



community stories

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Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction: Setting the Table for Change

A City on the move against poverty

The poverty reduction work under way in Hamilton is nothing short of breathtaking. In the space of three years, some 900 organizations and 42,000 people have embraced a vision of hope. They have created linkages and relationships that defy lackluster volunteer participation rates reported elsewhere in Canada. A combination of inspired leadership, tradition of voluntarism and philanthropy, collaborative model for engaging diverse partners and willingness to learn from past experience have created a dynamic force for change.

Imagine youth in your community – including youth at risk – deciding to interview people about poverty while they wait for the bus at a local mall. After talking, they encourage interviewees to take out their cell phones and text someone about their ideas. At a community celebration event, some 450 people – including City managers, the Mayor, business leaders, and provincial and federal government representatives – hear about the idea from some of the youth involved, then are asked to pull out their phones and BlackBerries, and to do the same thing.

Lack of understanding about the roots of poverty and stigma associated with being poor are two of the most persistent forces working against people who live on low incomes. Hamilton has found ways to educate, include and inspire citizens in its efforts to reduce poverty and the work shows no sign of slowing down.

Hamiltonians not only want to reduce poverty in their city, they want to help create a policy environment that provides the supports people need to improve their lives. Hamilton’s civic leaders

This story is one of a series that describes work done by members of a community of practice that was established to explore community-government collaborations on policy. Funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the community of practice developed policy tracking procedures and produced a “Collaboration on Policy” manual. Visit www.caledoninst.org for more details of this 13-month initiative.

have been at the forefront of participating in the recent round of provincial talks aimed at creating an Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy. How did all of this come about?

The New City of Hamilton

Beginning in the 1990s, Hamilton's steel and heavy manufacturing industries endured downsizing and restructuring. A period of economic depression and rising poverty and unemployment levels forced municipal government and industry leaders to think about Hamilton's potential for economic diversification.

Hamilton underwent a regional amalgamation in 2001, joining with several towns of the former Hamilton-Wentworth Regional Municipality. That year, the New City of Hamilton formulated a 20-year Economic Development Strategy. An important first step, the document focused on industrial development and assumed that a highly skilled, well-educated workforce would be present.

In 2002, the City hired the Caledon Institute of Social Policy to develop a Social Vision to complement the economic vision. It would identify the essential ingredients of a healthy community from a social perspective [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002]. This document became the basis of the City's Social Development Strategy released in 2003. Children and families, affordable housing and skills development were identified as three priority areas. Both the economic and social vision documents were concerned with the overarching priority of poverty reduction.

Coming together

Despite the City's progress on several of its priority areas in the early 2000s, poverty levels remained among the highest in Ontario. When City of Hamilton General Manager, Community Services, Joe-Anne Priel reflected on this reality in 2005, she knew it was time to try something bold. Together with Carolyn Milne, President and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF), Joe-Anne helped create the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR). A Hamilton Community Foundation decision to both house and fund the HRPR gave the fledgling organization instant credibility and administrative capacity. Hamilton Community Foundation contributions for both Roundtable and subsequent neighbourhood and systems change work now stand at \$8.4 million.

In early 2006, the Roundtable defined an aspiration of "Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child." Three years later, this 42-member body, co-convened by the City and the Community Foundation, has embedded its aspiration into the consciousness of the community.

HRPR is chaired by a member of the business community. Mark Chamberlain is President of Trivaris, a commercialization firm that specializes in developing early-stage ventures. He has helped create an atmosphere that welcomes business people as essential members of the community's team effort to reduce poverty. The combination of business, government and the community sector provides an almost ideal pool from which to draw talent and inspiration. Participation by people who

Roles which define the work of the Roundtable

Adopting a Strategic Poverty Focus

- Develop a shared poverty aspiration and outcomes
- Keep the focus on strategic community change

Encouraging Broad Community Engagement

- Engage the community in creating solutions
- Ensure civic space for discussion across sectors

Supporting Change and Action

- Identify barriers that block progress and provide solutions
- Help link organizations to strategies
- Leverage resources and attract investment
- Provide administrative support to continue moving forward

Facilitating Community Learning and Communication

- Facilitate the exchange of knowledge
- Communicate to the community about poverty and change strategies
- Measure progress and report to the community

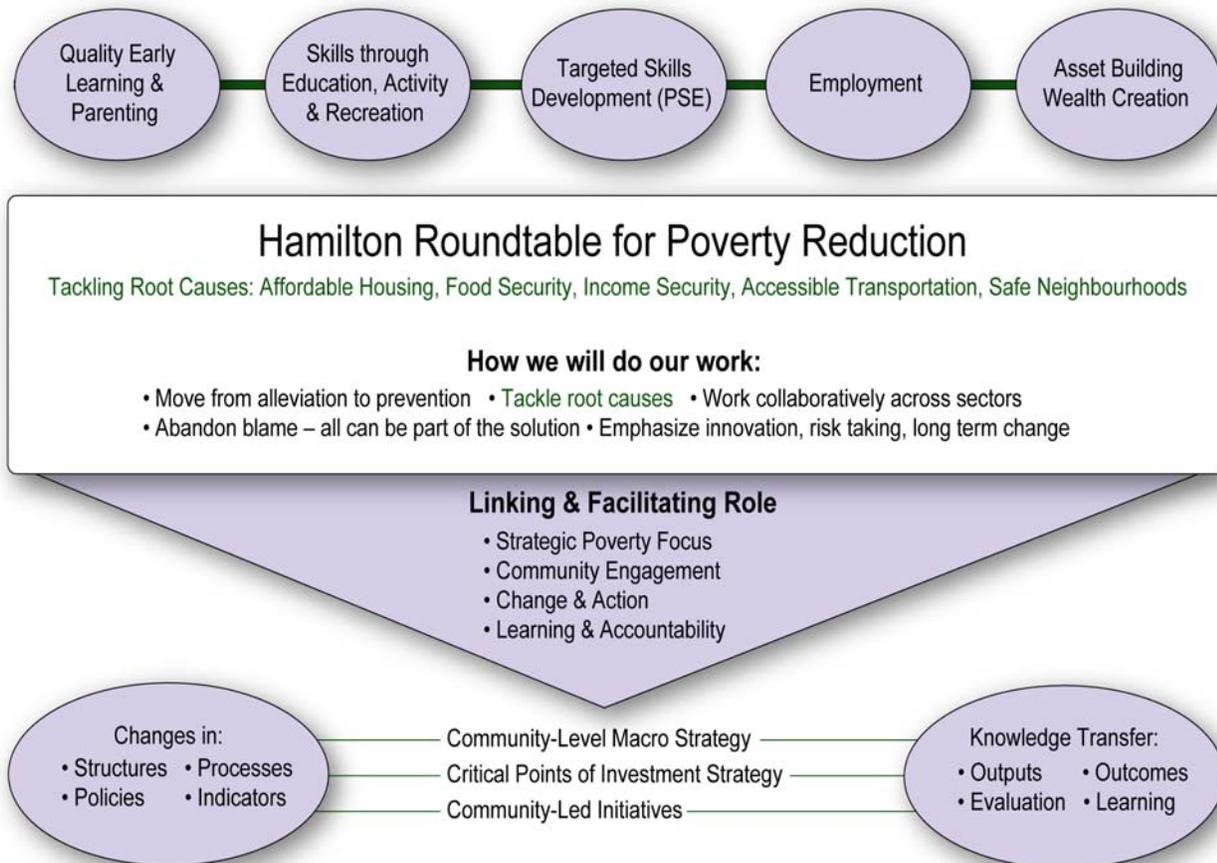
live in poverty is a critical fourth element. Though the HRPR's formation period did not specifically include this group, targeted efforts are helping to forge relationships that will ensure meaningful and ongoing participation. Ten low-income citizens are now counted among the initiative's leaders.

Financial support for the HRPR comes from the City of Hamilton, Hamilton Community Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation through Hamilton's involvement in Vibrant Communities (www.vibrantcommunities.ca). HRPR sponsors include the Charles Johnson Charitable Fund, Pictorvision, Arcelor Mittal Dofasco, Turkstra Lumber, *The Hamilton Spectator*, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada and the Ministry of Health Promotion, Government of Ontario. Significant in-kind support has been provided by a number of community partners including the Hamilton Community Foundation, the City of Hamilton, the Social Planning and Research Council, and Wesley Urban Ministries. Key strategic partners include the Hamilton Best Start Network, School-Age Solutions, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, Skills Development Flagship, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative and Affordable Housing Flagship.

Organizing the Roundtable's efforts

HRPR members based their preliminary efforts on research compiled about Hamilton's poverty profile. A Poverty Matrix, based on 2001 Census data, concluded that 20 percent of Hamilton residents lived in poverty. Among children under 14 and seniors 65 and older, the rate was 24 percent. Aboriginal community members experienced rates of 37 percent and recent immigrants

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



50 percent. Roundtable members stated collectively that these levels were unacceptable and that they stood together to find community solutions to the problem. Next, they identified key points in a child’s development where strategic public investments could make a significant, positive difference: quality early learning and parenting; skills gained through education, activity and recreation; targeted skills development; employment; and asset building and wealth creation. These were termed Critical Points of Investment.

Despite pressure to develop a poverty reduction plan – a time-consuming effort which suggests the existence of a definitive solution – the HRPR drew up a framework for change that sketched out goals and a general direction for the work. It articulated three levels of involvement for the Roundtable: It would facilitate high-level discussions aimed at systems change, encourage participation in groups that would address the Critical Points of Investment (see graphic) and support the development of structures that could respond to local ideas.

In addition to Starting Point Partners – collaborative tables that have been organized around the Critical Points of Investment – numerous Working Groups have been established over the last three years to carry out specific tasks or respond to opportunities as they arise.

Government collaboration

Beyond the vital work of building the community's understanding of and capacity for dealing with poverty, efforts to achieve deep and durable poverty reduction often give rise to proposed changes in government policy. HRPR's no-blame operating principle has helped create a supportive environment in which municipal, provincial and federal government employees are molding and shaping their efforts in the hope of making Hamilton the best place to raise a child.

At the municipal level, the City of Hamilton's role in matching policy with poverty reduction goals is large and increasing. In December 2007, Hamilton City Council adopted HRPR's aspiration as part of the new City vision statement and strategic plan. The City's vision is now "to be the best city in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens and provide diverse economic opportunities." In order to translate its vision into action, all six City General Managers are contacted on a regular basis by HRPR staff to update progress and to link the activities of the City with the work of the Roundtable. HRPR Director Liz Weaver notes: "When the Manager of Public Works talks about how his department can support the community aspiration, you know you've effected change."

At the provincial and federal government levels, two working groups have been established to guide macro- or systems-level change.

Founded in the summer of 2007, the Policy Working Group focuses on finding ways to build a policy climate and process which is supportive of poverty reduction efforts. During the 2007 provincial election, the Roundtable used a policy brief developed by the Policy Working Group to urge all political parties to support the creation of an Ontario poverty strategy. Some of the HRPR's recommendations, including the development of an inter-ministerial approach to address poverty, were adopted a few months later when the government created a Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction. One of the Policy Working Group's summer 2008 projects included organizing – with the help of several local organizations – a Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction. Hosted by five Hamilton MPPs, 200 people came together to talk about the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy – their suggestions, ideas and comments.

In late 2008, Policy Working Group members created a Policy Matrix for the Roundtable. It details overarching policy principles, key policy directions in each of the critical points of investment in children and their families, strategies for informing and influencing policy decisions, a set of community indicators which will measure change and progress, and recent investments and policy changes occurring in Hamilton. The Policy Matrix will form the basis of a policy paper to be written later this year. It is also used as background in the writing of policy briefs (visit www.hamiltonpoverty.ca for more details).

HRPR's Government Engagement Working Group, formed in November 2007, currently has five members from the federal government, representation from ten provincial ministries and seven city managers and directors. The group is co-chaired by City Manager Joe-Anne Priel and Rick Beauchamp, Program Manager for the Ministry of Community and Social Services and

Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Potential members continue to be identified and invited to join. Any recommendations made by the Working Group are brought forward to the Roundtable by the co-chairs. HRPR provides members with information and a work plan approach to ensure that the issues they pursue fit within the Roundtable aspiration and framework for change.

Working Group members take turns detailing their priorities and the investments their organizations have made in Hamilton. Sharing this type of information allows others to ask questions about how they might work more collaboratively and share investment priorities. After 16 months of operation, the group reports several new joint efforts that have resulted from their meetings. Community Services and Employment Ontario collaborated on Local Labour Market Planning. Public Works and Employment Ontario collaborated on training. The Working Group and Jobs Prosperity Collaborative reviewed shared approaches and planning. The Ministry of Health Promotion and HRPR's combined efforts resulted in \$53,000 investment in access to recreation for low-income children and their families. The Government Engagement Working Group also began to identify strategic opportunities to advance some of the policy and community change efforts.

Says Liz Weaver: "Bringing together the three levels of government has allowed all parties to learn more about one another's priorities and how investments can be aligned to support the Roundtable's overall vision. It takes a great deal of time to sort through so much information, but the more participants learn about one another's activities, the easier it is to identify areas where they can work together in support of our common goal."

While the Policy Working Group and Government Engagement Working Group began meeting, other Hamilton-influenced developments began to unfold. In the lead-up to the fall 2007 provincial election, the HRPR suggested the establishment of a provincial anti-poverty strategy. By mid-2008, the Ontario Government had announced its plans to develop such a document and the HRPR began meeting with provincial government and organizational representatives to help frame the work. In this period, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario made a presentation to Deb Matthews, the Minister responsible for the provincial poverty strategy, which highlighted the Hamilton approach to poverty reduction. The Association suggested that the government adopt a strategy that would "Make Ontario the Best Place to Raise a Child." Other evidence of the Poverty Roundtable's influence is the City of Hamilton's recent decisions to establish a Local Immigration Partnership Council and a human services planning collaborative table. Both groups will profit from HRPR lessons and take a similar, collaborative approach to their efforts.

As the HRPR's profile gained greater notice from all levels of government, increased investments were made in community initiatives which support low-income individuals and their families. For example, the Ministry of Education announced \$765,000 for summer program opportunities. In 2007, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services had made a three-year funding commitment for at-risk youth and in 2008, renewed a commitment to summer employment programs.

Critical points of investment strategy

At this second level of involvement, members identified the five critical points where investment could significantly improve the life chances of young people. Each of the investment points has been used as a springboard for organization and action among its Starting Point Partners. These include the Hamilton Best Start Network, the boards of education and School Aged Solutions, Skills Development Flagship, Jobs Prosperity Collaborative and Affordable Housing Flagship.

Community-led initiatives

A Hamilton Neighbourhood Development Strategy (HANDS) Working Group was established to hear what residents felt they could do to build strong neighbourhoods across the community. Members include citizens, the City's Affordable Housing Flagship, United Way, Hamilton Community Foundation and the HRPR. The central task of this group is to help identify policy or systemic issues as they are experienced at the individual and neighbourhood level. Policy and Government Working Groups are then brought into the conversation. This critical meeting point between lived experience and policy-making provides a new vehicle for addressing the root causes of poverty.

Highlights of the changes made to municipal policies and programs as a result of the City's poverty focus and HRPR partnership:

- National Child Benefit Claw back – municipal portion returned to families
- Affordable Transit Pass Pilot Project for Low Income Workers
- Child Care wait list strategy
- Investment in early learning and parenting programs
- Investment in recreation infrastructure and access to recreation
- Local immigration partnership planning
- Affordable housing investments
- Support for rental supplements and hostel to homes project
- Community Action Plan on Homelessness

Small but important improvements

Statistics Canada figures for the period 2001-06 showed a 1.9 percent decrease in the number of people in Hamilton living below the low income cut-off (LICO) – from 20 percent to 18.1 percent (6,000 people). Poverty rates among children dipped slightly, from 24 to 23.4 percent [Statistics Canada 2008]. Though the rates are still unacceptable to HRPR members – some 89,000 people live in poverty in Hamilton – the modest gains have helped support the belief that their multisectoral, comprehensive efforts are beginning to help people who are struggling to move out of poverty. By contrast, poverty rates across much of the rest of the province either went up or held steady.



THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

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The stories have been removed from this page
to remind us that nearly 100,000 children, women
and men live in poverty in Hamilton,
people whose stories rarely make the front page.
We're going to change that.

See page A12

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COMPLETE INDEX
ON PAGE A12

Strengths of the undertaking

i. systems level change a priority

The multiple levels and rates of participation achieved in Hamilton's poverty reduction work are resulting in scaled-up efforts, reductions in program duplication and innovative new projects.

With so many groups working simultaneously, it is often difficult to arrive at a common set of indicators by which progress can be measured. Ontario's community consultations on poverty reduction have heard from several organizations interested in selecting indicators for the province as a whole, so it may be some time before a clear indicators path emerges. Liz Weaver, while hopeful that Ontario may yet produce something as useful to communities as the Newfoundland and Labrador Community Accounts model, believes that policy and systems change are related to indicators, evaluation, reporting and relationships. Says Liz: "There are many ways to uncover the information about what's changing in our community and it all fits together in a very complex way. When we gather various people around the table, however, their statistical dialects merge into a common language. We may not all be rowing in the same direction yet, but at least we're now in the same boat and we all have oars."

ii. media involvement

The Hamilton Spectator's decision to place a three-year emphasis on poverty reporting was taken shortly after the formation of the Poverty Roundtable. In 2005, then Editor-in-Chief Dana Robbins was on the Board of Directors of the Hamilton Community Foundation, taking part in its "Tackling Poverty Together" discussions. Employees at the paper not only covered the issue in their hard copy and online publications, they also made a corporate commitment to supporting poverty alleviation projects at the Hess Street Elementary School. These included lunch programs, sports and reading activities. Company time was provided to allow *Spectator* staff members to volunteer at the school [Makhoul 2007].

Since beginning the Poverty Project, the *Spectator* has published more than 560 articles, editorials and letters to the editor on the issue. Newspaper staff undertook an evaluation in late 2008 to determine whether there were observable differences in the community as a result of their actions. Results of the evaluation are forthcoming. Whatever the outcome, the paper's participation has made an enormous contribution to raising the level of community awareness of the complex nature of poverty.

iii. onus on partner action: what can you contribute?

Once a week, Liz Weaver and two HRPR staff members track the impact of their work on individuals and on policy and systems changes. Though these changes are hard to quantify, they are also moving toward defining 30 well-being indicators, which will enable the Roundtable to statistically report community progress on poverty reduction. Liz meets regularly with Starting

Point Partners to review outcomes for the period. Each session focuses on the precise nature of the contribution of both the HRPR and the partner in question. This ownership-focused discussion encourages innovation and active involvement. The work is gaining momentum, particularly since the recent release of Statistics Canada poverty figures.

Says Liz: “By building in an evaluation component early and taking responsibility for the weekly results, we have instituted a collaborative and developmental approach to charting our collective progress. In this way, we communicated our expectation of active participation and collaboration as well as shared ownership of any successes or challenges we may experience.”

iv. A new way of thinking about convening and advocacy

Adopting a no-blame principle has allowed HRPR to enter a new world of community and government collaboration. The Government Engagement Working Group brings together elected civil servants and paid staff at all three orders of government and draws them in as collaborators. A KUBA approach – knowledge, understanding, belief and action – seeks to understand how barriers came to be established and how they can be shifted. An evidence-based perspective ensures that discussion remains positive. Says Liz: “So many rules and structures keep people in circumstances of poverty, so unpacking them is a difficult challenge. The old rules of advocacy were rooted in a ‘we-them’ dynamic. Now, we are ‘us.’ In a careful, stepped process of sharing information, we learn about the issues and complexities and we come to see that we can make change.”

Challenges and new directions

If – as hoped by HRPR and its adherents – serious inroads can be made into the high numbers of people living in poverty, the work may become self-sustaining. In addition, the inflationary effects of rising energy prices and a shifting economy likely will influence the Roundtable’s work in many beneficial ways. Issues like affordable transportation might move farther and faster as Canadians feel the bite of a deepening recession.

HRPR Steering Committee members are very aware of the short- and long-term tensions and challenges between the Roundtable and people living in poverty. Because they were invited after the visioning process had begun, many feel that a charity model – where things are done *to* people instead of *with* them – is still in effect. Unequal input translates into unequal power dynamics. Members are asking themselves how to bridge these differences and move beyond them.

Some people in Hamilton have suggested that the HRPR’s approach might be reframed with an emphasis on prosperity, rather than poverty reduction. More than a public relations exercise, such a shift must be examined from many angles and would be accompanied by numerous changes in roles and responsibilities.

Ontario is experiencing a wave of interest in the provincial government's Poverty Reduction Strategy. While the HRPR can take credit for helping to build a basis of support for this initiative, the rising tide of expectations among anti-poverty groups will affect place-based change efforts. Organizations like the recently formed 25-in-5 are weaving a tapestry of concerns and ideas they wish the provincial government to consider. Keeping its messages and mandate coherent and focused during the Strategy's rollout presents yet another challenge to HRPR.

In community development work, there is no one magic formula, no right starting place. In Hamilton, one City Manager's frustration and sense of powerlessness in 2005 became the spark that lit up a network of people who were willing to speak and act on behalf of the entire community. Their efforts may yet inspire a province grappling with a fast-changing economic and social landscape.

Liz Weaver and Anne Makhoul

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