

Community Dispatch

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INCLUSIVE CITIES CANADA BURLINGTON: COMMUNITY VOICES, PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES Part 1 – Executive Summary

I would like to take the opportunity to share with you Community Development Halton's recent report, "Inclusive Cities Canada – Burlington: Community Voices, Perspectives and Priorities." Inclusive cities and communities are critical not only to the well-being of individuals, but also to the social and economic health of nations. This study is part of a cross-Canada civic initiative based on a groundbreaking partnership among the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and five social planning partners in cities across Canada: Vancouver and North Vancouver, Edmonton, Burlington, Toronto and Saint John, N.B. Local Civic Panels composed of community leaders have given leadership and vision to the project and have developed recommendations that identify the steps needed to build an inclusive community. Recommendations are addressed to all levels of government and the community at large. Our full Burlington report is available online at www.cdhalton.ca and those of other partner cities at www.inclusivecities.ca. In the coming months, a cross-Canada report will be published, combining learnings from the participating cities across Canada. Civic Panel members and their social planning partners will be working individually and in cross-Canada civic alliances to move their recommendations forward.

Joey Edwardh

An inclusive community is one that provides opportunities for the optimal well-being and healthy development of all children, youth and adults. Social inclusion is key to individual and collective well-being. All members of the community gain from social inclusion – those who are vulnerable for reasons of poverty, racism, or fear of difference – as well as the broader

community that benefits when everyone is able to participate as a valued and contributing member of the community. Inclusive cities and communities are recognized as critical not only to the well-being of individuals, but also to the social and economic health of nations.

Inclusive Cities Canada: A Cross-Canada Civic Initiative (ICC) is an innovative and timely project to examine and enhance social inclusion in cities and communities across Canada. The aim of *Inclusive Cities Canada* is to strengthen the capacity of cities to create and sustain inclusive communities for the mutual benefit of all people.

Inclusive Cities Canada is a collaborative venture of five social planning organizations across Canada and the social infrastructure sub-committee of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). In each participating city, municipal and community leaders have come together to form a Civic Panel, to provide leadership and direction to the initiative locally. Local research, analysis and reporting by each of the five social planning partners is based on a common framework and methodology.

Inclusive Cities Canada — Burlington: Community Voices, Perspectives and Priorities reports on the first phase of the project in Burlington, and includes both qualitative and supplementary quantitative research. The report integrates the perceptions of 244 community members who participated in focus groups, local soundings and a survey. Statistical information pertaining to inclusion in Burlington has been added. The report contains several sections:

The Changing Face Of Burlington provides a statistical profile of the community.

Common Areas of Inquiry summarizes participants' observations and suggestions for change regarding the areas of inquiry discussed in all the participating cities: health care; crisis services; publicly funded education; early childhood development; recreation, arts and culture; transportation and mobility; local government; policing and justice; income and employment; housing; community safety; public spaces; and community capacities.

Local Soundings report on additional small-group discussions and interviews conducted with newcomers, seniors and youth, in order to clarify, and make more profound, the understandings gathered in focus groups.

Barriers To Social Inclusion. During this study, participants were asked to identify both what is being done well and what areas need improvement. They found that there are many strengths supporting inclusion in our community. However, certain broad themes arose in discussions on diverse areas of inquiry and local soundings, which have assisted in the identification of underlying barriers to social inclusion in our community, and have been useful to the Civic Panel in developing its recommendations. They are:

Underfunding Of Social Infrastructure

Despite services of generally good quality, participants believe that access and quality, particularly in health care, home care and education, have declined significantly over the past decade or more, due to underfunding. Major issues identified include:

- Shortage of family physicians, specialists and psychiatric professionals and services
- Insufficient range of, and access to, home care services for the frail elderly and those living with disabilities, attributed in part to a funding shift toward long term care
- Ongoing erosion in overall quality of education, in programs which nourish the whole person and in special education and student services

- Shortage of affordable and appropriate child care

Poverty And Housing

One or both are raised in most areas of inquiry. Participants observe:

- That poverty compromises social inclusion in the community and has impacts on health care; crisis services; early childhood development; opportunities in education; housing; transportation and mobility; access to recreation, arts and cultural activities; civic engagement; and access to public spaces
- That there is a severe shortage of affordable housing, accessible housing and affordable supportive housing
- That the impact of poverty is exacerbated by living in an affluent community
- That there are insufficient financial and social supports for low-income families and individuals
- That family poverty compromises child development
- That, despite some shelter space, there are shelter gaps for youth, seniors and those with mental illness

Income and Employment

Certain issues arise in the discussions:

- Barriers to newcomers in achieving recognition of foreign credentials
- Low social assistance rates and low minimum wage
- Barriers to getting off Ontario Works
- Shortage of secure employment with adequate wages and working conditions

Transportation

In almost every area of inquiry, participants express concerns that inadequate public transportation, both within the community and to areas outside the community, compromises social inclusion. The major issues include:

- Cost
- Inadequate routes and hours of local service
- Deficiencies in transportation to other parts of the Region of Halton

Physical Planning And Accessibility

Despite some positive initiatives in city planning, participants express concerns about:

- “Car-based planning” and “building big”
- Loss of neighbourhood amenities, and concentration of amenities in larger facilities on major thoroughfares
- Insufficient sidewalks and bicycle paths
- Need for improvement in sidewalk design for those with disabilities
- Physical barriers to mobility in public spaces, public and private buildings and residences

Being “Priced Out”

Participants express support for free programs and festivals, and believe that social inclusion is compromised by:

- Decline of free activities in schools
- Insufficient free and low-cost activities in the community
- Shortage of subsidies; attitudinal, capacity or awareness barriers to applying for subsidies; subsidies which are not sufficient to ensure affordability

Policing and Justice

Participants believe there are “two realities of policing.” They observe:

- Generally high level of respect for police in the community
- Police efforts to reach out to youth, seniors and diverse cultural and racial groups
- Commitment to outreach and antiracism at the highest levels of the police service.

Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that:

- Youth are over-policed, both by the public police force and by private security
- Both youth and some cultural and racial groups may be targeted by police and are disadvantaged in the courts.

Communication And Awareness

Three aspects of communication and awareness are raised in nearly every area of inquiry:

- Gaps in the public’s awareness of available programs and services
- Gaps in providers’ awareness of needs (diversity competence)

- Gaps in the public’s awareness of important issues, such as poverty and the lack of affordable housing

Certain specific issues are frequently mentioned:

- Weak media coverage of local issues
- Lack of information on diversity in official publications
- Lack of orientation for newcomers
- Shortage of information and services in languages other than English
- Over-reliance on automated telephone attendant systems and Internet

Community Attitudes

Participants observe several attitudes they believe are widespread among community members and that work against social inclusion:

- Lack of awareness and concern about poverty; reluctance to accept the realities of poverty
- Viewing low-income individuals as either “deserving” or “undeserving”
- Lack of awareness and concern about the shortage of affordable housing, accessible housing and affordable supportive housing
- Reluctance to accept differences, primarily those of income
- Fear of youth
- NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome

Civic Engagement

Despite noting some strengths, such as an approachable City Council, advisory committees, free festivals, parks and public spaces, participants articulate concerns that social cohesion and civic engagement are compromised by numerous factors, including:

- Voter apathy and lack of time in a “commuter community”
- Insufficient civics education in schools
- Selection processes for membership of City committees
- Few free and low-cost activities
- Unwelcoming attitudes toward youth
- Deficiencies in transportation
- Erosion of community members’ commitment and sense of control over local issues, due to the presence and powers of the Ontario Municipal Board

Recommendations have been developed by the Burlington Civic Panel to contribute to building social inclusion, and are addressed to all levels of government, community agencies and organizations. These recommendations will be included in the next edition of Community Dispatch Volume 9, #5 to be released May 2005.

Burlington Civic Panel

Co-Chairs

Mayor Rob MacIsaac

City of Burlington

Joey Edwardh

Executive Director, Community Development Halton

Members-at-Large

Rick Craven

Councillor, Ward 1, City of Burlington

Gary Crowell

Deputy Chief, Halton Regional Police Service

Helen Ferguson

Elderly Services Advisory Committee, Region of Halton

Jeanne Hay

Past Chair, Board of Governors, Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital

Peter Hoyle

Inter-Church Council of Burlington

Susan Jewett

Burlington Counselling and Family Services

Rick MacDonald

Superintendent, Halton Catholic District School Board

Suzanne Muir

Diversity Co-ordinator, Halton District School Board

Walter Mulkewich

Performing Arts Burlington

Dave Nanderam

Halton Multicultural Council

Elizabeth Rennie

Canadian Federation of University Women

Diane Tuszynski

Burlington Chamber of Commerce

Bob Van Cleef

Oakville and District Labour Council

Paul Wendling

Burlington Community Foundation

Project Coordinator: **Glynis Maxwell**



Produced by Community Development Halton
860 Harrington Court
Burlington, Ontario L7N 3N4
(905) 632-1975, (905) 878-0955; Fax: (905) 632-0778;
E-mail: office@cdhalton.ca
Web site: www.cdhalton.ca
www.volunteerhalton.ca

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