

Community Dispatch

An InfoFax of Community Development Halton

September 2008

Vol. 13, No. 1

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

I am pleased to share in this Community Dispatch highlights from the June 27, 2008, Community Conversation on the Government of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy with Oakville MPP, Kevin Flynn. Citizens across the province have concluded that poverty and inequality hurt us all. The need to address poverty reduction is a blight on our polity. Poverty reduction is about the articulation of social values of fairness and sound decisions to assist people, to prevent human suffering and social and health problems over a life time. Moving forward with poverty reduction is a call for public investment in the well being of our people. To do so is not dependent on economic cycles. As a recent report, by the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, argues poverty is "a matter of life and death" and that the inequitable distribution of power, money, resources and opportunities is both the prime reason for health inequities and the biggest factor limiting the health of the entire population.

Joey Edwardh, Executive Director

Opening Proceedings

The consultation was sponsored by Community Development Halton, the Burlington/Halton Chapter of Make Poverty History, Oakville MPP Kevin Flynn, and 16 other local organizations committed to poverty reduction. Those in attendance included the Honourable Margaret Best, Minister of Health Promotion and member of the Ontario Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction, Oakville MP Bonnie Brown, and representatives from a wide range of faith groups, multicultural and women's groups, nonprofit service providers, funding organizations, local government, unions, advocacy groups and

concerned citizens. In total, the session was attended by 120 people, making it one of the largest consultations in the Province.

John Versluis, Chair of the Burlington/Halton Chapter of Make Poverty History, emceed the event. He began the proceedings by noting that the current push towards a Poverty Reduction strategy "didn't just happen", but was the product of a great deal of groundwork laid by social planning councils, the Social Planning Network of Ontario, Make Poverty History, Campaign 2000 and many others in the anti-poverty movement.

MPP Kevin Flynn spoke next, indicating that the Government of Ontario's goal is to address the root causes of poverty, rather than merely increasing social assistance rates or the supply of social housing. He also remarked on the importance of benchmarks and targets, stating that they will increase likelihood of achieving success.

Voices of the Community: Delegates

The next segment of the program incorporated testimonials from those who knew the experience of living in poverty in Halton.

First, Rev. Bruce Dickson of East Plains United Church in Burlington described the circumstances faced by some of the 160 people who seek assistance from his church every year. He indicated that many who come through his doors have exhausted other avenues of support such as food banks. He noted that the meagre incomes afforded by social assistance (Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program) are not sufficient for the bare necessities of life and that there are barriers to supplementing this income

because of claw backs on earnings from employment. Describing the shelter situation in Halton, Rev. Dickson spoke of low income housing wait lists that span years, and that those unable to come up with first and last month's rent have no option but to live in motels that are used to supplement insufficient space in Halton's only shelter.

Susan Jewett, Executive Director of Burlington Counselling and Family Services spoke next, commenting on the intersection between poverty, violence and sexual abuse, where physical or sexual abuse can be both the cause, and the result, of homelessness for women. She stated that women, whether living on the street, in an apartment or couch-surfing, are more often living in poverty than men. She also noted that women in violent situations frequently lack the financial resources to leave, and are often reluctant to report incidents of abuse, fearing loss of income if the man is no longer part of the family unit or, for newcomer women, the risk of deportation. Concluding her remarks, Ms. Jewett reminded participants that between 2000 and 2006, when 50 Canadians were killed in Afghanistan, 500 women were killed by their partners in Canada, many of them trapped in their home through poverty or the fear of poverty.

Three speakers from Kerr Street Ministries in Oakville: Executive Director, Ron Shantz; volunteer and service beneficiary, John Quesnelle; and food bank volunteer, John Raynor, shared their insights and experience of the suffering and exclusion caused by poverty. Noting that crime is rarely talked about in the context of poverty, John Quesnelle provided a powerful description of how he had been raised in a life of crime and would have returned to it out of desperation to support his family, but for the assistance provided by Kerr Street Ministries. John Raynor described bureaucratic obstacles faced by community-based organizations seeking to provide assistance to those in need, such as a recent Public Health Department ban on preparing food for community meals in the homes of individuals whose kitchens have not been inspected.

A Legacy for the Future: An Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy

Next on the agenda was a presentation from Dr. Joey Edwardh, Executive Director of Community Development Halton, who introduced the 25-in-5 Network's Founding Declaration and accompanying Poverty Reduction Plan for Ontario. Before discussing the details of the Plan—which has been endorsed by communities in every corner of the province, Dr. Edwardh stated that we are in “a historic moment” in which the appetite to address poverty is heightened. This is evidenced by a number of initiatives and happenings across the country and around the world: poverty reduction strategies are being developed in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, Parliamentary and Senate Committees are exploring poverty reduction alongside the social determinants of health, strong election commitments have been made by two federal parties (the Liberals and NDP), the media are raising public awareness, and the United Kingdom and Nordic countries have, by example, diffused the argument that investments in human services and poverty reduction are incompatible with economic prosperity.

Dr. Edwardh went on to note that, while Ontario with a poverty rate of 14.7%, it has 44% of Canada's poor children, with 127,000 children relying on food banks monthly. In Halton, there are nine food banks and more than 1,500 people on the waiting list for community housing in 2007; 43% of tenant households spend more than 30% of their income on housing. Those most vulnerable to poverty are newcomers, racialized people, seniors (especially the ‘old old’, most of whom are women), those who have suffered abuse, and those who live with mental health issues and disabilities. She observed that in Ontario, the rate of poverty is constant, but that poverty is deepening, leading to hopelessness, alienation and violence, and that as the rich get richer and the poor poorer, we are becoming psychologically further apart, such that the poor become “other” rather than “us” (a trend exacerbated by the increasing racialization of poverty).

Dr. Edwardh then outlined the core foundations of a poverty strategy, as framed in the 25-in-5 Declaration:

1. **Sustaining employment** so that those working full-time full-year can live out of poverty
2. **Livable incomes** to provide dignity to all Ontarians, including those unable to work
3. **Strong and supportive communities**, with basic life opportunities, including affordable housing, early learning and child care, public education and ensuring stable community agencies and infrastructure

Before moving into the discussion portion of the agenda, the Honourable Margaret Best, Minister of Health Promotion, addressed participants, commenting on behalf of the Government of Ontario that “we know that poverty is a moral issue, an economic issue, an education issue, a criminal issue, a gender issue and a social issue,” continuing that “poverty is an urgent issue and poverty is everyone’s issue.”

The Minister also acknowledged the community’s concern that the development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy not become lost in the development of benchmarks and indicators.

Participants Soundings

Participants were asked to engage in group discussions and report back to the full group on the following questions:

Whether an acceptable level of progress on poverty reduction can be made with resources already in place, or if significant new investments are required?

Participants felt that additional and significant investments were needed, as well as changes in how we do things: coordination and a team approach among all levels of government; greater collaboration and efficiency in agencies and organizations; strong collective bargaining; increased eligibility for Employment Insurance; decreases in red tape; increases in stable funding to agencies and community organizations working

with those in poverty; increased investment in affordable housing, minimum wage, employment opportunities, access to education and transit; increased mentorship; increased awareness and support structures; increased funding to mental health and those with special needs. The statement “It’s time for action” was widely applauded.

Whether the 25 in 5 plan is a solid framework that the Government of Ontario should consider adopting as a starting point for its own poverty reduction plan?

All but one of the nine groups supported the 25-in-5 framework as a starting point for an Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, with groups commenting variously that the 25-in-5 needs to be accompanied by increases in transit and infrastructure; collaboration and coordination between ministries and levels of government; more communication between organizations; heightened public awareness; affordable housing; the connection between poverty and addictions and mental health issues.

The ninth group felt that the 25-in-5 framework is not yet specific enough, and that Ontario should look at the model of Nordic countries in developing its Poverty Reduction Strategy.

To identify an indicator of poverty reduction by completing the following sentence: We will know that poverty has decreased when . . .

This question allowed participants to explore indicators that could measure change both locally in neighbourhoods and communities and also provincially and federally. Groups completed this sentence with a wide variety of phrases, including the following:

- When... we see children go to school with a lunch;
- When... food banks close;
- When programs no longer support people at rates well below poverty;
- When... NGOs are no longer on burnout mode;

- When... [there are] decreased housing wait lists and social assistance caseloads;
- When... those with disabilities can live with dignity and respect;
- When... post-secondary education is a right not a privilege;
- When... people are out of the margins.

Before the session came to a close, MPP Kevin Flynn thanked participants for attending and commented that “how we treat our most vulnerable is a measure of our society.” He identified poverty reduction as being in the best interest of all Ontarians and of Ontario’s economy and competitiveness, stating “Ontario’s economy cannot afford to have a large number of people in poverty: We need everyone at the top of their game.”

The session was adjourned.

Conclusion

As noted by Dr. Joey Edwardh, the emergence of poverty onto the political agenda in Ontario has produced a “historic moment” in which meaningful progress on poverty reduction can and must be attained. With gatherings similar to those in Halton springing up across the province, communities have been seizing this moment and

stating loudly and clearly that we cannot continue down the same path—that we expect our representatives at Queen’s Park to take firm and decisive action and make a real difference in the lives of Ontario’s poor and marginalized.

At the same time, we mustn’t forget that satisfactory progress over the long-term will also require political will and corresponding investments from our Federal Government. With a Federal Election on the horizon, it is incumbent upon all of us to let our candidates know – regardless of our partisanship, that allowing our country to slide into further inequality is not only antithetical to our values as Canadians, but will also, as pointed out by MPP Kevin Flynn, have implications on the success and competitiveness of our economy.

John Versluis,
Chair, Make Poverty History,
Burlington/Halton Chapter

For more information on the 25-in-5 Declaration visit:
www.25in5.ca

For more information on the poverty reduction initiatives in Ontario visit: Poverty Watch Ontario
www.povertywatchontario.ca

For the report from the Halton Community Consultation visit: www.cdhalton.ca

To contact the Burlington/Halton Chapter of Make Poverty History visit: burlingtonmph@cogeco.ca



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

A United Way Agency

