Niagara Poverty
Reduction Strategy

Phase 1:
Identifying Local
Priorities

Interim Report on
Community Engagement

Preamble

This document outlines the results of community engagement about poverty in Niagara. The information presented represents the thoughts, feelings, and feedback from Niagara residents. This information will be used to inform the development of Niagara's first Poverty Reduction Strategy.

For the full report, please visit **niagararegion.ca/projects/ poverty-reduction-strategy**

Background

In October 2021, Niagara Region staff received Council approval to develop a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy. Development of a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy meets the recommendations put forth in the Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative report by Brock University and the Niagara Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.

Objectives

To ensure that diverse perspectives and experiences inform the strategy, staff met with residents, individuals with lived expertise, educational institutions, service providers, planning tables and the business community. Participants were asked to envision an ideal future state, speak to challenges, identify community strengths, and recommend actions.

Methods

Over six weeks through September – October 2022, **600+** residents completed an online survey to provide input into the development of a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy. Between September and December 2022, **45** in-person and virtual consultations resulted in feedback from over **600** people, with representation from **60+** agencies. Additional engagement with the Indigenous community is planned for 2023.

Findings

Through the various avenues of community engagement, staff were provided with best practice, historical context, current state, recommendations, reflections, and most importantly the lived expertise of people directly affected by these issues.

Poverty is highly complex and interconnected, which was evident during engagement. The following image depicts a high-level overview of feedback from the community. The sections that follow are summaries of main themes identified throughout engagement, both from the survey and focus groups combined.

Vision

What would a Niagara without poverty look like?

- Equitable and inclusive
- Where basic needs are met
- Supportive and accessible
- Dignifying
- Where people have choice and hope for the future

- Community-oriented
- Safe
- Prosperous
- Healthy and well
- A great place to raise a family

POVERTY

Stigma · Social Isolation · Lack of Purpose

PROSPERITY

Dignity · Connectedness · Purpose

Homelessness	Affordable Housing
Inadequate Income and Lack of Education	Liveable Income and Proper Education
Unemployment	Quality Employment
Food Insecurity	Food Security
Poor Mental Health and Addictions	Good Mental Health and Lack of Addictions
Lack of Transportation	Accessible Transportation
No Family Supports	Healthy Families

Through advocacy, funding, access and coordination of services, diversity, equity and inclusion and listening to the voices of lived experience we will move from poverty to prosperity.

Health and Safety

Residents often spoke to the impact of poverty on health, safety, and gender-based violence.

- Toxic stress of poverty has a negative impact on health
- Impact of stigma when accessing healthcare
- Barriers including cost (dental, medications), transportation, and availability of healthcare
- Feeling unsafe in community
- Gender-based violence tied to financial stress and financial dependence

"You don't feel safe in your community. It's not even safe to let pets out."

Social and Spiritual Poverty

Participants spoke to the experience of social and spiritual poverty through stigma, social isolation, and lack of purpose. Social poverty exists where people are isolated and lack the formal and informal supports necessary to be resilient in times of crisis and change. Spiritual poverty exists where people lack meaning and purpose in their lives.

"Stigma keeps people from asking for help or reaching out. You're worried about what people will think and how they'll react."

"People look at you like you are worthless."

"Clients are socially isolated, no connections to community and family. Missing piece for healthy communities where people feel welcomed and important."

Pillars of Poverty

The community identified seven pillars, or areas of action, that are particularly connected to poverty in Niagara.

1 **Income and Financial Security**

All engagement sessions pointed to income as the primary determinant of poverty, according to the community.

"Poverty reduction is about income – everything else is the consequence of poverty, not the cause of poverty. Equal access to income is required."

- Social assistance rates keep people in deplorable poverty. Need greater advocacy for increased rates and consider a basic income.
- Increase living wage employers and provide incentives
- Focus on wealth redistribution to address income inequality
- Increase financial literacy and money management skills as a means of prevention

2 Housing

Consistently noted as one of the biggest poverty-related challenges in Niagara.

"How can you pay rent anywhere other than subsidized housing with a low income on assistance?"

- Continue using a Housing First model
- Greater investment in social housing stock
- More supportive and transitional housing
- Additional support to maintain housing and prevent evictions
- Greater landlord engagement
- Improved shelter policies, capacity and safety
- Housing policy changes (e.g., enforcement of rent control)

3 Employment and Education

Participants discussed many barriers to employment in Niagara.

"There is a mismatch for employment skills and the jobs that are available. Jobs are not paying enough."

- Diversify the labour market and increase job opportunities (e.g., move away from a service-based economy)
- Ensure reliable employment (e.g., regulation of no-guarantee hours)
- More inclusive labour market (e.g., address racism and bias in hiring)
- Increase employee knowledge and skills (e.g., training and professional development)
- More programs to upgrade work skills and education across the lifespan

4 Food Security

The primary problem with food security according to residents is income and affordability.

"Many, many people are struggling to choose between paying bills and paying for groceries."

Outside of increased income, residents recommended:

- Stronger policy and advocacy to regulate food prices
- Improve accessibility to healthy, culturally-appropriate food
- Greater coordination and collaboration of the entire food access system
- Address food waste
- Support local agriculture
- Employ food co-ops
- Improve food literacy

5 Mental Health and Addictions

Mental health and addictions was frequently discussed as being heavily tied to poverty.

"There are a lot of people out there... they don't feel like they're somebody, and they're looking to address the hurt."

- Increase the availability of long-term, cost free mental health and addictions services
- Better support for children and youth
- Continue coordination and collaboration in this area
- Advocacy to the province for increased funding
- Expand harm reduction programs

6 Transportation

Transportation has the power to facilitate access to resources, programs, social connection, employment, food access points, education, and more.

"I sense there is too much ableism in the region. Everything is for those that drive, or have a high income, not people who don't drive or don't have a high income."

- Amalgamation of transit services is a positive step
- Provide free or significantly subsidized transit for people on a low income
- Implement bus alternatives
- Evaluate and improve the current system in terms of reliability
- Address transit limitations in rural communities

7 Families, Children and Youth

Intergenerational poverty and the need to focus prevention efforts at childhood was identified by residents.

"Often children are born into poverty. If we can support children at a younger age, we can do some preventative work."

- Focus on early identification and connecting families to wraparound supports at every opportunity
- Increased support for youth
- More funding in schools, after-school programming, mentorship programs, and development opportunities for children
- Expand child care opportunities

Mechanisms for Change

Residents identified various mechanisms for change to move from poverty to prosperity.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Experiences of poverty are shaped by the intersections of identity, such as age, culture, gender, race, ability and other social aspects. Addressing and reducing poverty must consider diverse experiences of poverty.

"Addressing equity and racism is a poverty reduction strategy to provide equal opportunities to all."

- Attention to the issues of diversity and inclusion in Niagara are important and need to continue
- Include representation in all levels of government and hire diverse populations to elevated leadership positions
- Systemic change in businesses, organizations and other systems to recognize prejudices and break down barriers
- Stronger enforcement of inclusive policies, collection of disaggregated data, awareness and education, and additional funding

Service Access and Coordination

A person's ability to access appropriate, coordinated and comprehensive services can impact their experience of poverty, and their capacity to move out of poverty. Service access and coordination is embedded into all of the pillars noted above (transportation, mental health and addictions, income, etc.).

- Increase in funding
- Increase opportunities for collaboration on funding opportunities
- Greater communication, collaboration, and willingness to work together
- Hub models of service
- Improve knowledge and awareness of programs and services
- Address staff shortages and burnout
- Ensure equitable service coverage across the region to rural areas

Value of Lived Expertise

Lived experience is defined as "personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people." It is also defined as "the experiences of people on whom a social issue or combination of issues has had a direct impact."

Providing opportunities for people with lived expertise to have a voice in programs, services, policies, and decision making is important. "Nothing about us, without us" is a common best-practice understanding to help inform program design and decision making.

Next Steps

To date, the work of strategy development has primarily focused on understanding the current state through community engagement. Next steps in strategy development focus on validating community feedback and recommendations through research and data, creating the Theory of Change, developing actionable recommendations and finalizing the strategy.

2023

February - March	Identify best practice strategies through research and a scoping review
April	Convene a Steering Committee
April - May	Validate through further community engagement
June	Create the Theory of Change
July - August	Collect community feedback on proposed plan
September - October	Finalize recommendations, strategy, monitoring plan, and report

Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities