

CORNWALL THRIVES

Project: To establish a community group to oversee the development of local solutions for poverty reduction and implement those solutions / strategies over long-term.

As I understand it, community economic development (CED) is a process. As it relates to the City of Cornwall, this process begins to look at solutions to our economic problems and build long-term community capacity that includes the economic, social and local environment. This holistic process leads to positive, concrete changes in our community. Over the course of time, this process creates employment, reduces poverty and contributes to the health of the individual as well as the community.

We recognize that poverty affects everyone. Using a CED approach, what can our municipality do to reduce our high-levels of poverty? Based on current research¹, municipal poverty reduction strategies are still fairly new and only a few municipalities are starting to focus on this topic. Evaluation and evidence of poverty reduction strategies are thin. Based on my inquiries, any reduction strategy must involve a combination of public policy, programs and initiatives with a strong collaborative effort of community stakeholders². Also noted is that dollars invested in children will provide the conditions for healthy development and will save us huge social and economic costs later. Everyone in the community needs to believe in and be committed to reducing poverty.

Our municipality has many levers to support the basic needs, ensure inclusion and promote learning for all. They can utilize public policy, programs and initiatives to accomplish change in the following areas: affordable housing for all, subsidized child care, recreation and food programs.

There appears to be a few common areas in which municipalities can get involved in taking action to reduce poverty. The first thing, and I feel the most important, is to shift the attitudes towards poverty. We need to educate those who may not understand the full complexity of the issue yet hold the power to create change in our community. Next, we need to address immediate needs and make the day to day life better for those living in poverty. Lastly, we have to shift public policy to address the root causes of poverty or else we will never create enduring change.

However, as the City of Cornwall's involvement is paramount to the success of any local poverty reduction strategy, our city needs to decide first on what type of involvement it would like to have. For example: Does the city act as a leader or co-leader; as a participant and the poverty reduction strategy is community led initiative and the municipality is a participant; or as a funder and provides funding to support poverty reduction initiatives and

¹ A compendium of Poverty Reduction Strategies and Frameworks. Garry Loewen. Tamarack. An Institute for Community Engagement. www.tamarackcommunity.ca

² The Social role of local government. Sherri Torjemen. The Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

prevention activities. It doesn't have to be one of these scenarios; it can be a combination of any of them.

Moving forward, based on my project Cornwall Thrives, I would like to see the following steps implemented:

Step 1: Establish the community group. Centered on the stakeholder analysis, it is imperative to create an eclectic group with a broad range of skills, expertise and experiences. Past experiences have proven that many activities are needed in order to establish a strong collective. Public forums, community consultations, conferences where experts are brought in are but a few examples of getting people together in one room to discuss this pertinent issue and formulate a group. Questions the group needs to think about are: What more needs to be done to persuade relevant decision makers, funders and opinion leaders that new solutions are necessary and desirable? Which spokespersons, messages and methods are most likely to have an impact on the audiences we are trying to reach?

Step 2: Research and apply for funding opportunities. Initiatives are not sustained on volunteers alone. It is important to have a funding base to head up a community group and sustain its work. The Ontario Trillium Foundation and Local Poverty Reduction Fund (Ontario) are two noted funders.

Step 3: Begin the dialogue with the community and build public will. By building public will, vision and strategy will be guided by the community and not just a select few. More community members will feel empowered to take action on the issue of poverty. When we work towards building a constituency, we need to look at authority. Who has the authority to make decisions? What are the most effective networks and alliances for carrying out the action plan? How can we be most efficiently mobilized and organized?

Step 4: Create an action plan to end poverty in Cornwall and come up with a solid objective or two. An example of an objective would be: reduce the proportion of Cornwall families who are living in poverty by 25% in five years and by 50% in ten years.

Step 4: Develop strategies. Research on poverty is clear and compelling. Poverty reduction is a community responsibility which has tremendous rewards for all concerned. Strategies need to have a holistic approach and strive to incorporate the following three broad based, yet different focused narratives:

1. Increase social awareness and community engagement;
2. Reduce the impact of poverty and make day to day life better;
3. Break the cycle and stop the next generation from living in poverty.

1) Increase social awareness and community engagement

Here are a few approaches:

- a. Social media campaigns.
- b. Survey the public about issues important to them.

- c. Do an awareness raising campaign on specific topics related to poverty.
- 2) Reduce the impact of poverty and make day to day life better for those who are most vulnerable.

For municipalities, making everyday life better can involve the following types of tactics:

- a. Affordable transit pass program.
 - b. Encouraging employers to take measures to improve employment practices.
 - c. Affordable housing programs – to make housing more affordable.
 - d. Supporting food programs – collective kitchens, bulk fresh produce, community gardens.
 - e. Access to municipal recreation programs: discounted recreation program fees.
 - f. Tax programs – offering clinics that provide low income earners with access to information and application forms for benefits and subsidies to which they are entitled.
 - g. Providing individuals essential skills training: job training mentoring.
 - h. Post-secondary strategies: helping parents to access Canada Learning Bond.
- 3) Break the cycle and stop the next generation from living in poverty.

The only way our city can break the cycle and stop the next generation from living in poverty is to get involved, where it can, at the policy level. We need to develop long-term solutions that will help families, children and individuals move permanently out of poverty by creating policies that will provide income security and a living wage. It is also my opinion that our city needs to **champion** the development of a poverty reduction strategy and commit fully to the poverty table over the long-term. It will be instrumental in guiding the vision for community efforts and its associated strategic plan.

Our city can be an exemplary employer and adopt living wage employment practices. They can also invest in community programs and processes like employment, training and financial literacy programs. We similarly need to explore targeted programs to meet the needs of groups at high risk of poverty such as women. We need to develop leaders to further champion community based poverty reduction initiatives.

All in all, our city must strive for the following outcomes in order to ensure every community member has the chance to thrive in our community.

Outcomes:

1. All families / individuals in Cornwall will have incomes above the low income cut off;
2. All families / individuals will have opportunities to participate in their neighborhoods, the labour market and community activities;
3. All families / individuals will be able to acquire the income, savings and assets to be financially stable.

It is only by establishing a community driven group that will oversee the development of local solutions for poverty-reduction and to implement those solutions over the long term will we see change.