emergencies (17%).

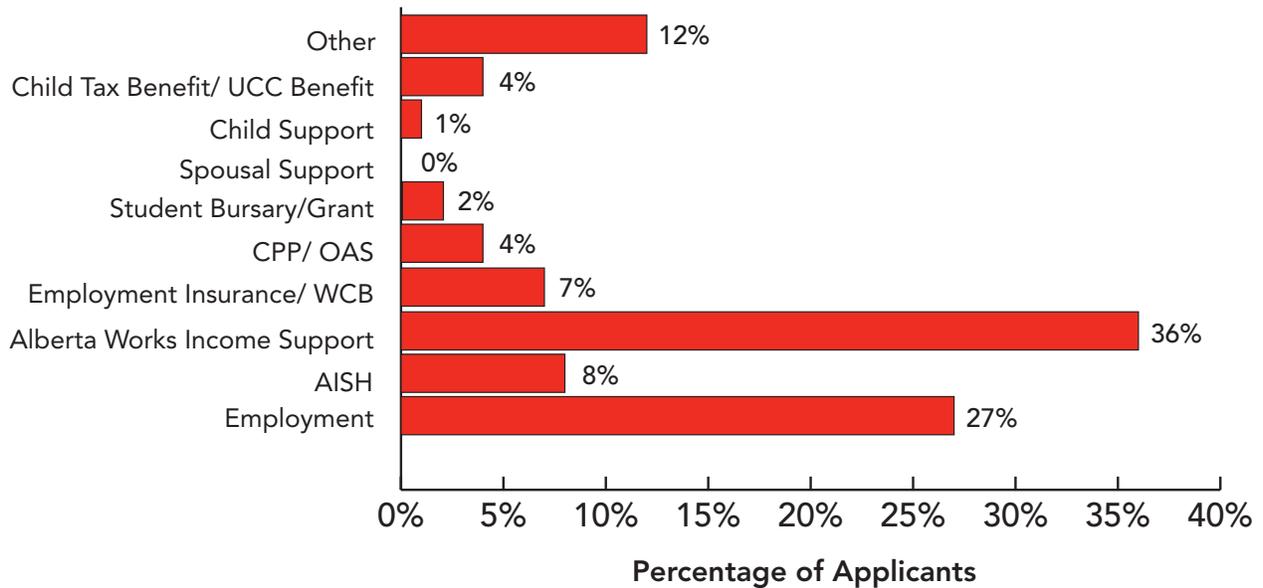
## MOST FREQUENTLY REPORTED REASONS FOR CRISIS



The findings affirm many of the policy areas that need to be addressed in order to reduce overall poverty rates, including affordable housing, adequate income, employment security measures, and preventative healthcare systems.

With respect to applicants' main source of income, 30 per cent said employment was their main source of income, while 35 per cent said Alberta Income Support is their main source of income, and 9 per cent said Alberta Assured Income for Severely Handicapped is their main source.

## PERCENTAGE OF APPLICANTS AS PER MAIN INCOME SOURCE

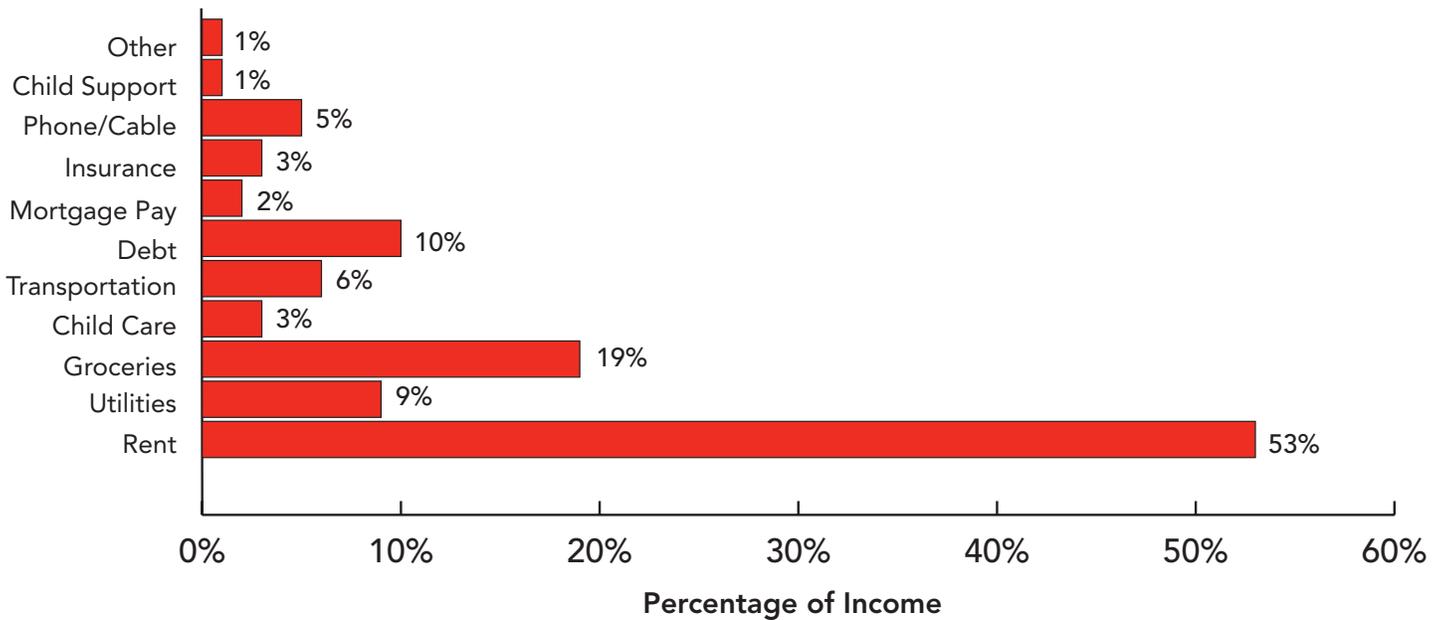


Analysis of the applicant's demographic characteristics show that approximately 45 per cent have children under the age of 18 living at home, and only 20 per cent of all applicants are living with a spouse. The average age of applicants is 45, but spans from 19 – 83. Female applicants are over-represented at 62 per cent, while Aboriginal applicants are also over-represented at 17 per cent. Recent immigrants, that is, those who have lived in Canada for less than three years, are under-represented at 3 per cent.

The average household monthly income of applicants is \$1,721 after-tax, or just under \$21,000 per annum, while average expenses exceed that by \$202 per month. This suggests that applicants are spending 112 per cent of their income at the time of their application.

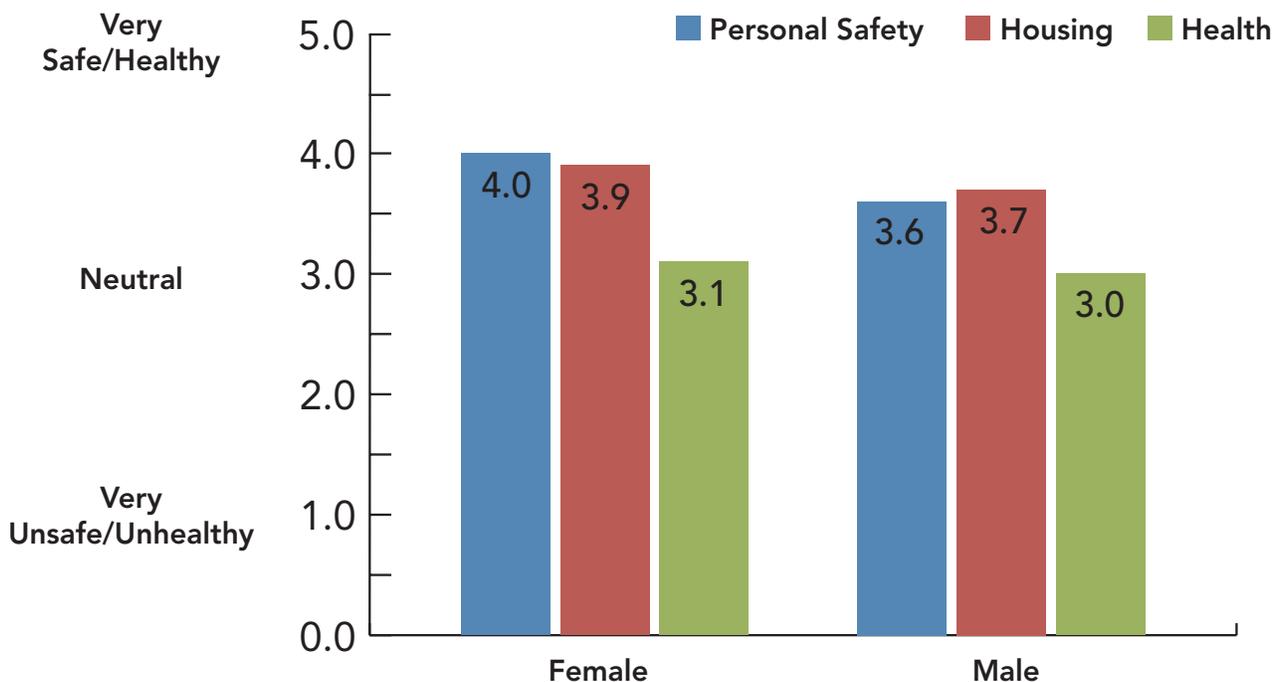
Looking at the amount per expense item is another way to assess the degree of poverty facing applicants. On average, applicants are spending 55 per cent on shelter and 9 per cent on utilities, while Canada Mortgage and Housing Company defines affordable housing as being less than 30 per cent of before-tax household income, including utilities. When looking only at the expenses of those paying for child care, 17 per cent of income is going towards child care costs, a considerable added financial burden for parents.

## APPLICANTS' HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES AS PER CENT OF INCOME



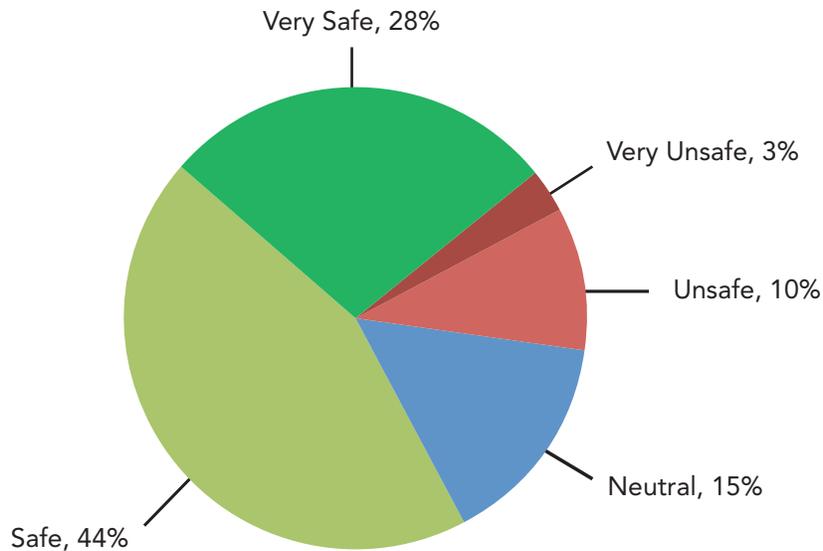
Applicants are also asked to indicate the degree to which they feel safe, as it relates to their personal safety and housing conditions and the degree to which they feel healthy. Overall, aggregated responses are moderately positive.

## OVERALL RESPONSES TO SAFETY & HEALTH

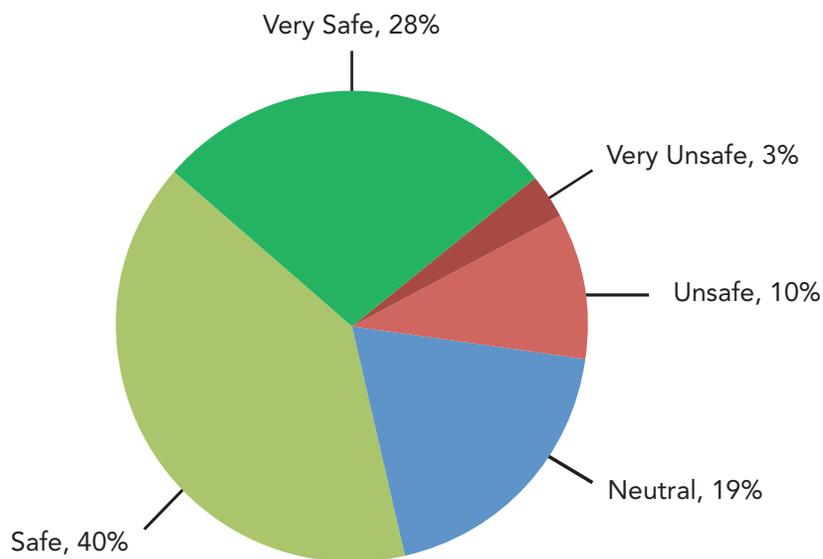


However, a closer look reveals an unsettling depiction of the anxiety and discomfort under which many applicants are living. That is, nearly one third feel neutral, unsafe or very unsafe in terms of their personal safety and housing conditions. Over two-thirds feel neutral, unhealthy or very unhealthy with respect to their health status.

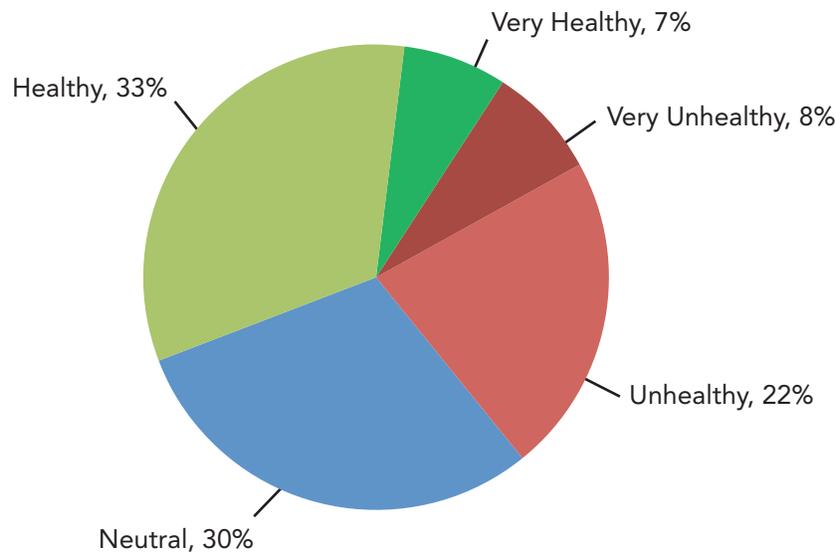
## PERSONAL SAFETY



## HOUSING CONDITIONS



## HEALTH



### How is the Fund Supporting People in Crisis?

The sample of follow-up interviews is not yet large enough to provide sufficient evidence on the outcomes; however, the caseworkers' reflections combined with application form data provide valuable predictions. The following outlines two dominant themes that are emerging in terms of how the Fund is supporting people in crisis.

#### 1) THE BASIC NEEDS FUND ENABLES APPLICANTS TO OVERCOME A TEMPORARY SITUATION

Applicants to the Basic Needs Fund are applying because of a change to their circumstances, often unexpected, that renders them unable to afford their basic needs. Generally speaking, the Fund is primarily supporting people who experience a temporary increase in their expenses or a temporary decrease in their income. Without accessing the Fund, such applicants would have been less likely to overcome the situation, and their circumstances would likely have worsened.

*"Maria<sup>5</sup> is a single mother of 2 children. She works full-time at a preschool, and recently moved into Calgary Housing. She is struggling to afford all of the start-up costs, however once she settles into her new home and has paid these she will be stable in her housing. She is required to pay an Enmax deposit that she cannot fit into her budget. With support from the Basic Needs Fund, she will be able to keep up with monthly bills."*

- Case Worker's Reflections on Basic Needs Fund Applicant

Where it appears that the change in circumstances is going to be more long-term than temporary, the caseworkers are diligent about connecting the individual to additional resources, programs and supports. By connecting them, the caseworkers help ensure the program will be enough to get the applicant through the crisis. In some cases, this is all that might be required.

*"Vince has been living with friends for some time. He decided to become independent and found his own place, but rent was above his monthly income. We talked about sustainability with the applicant and developed a budget together. Instead of assisting him with Funds, he was advised to move back with his friends until he could find a more affordable place. Vince went back to living with his friends and continues to search for something affordable."*

- Case Worker's Reflections on Basic Needs Fund Applicant

<sup>5</sup> Names of all applicants in this report have been changed to protect anonymity.

## 2) ACCESSING THE BASIC NEEDS FUND SUPPORTS SELF-DETERMINATION AND CONNECTS APPLICANTS TO RESOURCES

In some cases, the barriers facing applicants are highly complex and the caseworker believes crisis is likely to re-occur. If the crisis is severe and immediate, funds are provided to ensure the individual or family is not in harm. Additionally, the caseworker will refer the person to more intensive supports. By providing a non-judgemental environment and supporting the individual to identify their strengths and capacity to overcome challenges, the caseworkers build self-determination. Even if the applicant does not receive funds, building a sense of self-determination and getting connected to further supports is a critical value-add that the applicant may not have received otherwise.

*“Marg and her husband have two children and are here on a work permit from Poland. They do not receive the child tax credit and Marg hasn't been getting many hours at work. Her husband, while employed, is unable to work due to physical health issues. Because Marg doesn't work many hours and her husband isn't able to work right now, they haven't been able to stay on top of their rent or bills. Through the Basic Needs Fund, they were given assistance with their Enmax bill and were also referred to Aspen Home Stay Prevention program. Now that they have a Case Manager through Aspen, their hope is to be stable once again.”*

*- Case Worker's Reflections on BNF Applicant*

## CONCLUSION

The data is providing important insight as to why people are experiencing financial crisis in Calgary. While the data can be used to monitor socioeconomic trends and adjust programming accordingly, it can also help identify policy gaps that will help address the dominant, systemic drivers of financial crisis and poverty. So far, data is pointing to affordable housing, adequate income, employment security measures, and preventative healthcare systems as critical areas to address. Additionally, the data is providing significant insight as to how valuable an emergency fund is in supporting people who are vulnerable to severe crisis. The Fund is assisting people to overcome a temporary change in circumstances, upholding dignity and inspiring self-determination, and of course, connecting people to additional supports. Indeed, there appears to be nothing “basic” about the Basic Needs Fund after all.

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