

Opportunities Niagara – Untying the Knots, Connecting the Dots

How do comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives contribute to poverty reduction? The six Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities are experimenting with a variety of approaches. This series documents their experiences. For each Trail Builder, an initial story will present the key ideas guiding its work: how local partners understand poverty, the role they can play in reducing poverty, their goals and the core strategies to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and adjustments. Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative in which representatives from 15 urban centres have come together to explore local solutions to poverty. Trail Builder initiatives will provide insights that fuel the learning within Vibrant Communities and with others interested in the role that collaborations can play in tackling poverty.

Introduction

Prior to the introduction of Vibrant Communities in 2001, a distinct challenge faced residents of the Niagara Region in southern Ontario. No structure existed to bring together individuals and organizations from across the region's 12 member municipalities to tackle complex social and economic issues such as poverty. Coordinating efforts across these boundaries and bringing people together from the economically and socially diverse region was an ongoing challenge. Many opportunities for taking effective action on difficult issues related to poverty reduction failed to be realized because of the logistics involved in getting individuals and organizations throughout the region to work together.

Vibrant Communities activity in the Niagara Region began in February 2001 when community agency representatives met at Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold and agreed to explore the project's viability. They

were offered an introduction to Vibrant Communities by Paul Born, one of the creators of Opportunities 2000 (OP2000) in Waterloo. Paul's OP 2000 experiences had demonstrated the strength and effectiveness of working collaboratively to address issues of community vitality. OP2000 became the model for Vibrant Communities' operations.

After Paul's presentation, a small group began to develop a model of possible strategies for Niagara and spent the next nine months gathering input and soliciting support for the initiative. They made presentations to more than 75 community and municipal agencies, including the Regional Municipality's Community Services Department. Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold agreed to act as the convenor organization for the newly named "Opportunities Niagara." In November 2001, a strategic plan was approved by the working group and presented to the Region of Niagara.

In June 2002, the Niagara Regional Council agreed to enter a partnership agreement with Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold to operate the new initiative, also donating \$75,000 in start up funding. Peter Papp from the Region of Niagara Community Services Department was appointed Project Manager, and funding was committed by several key business partners, including Algoma Central Corporation and Canadian Tire Financial Services. By September, the Opportunities Niagara Working Group had expanded to include 15 members that represented community agencies, residents and the federal, provincial and regional governments.

Opportunities Niagara partnered with the Niagara Homelessness Committee (NHC) in hosting a Community Forum and Information Trade Show in early December 2002. The

theme for the day was "Creating a Caring and Vibrant Community in Niagara." The forum's purpose was to provide an update on the NHC's work, present Opportunities Niagara as a new approach to poverty reduction and gather input for a community plan. The event was a major success: More than 150 participants and 60 agencies representing the community, business, government, labour and residents attended. In May 2004, Opportunities Niagara was officially launched and its Leadership Roundtable established.

Opportunities Niagara participants have been clear that their goal is not to establish another service provider organization in the Niagara Region. Rather, Opportunities Niagara will work with all four sectors of the community (government, residents, business, community agencies), performing the primary role of facilitator, broker and coordinator to ensure that community responses to poverty and quality of life improvement meet Niagara's needs. "Untying the knots and connecting the dots" has become the initiative's slogan.

Portrait of a region

The Regional Municipality of Niagara lies between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario and boasts the unique economic drivers of tourism, wine and the automotive industry. Its 430,000 residents live in a sprawling collection of 12 municipalities. Despite its comparatively stable economy, approximately 17 percent of the region's residents live in poverty – an increase of 30 percent over the last five years. Although tourism continues to grow, jobs in the industry tend to be lower paid than those simultaneously being lost in the manufacturing sector. Niagara has the second highest number of seniors in Canada and the highest number of refugees

claimants. In 2001, 20 percent of children in Niagara lived in poverty. Local lay-offs in a variety of manufacturing enterprises and a continual shift to low-wage service jobs have prompted some local observers to speculate that poverty levels could rise to 20-25 percent of the population in the near future.

Like many widely spread communities, a certain degree of service fragmentation has occurred within the region, reflecting different groups' needs. Few organizations exist to facilitate collaboration, especially across different sectors. The demographics and history of the Niagara Region are unique. Says Opportunities Niagara Project Manager Peter Papp: "We are of the belief that only a definition of poverty for Niagara will assist us in the development of multisectoral initiatives which can address the poverty circumstances common to people living in this region."

Understanding of poverty

Opportunities Niagara commissioned Allan Day and Associates to prepare a comprehensive report entitled *Gaining an Understanding of Poverty in Niagara*. It was developed to identify a broad range of measures and indicators of low income and economic performance of individuals and families within Niagara.

The report provides a statistical profile of Niagara, including low-income rates for member municipalities and a range of indicators including transfer payments to families and individuals, charitable donations, investment incomes and retirement savings. The report serves as an information base from which a greater understanding of poverty within Niagara can be built.

Consultations with the many groups involved in Opportunities Niagara helped the Leadership Roundtable to arrive at a definition of poverty as:

- lack of access to, or control of, resources
- lack of access to basic infrastructure and services
- feelings of powerlessness, voicelessness, dependency and social humility
- experiencing barriers to maintaining cultural identity.

In Niagara, many forces combine to keep people from realizing their potential. These include the lack of:

- affordable housing
- adequate employment and suitable employment with sustainable incomes
- skills training, upgrading, training, skills accreditation
- affordable and flexible childcare
- Niagara-wide affordable public transportation
- tools and programs to surmount language barriers
- support services to address the needs of individuals and families
- community involvement, understanding and knowledge about poverty
- adequate health care benefits for low-income families and individuals
- a rapidly growing and aging population coupled with ongoing youth out-migration
- an emerging knowledge-based economy in conjunction with a faltering manufacturing sector.

Opportunities Niagara has identified a variety of groups within the community that are

facing particularly severe challenges with respect to poverty including:

- unemployed youth 16-24 years of age
- Ontario Works clients (single families and youth)
- low-income families
- older workers (45 years and up)
- people with mental and physical disabilities (i.e., Ontario Disability Support Program recipients)
- recent immigrants who are under-employed and underutilized as a result of complicated and expensive accreditation processes.

The response

Opportunities Niagara members seek comprehensive solutions to the issues faced in the region. An example of the approach was the establishment of a Long Term Shelter Committee. This group continues to focus on finding transitional and long-term housing for single adults who have had a long history of mental illness and addictions. The work also includes the provision of key support services such as counselling and skills upgrading. Under the direction of St. Catharines Mayor Tim Rigby (who is also a Leadership Roundtable member) and co-chaired by Peter Papp, the committee has helped place 45 adults in suitable housing and has linked them to employment opportunities.

The Leadership Roundtable (LRT) plays a pivotal role in shaping Opportunities Niagara's approach to poverty reduction. Collectively, LRT members understand that the poverty reduction process is complex and that they must weave their response using many different threads of activity. The generally accepted understanding of the process is

that they need to remove or reduce the multiple factors contributing to poverty to make a notable impact.

Says Peter Papp: "Addressing the systemic causes of our community's poverty is the only way to provide long-term, lasting protection from the ills associated with it. The format of our Leadership Roundtable meetings allows us the opportunity to forge a common understanding of poverty. Each member of the collaboration brings a unique understanding of the issues associated with poverty and the processes we need to create to reduce or alleviate it."

Making change happen

Opportunities Niagara's region-wide goal is to help 2,000 households move out of poverty and improve their quality of life by 2007. Opportunities Niagara has chosen to act a mechanism for regional collaboration and problem-solving – a veritable problem-solving machine. Its key tasks are to build partnerships and to encourage and facilitate collaborative approaches that result in new policies, programs and services for countering poverty.

Opportunities Niagara is supported by a small core staff whose members also possess sound knowledge of the community, strong connections to a wide range of individuals and organizations, and skills for bringing people together to work through challenges and find solutions. An important goal is to create a sustainable organization that can play this role in Niagara on a long-term basis. One of the staff's key responsibilities is to integrate members' assets and knowledge, garner mutual cooperation among key stakeholders and report on poverty reduction projects as they evolve. While convening collaborative meetings and

conducting community presentations, they continue to provide a voice for those living in poverty.

The Opportunities Niagara work plan was developed in 2004 based on a Community and Business Plan, with input from a wide range of community stakeholders to ensure that the insights and priorities of local residents were well represented. The process itself gave stakeholders an opportunity to affirm their commitment to long-term strategies for remedying Niagara's poverty problem. The four pillars of Opportunities Niagara's work plan are to:

1. influence an audience of key stakeholders in poverty reduction – including all levels of government, the private and nonprofit sectors, and low-income residents. Opportunities Niagara members firmly believe that attitudes and misconceptions about local poverty must be systematically addressed in order that poverty reduction initiatives make real, measurable progress. Initiating a campaign of social marketing (communicating how the broader community will benefit from reducing poverty and how they can get involved) is identified as a key strategy for tackling the challenges associated with introducing *new* solutions to poverty reduction.
2. provide community support by developing and implementing multi-sectoral approaches and initiatives for poverty reduction in Niagara. The challenge is to coordinate the current and future investments of community resources, and initiate the four key thematic areas of poverty reduction – affordable housing, living wage, mental and physical health, and public education.
3. collaborate with other Niagara efforts related to overall economic, social and community development.
4. build a sustainable organizational structure supported by a multi-year budget.

Opportunities Niagara has identified itself as offering four key services: brokering and coordination, social marketing, technical assistance and coaching, and expanded access to funding and resources.

brokering and coordination

Through brokering and coordination, Opportunities Niagara seeks to establish networking systems, create innovative partnerships, share information on best practices and increase opportunities for potential funding.

This brokering and service coordination function assists organizations to become more effective in the identification, development and implementation of poverty reduction initiatives. Already, Opportunities Niagara has been successful in assisting other organizations to access and combine resources to achieve their goals.

social marketing

Social marketing entails developing a high public profile and awareness of poverty and quality-of-life issues. This function ensures that the public understands poverty, its pervasiveness, dynamics and root causes. Continuous communication with the broader community on the benefits of reducing poverty also helps to attract new supporters, partners and funders to the poverty reduction effort.

technical assistance and coaching

Opportunities Niagara's technical assistance and coaching services focus on providing information in a timely manner and helping organizations to forge mutually beneficial relationships. Staff continue to design and develop new initiatives that reduce poverty, and to monitor and evaluate program results. They also deliver organizational training, as required.

expanded access to funding and resources

Finally, Opportunities Niagara plays an important role mobilizing the resources to support poverty reduction efforts. Through its multisectoral approach and expanded connection to both national and local funding sources, the initiative seeks to secure and expand funding resources for organizations, locate funds to help pay for high impact initiatives, and match funders and organizations in order to achieve success.

The process in action

Opportunities Niagara tends to be entrepreneurial and opportunity driven in its approach, responding to practical opportunities and the need to find ways for these to move forward. One of the initiative's greatest strengths has proven to be its ability to mobilize diverse participants to engage collaboratively in poverty reduction efforts. Opportunities Niagara has involved 36 businesses, 39 nonprofit organizations, 23 government officials and two low-income leaders in its work, largely on a project-by-project basis.

Opportunities Niagara has targeted its efforts in four areas: adequate employment,

accessible transportation, affordable housing and a fourth area that provides a space for projects which meet the mandate of poverty reduction but are not limited by specific category definitions. The following examples illustrate the scope of the initiative's work.

The Job Bus

Opportunities Niagara played a role in bringing together a diverse group of local businesses, regional government representatives and community agencies to provide customized job training to long-term unemployed residents. The "Job Bus" is an effort to overcome the region's fragmented public transportation system. It has assisted up to 75 workers get to work at hotels in Niagara Falls. Says Peter Papp: "We felt it was important to demonstrate the employment outcomes possible with a more integrated, Niagara-wide transit system. We're hopeful that this project will help to leverage broader policy changes that will support people who are trying to transition into employment."

Because of its higher than regional average unemployment rate and close proximity to Niagara Falls, Port Colborne was selected as the target community for a transportation pilot project in 2005. In collaboration with an employment support agency, job seekers were prescreened for entry-level jobs with a major Niagara Falls hotel owner (Marriott). Candidates were helped to prepare for the interview process and possible work placements as room attendants, dishwashers and line cooks. A community services organization contracted with the employer to undertake on-the-job training, and an agreement was reached for the employer and employees to share the costs of providing a bus from Port Colborne to Niagara Falls.

Welland's transit system ran the Job Bus from Port Colborne and Welland to hotel employment sites in Niagara Falls from June to November 2005. The pilot project targeted single adults, families and youth (ages 16 to 23) and, in six months, saved the region \$250,000 from its Ontario Works budget.

The Job Bus pilot project was operated by a total of ten community partners. It was deemed a great success by employers, job seekers and Niagara Region and local government representatives. The project was awarded the prestigious "Community Partners Award" (sponsored by Trivial Pursuit) for its innovative and collaborative direction. Brody, Weiser, Burns – the managing firm for the Ford Foundation's Corporate Involvement Initiative – wrote a letter of commendation for the Job Bus initiative, citing it as a productive and efficient approach to enabling access to good jobs for low-income citizens.

Two major hotel chains and a Fortune 500 call centre have confirmed their interest in an expanded Job Bus service. The initiative is being scaled up to address transportation gaps for other large private sector employers, including floral distribution facilities and several more call centres.

Establishing exemplary human resources practices

Rather than focus on wage rates, the living wage challenge in Niagara is seen as part of a broader initiative to improve human resources practices generally. This includes looking for ways to provide the transportation, child care services and health care benefits workers need to get to work and maintain their employment.

Since January 2004, Opportunities Niagara has completed two discussion papers for the Region of Niagara on local poverty issues and mapped out a strategy for advancing a living wage campaign. In the spring of 2005, organizers met with a diverse group of community leaders – human resources professionals, hotel industry representatives, government, nonprofit, and business and education officials. The group discussed how to best proceed with efforts to promote exemplary human resources practices and learn more about the subject (or improve access to existing knowledge). They also reviewed how living wage campaigns have been developed in other jurisdictions.

The result of these efforts has been the creation of the Progressive Employment Relationship Committee (PERC). Members are in the process of developing a productivity and employee retention exemplary practices booklet for small- and medium-sized businesses. PERC participants see the need to provide access to resources and practical experiences that may assist businesses in the future. Scheduled for completion in the fall of 2006, the booklet will encourage employers to consider the untapped potential in populations they may not have traditionally targeted for employment: women, newcomers and underemployed populations in outlying communities.

PERC members have also begun to prepare a draft procurement or living wage by-law which they plan to present to Regional Council in the fall. Committee members are studying the effects of the living wage movement in the US and conducting facilitated meetings and open-ended discussions to help formulate the draft by-law framework. Adopting such a by-law could potentially affect contracts awarded by the regional government, ensuring

that contractor employees are paid a living wage.

One of the challenges at this time is how to arrive at a dollar value that will be acceptable to all 12 jurisdictions in Niagara and to determine what other provisions must be included in the by-law. Opportunities Niagara members are pleased that the process of formulating the proposed by-law is proceeding in an open, respectful manner and that the outcome will have a positive impact on public policy in Niagara.

“We are concerned both with maintaining a healthy workforce and a healthy economy,” says Peter Papp. “It is our intention to track the progress of some employers who pay their employees a living wage and, in this way, support or refute the claims made by US groups that paying higher wages ultimately benefits both parties. This information, along with a regional government which has already established fair wage levels, will likely result in a living wage campaign that blends voluntary and regulatory strategies.”

Brokering partnerships to build affordable housing

In 2003, Peter Papp brokered a relationship between members of Canadian Auto Workers Local 199 (CAW 199) and a non-profit housing organization. Union members volunteered the labour to build 40 units of affordable transitional housing for women living on low incomes and their children. CAW 199’s involvement is following a Habitat for Humanity model, which is based on supplementing the work of the construction industry through volunteer labour and charitable contributions. Members’ efforts will complement

overall construction and assist in potential efficiencies and savings in the amount of \$500,000. Without CAW 199’s contributed labour, the financial challenges of the project would have been severe.

On the strength of the agreement between CAW 199 and its community partner, Peter helped to secure a commitment from the province for a total of 150 affordable housing units for Niagara in 2003, up from the 50 units originally promised. That increase was the result of getting the right players to the table at the right time. Says Peter Papp: “Building strong relationships is the first ingredient in any successful undertaking. Using those relationships as a base, we have begun to effect real change in the area of affordable housing in the region. Because Opportunities Niagara is seen as non-parochial, unbiased and community driven, we are able to engage multiple sectors, draw on one another’s resources and create interrelated projects. People who normally wouldn’t work together have a chance to build new relationships. We get the work done and build new skills within our organizations at the same time.”

Creativity at its best

“Wraparound in Niagara” is an example of how Opportunities Niagara has expanded a good community practice and established a project model which will make the initiative self-sustaining. Wraparound projects are a means of coordinating care and support for an individual. They originated in Europe in the 1850s to help children with complex needs. Early Canadian Wraparound projects were generally operated by faith-based groups and child welfare agencies, but today also serve the needs of adults and people with disabilities. Wraparound in Niagara will operate by mobilizing individual citizens,

agencies, faith communities and other organized bodies to ‘wrap’ support around families and individuals.

Working with professional Wraparound staff members who have already created a similar project in Stoney Creek in the Hamilton area, Opportunities Niagara has brought together child welfare professionals from Niagara, community-based agencies and citizens to shape and facilitate a project in Niagara. This summer, Wraparound in Niagara community resource teams will be recruited in three municipalities – St. Catharines, Port Colborne and Welland; another three municipalities are being considered for inclusion in the initiative.

Says Opportunities Niagara staff member Michelle Sault-White: “Our goal was to create a project model which could be adapted for any region or municipality. We knew that the Wraparound concept was a good one, but we built a structure around it that would make it easier to communicate and establish. One of Opportunities Niagara’s guiding principles is to design initiatives that will continue to be successful after we have moved onto other projects.”

Tracking progress

Opportunities Niagara is committed to tracking the results of its work and identifying lessons that will allow for continuous improvement. It is participating in the learning and evaluation process designed for Vibrant Communities, which includes tracking key targets related to partnerships and household outcomes, and annual reflections on the theory of change guiding its work. An assessment of progress combined with lessons about the strategies employed will enable Opportunities

Niagara to make adjustments and improvements as it evolves.

In addition to these core elements of learning and evaluation, Opportunities Niagara has identified a series of indicators which will help it to know whether it is achieving the desired results:

- comparable tax filer data year over year show relative increase in income and wealth
- participation in projects by non-traditional partners (e.g., increased private sector involvement)
- increased demand for service
- recognition of Opportunities Niagara work by media, all sectors and the overall Niagara community
- success story telling
- stable and ongoing investments of resources.

Looking ahead

A possible downside of Opportunities Niagara’s opportunity-driven approach is that the initiative could invest precious time and energy on activities that are of less strategic importance for reducing poverty in Niagara in the long run. It is addressing this challenge by calling on its Leadership Roundtable members to provide ongoing strategic input with respect to the priority issues to be addressed.

A second challenge is to demonstrate the power of collaboration. In a widely dispersed region with many government, community and private sector organizations, forming partnerships and making them work is easier said than done. Building a culture of collaboration is job one. Once that happens, the sky is the limit.

Says Peter Papp: “If we cherish the quality of life we have here and if people want to live and work and play here, it is imperative to show our caring, compassion and commitment to addressing the ills associated with poverty. This will only result in a much more vibrant, healthy and more caring community. In the long run, our children and our descendants will be happy to stay here and prosper.”

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