

## ***Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction - A Theory of Change***

*Becoming a Vibrant Communities participant is a process that requires a concerted effort by the convening organization to develop its ideas on how it will bring about sustained poverty reduction.*

### ***Introduction***

Hamilton's economy suffered as a result of plant closures in the early 2000s. In 2001, Hamilton's newly amalgamated municipal government released a 20-year Economic Development Strategy which concentrated on industrial development as the key to attaining a diversified, sustainable economic base. It assumed the presence of a highly skilled, well-educated workforce. In conjunction with community partners and the Caledon Institute, the City's Department of Social and Public Health Services formulated a Social Vision which became the basis of its Social Development Strategy. Released in 2003, the Vision identified three flagship initiatives as priority areas: children and families, affordable housing and skills development.

As time passed, City of Hamilton General Manager, Community Services, Joe-Anne Priel became increasingly concerned about Hamilton's poverty profile. She took the courageous step of suggesting the City create a task force specifically to address poverty. Friend and colleague Carolyn Milne, President and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF), suggested a more holistic approach. In 2003, HCF had decided to make poverty its central issue and had designated \$3 million over four years through its Community Fund grant-making program. Completed in 2007, "Tackling Poverty Together" invited all sectors of the community to be part of HCF's new way of operating – the arts, culture, recreation, environmental groups and social services. HCF's Young Fund had been supporting Vibrant Communities efforts throughout Canada and members of its board of directors were open to the notion of creating a community problem-solving table to generate solutions and to work differently.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) was formed in 2005. Co-convened by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation, it continues to build on earlier efforts to tackle challenges to Hamilton's economic and social well-being. The City's role includes facilitating access to resources and people at the local, provincial and federal levels. HCF provides connections to groups and individuals outside the government sphere as well as day-to-day operational support – office space, technical supports and salaries. The deep commitment of these organizations – both to the work and to one another as partners in a long-term effort – was a vital element in the creation of the Roundtable.

Another element necessary for building a structure capable of advancing the work of poverty reduction was the presence of a champion. Roundtable chair and former HCF chair Mark Chamberlain is a business leader with a strong track record (Wescam, Pictorvision, Trivaris). Mark was able to speak pragmatically to members of the business community about the Roundtable and secure their interest and commitment. His community and business perspectives have helped ensure the active involvement of public, private and nonprofit members.

### *Defining poverty*

The Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and the City's Public Health and Community Services Department used low income cut-offs (LICOs) to arrive at a statistical portrait of poverty in Hamilton. "The Poverty Matrix," reported a 20 percent poverty rate, which translated to 96,000 residents living in poverty out of a total population of an estimated 484,000 [SPRC Hamilton and City of Hamilton 2005]. Poverty rates for specific populations were also calculated, including children under 14 and seniors age 65 and older (both at 24 percent), the Aboriginal community (37 percent) and recent immigrants (50 percent).

Says HRPR Director Liz Weaver: "Our use of LICOs provided Hamilton with a clear picture of the populations most affected by poverty as well as the overall number of people living with low incomes. However, since releasing these figures in 2005, the community's understanding of poverty has deepened and we are no longer satisfied with a strict income definition. We are particularly appreciative of the educative role played by *The Hamilton Spectator*. Initially involved with HCF's Tackling Poverty Together project and now members of HRPR, the newspaper's editorial board decided in 2005 to place a three-year focus on poverty. The paper's work, combined with the involvement of larger public institutions like the public and Catholic school boards, Arts Hamilton, United Way of Burlington and Greater Hamilton and Hamilton Public Library have advanced community understanding of the barriers to prosperity faced by Hamilton residents."

HRPR members have been building on the City's economic and social goals. They have taken the view that poverty has interrelated root causes which include insufficient income, employment, food security, affordable housing, accessible transportation, social inclusion and safe neighbourhoods. Early on, an overall understanding of how the work would unfold in Hamilton was shaped by a Vibrant Communities document entitled "Phases for Poverty Reduction." Four main areas of work – poverty reduction efforts, building a community base, strengthening organizational

capacity, and importing technical and financial resources – are presented as a basis for organizing change efforts. HRPR continues to be guided by this framework [Vibrant Communities 2004].

At the core, HRPR adherents believe that their efforts to work across sectors and put a strategic focus on poverty are the key ingredients required to achieve substantial and durable poverty reduction in Hamilton. They are taking a prevention rather than an alleviation focus. They are abandoning blame and inviting people on low incomes to create solutions, demonstrating a desire to work collaboratively across sectors, and placing an emphasis on innovation, risk taking and long-term change.

Members chose the aspiration “Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child,” a phrase which provides a focus for the work while allowing broad scope for creative collaboration.

### *Goals and strategies*

Between 2005 and mid-2007, the Roundtable developed three levels of strategic activity to support its primary goal of engaging as many partners as possible. HRPR itself operates at a macro or community level, working to articulate its shared poverty reduction aspirations across all sectors and to influence necessary policy and systems-level changes. The decision to focus on children and youth creates opportunities to expand the work into areas beyond that population, rippling outward to positively affect families, neighbourhoods, the larger community and future policy development. These concentric circles supporting children and youth also use an inclusion lens which recognizes the increased barriers faced by families living in poverty and residents from ethnically and racially diverse communities.

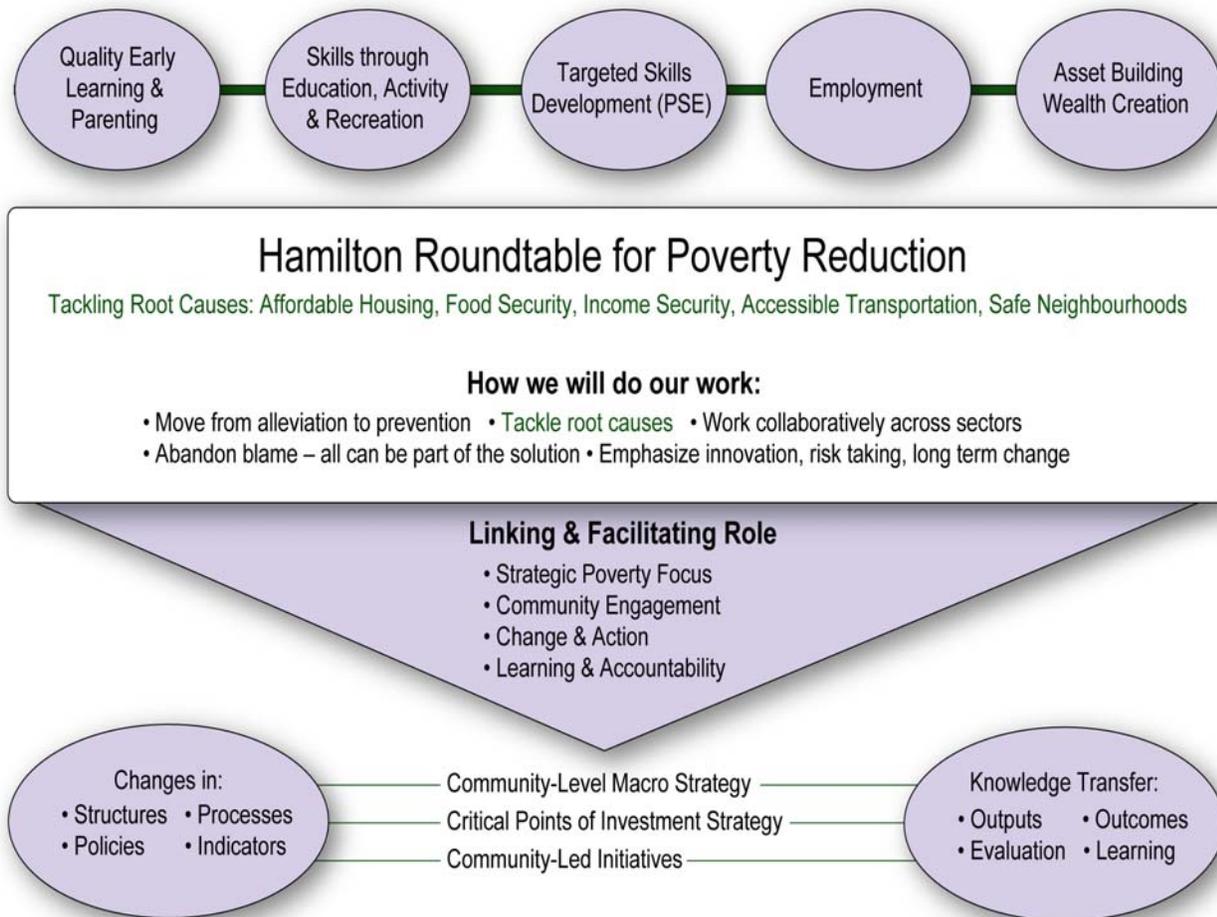
HRPR’s second strategy centres around several critical points of investment – quality early learning and child care; skills through education, activity and recreation; targeted skills development (postsecondary); employment; and asset building and wealth creation.

In each critical point of investment, the Roundtable is working with a collaborative table in the community to further define service gaps and develop plans to address the underlying problems. These collaborative tables include the Hamilton Best Start Network, the boards of education and School Aged Solutions, the Skills Development Flagship, the Hamilton Immigrant Workforce Integration Network and the Affordable Housing Flagship.

Through its Starting Point Partners, the Roundtable is connected to more than 700 organizations, businesses and government services across the community. The Starting Point Partners and Roundtable have identified shared outcomes which will have an impact on the lives of children and youth living in poverty in Hamilton.

HRPR’s third level of operation is defined by strategies and solutions that percolate up from the community level. Mohawk College, as Hamilton’s largest community college, worked with the Robert Land Community Association to build programs and services for the residents in a vulnerable neighbourhood in Hamilton’s east end.

# The Aspiration: Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child



The success of this approach, combined with recent examples of work done through Action for Neighbourhood Change<sup>1</sup> and other Vibrant Communities initiatives, led HRPR to initiate a series of consultations with community partners to investigate support for a multi-pronged neighbourhood strategy. As currently envisioned, a working group composed of citizens and key community service providers will address systems level issues. Neighbourhood Launch Pads will provide the structure for initiating work at the neighbourhood level and will include Starting Point Partners, Community Solution Partners and neighbourhood leaders. Already, five areas of the city have been suggested as possible places to begin this work. Each one has access to funding or program options, and all have benefited from a five-year Hamilton Community Foundation initiative to invest in neighbourhoods. Preliminary feedback suggests that partners see this new endeavour as complementary to HRPR’s existing neighbourhood projects and its core principles.

Says HRPR Director Liz Weaver: “The neighbourhood initiative and Launch Pad approach will provide the Roundtable with the opportunity to help get the work started, then we can withdraw and let partner organizations lead operations. We see this as our newest and most effective way of taking our framework and working it down to the community level.”

## *The role of the Roundtable*

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction's main tasks of building partnerships and keeping the community focused on poverty reduction also require that its members encourage broad community engagement. Creating safe spaces for frank discussion and working with the community to create shared goals and solutions are key elements for successful involvement. In addition, the Roundtable identifies barriers to progress and links the organizations and sectors most suited to removing them. Another task is to lever resources, attract investment and encourage the alignment of resources to support change. Finally, HRPR takes responsibility for ensuring that learning is shared broadly with the community.

Mindful of Vibrant Communities' focus on setting tangible goals for poverty reduction, HRPR members nevertheless did not initially commit to using such indicators. Says City of Hamilton's Joe-Anne Priel: "We knew that this work would rest on relationships, and we were careful to make it very clear that we would invest time up front to strengthening and extending our ties in the community. Based on the outcomes we have achieved to date, we know that the foundational relationship focus was the right way to begin the Roundtable work in this community."

As a way to build accountability and evaluation into its relationships, HRPR has begun a reporting process which regularly documents the results achieved by the Roundtable and Starting Points Partners. This regular review of activities and outcomes identifies the specific contributions HRPR has made to the work. Each partner initially meets with Roundtable members to identify service gaps within their particular area. Evaluation meetings review progress and chart future areas of work. In this way, assessment is entered into as a collaborative process where HRPR and partners can act, evaluate and course correct, identify new issues and focus on finding new solutions.

### ***Essential criteria in the Hamilton approach:***

- *co-convening organizations*
- *community leadership*
- *following the Vibrant Communities collaborative framework*
- *a stepped process which includes researching best and promising practices, building an evidence base, conducting community consultation, harnessing aspiration and developing starting point strategies.*

## *Sustainability questions*

Before the Roundtable was formed, community learning about comprehensive community initiatives – including participation in Vibrant Communities tele-learning events and investigation of the ideas expressed by community collaborations expert Jay Connor – deepened local understanding of how to address poverty in an orchestrated, multipartner, strategic way.

In its earliest days, members of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction worked to embed a sustained approach to poverty reduction into its operations, and it encouraged partners to do likewise. Shared ownership for sustaining the work is the best possible insurance of longevity.

The City of Hamilton and Hamilton Community Foundation, as convenors of the HRPR, have also made significant investments in the sustainability of its work. The City of Hamilton allocated an ongoing operations grant from its core budget and HCF committed to a four-year contribution.

During its first two years of operation, HRPR has garnered financial support from the corporate community including Pictorvision, Turkstra Lumber and Dofasco. Special project funding has been received from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Charles Johnson Charitable Fund and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Leveraging this firm foundation of support, the Hamilton Roundtable will work with Vibrant Communities and the McConnell Foundation to fully secure its Trailbuilder status. In addition, as the network of activity grows, the Roundtable will look to community partners to invest in specific outreach such as the neighbourhood strategy and in the integrated efforts of community engagement, policy change, and evaluation and learning.

## *Signs of progress*

In the June 2007 version of its Strategic Overview, HRPR summarized community impacts which resulted from its efforts and work done by its many partners. These included:

### *Impacts on individuals*

- 6,418 low-income families on welfare receive \$962,000 through the City of Hamilton return of the National Child Benefit (NCB)
- \$5.9 million dollars invested annually in poverty reduction efforts by HCF, United Way of Burlington and Greater Hamilton, and the City of Hamilton
- new services established in low-income neighbourhoods, including a health centre in the Keith neighbourhood and an early learning and parenting centre in the Beasley neighbourhood
- eight partnerships developed to support an at-risk school in Hamilton. Partners include *The Hamilton Spectator*, Kiwanis Club of Greater Hamilton, Hamilton Community Foundation, Hamilton Police Service, Hamilton Port Authority (and partners) and Mark's Work Warehouse.

### *Working together*

- 60 community-led, poverty-focused solutions are initiated
- four organizations establish youth advisory committees and include the involvement of youth living in poverty – the City, HRPR, Hamilton’s Centre for Civic Inclusion and Building a Resilient Community by Engaging Youth
- five community collaborative networks representing more than 300 private and public organizations join HRPR to drive change for children, youth and their families living on low income.

### *Policy and systems change*

- municipal policy change efforts focus on poverty – including support for the return of the NCB clawback to welfare families, progress on work to adopt a living wage procurement policy and the adoption of a low income tenant tax rebate program
- an Ontario Poverty Strategy is proposed by HRPR’s policy working group
- HRPR is recognized as a community problem-solving model by municipal, provincial and federal government leaders, national and international foundation leadership, and several Canadian municipalities.

General Manager, Community Services Joe-Anne Priel, in a recent speech to federal government partners in Ottawa, reflected that much of the work being accomplished in Hamilton is not captured by statistics or reports, but rather is felt in the increased positive energy, trust and conversational shifts being heard and felt every day in her city.

Says HCF President and CEO Carolyn Milne: “The Roundtable’s policy committee recently released a poverty position paper which it shared with all local electoral candidates and party leaders.<sup>2</sup> The City’s decision to endorse this report and take a formal position on the issue in preparation for the upcoming election would have been inconceivable even two years ago. It captures the multiple levels of change we are now able to effect through the Roundtable and is a measure of the seriousness and commitment of everyone involved.”

*Anne Makhoul*

### **Endnotes**

1. Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was a pan-Canadian initiative that involved national and local partners in revitalizing and improving the quality of life in five selected neighbourhoods. Financed by five federal government partners, the project partners included United Way-Centraide Canada, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the National Film Board of Canada. Local United Way partners from Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Halifax convened representatives from diverse sectors in an effort to revitalize the selected neighbourhoods in their cities. Operating from February 2005 to March 2007, ANC provided a legacy of important learning about community development which can be accessed at: [www.anccommunity.ca](http://www.anccommunity.ca)

2. On October 3, 2007, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction released a call to candidates in the Ontario Provincial Election to commit to an Ontario Poverty Strategy which includes four key recommendations:

- Establish an interministerial secretariat on poverty reduction
- Establish a multisectoral provincial panel on poverty reduction
- Develop measurable targets and a timeline to reduce poverty in Ontario
- Invest the resources and create the necessary policies to reduce and prevent poverty.

## References

Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and City of Hamilton Public Health and Community Services Department. (2005). "Hamilton Poverty Matrix – Estimated Number of People Living in Poverty." Hamilton: Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, August.

Vibrant Communities. (2004). "Phases for Poverty Reduction." Waterloo: Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement. [www.tamarackcommunity.ca](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca)

*Other Caledon community stories which focus on Hamilton initiatives:*

*Community Snapshot: Hamilton's Mohawk College Builds its Community Partnerships (October 2007)*

*Community Snapshot: Hamilton's Best Start Network (October 2007)*

*Community Snapshot: The Hamilton Spectator's Focus on Poverty (October 2007)*

*Hamilton's "One Book, One City: Tackling Poverty Through the Arts" Project (September 2007)*

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