

REPORT

**HALTON COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON POVERTY
REDUCTION: MPP CONSULTATION**

June 27, 2008

**Report on the Halton Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction
MPP Consultation on the Government of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy
International Union of Operating Engineers Banquet Hall, Oakville
Friday, June 27, 2008
7:30am-10:00 am**

The consultation was sponsored by Oakville MPP Kevin Flynn, Community Development Halton, the Burlington/Halton Chapter of Make Poverty History and 15 other local organizations, agencies and individuals including:

- Advancement of Women Halton
- Affordable Housing Halton
- Burlington Old Timers Hockey Club -- White Division
- East Plains United Church
- Food for Life
- Halton Catholic District School Board
- Halton Community Legal Services
- Halton District School Board
- Halton Multicultural Council
- Halton Nonprofit Network
- Halton's Public Elementary Teachers
- Halton Women's Place
- International Union of Operating Engineers Local 793
- Mighty Transportation Services
- Oakville and District Labour Council
- SAVIS (Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Services of Halton)

Those in attendance included The Honourable Margaret Best, Minister of Health Promotion and member of the Ontario Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction, Oakville MP Bonnie Brown and representatives of faith groups, multicultural and women's groups, agencies, funding organizations, local government, unions and advocacy groups.

John Versluis, from the Burlington/Halton chapter of Make Poverty History, began the proceedings. He commented that, although Halton (comprising the communities of Oakville, Burlington, Milton and Halton Hills) is one of the wealthiest regions of Ontario, this was one of the larger consultations to date.

Versluis noted that the current push toward a Poverty Reduction Strategy "didn't just happen" but is the product of groundwork laid over decades by social planning councils, the Social Planning Network of Ontario, Make Poverty History, Campaign 2000 and others in the anti-poverty movement.

In his opening comments, MPP Kevin Flynn stated that the government's goal is to address the root causes of poverty, rather than merely increase social assistance rates or increase the supply of social housing, and that benchmarks and targets provide better opportunities for the likelihood of success. He commented that not all people can be self-sufficient at every stage of life, and that there is an appetite in

Canada to recognize this and to address poverty, but, at the same time, that polls seeking to identify the public's priority issues indicate that poverty ranks low.

The next segment of the program incorporated personal testimonials regarding living in poverty in Halton. East Plains United Church Minister Bruce Dickson noted that the poor are largely invisible and that many in the community are unaware that poverty exists. He described the situations of some of the 160 people who come to his church annually seeking assistance: that typically they have exhausted their access to a food bank, require transportation to a medical appointment or need to launder their sleeping bag. He noted that there are barriers to supplementing Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) income, even with casual work, such as delivering flyers, collecting bottles or doing odd jobs: that many of those in poverty have mental health issues that prevent them from working, that for those who succeed in earning extra income, money is clawed back from social assistance payments, and that the remaining meager income is not sufficient for the bare necessities of food, rent, medicine and warmth. He described the shelter situation in Halton: that there is a waiting list of years for low income housing, and that those who are unable to find first and last month's rent to get into an apartment have no option but to live in the motels that are used to supplement the insufficient space in Halton's only shelter.

Susan Jewett, Executive Director of Burlington Counselling and Family Services spoke of the intersection of poverty and sexual abuse, where physical or sexual abuse can be both the cause, and the result, of homelessness for women. Referring to a recent report by Street Health, she noted that there are 1250 homeless women in Toronto, of whom 21% were sexually assaulted and 37% physically assaulted in the past year alone. She stated that women, whether on the street, in an apartment or couch-surfing, are more often living in poverty than men, the most vulnerable being: those who are single mothers; newcomer women; young women and senior women; Aboriginal women and women from visible minority groups; women with disabilities; women who have been abused; and women with low education. She stated that women in violent situations frequently lack the financial resources to leave, and are often reluctant to report incidents of abuse, fearing loss of income if the man is no longer part of the family unit or, for newcomer women, the risk of deportation. Ms. Jewett reported that every week she has requests to reduce even further the \$5 minimum fee charged for her agency's counselling services.

Continuing, she reminded participants that, between 2000 and 2006, when 50 Canadians were killed in Afghanistan, 500 women were killed by their partners in Canada, many of them trapped in their home through poverty or the fear of poverty, and she exhorted the gathering that, whatever is done to address poverty, we should "never forget the mental health issues and violence families experience" and work to decrease the shame and stigma.

Three speakers, Executive Director Ron Shantz, volunteer and beneficiary John Quesnelle and food bank volunteer John Raynor, described the importance of assistance provided over the past 15 years by Kerr Street Ministries in Oakville. Noting that crime is rarely talked about in the context of poverty, John Quesnelle, a survivor of residential school abuse, provided a powerful description of how he had been raised in a life of crime and would have returned to it out of desperation to support his family, but for the assistance provided by Kerr Street Ministries. John Raynor described bureaucratic obstacles to community-based organizations seeking to provide assistance for those in need, such as a recent Public

Health Department ban on food prepared for community meals, in kitchens that have not been inspected.

Dr. Joey Edwardh, Executive Director of Community Development Halton introduced the 25 in 5 Declaration developed by the 25 in 5 Network for Poverty Reduction with input from all corners of the province.

Dr. Edwardh described the process now taking place in Ontario as “seizing an historic moment,” as exemplified by Ontario’s Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction and examples provided by Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador; that federally there are currently both Parliamentary and Senate committees working in the areas of poverty reduction and the social determinants of health, and strong election commitments from two federal parties (Liberal and NDP); that the media are raising public awareness; and that we can also benefit from the examples provided by the United Kingdom and by the Nordic countries, that defuse the argument that investment in human services and poverty reduction damages the economy.

Dr. Edwardh noted that, with a poverty rate of 14.7%, Ontario has 44% of Canada’s poor children, with 127,000 children relying on food banks monthly. In Halton, there were nine food banks and more than 1500 people on the waiting list for community housing in 2007; 43% of households spend more than 30% of their income on housing, and those most vulnerable to poverty are newcomers, racialized people, seniors (especially the ‘old old’, most of whom are women), those who have suffered abuse, and those who live with mental health issues and disabilities. She observed that in Ontario, the rate of poverty is constant, but that poverty is deepening, leading to hopelessness, alienation and violence, and that as the rich get richer and the poor poorer, we are becoming geographically further apart, such that the poor become “other” rather than “us” (a trend exacerbated by the increasing racialization of poverty).

Dr. Edwardh then outlined the core foundations of a poverty reduction strategy, as framed in the 25 in 5 Declaration:

1. **Sustaining employment** so that those working full-time full-year can live out of poverty
2. **Livable incomes** to provide dignity to all Ontarians, including those unable to work
3. **Strong and supportive communities**, with basic life opportunities, including affordable housing, early learning and child care, public education and ensuring stable community agencies and infrastructure

She described benchmarks and strategic indicators that would be effective in measuring progress, among them: a Low Income Measure (LIM); percentage reduction in the gap between social assistance income and living out of poverty; percentage reduction in subsidized child care wait lists; percentage reduction in use and existence of food banks; percentage increase of those working full-time full-year who live out of poverty; percentage increase of lower income people with extended health coverage; percentage decrease in households paying more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities; and access to community and regional transit services

Minister of Health Promotion Margaret Best then spoke, commenting on behalf of the government that “we know that poverty is a moral issue, an economic issue, an education issue, a criminal issue, a gender issue and a social issue,” continuing that “poverty is an urgent issue and poverty is everyone’s issue.” The Minister also acknowledged the community’s concern that the development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy not become lost in the development of benchmarks and indicators.

Those in attendance were asked to engage in group discussions and report to the full group on the following questions:

1. Whether an acceptable level of progress on poverty reduction can be made with resources already in place, or requires significant investments?

Participants felt that additional and significant investments were needed, as well as changes in how we do things: coordination and a team approach among all levels of government; greater collaboration and efficiency in agencies and organizations; strong collective bargaining; increased eligibility for Employment Insurance; decreases in red tape; increases in stable funding to agencies and community organizations working with those in poverty; increased investment in affordable housing, minimum wage, employment opportunities, access to education and transit; increased mentorship; increased awareness and support structures; increased funding to mental health and those with special needs. The statement “No more reports. It’s time for action” was widely applauded

2. Whether the 25 in 5 plan is a solid framework that the Government of Ontario should consider adopting as a starting point for its own poverty reduction plan?

All but one of the nine groups supported the 25 in 5 framework as a starting point for the Poverty Reduction Strategy, with groups commenting variously that the 25 in 5 needs to be accompanied by increases in transit and infrastructure; collaboration and coordination between ministries and levels of government; more communication between organizations; heightened public awareness; affordable housing; the connection between poverty and addictions and mental health issues. The ninth group felt that the 25 in 5 framework is not yet specific enough, and that Ontario should look at the model of Nordic countries in developing its Poverty Reduction Strategy.

3. To identify an indicator of poverty reduction by completing the following sentence: *We will know that poverty has decreased when . . .*

Groups completed this sentence with the phrases: when we see children go to school with a lunch; food banks close; programs like this no longer exist, and communities get together because they want to; NGOs are no longer on burnout mode; decreased need for food banks and counselling; decreased housing wait lists and social assistance caseloads; decreased domestic violence; those with disabilities can live with dignity and respect; people can have an adequate diet and the occasional luxury; everyone has a network; rates of secondary school graduation increase; access to food, clothing, shelter and work opportunities; post-secondary education is a right not a privilege; increased hopefulness; increased health; people are out of the margins;

success stories from clients; organizations that deal with poverty disband, not because of a lack of support but because of a lack of need.

This question allowed participants to explore indicators that could measure change both locally in neighbourhoods and communities and also provincially and federally.

Additional Observations

Participants in this community conversation had the opportunity to contribute further thoughts and ideas beyond their contribution to their table discussion of the above questions through a brief evaluation questionnaire. Some important observations emerged:

- Consternation and cynicism at the inability of different levels of government to come together to work on poverty reduction and silo approaches taken by different departments within government
- Scepticism that serious policy and programmatic action with timetables and targets will emerge
- Ontario must move on a poverty reduction strategy regardless of the degree of support from the Federal government
- Grass roots communities have powerful understandings of how policy and program affect people in local communities. They often have creative and concrete ideas to change practices which adversely affect people. They should be heard
- Immediate action on poverty reduction should not be constrained by the evolving discussion and understanding of measurements and indicators
- Poverty reduction strategies are economic development strategies
- Poverty is a global issue and successes elsewhere can provide important learning
- Poverty reduction is a work in progress, it is in evolution
- Core funding to social infrastructure is part of a poverty reduction and prevention plan

In his closing remarks, MPP Kevin Flynn, stated: “how we treat our most vulnerable is a measure of our society.” He identified poverty reduction as being in the best interest of all Ontarians and of Ontario’s economy and competitiveness, stating “Ontario’s economy cannot afford to have a large number of people in poverty: We need everyone at the top of their game.” He thanked participants for their comments and hard work, and will pass the findings of the community conversation to the Government of Ontario Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction.

The community conversation was adjourned.

CDH: July 2008