

Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction

Monday, July 14, 2008 ~ 6:30 – 9:00 PM
Hamilton Convention Centre – Albion Room

Community Conversation Report

*'I sat with a lady tonight and by 6:45 we both knew we'd agree on nothing.
By 8:45, we'd agreed on quite a bit! The joys of conversation, the joys of crossing silos!'*

Report Overview:

On Monday, July 14, 2008, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and Hamilton-area Members of Provincial Parliament co-hosted a Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction. Attended by more than 200 community members, this report details the conversation, presentations and key themes generated from table discussions. This report will be shared with the local community through the HRPR website (www.hamiltonpoverty.ca) and distributed to Hamilton-area Members of Provincial Parliament, the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction for the Government of Ontario and to members of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

1. Welcome and Session Overview

- **Paul Johnson** ~ Moderator ~ Wesley Urban Ministries, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
- **Councillor Brian McHattie**, City of Hamilton
- **Tom Cooper**, Chair, Policy Working Group, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction
- **Tatum Wilson**, Senior Policy Advisor, Ontario Poverty Strategy

Paul Johnson, Executive Director, Wesley Urban Ministries and member of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction was the moderator for the Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction. He welcomed everyone to the session and thanked them for their interest in this important community conversation. Paul acknowledged the involvement and support of our Hamilton Area MPPs including Sophia Aggelonitis (Hamilton Mountain), Andrea Horwath (Hamilton Centre) and the Honourable Ted McMeekin (Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough and Westdale and Minister of Government and Community Services). Paul Miller (Hamilton East-Stoney Creek) and Tim Hudak (West Niagara-Glanbrook) sent regrets as both were out of town but had sent representatives from their offices.

Paul stated that the goals for the Community Conversation are to engage a broad cross section of our community to provide their input to the Ontario Poverty Strategy, to co-host the event with Hamilton-area Members of Provincial Parliament, to engage community organizations in the conversation, to provide a forum for diverse perspectives and to identify and support avenues for further conversation and input to the Government of Ontario.

Councillor Brian McHattie acknowledged political colleagues attending including Sophia Aggelonitis (Hamilton Mountain), Andrea Horwath (Hamilton Centre) and the Honourable Ted McMeekin (Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough and Westdale and Minister of Government and Community Services), and federal representatives: Wayne Marston (Hamilton East-Stoney Creek) and David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre). He also noted that Judith Bishop, Chair, Trustees of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board was in attendance.

Councillor McHattie noted that the Roundtable is pleased to co-host this community conversation with our Hamilton area MPPs to ensure that Hamilton citizens and community groups can provide their input into the community consultation process for the Ontario Poverty Strategy. The Roundtable is a collaborative community table which has placed a strategic focus on the issue of poverty and its impacts on Hamilton. We recognize that poverty is a complex issue that has many inter-related root causes and this means that our role is to engage all sectors of the community to do their part – the Roundtable is one part of the solution – many of you are here tonight because you also are part of the solution.

The City of Hamilton is a co-convenor of the Roundtable and has moved forward in a number of policy directions which are supporting individuals and their families living with low or limited incomes. But we recognize that more could be done and we look to our provincial and federal government colleagues to work collaboratively with the citizens in Hamilton to identify solutions which will help us achieve prosperity for all.

Tom Cooper, Chair of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction - Policy Working Group spoke next. Tom stated that Hamilton has many challenges related to poverty, but in our residents, in our people, there is tremendous hope and opportunity for our community. The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction's approach has been to develop a framework for change – by breaking down silos, forging partnerships and building the foundations for real and long term poverty reduction.

Real poverty reduction means addressing the deep and quite frankly, tough to get at, systemic barriers that prevent one-fifth of all Hamiltonians from escaping the clutches of impoverishment. Tom noted that is why it is so essential that today may a beginning and not an end of this conversation.

The HRPR Policy Working Group has challenged both policy makers and the public to think differently around poverty reduction: not as a short term cost, but as a long term investment.

Over the last few years, community partnerships have resulted in new health services in low-income neighbourhoods, bus routes and an affordable transit pass program for low-income workers, new early years programs, school-based and after school programs, employment and mentoring supports for at-risk youth, home ownership and affordable housing programs – two million dollars in rental allowance for the lowest income members of our community. But there is much more work that needs to be done.

Living wage policies and the creation of a social assistance rates board are two initiatives the Roundtable will continue to push forward.

Tom noted that Hamilton can't do it alone. That is why it is so important that we have our local MPP's here and why it is so important that the provincial government has committed itself towards the development of a province-wide poverty reduction strategy. That is why it is also important that we talk to the federal government about developing a national poverty reduction strategy.

The information gathered through this conversation tonight will be documented and submitted to Minister Deb Matthews and the entire Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction as well as our local elected officials at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

Tom noted that our elected officials need to hear from the audience. He stated 'you have the experience, the judgment and the solutions. Together we will make a difference.'

Tatum Wilson, Senior Policy Advisor for the Ontario Poverty Strategy provided a brief overview of the community consultation process for the Ontario Poverty Strategy to date. There have been 14 community consultations hosted by Minister Matthews with over 700 community stakeholders in attendance, 500 electronic submissions have been received and over 29,000 electronic links to the Government of Ontario website. Tatum noted that all Members of Provincial Parliament are encouraged to host community conversation sessions over the next month and that this community conversation on poverty in Hamilton was the largest he had attended to date. Some themes emerging from the consultation process include income adequacy, minimum wage/living

wage, Ontario Social Assistance rates reform, transportation and enabling the community to change processes and systems which provide barriers to individuals and their families in poverty.

2. Community Presentations

**** A Full copy of the presentation is attached to this report where received.***

Youth Engagement and Action In Hamilton – Mike DesJardins

Mike noted that Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton (YEAH) is an organization that represents youth (13 – 25 years) and that youth want to take action on creating community solutions on issues like poverty. Youth need to be included at planning tables with groups. Youth are a sizeable percentage of the population and have ideas and energy for the community. He noted that the community has to make youth engagement a critical component of a poverty reduction strategy.

Hamilton's Centre for Civic Inclusion – Madina Wasuge, Ismail Ibrahim and Nasir Sawar *

Representatives from Hamilton's Centre for Civic Inclusion spoke to the need to create an inclusive environment for all citizens. They noted that the visible minority and new immigrant community is impacted more deeply by poverty and that this is called the racialization of poverty. Fifty percent of recently immigrants live in poverty despite high levels of education and credentials. A poverty reductions strategy needs to create strong legislation to remove the barriers to accreditation and employment. It was also noted that the Employment Standards Act needs to be revised to better support temporary and insecure employment positions providing them with more protection in the work place.

Residential Care Facility Tenants – Lance Dingman *

Lance Dingman is the chair of the Residential Care Facilities Tenants Group which represents tenants, ex-tenants, supporters and advocated for the last 12 years. In his presentation, he strongly advocated for an increase in the personal needs allowance for residential care tenants which currently is \$122 per month or \$4.10 per day. This allowance is not sufficient to provide for even the most basic needs and is set against a rising cost of living. An inventory of basic needs was taken and a minimum of \$180 per month is estimated. Lance called for the government to commit to increasing the personal needs allowance as part of the poverty reduction strategy and to also commit to reviewing the personal needs allowance.

Hamilton Injured Workers Group – Peter Page

Peter Page represented the Hamilton Injured Workers Group. The group advocates for injured workers and their families, many of whom live at or below the poverty line. In 2007-08 a cost of living adjustment was included in payments to injured workers and the Hamilton group advocates for continuing cost of living adjustments which reflect real increasing costs faced by injured workers. They are also looking for inclusion of injured workers and their families as part of the Ontario Poverty Strategy.

Ontario Child Benefit Committee – Ursula Samuels

Ursula Samuels spoke on behalf of a newly-formed citizens group focusing on the implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit program. The Ontario Child Benefit is a new program which has changed benefits for low income families including the withdrawal of separate payments for a back to school and winter clothing allowance – these are now included in the OCB. Ursula noted that this change will negatively impact children attending school and their families. She encouraged the group to advocate for additional funding to support the return of the back to school and winter clothing allowances for families on social assistance.

Aboriginal Issues – Cindy Sue McCormack

Cindy Sue McCormack spoke briefly about the impact of poverty on the Aboriginal community in Hamilton – more than 44% of the Aboriginal community lives below the low income cut-off and 20% are considered to be homeless. She emphasized the importance of considering all sectors and groups of the population when considering an Ontario Poverty Strategy but that there was a need to focus on those groups most deeply impacted by poverty.

3. Table Conversations focusing on a Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario

The larger group of 200 individuals was invited to participate in small group table discussions focusing on two of the six questions identified in the Ontario Poverty Strategy. Themed results are identified below. Individual responses to the questions are attached to this report for information.

- ***What ideas could be incorporated into existing government supports that would increase opportunities for children and their families living in poverty?***

Policies and Individuals

- Funding based on the complexity of needs (the NEED should drive the dollar)
- Policies should be flexible and be respectful of the individual's dignity
- Needs need to be addressed by the community – grass roots movements
- Social workers should advocate more for consumers and make aware of all programs which are available
- Audit our system, look at barriers in policies that keep people in poverty
- Programs don't have latitude for earning – reduce limitations imposed by government legislation - should be supportive not punitive
- Inequities in legislation – such as ODSP and CPP in social housing
- Complexity of forms, information requests
- Program forms too cumbersome to fill, requestors need help to fill out
- Families who need help the most often don't know what is available – need to look at creative way to inform families
- We need to have a mindset that poverty exists
- Remove the barriers to accessing social programs
- Government to listen to the people who live in poverty - they know what needs to be changed
- Previous policy 25% geared to income housing in new housing starts
- Need to plan longer term and fund longer term so that agencies and government can plan

Social Assistance Benefits

- Inadequate
- Need to conduct cost analysis – cost to live and prosper versus cost of living
- Household/shelter costs too much of family budget (60%)
- Back to school and winter clothing allowance needs to be re-instated
- Need to address child benefit – back to school allowance
- Free transportation and recreation for ODSP, residential care tenants and families
- Guaranteed annual income – redirect resources from current programs that are endlessly administered
- Equitable distribution of assistance – commit supports to those that need them – communication is critical
- Presumption – appropriate support both financial and non-financial – poverty is the issue
- Priority should be to ensure an appropriate standard of living that eliminates the need for individuals and families to have to choose between food or paying the rent
- Prosperity and poverty – child benefit claw back, university student income restrictions
- All government should be seamless (cost of living allowance)
- Evidence based social assistance rates – Ontario Social Assistance Rates Board
- Need for independent social assistance rates board
- Transitional benefits
- OW/ODSP income exemption for post secondary students living at home and working
- Part time jobs for students, families on social assistance (skills building)
- Grandparents as primary care givers on fixed incomes, need broader definition of families
- Universal recreation supports
- Increase level of assets income level to allow room for recipients not to fall backwards

- Need for cheque cashing
- Funding access to programs
- Better support in helping families, greater staff and funding and resources to Ontario Works
- Reverse municipal downloading of service 'ODSP Chart' for travel

Investment in Children and Youth

- Understand the benefits and value of early intervention
- Visual/dramatic arts for children – self confidence/self esteem
- Children services need to be more coordinated – Britain 'Every Child Matters'
- Children services need to be coordinated with education services
- Outreach workers/child welfare – vicious cycle
- Keep fulfilling affordable, available child care
- Issue is that we cannot just focus on children
- Every child need access to day care
- Early learning centres and access to recreation programs
- Child care (professional, cost effective) peer counseling for low income families
- Housing and child care supports incorporated as wraparound – one-stop

Education

- To invest in the school system so that all children can participate – pizza days, school trips, etc
- School activities, pictures – affordability, school trips, need for flexible options
- Lunch programs in schools; equal access to all children
- Partner college students to provide leadership to elementary students
- Communities should have mentors – link to educate intergenerational programs
- Mentorship programs and linking to seniors – benefits seniors and youth
- High school education should include practical everyday life skills ie parenting, budgeting
- Open opportunities for learning
- Skills and education = employment opportunities = improved earning potential = reduced poverty = prosperity for our community
- Change the education system – children are not learning in schools – special needs students are not getting the services they need

Youth

- Lack of income support in general, specifically students/trainees
- providing guidance and including a range of programs for youth to access (school, training, etc)
- raising graduation rates for those in school, creating opportunities for those who have dropped out
- fear of paying back OSAP – make education more accessible
- more education and training opportunities year round, greater variety of programs to address many needs
- opportunities for education and training in small settings

Employment Supports

- Living wages – at least \$12.60 per hour – temp workers not paid a fair wage
- Broader thinking from minimum wage to living wage
- Implement living wage legislation
- Pay equity – profit sector responsibility
- A clear training strategy is needed
- Protect workers, often violations with temp workers, no status under employment standards act,
- Support employment opportunities with subsidy
- Free education – important for people who are lowest income to enter or re-enter the workforce
- Asset based approach – what is working, what is not on the road to prosperity ie employment needs to be meaningful, used to value what people do, gives dignity to people, entitlement to meaningful existence

- Increased funding for skills development and education – level the playing field – increase access and opportunity by changing eligibility requirements – support lifelong learning including workplace literacy
- There is a need for new partnerships with private sectors to encourage unsecured loans to promote entrepreneurship
- Need to address labour issues – full employment
- Transportation – reduce transit costs

Health

- Medical and dental care for the working poor
- Teenage mother programs – experienced mothers versus traditional health professionals
- LEAP – Learning, Earning and Parenting – how do we overcome the stigma of the program marketing
- Healthy babies Healthy children important
- More health mobility ie bus
- Return to public health nurses assigned to neighbourhoods

Integration and Access to Services

- Make programs more accessible
- A local policy direction is required for local solutions
- A collaborative municipal team ‘everyone gets to play’ strategy
- Collaborative approach – recognize the problem – address basic needs areas – recognize that there is a national/provincial/municipal need for a collective approach
- Band aid approach now – change the way we look at poverty
- Where are they successful elsewhere – need better support systems
- Pilot projects that worked need to be reinstated
- Need people supports for individuals to transverse the system and processes ie opening bank accounts, driver’s license
- Need to make ‘real’ changes not symbolic changes
- Integration of systems – working together rather than in silos
- Systems barriers – policies are applied with a cookie cutter approach
- Share infrastructures to reduce duplication – saved money could be reinvested in programming
- Sharing information and resources – ongoing review of all programs
- Business community needs to be at the table and encouraged
- Mapping of all existing government and private agencies to streamline all policies
- Need integrated services
- Need recognized way to access services
- Government and service provider accountability
- Abandon band-aid solutions
- Create systems that are flexible

New Immigrants

- Increased supports for new immigrants while they search for work
- Professional credentials need to be recognized
- Barriers through accreditation societies / ASSO
- Credentialing barriers, stresses on the family
- Need to fast track credentialing before other paths are taken
- Barriers to recognition of foreign credentials for employment experience
- Increased training for business English
- Possible university on the weekend courses
- Acclimatization through job shadow programs
- Possible apprenticeship programs
- Tax incentives to hire newcomers, childcare for families lacking networks, safety nets

- We lose talents – need to recognize talents
- Need to address barriers – language, cultural

Housing

- Housing programs – co-ops, hostels to homes, etc – need to be extended
- Decrease restrictions in terms of renting in public housing
- Expand opportunities for collective supports
- Land for affordable housing – land bank of public land to be moved to the community
- Increase funding for affordable housing
- Not enough housing
- Housing – we need to ensure we don't ghettoize certain parts of the city
- Low-income housing loans (tools, training, info on housing emergencies)
- Budget management – objective assessment of cost of housing

Neighbourhoods/Community

- Community outreach workers/support workers know the community and can assist in connecting people to programs at the neighbourhood level
- Safer communities
- Importance of neighbourhoods/hubs
- Create neighbourhood hubs – grow the seeds that enlarge children's growth
- Provincial funding for community centres
- ***What actions and measures do you think will best show progress in improving opportunity for Ontarians living in poverty?***

Collaboration / Integration

- Review of current levels of collaboration that exists (1)
- A system that allows for citizen participation in identifying community solutions
- Increased engagement of broader sector (private sector)

Community

- Decrease in incidents of crime
- Free public transit
- Integrated neighbourhoods
- More community hubs in neighbourhoods (1)
- Increase of number of outreach workers in neighbourhoods
- Increase social supports in the community
- Voter turnout rates

Children

- Increase in child care spaces
- Proper tools for our children and youth
- Summer holiday activities for children and youth in summer for free
- No cancellation of field trips because of lack of funds
- No child would go to school or bed hungry
- Fewer children coming in to care
- Increased access to after school programming

Education

- Reduction of high school drop outs (4)
- Increased access to and participation in post secondary education (3)
- Stability of children attending school (2)
- EDI/EQAO scores in high risk schools

- Schools equalized – same treatment – zero tolerance on racism
- Government funded post-secondary education
- Schools are a hub of community services
- Stop standardized testing in schools
- Education levels
- Increased funding for education – special education teachers, literacy, numeracy

New Immigrants

- Solution to the accreditation issues (1)
- Diversity audit at all levels
- Increased training, bridging programs
- Increased social housing allowance to 2 years as they gain entry to full employment
- Increase in ESL programs for immigrants and refugees

Financial

- Decrease in barriers to financial assistance
- Decrease in the number of punitive policies ie seniors benefits

Income

- Income levels percentages below the poverty line – LICO is going down (3)
- Increase in social assistance rates
- Ontario child benefit reform
- Measure dollars in family hands
- Fully upload OW to the province
- Increased supports for people accessing systems
- Measure Ontario Child Benefit change
- Income earned – measure how much OW/ODSP recipients earn as a measure of progress
- Link to living wage – don't deduct OW/ODSP until employment income is over Living Wage threshold
- Lower deductions or higher incentives for working on Social Assistance
- Basket of measures – LICO, LIM, MBM

Employment

- Collect data and monitor success of employment programs
- Increased training and retention in the workforce rates
- Legislate benefits for contract workers
- Employment levels (1)

Health

- Health care measure – diabetes/mental health (1)
- Level of participation in hospitals/inmates in prison with mental health issues
- Healthy children
- Every child would have a family doctor
- Decrease in teen pregnancy rates
- Decrease in bullying

Homelessness / Housing

- Homelessness rate (1)
- Increase in affordable housing (2)
- Increased access to geared to income housing/home ownership
- Increased home ownership
- Reduced wait time for affordable housing and other services
- Amount individuals pay as a percentage of income on housing
- Eviction rates for arrears in rent

Food

- Food bank usage rates (4)
- Fewer food banks / fewer food drives

4. Responses from Hamilton – area Members of Provincial Parliament

Sophia Aggelonitis (Hamilton Mountain): Poverty is a significant problem and we need to solve this problem. Youth must be part of the process. We need to consider the issues around the racialization of poverty. The Province must consider the personal needs allowance for residential care facility tenants. She is looking forward to receiving the report of this community conversation and to voice some of the issues which have been raised at the conversation.

Andrea Horwath (Hamilton Centre): Poverty is about real people with real barriers that need real approaches and solutions. She heard tonight that some current programs and funding allowances are inflexible and unrealistic. There is a need to look at schools, public health, affordable housing. We need to think about the dignity of people on social assistance and pull people into deeper poverty. We need to make policies work for people not against them. We need to have a broad spectrum of people engaged in the solutions.

Honourable Ted McMeekin (Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough and Westdale and Minister of Government and Community Services): He was instrumental in getting the issue of poverty on the agenda and identified, with colleagues, the need for Ontario to develop a poverty reduction strategy. There is a need to understand issues around an adequate standard of living for all and on the diverse faces of poverty including the differences between rural and urban poverty. A poverty reduction strategy needs to be collaborative and evidence based. It needs to focus on early intervention. The poverty reduction strategy may not have all the answers in its initial design but it is critical that we continue to move forward and address this important issue.

5. Questions and Answers

Thirty minutes were allocated for a question and answer session. A number of participants were able to explore particular issues with the Members of Provincial Parliament. Below is a list of issues identified during the question and answer session.

- **Reducing the Silos:** there needs to be better integration of social/health and recreation services so that individuals can have seamless access through a single point of entry
- **Investing in children and youth:** there is significant evidence by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Dr. Dan Offord that investments in children and youth are key pathways out of poverty
- **Temporary Workers:** legislation and additional resources are required to support temporary workers
- **Social Service Agencies:** need to be accountable for the resources which are allocated to them
- **Racialization of Poverty:** need to also consider gender and the impact of the racialization of poverty on youth and families
- **Grandparents raising their grandchildren:** financial support must be increased to grandparents, who are on limited incomes, who are raising their grandchildren
- **School fees and trips:** the government needs to consider equity of participation when determining additional school fees including hot dog days, pictures and school trips and the burden this places on low income families
- **Influencing the Ontario Poverty Strategy:** the government needs to truly listen to and engage citizens in the development of the Ontario Poverty Strategy and to make the process as open and transparent as possible
- **Dignity for people on social assistance:** the government must ensure the dignity of individuals and not set up systems that demoralize people, either staff or recipients

6. Wrap Up and Next Steps

The Hamilton Roundtable committed to pulling together the notes from the Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction and develop a written report. The written report will be sent to Hamilton-area Members of Provincial Parliament and members of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction. The Roundtable also agreed to post the full report on the www.hamiltonpoverty.ca website and to distribute to those in attendance who request a copy of the report. The information generated through the community conversation will also help to inform the work and direction of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

7. Report Attachments (Available upon Request)

The following report attachments are available upon request by contacting the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction:

Community Presentations

- Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion – Madina Wasuge ★
- Residential Care Facility Tenants – Lance Dingman ★
- Youth Engagement & Action in Hamilton – Mike Desjardins ★

Facilitator Table Discussion Notes

Individual Responses to the Two Questions

Participant Evaluation Responses

8. Acknowledgements

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and the HRPR Policy Working Group would like to acknowledge and thank the following individuals for their contributions to the Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction:

- Paul Johnson, Executive Director, Wesley Urban Ministries
- Councillor Brian McHattie, City of Hamilton
- Tatum Wilson, Senior Policy Advisor – Poverty Reduction Strategy, Government of Ontario
- Sophia Aggelonitis, MPP Hamilton Mountain
- Andrea Horwath, MPP Hamilton Centre
- Honourable Ted McMeekin, Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough and Westdale and Minister of Government and Community Services
- Paul Miller, MPP Hamilton East-Stoney Creek
- Tim Hudak, MPP Niagara West-Glanbrook

Community Presentations were provided by the following organizations:

- Hamilton's Centre for Civic Inclusion, Hamilton Injured Workers Group, Ontario Child Benefit Committee, Residential Care Facility Tenants, Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton

Table Discussion Facilitation was provided by volunteers from the following organizations:

- Bay Area Leadership, City of Hamilton, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Hamilton Training Advisory Board, Health Canada, McQuesten Legal & Community Services, Mohawk College, The Hamilton Spectator, United Way of Burlington, Greater Hamilton, Volunteer Hamilton, YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington