

Bold Solutions for Tackling Poverty in Waterloo Region

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

Waterloo Region has the distinction of being the birthplace of the Vibrant Communities concept. Between 1997 and 2000, a Millennium project known as Opportunities 2000 (OP2000) gave community partners the chance to try out a new way of tackling poverty – a comprehensive approach based on the power of combined thought and action. Joined by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, the initiative garnered awards and created interest across the country. As Paul Born, Mark Cabaj and Louise Kearney moved on to consolidate their OP2000 learnings into a framework for Vibrant Communities, organizers in Waterloo Region underwent a year-long organizational shift. Renamed Opportunities Waterloo Region (Opportunities) in 2002, the revitalized initiative has built a solid relationship base and moved into many new areas of activity.

Welcome to the Region

Waterloo Region is composed of three small cities (Waterloo, Kitchener and Cambridge) and four rural townships (North Dumfries, Wilmot, Woolwich and Wellesley). It has a combined population of 478,121 [Statistics Canada 2008], a number which is actually closer to 507,000 when taking into account the area's considerable postsecondary student population [Region of Waterloo nd].

Situated an hour's drive southwest of Toronto, the Region supports two universities, a vibrant insurance industry and more than 350 high-tech companies. It receives the fourth largest number of new Canadians by municipality. Despite its healthy economy and well-established tradition of neighbourhood

support, the area's poverty rate is a sizeable 10.2 percent [Statistics Canada 2007]. Poor individuals and families in Waterloo Region have seven times less than the average regional household income.

Fortunately, the Regional government has demonstrated strong commitment to address the problem of poverty and its impact on citizens. Two representatives from the Region are members of Opportunities Waterloo Region's Leadership Roundtable, which provides recommendations and guidance regarding the initiative's operations. The Region's Public Health and Social Services departments have both been proactive in involving the community in their decision-making processes. They are exploring the development of Living Wage policies and continue to focus efforts on affordable housing, food security, and poverty and health.

Waterloo Region is also fortunate to have numerous networks that address social issues, including the Child Care Network; Alliance for Children and Youth; Community Safety and Crime Prevention Council; Literacy Network; Employment Service Provider Network; Housing and Homelessness Umbrella Group (HHUG); Waterloo Region Shares (emergency food assistance); Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network; Waterloo Region Active Living Network; and the Community Garden Network.

Two Social Planning Councils and the two United Way organizations which serve the Region's communities are actively involved in poverty reduction, though they have not developed a combined approach to the issue. The United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries, for example, is planning to implement two neighbourhood projects which will focus on poverty reduction and improving residents' quality of life. United Way Kitchener-Waterloo and the Townships of Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich is beginning to help fund Opportunities Waterloo Region and other community groups that undertake poverty reduction and prevention work.

A definition of poverty

The Opportunities Leadership Roundtable members ground their work in the concepts embedded in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), a framework developed in the 1990s by the UK Department for International Development. SLA provides Opportunities with a way to think and talk about the complexities of poverty and then act comprehensively. It provides a set of principles that act as a guide for acting and planning at the individual, family and household levels.¹

SLA divides an individual's assets into five main areas: human, social, physical, personal and financial.² Strengths must be established or increased in each of the asset areas for a sustainable livelihood to be achieved and maintained, though it is not necessary to tackle all areas simultaneously. Change in one asset will usually affect one or more areas. For example, the value of recreation can be assigned to human, social and personal assets but one area is generally chosen as the basis for action.

The Opportunities Leadership Roundtable (LRT) decided upon a definition of poverty that was in line with the beliefs and principles of their community, and that aligned well with the Sustainable Livelihoods and Vibrant Communities approaches. They chose a definition that sets individual or family needs within the context of the community:

Poverty occurs when individuals and families lack financial and other resources needed to achieve a sustainable standard of living. That standard allows for all needs to be met while maintaining dignity, safety, well-being and participation in the life of the community.

– Opportunities Waterloo Region Leadership Roundtable

Two further definitions guide the work. Poverty reduction includes those interventions which provide opportunities to build assets in one or more of the five SLA asset areas. Poverty prevention centres around activities which either assist people in breaking the cycle of poverty or prevent them from becoming poor in the first place.

In its 2008 Action Plan, Opportunities makes clear the distinction between personal and social responsibility for poverty: “It is possible for an individual to have personal responsibility, taking action such as upgrading education or performing a job search. However, social responsibility is lacking in cases where jobs do not pay a living wage or affordable child care is unavailable or there is inadequate support for welfare-to-work transitions. Furthermore, when accidents lead to injury, poverty should not be the result. This is a failure of social responsibility.”

Aspirations

Opportunities Waterloo Region’s mission is to ignite community action and leadership to create bold solutions that reduce and prevent poverty through collaboration, advocacy and education. It seeks to build on existing assets and thereby increase the community’s capacity to do more while sustaining work already under way. Opportunities acts as a regional convener – a community connector and support organization. It facilitates poverty prevention and reduction efforts by providing opportunities for the community to generate ideas and take action.

Words to guide the work

A vision was developed in 2001 by the Leadership Roundtable and participants believe that it holds true today.

A Community of Opportunity! We have a vision of a caring community with social and economic well-being for all where people care about each other, children are cherished, diversity is valued, food, housing and health care are secure and affordable, employment is meaningful and adequately compensated, education and training are available life long, and opportunities for participation in community life are accessible and abundant.

It takes an entire community to make this vision a reality. Residents, businesses, and voluntary and public sector organizations create innovative opportunities and solutions.

We all have a part to play.

Opportunities Waterloo Region will assume three key roles – network facilitator, policy research and communications strategy lead, and project management. It is important to note that Opportunities staff see project management as an interim activity only. Opportunities may choose to launch and manage new initiatives, but by also acting as a community support organization, its members seek to turn over emerging projects to existing or newly-created groups as soon as the work can be managed effectively.

More remains to be done to improve collaboration and cooperation among networks, groups and organizations. Currently, there is little coordinated effort to address poverty reduction and prevention, and related policy issues. Opportunities organizers hope to inspire people now working in isolated networks to collaborate more effectively.

Approach

Opportunities organizers have identified several goals to guide their work and diverse strategies by which those goals will be realized. Its work has the potential to positively affect the life of every person living with low income.

Opportunities Waterloo Region will continue to be guided by the blending of Sustainable Livelihoods Approach and Vibrant Communities principles. The SLA principles state that the work should remain:

- *people-centered* – focusing on what matters to project beneficiaries
- *dynamic* – flexible, but able to make long-term commitments
- *responsive and participatory* – people on low income are key actors in identifying and addressing priorities
- *multi-level* – working with the grassroots, at the institutional level and with everyone in between
- *conducted in partnership* – with public and private sectors
- *sustainable* – finding a balance among the economic, institutional, social and environmental elements of sustainability.

Vibrant Communities' key operating principles require convener organizations to focus on:

- *establishing a multisector collaboration*
OP2000 helped the community to learn the value of working together to address poverty issues. Opportunities Waterloo Region is building on this history and continues to add representation from the four standard Vibrant Communities sectors – government, nonprofit, business and people living in poverty – as well as by inviting and including participation from education and faith groups.
- *comprehensive thinking and action*
For Opportunities organizers, comprehensiveness includes three elements. First, it is about trying to effect a wholesale change in societal attitudes toward people living in poverty. If achieved, deep and durable poverty reduction outcomes will result and policy decisions will be based on the needs of people living under difficult circumstances. Second,

comprehensiveness means working simultaneously on community projects, community partnerships and systems change. To that end, Opportunities will try to develop a better alignment of existing community networks. By aligning priorities, energy, funds and creativity can be freed up and a regional focus can strengthen and deepen the impact of poverty reduction and prevention initiatives. Third, participants hope that the strength of the blended SLA and Vibrant Communities approach will prove its effectiveness and become a widely recognized tool for change. To this end, Opportunities will track how many organizations adopt all or a portion of the SLA model in their operations.

- *community asset and strength building*
Opportunities will build on existing strengths. It will bolster community capacity, increase and enhance partnerships among groups, organizations and networks, and advance policy solutions which meet the needs of individuals and families. Participants will continue to work towards increasing and building individual, family and community assets by working comprehensively across all five asset areas.
- *community learning and change*
Increases in funding from Vibrant Communities and the United Way of Kitchener-Waterloo will allow Opportunities to create more learning opportunities.
- *poverty prevention and reduction*
Poverty prevention has not been a strong area of focus, to date, within the Vibrant Communities network and Opportunities Waterloo Region organizers feel it is an area which bears more examination and dissemination. For example, research shows that providing recreation to all youth builds self-esteem and community involvement, which helps prevent poverty by reducing school dropout rates and promoting positive youth development.

By integrating these principles with effective interventions in their community, Opportunities Waterloo Region will address the root causes of poverty in a comprehensive way.

Capacity

Opportunities Waterloo Region operates on three levels. A Leadership Roundtable (LRT) acts as forum for discussing and defining local poverty issues, identifying potential strategies for addressing them and acting as the creative hub around which the initiative revolves. A Board of Directors is the fiduciary agent and paid staff members are charged with acting on the advice of the LRT and Board.

Leadership Roundtable: currently has 18 members composed of leaders from the Regional government's Public Health and Social Services departments, funders, educational representatives, nonprofit organizations, business, people on low incomes, Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries, and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The LRT is looking for ways to increase representation from the business community and anticipates that the release of its recently completed community plan will assist in this effort.

Board of Directors: currently has seven members.

ALIV(e): Awareness of Low Income Voices was founded in 2007 by Opportunities in order to hear the issues, experience and concerns of people living on low income. The group has developed a frame of reference for its operations and identified priorities for action. Hoping to grow its membership past the five people currently involved, members have nonetheless participated in many events – including provincial consultations and community conversations – to ensure that the voices of people living on low income are heard. Three ALIV(e) members sit on the Leadership Roundtable.

Staff and other key social assets: Five paid staff members – the Executive Director, Project Manager, Project Coordinator, Administrative Coordinator and Executive Assistant – manage Opportunities Waterloo Region’s operations. A bookkeeper and Community Conversation Coordinator are employed on a contractual basis. Plans are in the works to secure funding to hire a Project Developer. In addition, a partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University’s Community Research in Action (CRA) team is providing access to PhD students and two Master of Social Work students to identify policy issues faced by people living on low income. Two Renison College students will work with ALIV(e) and assist with the CRA policy research. Two individuals have been placed for eight months with Opportunities Waterloo Region through Employment Ontario’s Job Creation Project Partnerships. One will assist with marketing and promotions for the Social Purchasing Portal; the other will help coordinate special events.

Partnerships are the lifeblood of every Vibrant Communities endeavour. Opportunities Waterloo Region distinguishes between partnerships – where members assume responsibility for actively directing or promoting initiatives – and contributors. While contributors help with poverty reduction or prevention efforts and may provide information and attend meetings, they play a less active role in the network. Opportunities staff members maintain an ongoing register of potential partners with whom they continue to develop contacts and relationships. Currently, Opportunities lists 57 partners, 103 contributors and 23 potential partners in its work. The 160 partners and contributors are distributed by sector as follows:

- business 51
- education 2
- faith 14
- government 22
- nonprofit 38
- other 33

By jurisdiction, Opportunities draws 11 national, eight provincial and 141 regional partners and contributors.

Opportunities organizers are now reviewing various strategies for deepening the involvement of its business contacts, particularly as potential members of its Leadership Roundtable. To date, business contacts have provided assistance in program operations, but Opportunities hopes to harness the energy and influence of key business leaders who will champion poverty reduction and attract others to the work. Toughening economic times require a concerted community effort to built vitality. The voice of business can lend strength and credibility to the effort.

Specific strategies

The strategies by which Opportunities Waterloo Region will fulfill its goals of igniting community action and creating bold solutions to poverty prevention and reduction were chosen on the basis of their ability to fill current gaps in the community. Each strategy description includes an estimate of the number of people Opportunities hopes to affect, except in cases where regional or provincial baseline figures are unavailable. A complete listing of strategy indicators by which the initiative will measure its progress can be found in Opportunities' community plan [MacKeigan 2008].

Opportunities Waterloo Region has chosen four key areas around which it will design strategies: including the voice and experiences of those living with low income; advocating for social policy change at all levels of government; increasing the impact of the local community system; and creating a shift in societal attitudes towards people living in poverty.

1. Hearing the low income voices

With financial, administrative and facilitation support from Opportunities, ALIV(e) will become self-directed, actively involved with educating its members and communities about initiatives aimed at preventing and reducing poverty. It is hoped that members will contribute more actively to Opportunities' work and develop projects of their own. Ideally, more of them will join the LRT and the Board of Directors. In the interim, a Bachelor of Social Work student will help ALIV(e) members refine their goals and facilitate meetings while preparing members to take over that responsibility. ALIV(e) and Opportunities will prepare joint election awareness campaigns, educating low-income residents about party platforms and candidates, and encouraging them to vote. Members also wish to create a media bureau – a group of volunteers that can be relied upon to supply information and real-life experiences to media contacts that may be preparing stories about poverty.

Impact: Opportunities expects to have 15 ALIV(e) members in year 1, 30 in year 2 and 50 in year 3.

2. Advocating for social policy changes

Opportunities' Community Conversations Series (CCS) – entering its seventh season – showcases work being done in the community. Since its inception, it has provided attendees with networking and learning experiences, given them access to research and innovative solutions, and built up its own community of participants. Always looking to provide a values-added experience, speakers' remarks are followed by table discussions or question and answer periods. This gives participants a chance to explore how the topic affects their work or life and to share solutions and perspectives.

A January 2008 CCS presentation revealed a deep concern about social inclusion and human rights. Opportunities summarized the learning with an understanding that policy development and implementation – at whatever level – should adopt a framework for ensuring that the values of social inclusion, dignity and integrity of the individual are at the heart of policy development. This insight provided the impetus for Opportunities to place a greater emphasis on efforts to influence the development of regional, provincial and national anti-poverty strategies.

A first set of poverty reduction and prevention recommendations that arose from the 2007-08 CCS will be presented to Regional Council in 2009. One key recommendation is that the Regional Council implement a Living Wage policy. Opportunities will also conduct local research in 2008-09 through its partnership with the Community Research in Action team in order to identify policies which help and hinder individuals and families working toward a sustainable livelihood.

Opportunities will work with local, provincial and national partners to ensure that all orders of government are encouraged to implement a poverty reduction strategy.

Impact: Target numbers for this work will rely on statistics generated by the Region as staff research the possibility of implementing a Living Wage strategy.

3. Increasing the impact of the local community and government systems

i) Investigating poverty issues – a local research initiative with national implications

The overall objective of this work is to advocate for a “one program, one place” approach to eliminate barriers, disincentives and duplication in the current welfare system. The many programs available are difficult to access because they operate independently of one another and have no central access point. Moreover, welfare programs such as Ontario Works do not provide an income above the low income cut-off, guaranteeing poverty for its recipients. Improvements can be made in the lives of welfare recipients if programs work in support of one another, if the transition to paid employment is supported, and if the benefit levels are raised. For Opportunities Waterloo Region, the first step is determining which policies are negatively affecting the lives of those with low incomes. Other social policy issues will be researched as the research determines.

Wilfred Laurier University’s Community Research in Action Team (CRA), the Region of Waterloo and a number of community partners will take one year to research policies affecting people on low incomes. The CRA and partners will conduct a document review and key informant interviews. In the second year, the research findings will be brought to the attention of the local community and policy-makers at all levels. Findings will be evaluated in order to decide which specific policies the partners can influence.

Impact: Specific numbers will be determined as research initiatives evolve and policy changes are implemented.

ii) increasing the partnerships and capacity of the local networks

Opportunities members have started a dialogue among representatives of local networks – each with their own level of emphasis on poverty – in order to begin to work together more effectively. Within the next year, they hope to develop a joint communication strategy for poverty reduction and advocacy, including a sustainability mechanism to ensure continued dialogue and action. The second year of the initiative will focus on broadening the network and providing opportunities for groups to come together. By the third year, Opportunities anticipates that the group will be in a position to identify and fill gaps in the area of poverty prevention or reduction advocacy. (The networks Opportunities hopes to include in this effort were listed in the Introduction.)

Impact: The community capacity to effect change will be enhanced.

iii) increasing access to recreation for all youth

Improving access to community resources – particularly youth recreation – has been an area of focus for Opportunities Waterloo Region for the past two years. Among the root causes and consequences of poverty is a lack of recreational opportunities for low-income young people (ages 6-18) to build skills, self-esteem and civic engagement through participation in sports, arts, hobbies and a range of positive activities. Such engagement reduces school drop-out rates, a key to preventing poverty. Barriers include financial resources, the stigma associated with subsidized programs, diverse cultural norms, inadequate transportation and lack of information. By contrast, user-friendly registration procedures; more no-fee or low-fee activities; more activities that are youth-identified, initiated and led; improved transportation options; programming which recognizes cultural differences; and secure funding make for an inclusive recreation environment.

In 2006, Opportunities began to address these issues by conducting a region-wide scan of recreational resources. It became clear that youth did not know what recreational activities were available in the community and would benefit from an online directory that provides program descriptions and locations. In 2007-08, Opportunities worked with partners to develop and implement Playscape Waterloo Region (www.playscapewr.ca).

Opportunities' next steps are to develop collaborative partnerships, including the engagement of a lead organization. Opportunities will complete and submit funding proposals to carry on the initiative. Three areas of future work have been identified: increase the partnerships among youth recreation stakeholders, deepen the research regarding access issues and engage a website host for Playscape Waterloo Region (Opportunities is currently hosting the site).

Impact: This strategy potential is to enhance the lives of all youth in the region, regardless of individual or family income. The number of visits logged to the Playscape website will provide one indication of involvement in recreation. The region is preparing the overall strategy which will include methodologies for evaluation and participation.

iv) increasing awareness of existing community resources for the low-income sector

ALIV(e) members suggested producing a website to help spread the word about new and existing assets available to people living on low incomes. In 2009, ALIV(e) members will form a multisectoral working group to plan the website design and an accompanying communications strategy. In the project's second year, group members will secure funding for the project and launch both elements. Year three will focus on producing a sustainability plan for the work.

Impact: The communication tool, once established, will provide a baseline indicator of interest in this initiative.

v) increasing affordable transportation

Affordable transportation was identified as a major barrier to youth's ability to access recreation opportunities. Both the Regional Government and the local transit authority have identified

affordable transportation as a priority. Opportunities Waterloo Region will explore its role within the stakeholder groups.

Impact: Transit user statistics generated by the Region will provide the number of low-income individuals who may benefit from this initiative.

vi) food security: increasing the capacity of the Community Garden Network

With the aim of creating a strong, sustainable community garden network throughout Waterloo Region, Opportunities – in partnership with the Community Garden Network and Waterloo Region Public Health – secured Ontario Trillium Foundation funding to hire a Community Garden Capacity Builder. Over the next 18 months, this individual will work with regional and low-income representatives to increase awareness of community garden opportunities, as well as build a community garden system – council, garden coordinators, more plot spaces – which can sustain the network over the long run. Waterloo Region currently has 39 community gardens. With sponsorship, harmonized garden policies across the region and increased awareness of the benefits of consuming locally-grown produce, Opportunities hopes to create a vigorous garden network and increase food security for low income persons.

Impact: Organizers will investigate options for establishing a garden association in order to learn more about the demographics of current gardeners.

vii) food security: neighbourhood markets

As part of its work to improve and increase community assets, Opportunities is working to create a network of sustainable neighbourhood markets. Neighbourhood “Walk to it” markets will make it easier for low-income households to purchase high-quality fresh produce. Part of the work will be to build awareness of the markets in order to ensure their long-term viability. To date, five neighbourhood market pilot projects have been launched. Once their operations have been evaluated, further plans will be considered to expand the project partnership base and secure more funding. If all goes well, funds will support more pilot markets or will provide start-up capital for 2008 partners that wish to launch their own markets with only partial support from the market collaborative.

Impact: This region-led initiative is still in the pilot phase. Preliminary indications show that the affordability of food – whether at the community markets or elsewhere – presents purchasing barriers. Project organizers are looking at ways to make local produce more accessible to people living on low incomes.

viii) increase sustainable employment opportunities

In 2006, Opportunities used Ontario Trillium Foundation funds to establish a Waterloo Region Social Purchasing Portal (SPP). This online tool – first launched in Canada in east side Vancouver – helps employers and potential employees to link up. Results show that this type of social marketing increases cooperation among businesses, suppliers, employment agencies and individuals that face challenges to employment – all while supporting local businesses and communities. Waterloo Region’s SPP currently has 40 businesses and six employment agencies listed. Over the next year, Opportunities will work to recruit

more businesses to the site. A governance structure and sustainability plan will be developed – in particular, an SPP host will be identified. The portal website and marketing materials will be redesigned, incorporating both the changes to the employment service sector and to promote corporate social responsibility. Opportunities will also explore the possibilities of the employment service providers using a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach tool in their assessments process.

Impact: In year one, organizers hope to broker 18 more job placements. Some of the 40 businesses currently involved are inactive and will be replaced. Opportunities hopes to maintain a roster of 40 committed businesses.

ix) explore the use of the SLA as an employment assessment tool

The local employment service provider agencies are undergoing reorganization as directed by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Preliminary discussions have been initiated to investigate how the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach could be used in individual assessments for employment.

Impact: Specific numbers will be determined after community feedback has been received and a decision has been made to further explore this question.

4) *Creating a shift in societal attitudes towards people living in poverty*

Given the central importance of this effort, Opportunities will try to incorporate the goal of shifting attitudes into every facet of its operations. Over the past year, 26 national partners including Vibrant Communities Canada, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and Community Foundations of Canada have met four times to explore how they can work together to shift societal attitudes (www.igloo.org/shiftingattitudes123).

To specifically address the issues, Opportunities has developed a three-year plan. Year one will see the development of a comprehensive long-term national plan and the engagement of 20 more national partners. One local event will be held to highlight the issue of attitudes. In year two, the national plan will be completed, efforts to increase government awareness at all levels will continue and presentations will be made at the municipal level. Year three will see the plan's implementation.

Impact: This work is too far-reaching and involves too many influences and partners for its effects to be ascribed to any one organization. Opportunities Waterloo Region members believe that their community will continue to keep a clear focus on building community vitality and, far from retreating from the current economic storm, believe that the region will pull together to help its weakest members.

Signs of Progress

Opportunities Waterloo Region has been tracking progress in all areas of its works and has achieved significant gains. These have included record numbers attending the 2007-08 Opportunities' Community Conversations Series, and an increased interest in poverty prevention and reduction across the province as evidenced by the forthcoming Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy and its attendant community

consultations. Local initiatives have prospered, as evidenced by an increase in the number of partnerships and contacts involved with Opportunities, and the release of a regional funding plan which was developed as the next phase for the “Access to Recreation for ALL Youth” initiative.

Opportunities is also on guard for signs of trouble. In particular, Opportunities staff members believe that a lack of active partner involvement will signal a decrease in the initiative’s community presence and appeal. Competition for funding or status can stand in the way of collaboration. Opportunities’ task will be to create a working environment where participants can lay aside personal or organizational priorities and learn to work for the betterment of the whole community.

Conclusion

Secure in its experiences in community collaboration, Opportunities Waterloo Region participants are confident that the plans they have made for the next three years are based on a solid foundation of research and partnership. Ready, set... ignite!

Anne Makhoul and Mary MacKeigan

Endnotes

1. For a more complete description of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, visit www.livelihoods.org and see Section 1.1 Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets, Department for International Development (UK).
2. The SLA asset pentagon can be seen on page 17 of *Women in transition out of poverty*, 2001, at www.cdnwomen.org/PDFs/EN/CWF-WIT-asset.pdf

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