

*People's Review Panel:
Getting the Ontario Social Assistance Review issues straight...
from people with lived experience of poverty*

We will battle for hearts and minds, at a time when financial unsettledness and fear is causing a backlash against the poor, as it always does: When things are tough, society has a tendency to look for those to blame, to point at, to curse. This time will be different, because we will be speaking for ourselves, not just waiting to be interpreted by reporters or agency staff or politicians: We will be speaking our truths in ways that will be heard and felt. And we will bring with us the voices of our peers, bring their truths, their struggles to the forefront, so that they will know the power they possess.

Pat Capponi, Voices from the Street

Introduction

As part of the poverty reduction and social inclusion plan it released in December 2008, the Ontario government committed to conducting a review of its social assistance programs. Though the plan, *Breaking the Cycle*, hinted at the makeup of an advisory council to guide the review process, it did not release any description of the scope or membership of that group. The timing of the recession made it difficult for the government to continue to focus on poverty reduction, and no further word came on this initiative for some time.

Meanwhile, discussions went on between representatives from Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank and Voices from the Street, an organization that involves people with direct experience of poverty as leaders to educate the public and effect policy change. Both groups wondered if they could establish a participatory learning process for people with lived experience of poverty.

Successes with community-based and peer research they had undertaken in the development of the Ontario Deprivation Index led them to apply for funding in September 2009 from the Atkinson Foundation and the George C. Metcalf Foundation to develop a “people’s review of social assistance.”

A new kind of consultation

By December 2009, the Ontario government set out its plan to establish a process for the social assistance review. It promised a person-centred approach to programming, with the potential for people with lived experience to provide input. The community sector was in support of such a process and by now, the fledgling People’s Review Panel (PRP) project had secured operational funding. Its main objective was to achieve tangible changes in security assistance that would result in improved income security. Using dialogue as a tool, the PRP would generate innovative solutions to social assistance reform that would be based on people’s lived experience.

The PRP project group wanted Ontario-wide participation, so sent out invitations to community groups, government offices and legal clinics across the province. Their goal was to have the eventual 18 members represent Ontario’s diversity and population concentrations. They were also mindful of including a variety of personality types to ensure variety of viewpoint and leadership style. By early 2010, the members were chosen: eight from Toronto, the balance from other parts of the province. A technical panel of advisors was assembled in the same period and included the Caledon Institute’s Senior Scholar Michael Mendelson and Metcalf Foundation Fellow John Stapleton.

Over the course of early 2010, the PRP was brought together for six, three-day sessions. The first two sessions introduced the panel to one another and taught them the public speaking and meeting model skills they would need in the months ahead.

These gatherings were about more than skills development, however. In the group’s words: “It was bringing something new to participants, where only folks of lived experience were in the room, where the focus was on the struggles, but also on the survival rate and skills. The intent was to help people re-work the perception of themselves and others on assistance, to learn to work together, yes, but more, to feel each other at a deeper level. To see themselves in the others in the room, to start to hope again that they’ve been seen and heard and valued. To understand that life for each of them can be better, that advocacy is a road to get to that better life. That it’s up to each individual to pick up the challenge and rebuild, and to start building ladders out of the pit instead of simply kicking dirt around.”

In March, the group focused on research training and how they would gather input from others with lived experience of poverty – what they would ask, who they would ask. Members were sent home to conduct their first three interviews, having had a chance to practice their skills in a session animated by a set of actors.

Questions posed, probes to encourage further discussion

Q: Tell me briefly about yourself.

What led you to apply for social assistance?

How long have you been on assistance?

Q: Tell me about your general sense of well-being.

What do you like to do or would like to do for fun?

Are you able to eat what you need for your health?

How have your relationships (friends, family, girlfriends/boyfriends/partners) been affected by being on social assistance?

Q: Do you feel supported by your welfare workers?

How do you feel when you visit your worker?

Have you accessed other benefits that are part of social assistance (such as Community Start-Up, medical benefits, etc.)?

Do you understand the wording in the documents they give you?

What would you like your relationship with your worker to be?

Q: I'd like to hear about your experience with education, training and employment.

Ideally, what kind of job would you like to do?

Do training and education programs provided help you find the kind of work you want?

Ideally what supports would you need to help you find the job you want?

Does it feel rewarding to you to work?

Q: What is your experience with housing?

What is your housing like?

How much do you pay in rent?

How do you manage to pay your rent?

Q: Are you able to get around your community?

Are there any barriers (physical, cost)?

Q: What changes would you like to see in social assistance?

What would an ideal social assistance system look like to you?

By mid-summer, the interview questions had been formalized and guidelines with probes and supplemental questions were distributed. Panel members conducted a further five to seven interviews, as time and personal circumstances allowed.

It was originally thought that interviewers would seek out members of the community whom they already knew or knew by reputation. The quality of the interviews demonstrated how important it was to have an established level of trust. In some cases, the experience was so positive that additional interviewees sought out the interviewer themselves.

Responses were logged on video and transcribed. Each interviewer completed a ‘face sheet’ on each person they spoke with – a record of basic demographic information that helped ensure a comprehensive set of consultations.

Packaging the lessons

In early December 2010, the Panel members met again. By this time, they had begun to analyze one another’s interview results, and were instructed to look and listen for common words and phrases, themes and issues. Key messages emerged from this meeting. Most significant were that fear, stigma and “feeling trapped” were commonly experienced by interviewees in all areas of their lives – employment, housing and relationships.

The December session allowed all participants to review their work as a group and begin planning a March 2011 charette (a planning and vision-creating exercise). This event will provide a space for panel members to describe their experiences and observations. Service workers and government representatives will be invited to provide their input on issues, including previous efforts to overcome some of the barriers to assistance. Panel members will be able to give issue-by-issue feedback on their perceptions of the government’s successes and continuing difficulties.

Part of the PRP’s work is to determine the best way to package for others the story of their efforts. The leadership team is planning to have a mini-documentary ready for the commencement of the Social Assistance Review, and a longer video presentation will be ready for release at a later point. Footage will be pulled (with participant permission) from the interview videos and planning sessions already captured by videographer Cheryl Smith. Cheryl has launched and continues to develop a participatory website called “Peacock Poverty” (www.peacockpoverty.org). The site carries footage of on-the-street interviews of panel members, text and blogging features – all to help engage and share the experiences of those involved in the work – as well as new audience members.

An important consideration for making the short and longer documentaries was to ask panel members how they wanted to portray both their experience of social assistance and the interactions captured during their interview sessions. Fear, stigma and feeling trapped have already been identified as core realities to convey.

Most significant, however, was that the panel wanted to portray people on social assistance in the light of their hopes and aspirations. This rare opportunity to portray people alongside their dreams serves as a powerful reminder that the current system is robbing people of their potential and, by association, robbing us all.

The project team plans to use the documentaries to engage the public and the government in a broad conversation about poverty issues and their impact on people with lived experience of poverty.

The PRP partnership members have continued to liaise with provincial government representatives throughout 2010 to keep them informed of their work. Positive signals have been received, and one idea has been to adopt the PRP process as a template for continuing the process of gathering input for the Social Assistance Review.

Capturing people's daily experiences of poverty may also take the form of written personal stories collated into a book or other publication. A toolkit that documents how the PRP was formed, its goals and process would provide a legacy for social service workers and other community organizations conducting work of this kind.

Future plans

The PRP's first phase of work officially ended in June 2010. The March 2011 charette will be both an ending for the Panel's work and a possible point of departure for further issues research – either by policy experts or by panel members and others with lived experience.

Putting a human face on poverty is the ultimate aim of the People's Review Panel. If we can *see* one another, there is hope that our systems may be reshaped to better serve those who are most vulnerable.

Anne Makhoul and Richard Matern

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