



Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre
NO Community Stands ALONE

Highlights of the Community Roundtable Discussions

October 2008



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Introduction

Hamilton, Ontario is a busy city with a growing population of over 500,000 people. Hamilton is one of the most diverse cities in Ontario and one of the largest receiving centers for immigrants and refugees and a popular choice for many secondary migrants. Approximately 40% of the population identifies as being born outside of Canada and there over 52 of the main language groups represented in the area. In close proximity to Six Nations, the largest reserve by population in Canada, Hamilton also has a significantly high number of Aboriginal people living in the city.

But poverty is also one on Hamilton's most serious challenges and a significant determinant of health and well-being for the individuals and families in the city, particularly in the core area. Reports by planning agencies note that 20% of those living in Hamilton or about 100,000 people are living in poverty. Poverty is usually described as the income levels of individuals and families that are below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-off, or LICO as it is often referred to. These are the individuals and families who are forced to make choices between paying the rent and feeding the children, or buying medication and having a telephone on a regular basis. In fact, people experiencing poverty do not have access to the resources needed to maintain a decent standard of living, and to participate fully in the life of the community. And while some may say poverty is not only an income issue, poverty is always related to issues of access to income and resources.

Why this Forum?

As an inner city health centre Hamilton Urban Core works closely with communities in the core as a trusted service provider and strong advocate. Over the course of many months and in some cases years, people shared their experiences of living in poverty, of isolation and most importantly, of being tired of never being heard.

In response Hamilton Urban Core made a promise to listen to the comments and suggestions being made by those with lived experience and make sure that their voices were brought forward to the tables and spaces where decisions about poverty are being made. We agreed to share their comments in video and a brief written report that was both honest and respectful. In February 2008 in partnership with McQuesten Legal and Community Services, St. Matthew's House and the Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits, Hamilton Urban Core hosted a series of community roundtable discussions under the banner of "NO Community Stands ALONE" a campaign to end poverty.

The goal of this initiative was to provide a vehicle for the people who are actually living in poverty to speak about their lived experiences, share their ideas and give advice about how to make real change in this community and to eradicate poverty.

As a result of this work a video titled "Urban Crisis: The Story of Poverty in Hamilton" has been produced and distributed widely as part of the commitment to sharing the word. The video serves to amplify the voices of the many people of Hamilton living in poverty. The video is also accompanied by this report which is a brief overview that pulls together the common themes raised during the community roundtable discussion.

Although every story is unique, there are some common threads. Often the lack of the very basic necessities of life – food, shelter, and clothing - is a shared experience for

many people living in poverty. The following are the common themes we heard that were identified most often as being the real challenges people face every day in Hamilton. We hope you are informed and take action to help eradicate poverty now!

“One person can make a difference and every person should try.”

What People Told Us

“People need a voice, need to organize, and a collective community voice.”

Not ever having enough money to live ...

According to statistics 20% of Hamiltonians are living in poverty. This means that many families in Hamilton struggle to meet their basic needs with insufficient funds. The constant struggle to obtain the minimum necessities needed to sustain physical health and well-being is overwhelming and morally deflating. Many Hamiltonians do not have enough food to eat, are living in substandard housing that may not have plumbing, electricity or heat.

“People can’t afford food, clothing and shelter on \$560 per month!”

“Urban Crisis” is a real life portal to the daily struggles of many Hamiltonians living in poverty. In Hamilton, the Ontario works payment for a single person is a maximum \$560 per month and a family of four receives a maximum of \$1,782 per month. As of March 31, 2008 the minimum wage in Ontario was \$8.75¹ per hour therefore the maximum monthly income for minimum wage earners in a family of four is approximately \$2,170 based on one adult person working 40 hours per week and including the Ontario Child Tax Benefit and GST Benefit, less applicable taxes. With the average cost of a bachelor apartment in Hamilton being \$511² per month, and with

¹ Ministry of Labour “Your Guide to the Employment Standards Act” web version

² Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation “Canadian Housing Observer” Average Rent for Two-Bedroom Apartments, Canada, Provinces and Metropolitan Areas, 1992-2007 (dollars)”

most one bedroom apartments starting at \$660 per month, eating becomes a daily challenge for many families and individuals who are left with more month than money.

The cost of a Nutritious Food basket NFB ³in Hamilton for a family of four is \$587.28 but this does not include other necessities such as toilet paper, diapers or feminine hygiene products, telephone, transportation, medications, laundry, clothing and any other unexpected expense, or pizza days at a child's school. Often food is the first sacrifice for families and individuals trying to keep their roof over their heads.

“I find it very discouraging asking for everything, food, soap, a towel, places to sleep on a daily basis.”

Systemic barriers and challenges for people dealing with Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Employment Insurance and other government services or organizations...

There are many social programs which have been created to assist Canadians in times of need. Unfortunately these programs have seen ongoing cutbacks. There is growing stigma due to the misconceptions about why, when and how people are utilizing these systems. This is often fuelled by decision makers and those who have looking for easy ways to explain problems in the economy or negative social or economic situations. In 1995 the conservative government cut welfare by 21.6% in the name of the conservative campaign called “the common sense revolution”. This mass media campaign led voters to believe that all of their tax woes were the fault of Ontario's welfare recipients. The alleged “widespread welfare fraud” in Ontario amounted of to actually only 92 allegations of fraud and only nine convictions in 1997. Many reports indicate that in fact the improper welfare payments were actually due to system error not individual behaviour.

³ the tool used by Public Health's, Healthy Living Department to determine the minimum nutrients needed per month

“Mindset of workers seems like they think that everyone trying to scam.”

In 1992 a report by the Auditor General suggested that the maximum caseload for a worker should be no more than 275 cases to be effective; however by 1996 the average caseload for workers was reportedly around 385 cases per worker. This of course means that there is very little time to return phone calls, provide support to clients or even to care about the quality of service and the impact on the client. Subsequently many people report the same obstacles in accessing and maintaining Ontario Works Support and ODSP.

“The reduction of OW under Harris means that whereas before I might have been able to dig myself out now I can maybe cover the rent with \$32.”

“When I’m hungry I don’t need someone to tell me access a 1-800 number. It’s too much to deal with that and still not get help. I can’t get help. It’s the daily grind of reaching out and no one there.”

Lack of housing, substandard housing, homelessness...

According to a report by the Wellesley Institute one in four Ontarians are forced into unaffordable, often inadequate, housing. Cities outside of the Toronto area used to report a more friendly housing market often offering affordable housing that was safe and adequate for the needs of many families. But the cost of housing has been steadily increasing in areas outside of the GTA and Hamilton is no exception. In Hamilton the average price of a bachelor apartment starts at approximately \$511 per month.

We know that housing is a basic necessity of life yet many people cannot afford housing in Hamilton. To survive some choose to pay the rent and use food banks to eat or just go without enough food; others sleep on couches of friends or family for short periods of time before being asked to move on. And there is great concern about the quality of

housing with many unsafe and inadequate housing units being offered to individuals and families who often have no other choice available to them. Substandard housing is both dangerous and unhealthy. Reports of break-ins, urination in hallways, broken windows, no maintenance and the recent infestation of bedbugs are all the result of not having decent affordable, safe housing available to those most in need and ultimately most at risk.

Many people are spending more than 30% to 50% or more of their annual income on housing; this does not leave much for food, clothing and other necessities. In 1986, the World Health Organization's Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion recognized shelter as a basic prerequisite for health. There is often an assumption that if someone is homeless or living in substandard housing that they must have done something wrong or that they deserve what they get. This is a big misconception. The truth is that many Ontarians are housing insecure including those living in market housing, private dwellings and rental units. There is not enough social housing available and with no commitment to social housing not many are being built or renovated. The options for housing are very limited, even more so if you require more than a 2 bedroom accommodation for your family.

“People pay rent or power; you can't cook food without power.”

Deteriorating Health...

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion as established by the WHO in 1986 states that there are certain prerequisites for health. They identify peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources social justice and equity as integral for people to achieve their fullest health potential. It also states that “health” must be included with all societal goals; it cannot be separate.⁴

⁴ Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, First international Conference on Health Promotion, Ottawa, 21 November 1986 - World Health Organization/ HPR/HEP/95.1

***“Incidents of diabetes increasing due to poor eating habits,
we can’t afford proper food.”***

Financial hardships and other “lack of” factors combined together means that many people do not have access to health treatment, tools and education they need to stay healthy. In 2005 in Hamilton 71.8% of the population above 12 years of age reported having a chronic condition. When chronic conditions are not well managed the potential for developing a chronic illness or chronic disease is very high and very costly. Many of the health factors can be addressed through proper food and nutrition, adequate and stable housing, and other factors. However when there is no money to buy food or when there is no grocery store in sight access to these basic items becomes another challenging barrier. In Hamilton more than 35,000 adults have been identified with diabetes mellitus⁵ and all indications are that this is a conservative number. In addition, lung cancer and heart disease are examples of two of the most commonly diagnosed condition in Hamilton and have a percentage rate often higher than the provincial average. And the experience of illness and disease is different for those living in poverty than it is for those who have access to financial resources, family supports, the basic necessities and enjoy a balanced life. Once diagnosed people living in poverty find it difficult to get the medications they need to treat their illnesses and achieve some level of stability. Without access to a drug plan people are forced to water down serums, skip medications cycles and sometimes share medication in an attempt to find relief. Worst of all many times people go without simple medications they need because there is no money. The Trillium program offers some support but it requires households to pay a deductible pr pay for the medications and be reimbursed. Where money is the problem this approach does not help to address that barrier.

Good oral health is important to an individual’s overall health and well-being. Oral health treatment, prevention and education is another essential health service that is not accessible or available to everyone. In Ontario, access to oral and dental care is limited to those who can pay for the services or from insurance plans that offered dental

⁵ Community Health Status Report, Chronic Conditions, City of Hamilton Public Health Services

coverage usually and are usually part of an employment package. There are limited programs that address the oral health needs of children with urgent or acute dental or oral health problems. As a primarily cash driven system, people living in poverty are left without options for themselves and their families and choices for good oral health care or in some cases for any form of oral health care. Poor oral health care is linked to health problems and over time can contribute to serious conditions related to digestive health, nutrition and of course self-esteem. While there are a few exceptions such as the oral health program provided by Hamilton Urban Core, there is no overall commitment to ensuring that people who are living in poverty or with little income are able to access oral health services.

***“We should be able to get the same level of health care as everybody else.
There should be no difference.”***

The lack of recovery beds for drug and alcohol treatment is a large barrier for people trying to be free of their addictions in Hamilton. Many service providers know that timing is critical in the path to recovery. The sad reality is that there are often no beds when people are ready for them.

***“Medications are not covered,
some doctors are prescribing medications not covered?”***

Lack of opportunities, training and support to transition from assistance into a sustainable independent livelihood...

In Canada, social assistance levels are clearly set at or below levels associated with absolute poverty. One prevailing view is that living on government benefits should be so unpleasant for people that it will motivate them into joining the workforce. The assumption is that people who live in poverty want to live in poverty and that they would rather not work. But the reality is somewhat different and this sentiment makes life difficult for those who find they may need a hand up. People indicated that they want to work; they want to engage in productive activities and contribute to their own life and society. They expressed the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as most adults and young people in the community. but the barriers from welfare to work can be huge and seem almost insurmountable. Individuals identified access to safe, dependable childcare, transportation costs, and work appropriate clothing, as examples of the barriers people experienced to getting and keeping employment. People also report finding it difficult to make it to the interview without money for transportation. And later difficulty with transportation can also be linked to high rates of quitting a job or being fired in the early stages of employment (e.g. due to late arrival, inability to work additional time, limited flexibility, etc).

In addition, there are limited training and development programs to support adults wanting to enter or re-enter the workforce. Too often existing programs do not offer a wide variety of vocations or provide training for fields where the individual has little interest or there are limited job prospects. Overall, there is a general feeling that there is no effective mechanism to support people in the transition from social assistance to achieving a sustainable, independent livelihood.

“How to get to work every day; the bus passes are increasing \$71-\$79 per month?”

Societal exclusion and social isolation...

Many people don't feel that they belong to the community. There are many obstacles to civic participation and community involvement when you are poor. In "Urban Crisis" people share these very painful experiences of being socially isolated and excluded. Feeling a part of the community or a sense of belonging has been linked to the transmission of social norms related to health promoting behaviours such as physical activity and refraining from smoking. According to Statistics Canada high levels of social capital have been linked to lower mortality rates, lower rates of crime, and positive perceptions of health. People with the lowest household income group were less likely to report a strong sense of community belonging.

"I feel like my family is being punished"

Misinformation...

In this time of global economic uncertainty people from all walks of life find themselves struggling for the basics. They can be working, receiving employment insurance, Canada Pension, Ontario Works, ODSP and they are men, women and children, homeless or living in substandard housing, new Canadians and Aboriginal and so on.

It often only takes a single incident, one simple, small thing for a person's life to change completely from being someone who has to someone who has not. A loss of a job or an injury or illness can change the life circumstance of individuals and their families in an instant. The stereotypes of people living in poverty are simply that, stereotypes. With increasing housing costs, escalating gas prices, rising food costs and the general cost of living more and more people are spending beyond 30% of their salary/ income on housing. Most people are essentially 60 days from being homeless should their employment stop for some reason. Poverty and homelessness should be on everyone's agenda because it impacts us all.

"Media responsibility – coverage influences what is the community belief."

The Challenge

Clearly now is the time to take action against poverty. We know that everyone has the right to live with dignity and as a society we agree that this is the way in which we need to live. In fact Canada signs international conventions and establishes policies to protect that belief and for the right of personal dignity and respect. But more needs to be done – the challenge is move from policy to practice, from paper to action. Every person should have access to the same benefits and standards and there is a significant role for decision makers, policy makers and governments to play in tackling the poverty problem.

In the course of the community roundtable discussions people stated that there are simple actions that can be taken now that will have a big impact on the lives of people living in poverty. They identified the need for Ontario to implement a plan now with a focus on eradicating poverty that includes:

- Health services to keep people healthy
Make sure that community health services are available to people where they live and that they are reachable for people living in poverty

Implement the pharmacare plan as part of the second stage of Medicare to help people pay for the essential medications they need to treat or manage health conditions
- Access to food and nutrition
Implement / restore special diet income benefits so people living in poverty can access better quality food and nutrition

Tie food accessibility and urban planning to funds flowed to municipal governments to address the creation of “food deserts”
- Safe and affordable housing
Commit to the assurance of a stock of safe, affordable social housing and support and work across governments to make this a reality now
- A living wage for every Ontarian
Implement a living wage that allows people to live in dignity

- Closing the gap between welfare and work
Exempt children's earnings from being deducted from the household income for those living on social assistance

Support families returning or entering the workforce by providing appropriate, affordable day care supports

The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Urban Crisis: The Story of Poverty in Hamilton”



Poverty Facts

As the face of immigration to Canada has changed dramatically over the past few decades poverty rates among newcomers have risen dramatically and critical settlement support services remain severely under-funded. People without status cannot easily access healthcare, education, fair work or police protection.⁶

Almost 20% of the population in Hamilton live in poverty. Within that number the poverty rate for immigrants and refugees is 52%; 44% for Aboriginal peoples; and 37% for visible minorities (or racialized groups).

More than 15,000 Hamiltonians visit food banks every month.⁷

41% of those living in poverty in Hamilton are either too young or too old to work.⁸

A person working 40 hours per week at minimum wage earns an income below the poverty line.⁹

Over a ten month period, Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre provided 10,300 services in which poverty was the central issue.¹⁰

Twenty percent of families who rent where they live spend more than half of their income on shelter and are always at risk of becoming homeless.

According to Dr Wasylenki, poverty has been shown to be a cause of poor health and also limits access to both preventive and remedial health care. In other words - poverty makes people sick!

⁶ Poverty Fact Sheet, The Colour of Poverty Campaign

⁷ The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Quick Facts

⁸ The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Quick Facts

⁹ The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, Quick Facts

¹⁰ Who We Are, Hamilton Urban Core

Poverty is the greatest health risk we face

We can change that. We can work to ensure that everyone has access to the health services and care and support they need to be well.

Poverty is a political choice

We can change that. We can commit to making sure that those who make the decisions on our behalf have our best interests in mind. We can demand a living wage; safe, affordable housing, access to food and nutrition and a commitment to rebuilding communities.

Poverty is an unacceptable human condition

We can change that. We can agree that no one deserves to live in poverty. We can agree that everyone has the right to a life with dignity and hope. We can agree to challenge ignorance and take action.

NO Community Stands ALONE a campaign to end poverty

On October 17, 2008 - the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty - Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre launched the **NO Community Stands ALONE** campaign to end poverty. Here is how you can get involved:

- ✓ Participate in an event on October 17th, 2009 in recognition of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty
- ✓ Share this information with others in the community
- ✓ Make a statement about your organization's position on poverty – its impact and eradication
- ✓ Provide information about your organization's services and how you can help people in need
- ✓ Make a donation of non-perishable food items to a food bank
- ✓ Sign our "Join the Campaign Card" and send a message to politicians and decision makers
- ✓ Get informed and get involved

For more information please visit our website at: hucchc.com and follow the link to the Campaign.