

Creating Shared Prosperity and Leading by Example

Roles Municipal and Regional Government Can Play to Contribute to Poverty Reduction

Prepared by the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

Municipalities see the first-hand effects of poverty every day. From the growing demand on food banks to job lay-offs, the struggles and challenges of many residents hit home and impact the entire community. While a charitable response is needed to help buffer some of these impacts, there is a much greater need to examine and address systemic issues that perpetuate and keep people trapped in poverty. The root causes of poverty are complex and varied; there are many sources of vulnerability, including illness, family breakdown, precarious work, household debt, lack of affordable and adequate housing, to name a few.

While both the federal and provincial governments have significant roles to play in addressing poverty, there are important roles to be played at the local level by municipal/regional governments. Municipalities face many challenges in the provision of social infrastructure, given their much smaller tax base and shrinking federal and provincial government investments; however the enhancement of social infrastructure is just as important as physical infrastructure. For many Niagara residents, their municipality/region has become their social safety net.

Suggested Resources

- Mending Canada's Frayed Social Safety Net: The Role of Municipal Governments - https://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/Mending_Canadas_Frayed_Social_Safety_Net_The_role_of_municipal_governments_EN.pdf
- The Social Role of Local Government - <http://www.caledoninst.org/pdf/553820495.pdf>
- Government Makes a Difference: Working Together Towards Poverty Reduction - <http://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-PDFs/Reports/2009/2009AMOOMSSAPovertyReductionPaper2009Jan.aspx>

There are four key areas where municipal/regional governments can make a difference in poverty reduction: (1) leadership; (2) public policy decision making; (3) programs and services; and (4) corporate operations/culture and inter-governmental advocacy. Within each of the areas we have provided resources and practical examples of ways these ideas can be implemented, including the development of a comprehensive local poverty reduction plan to connect all of the elements and monitor progress. What is needed is the political will to lead by example.



LEADERSHIP

Municipalities have a critical role to play in mobilizing the community and convening stakeholders to address complex issues such as poverty. In the case of the City of Calgary, it was the Mayor who spearheaded the poverty reduction initiative, bringing important credibility to the work. Municipal support for championing and enabling ongoing strategy implementation is also important.

- Develop a Comprehensive Local Poverty Reduction Strategy with targets and timelines
- Direct participation in the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network
- Creation of a committee-of-council focused on poverty issues

Suggested Resources

- Municipal Action to Combat Poverty Sends Strong Message to the Federal Government - <http://www.cpj.ca/content/municipal-action-combat-poverty-sends-strong-message-federal-government>
- Enough for All - Unleashing Our Communities' Resources to Drive Down Poverty in Calgary - <http://www.enoughforall.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FinalReport-Vol1.pdf>
- Capturing Hope - Approach & Discoveries of a Multi-Sector Collaboration to Reduce Poverty in Calgary - <http://www.enoughforall.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/FinalReport-Vol2.pdf>
- Ottawa's Poverty Reduction Strategy - <http://ottawa.ca/calendar/ottawa/citycouncil/cpsc/2010/0121/04%20%20Poverty%20Reduction%20Strategy-eng.pdf>
- Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy 2014-2019: Reaching Our Potential - <https://dr6j45jk9xcmk.cloudfront.net/documents/3384/en-prs-bklt-aug-28th-approved-final-s.pdf>
- Are the Consequences of Poverty Holding Niagara Back? https://www.brocku.ca/webfm_send/23225
- A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty and the Impact on Child Health in Niagara Region - <http://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/legacy-of-poverty.aspx>
- Niagara Poverty Reduction Network– www.wipeoutpoverty.ca



PUBLIC POLICY DECISION MAKING

It is essential to develop a solid local policy framework that supports poverty reduction and social inclusion. This framework needs to consider the impacts of all local public policy decisions on the most vulnerable and ensure they are addressed accordingly. It is also important to look at existing by-laws and regulations which may contribute toward the criminalization of poverty.

- Every business plan/policy reviewed for social/environmental/economic impacts – i.e. Calgary uses a Triple Bottom Line approach to guide decision making; also a social inclusion policy/fairness filter (Fair Calgary) and a Welcoming Communities policy – see resources below
- Examine existing by-laws to determine if any “criminalize” poverty
 - I.e. Punitive bylaws and fines for fare evasion on public transit. While fare evasion (people using public transit without paying the fare) is a concern for municipalities, currently the punishment for such an infraction can be especially hard on people living in poverty. Subsidies may be available but often only through onerous processes where the outcome is far from assured. It is no surprise then that some people living in poverty will choose to ride transit without paying a fare and take their chances. The consequence of being caught is a ticket for hundreds of dollars. If they are unable to afford the fare price they are highly unlikely to pay the fine associated with the ticket. This may sound reasonable to some but it is important to consider the consequences of this action on the lives of people living in poverty and more broadly in our communities. For example, for a single mom who is working to make ends meet at a minimum wage job, being arrested for not paying a fare can lead to losing her job, which could lead to not having money to support her family, and which could lead to Child Welfare taking custody of her children. Avoiding the above scenario is in everyone’s best interest. Instead of expensive and time consuming fare evasion policies, communities would be better served by finding mechanisms to support low income transit passes for all people living in low income.

Suggested Resources

- Triple Bottom Line Policy and Policy Framework: <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/cmo/Pages/Triple-Bottom-Line.aspx>
- Fair Calgary Policy: <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/city-clerks/Documents/Council-policy-library/csps019-Fair-Calgary-Policy.pdf>
- Welcoming Community Policy: <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Research-and-strategy/Welcoming-community-policy.aspx>
- Criminalization of Poverty - http://owjn.org/owjn_2009/jasons-test-submenu-page/62
- Don’t Crack Down on the Poor in Hamilton’s Core - <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/don-t-crack-down-on-the-poor-in-hamilton-s-core-poverty-advocates-1.2698674>



PROGRAMS/SERVICES

The provision of a range of programs and services that serve to reduce poverty is an important part of the social safety net. In Niagara, we are fortunate to have investment from Niagara Region for the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. Customer service standards are also key to reducing disrespect and the stigma of poverty.

Community Hubs

- The creation of community hubs could provide a variety of programs and services including childcare, community gardens, mobile health services, civic services, justice services, library services, recreation and arts programming, community kitchens, financial literacy, social services, youth, family, and seniors programming, immigration services and more. Such centres can also provide local economic development as potential centres of community economic development activity.

Transportation

- Integrated regional transit system with expanded hours and reach
- Subsidized or no cost bus passes for those with limited incomes and no coverage
- Increase time limits of ticket usage (i.e. a ticket is good for a three hour window)

Child Care/Recreation

- Increased subsidized child care
- Flexibility of child care options – shift workers need supports outside of 9-5 jobs
- After school programming (3-6pm)
- Recreation fee assistance

Housing

- Property tax payment assistance
- Work with private business on the development of more affordable housing options, including rental units, supportive housing, etc
- Inclusionary Zoning - Develop housing zones where a percentage of any new housing development would be made into affordable housing (currently not mandatory, but could ask developers to do so voluntarily)
- Earmark a percentage of fees from housing developers toward repairs of affordable housing and/or new units – or waive fees as an incentive for developers to build % of new affordable housing
- Strengthen and enforce by-laws and codes around the health and safety of buildings used for low-income housing



- I.e. - Have a good look at city by-laws around private homes and/or landlords that house five people or more per residence; also more specific standard of care, such as nutritional meals, hot running water, accountability to city for new set standards. We have many people across Niagara who are living and paying, at market value, for basic needs that are not being met, including food, heat, medical supports, and a safe and secure environment. Municipalities need to take a serious look at our property by-laws so as landlords are made accountable.

Customer Service Practices

- There are many holds, suspends, and denials of necessary (though discretionary) items by municipalities, often times for budgetary reasons, but other times for punitive reasons (e.g. not meeting participation agreement quota). The municipalities must take the punitive elements out of their customer service roles in delivering social supports.
- There are practices that can be engaged by the municipalities to stop threatening people's income and livelihoods for what appears to be administrative or compliance issues. If your employer has an issue about something you are doing or not doing in your job, they have no right to suspend or delay your pay cheque, to "encourage" or otherwise, get compliance. Why should people on Ontario Work (OW) be any different? Taking away their only income will only exacerbate the situation.

Suggested Resources

- Niagara Prosperity Initiative - <http://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/niagara-prosperity-initiatives.aspx>
- A Home for All: Niagara's 10-Year Community Action Plan to Help People Find and Keep Housing - <http://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/action-plan/>
- Finding Common Ground: Reducing Community Resistance to Infill, Affordable & Supportive Housing - <http://www.focus-consult.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/FCG-Final-Mar-28.pdf>
- Growing Roots, Strengthening Neighbourhoods - <http://hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca/leadership/strengthening-neighbourhoods/>
- Affordable Transit Pass Program in Hamilton - <http://www.hamilton.ca/HealthandSocialServices/SocialServices/SupportPrograms/AffordableTransitPass.htm>
- Program Subsidy Supports (transit, recreation, etc) - <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Neighbourhood-Services/Programs-and-services-for-low-income-calgarians.aspx>
- Strong Neighbourhoods Initiative - <http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Pages/Strong-Neighbourhoods/Strong-Neighbourhoods-Initiative.aspx>



CORPORATE OPERATIONS/CULTURE AND INTER-GOVERNMENTAL ADVOCACY

Municipalities have a key role to play by influencing the community through their substantial power as both a significant local employer, as well as through their substantial purchasing power. They also hold close ties with local businesses and can exercise their influence in engaging the business sector in poverty reduction beyond charitable responses. A deeper understanding of the root causes of poverty, as well as the experience of poverty is very important. Working with all levels of government to advance poverty reduction is essential. Advocate for social infrastructure investments.

Business/Wages

- Corporations are major employers and major buyers – implementation of an ethical purchasing policy which use a variety of factors, including social and environmental
- Encourage living wage policies within municipal/regional government, within their supply chain, and also with the private business sector – engage them in conversations about poverty issues, the role they can play (Shared Value/Council of Champions from the business community)

Culture

- Education on the root causes of poverty/sources of vulnerability to poverty with internal staff, politicians, as well as a community strategy to engage the broader public – The Niagara Poverty Reduction has a presentation available
- Anti-oppression training for all internal staff, politicians - Anti-Oppression work seeks to recognize the oppression that exists in our society and attempts to mitigate its affects and eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities.
- Ensure the voices of people who live in poverty are heard on issues impacting them
- Work with local front-line social service agencies on civic engagement/participation strategies with people who live in poverty
- Ensure availability of polling stations in lower income neighbourhoods, on bus routes

Increase Inter-Governmental Advocacy on Poverty Issues

- All levels of government have an important role to play in addressing poverty. Work with local MPPs and MPs to advocate for solutions
- Advocate for a comprehensive federal anti-poverty plan to coordinate with provincial and municipal strategies; adequate social assistance rates; dental/drug/vision benefit coverage for all low income families/individuals
- Advocate for greater investments in affordable housing builds and repairs and to reverse cuts to social housing - <http://housing4all.ca/the-problem>
- Advocate for the correction of funding formula inequities that are directly impacting mental health services, homelessness services, and more in Niagara



Suggested Resources

- Sustainable, Ethical and Environmental Purchasing Policy (SEEPP) - <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/fs/Pages/Policies/Sustainable-Environmental-and-Ethical-Procurement-Policy-SEEPP/Sustainable-Environmental-and-Ethical-Procurement-Policy-SEEPP.aspx>
- Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace - <http://www.calgary.ca/CS/HR/Pages/Inclusion.aspx>
- Useful Concepts in Anti-Oppression – http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/24815_9781412922688_Ch2.pdf
- Creating Cultural Competency – Customizable Training and Workshops - <http://www.competenceconsultants.com/>
- Ontario Budget 2014: Fostering a Fair Society - <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2014/bk3.html>
- Living Wage Canada – <http://www.livingwagecanada.ca/>
- Feasibility of Adopting Living Wage Initiative (City of St Catharines) - <https://stcatharines.civicweb.net/Documents/DocumentDisplay.aspx?Id=21036>
- Fair Wage Policy: City of Hamilton - <http://www.hamilton.ca/CityDepartments/CorporateServices/Procurement/FairWagePolicyandSchedule.htm>
- Make Hamilton a Living Wage Community - <http://livingwagehamilton.ca/wp/>
- Dignity for All: A Campaign Calling for a Federal Anti-Poverty Plan - <http://dignityforall.ca/>

