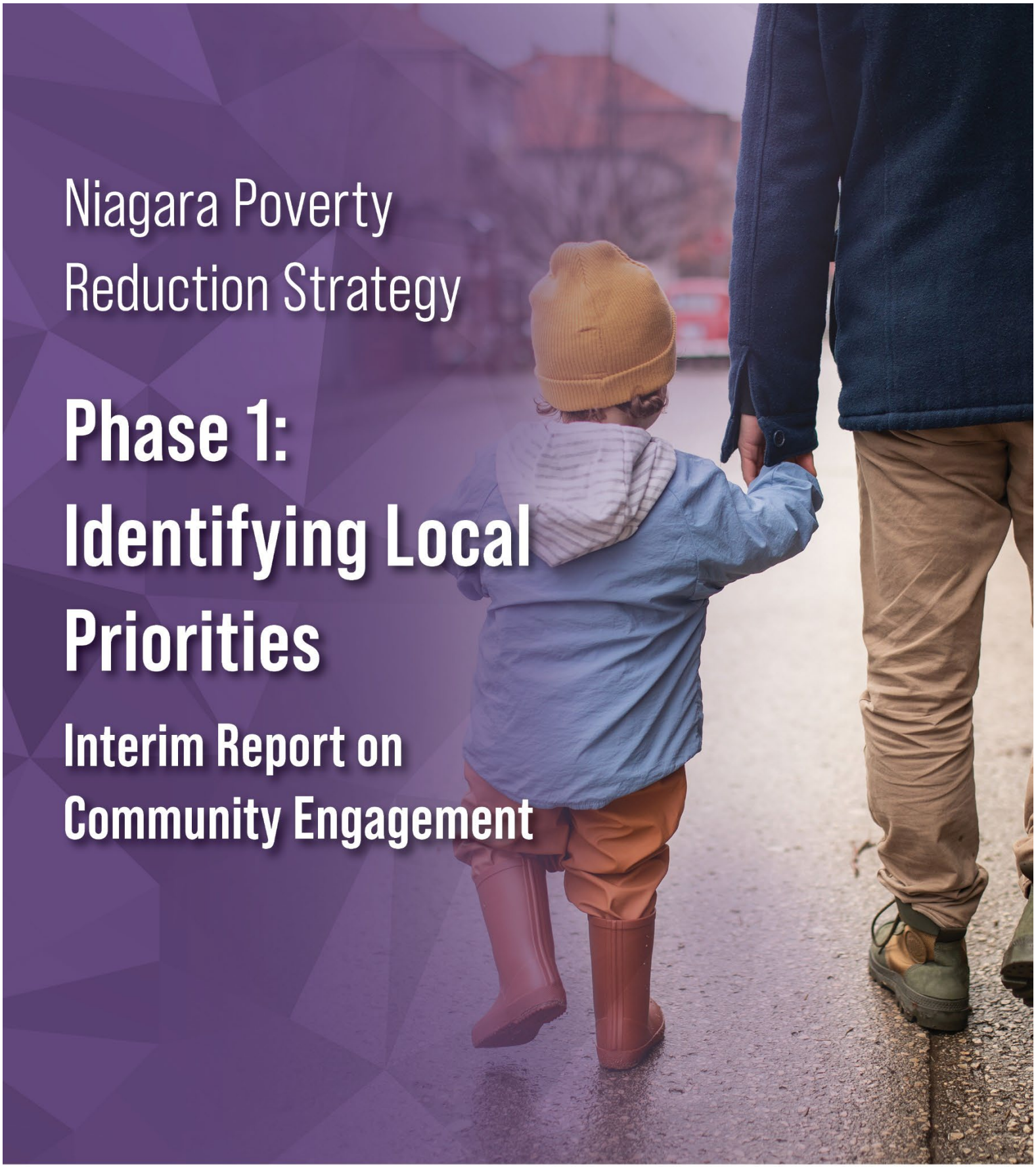
Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy

Phase 1: Identifying Local Priorities

Interim Report on Community Engagement



March 2023

Niagara Region

Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy

Phase 1: Identifying local priorities - Interim report on community engagement

Interim Report:

Key observations from the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy community engagement

Niagara Region is situated on treaty land. This land has a rich history of First Nations such as the Hatiwendaronk, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. There are many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples from across Turtle Island that live and work in Niagara today.

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Westview Centre 4 Women

Bethesda

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Disclaimer

The information in this document is intended for informational purposes only. The content of this report could be triggering. If you are in need of mental health support or services, please visit:
niagararegion.ca/living/health_wellness/mentalhealth/wellbeing/resources.aspx
or call INCommunities at 211.

In developing this resource, we recognize that each community has different needs and resources. The insights within the resource should be adapted for use according to specific community needs, resources, gaps, and context.

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Executive Summary

Preamble

This document outlines the results of community engagement about poverty in Niagara. This information will be used to inform the development of Niagara's first 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 experience of poverty, 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. The following

is a summary of main themes identified throughout engagement, both from the survey and focus groups combined.

Vision

When asked about an ideal future state, the community expressed that a Niagara without poverty would be:

- 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

Impact of Poverty on Health and Safety

In conversation, residents often spoke to the impact of poverty on health and safety. Specifically, the impact of toxic stress on health, lack of access to healthcare, feeling unsafe in their communities, and the increase in gender-based violence.

Social and Spiritual Poverty

Further, 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.

Pillars of Poverty

The community identified seven pillars, or areas of action, that are particularly connected to poverty in Niagara. In order of perceived importance:

1. Housing and Homelessness
2. Income
3. Employment & Education
4. Food Security
5. Mental Health and Addictions
6. Transportation
7. Families, Children and Youth

Mechanisms for Change

Finally, residents identified various mechanisms for change to move from poverty to prosperity. These include stronger advocacy, more funding, better service access/coordination, a greater focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, and the leveraging voices of lived expertise. These mechanisms for change can be used within each of the pillars (e.g., in transportation, housing, income, etc.).

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 through research and data, creating the Theory of Change, developing recommendations, and finalizing the strategy by the end of 2023.

Background

In October 2021, Niagara Region staff received Council approval to develop a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy and a new approach for Niagara Prosperity Initiative investments. The Niagara Prosperity Initiative is an annual investment by the Region towards poverty reduction and alleviation initiatives.

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.
A Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy has many benefits for Niagara residents, service providers and decision makers. A strategy can:

- Establish a more coordinated approach to reducing poverty and avoid duplication

- Improve communication and collaboration between service providers, organizations and decision makers
- Help to better meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents
- Emphasize equity and the unique experience of poverty for different population groups

Engaging the community throughout the planning process is a critical piece to developing a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy.

To ensure there are diverse perspectives and experiences informing the plan, staff met with residents, individuals with lived expertise, educational institutions, services providers, planning tables and the business community.

Objectives

The objectives of community engagement included:

- Ensuring diverse voices, including people with lived expertise, are represented in feedback that will inform the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Increasing the awareness of poverty in Niagara as well as the development of a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Identifying and prioritizing the biggest poverty-related issues affecting Niagara residents
- Identifying community strengths and assets
- Identifying opportunities for action, collaboration and coordination

Methods

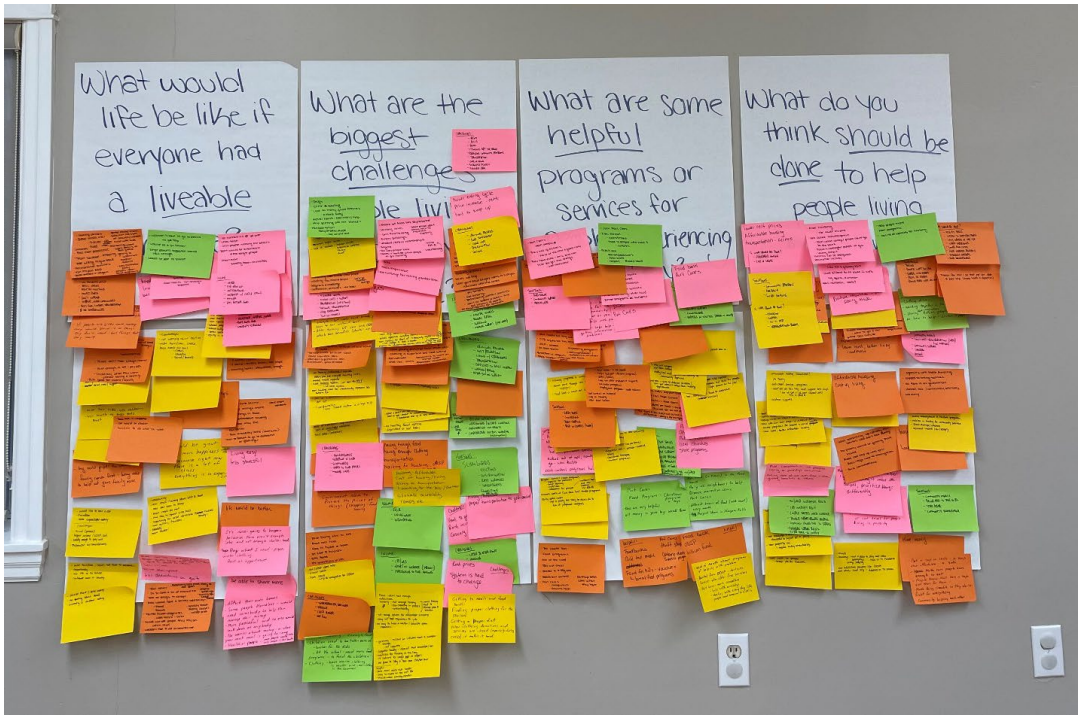


Figure 1. Post-it notes on chart paper after an engagement event at the Port Cares Reach-Out Centre

Survey

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.

Thirty-six percent of survey respondents reported a total family income before tax of $40,000 or less, and 11% percent of respondents reported their primary source of income as Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

Focus Groups

Between September and December 2022, 45 in-person and virtual consultations resulted in feedback from over 600 people, with representation from 60+ agencies.

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In addition to five open-invitation public meetings and four focus groups with Regional staff, staff engaged in conversation, interviews, and focus groups in the following spaces:

Ailanthus CASTLE Community

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)s Steering Committee

Bethesda Clients

Children's Services Sector Network

Coalition to End Violence Against Women (CEVAW)

Elmview CASTLE Community

Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Huddle

Employment-Focused Roundtable through Workforce Collective

Future Back Female

Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) Prevention Group

Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) Lived Experience Advisory

Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) Taskforce

Human Service & Justice Coordinating Committee (HSJCC)

Lived Experience Advisory Network (LEAN)

Local Immigrant Partnership

Mental Health and Addictions Working Group

Newcomers through Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities

Niagara Children's Planning Council (NCPC)

Niagara EMS Huddle

Niagara Food Security Network

Niagara Francophone Interagency Table

Niagara Ontario Health Team

Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

Niagara Region Mental Health Client Advisory Committee

Niagara Suicide Prevention Coalition

Overdose Prevention and Education Network of Niagara (OPENN)

Project Share Clients

Port Cares Clients

Queenston Neighbourhood Roundtable

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St. Catharines Accessibility Advisory Committee

Strong Fort Erie Neighbourhoods: Lived Experience

Stronger Fort Erie Neighbourhoods: Service Providers

Westview Centre 4 Women Clients

Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) through Public Health

Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) through the Youth Wellness Hub

Youth Wellness Hub Leads

It is important to note that the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and increased demand for services at the time of engagement posed some limitations. Opportunities for gathering and community capacity to support engagement were limited.

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. Across the board, all participants expressed concern for the depth of poverty being experienced in Niagara and the number of people experiencing it. Also expressed was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of political movement in addressing poverty, which has seemingly left the Niagara community with a profound sense of hopelessness about the situation.

During engagement sessions, staff asked decision makers, front line workers, the general public, and people with lived expertise about poverty in Niagara. Staff asked participants to envision an ideal future state, to speak to challenges, identify community strengths, and recommend actions. The following is a summary of main themes identified throughout engagement, with both the survey and focus groups combined.

Poverty in Niagara

Poverty is highly complex and interconnected, which was evident during engagement. The following image depicts a high-level overview of feedback from the community.



Figure 2. Visual depiction of main themes from community engagement. Moving from poverty to prosperity.

The top of the diagram depicts the experience of poverty and prosperity, as described by participants. When talking about the experience of poverty in Niagara, residents used words such as *depression, hopelessness, discrimination*, and outcomes such as *crime, gender-based violence*, and *discrimination*. When asked about a Niagara without poverty, participants described prosperity, using words such *as happy, thriving, inclusion, community, healthy*, and *safe*.

Further, participants spoke to elements 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.[1]

[1] Poverty in Canada. (n.d.). Poverty Institute. Retrieved from: https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/poverty-canada

The vertical “pillars” under each Poverty and Prosperity are what the community identified as foundational elements tied to poverty, and areas for change and action. Participants prioritized issues in this order:

1. Housing and Homelessness
2. Income
3. Employment and Education
4. Food Security
5. Mental Health and Addictions
6. Transportation
7. Families, Children and Youth

Finally, residents identified various mechanisms for change to move from poverty to prosperity. These include stronger advocacy, more funding, better service access/coordination, a greater focus on diversity, equity and inclusion, and the leveraging voices of lived expertise. These mechanisms for change can be used within each of the pillars (e.g., in transportation, housing, income, etc.).

The rest of the report will detail feedback received in each of these areas.

It is well established that existing systems perpetuate colonization and racism, and that many of them fail to support Indigenous peoples. It is important to understand the role that colonialism has played in poverty in Indigenous communities and its continued existence today.[2]

To better understand the priorities of Indigenous peoples as it relates to poverty in Niagara, additional engagement with the Indigenous community is planned for 2023.

In 2022, a survey through Niagara Region collected feedback from a small number of Indigenous participants, and included poverty-related questions. Findings from the survey indicate that priorities for action include employment and livable incomes, food security, housing and homelessness, families, children and youth, and Indigenous wellness and prosperity. Participants would like to see movement in housing, income levels, addressing racism, access to land, and mental health support. Most participants felt that nothing is being done to adequately address poverty. Out of a Poverty Reduction Strategy, participants hope to see greater financial security, housing, food security, inclusivity, self-reliance, and access to mental health and cultural services and programs.

Vision

When asked about an ideal future state, or a Niagara without poverty, the following is a vision that the community created. A Niagara without poverty is…

1. Equitable and inclusive
2. Where basic needs are met
3. Supportive and accessible
4. Dignifying
5. Where people have choice and hope for the future
6. Community-oriented
7. Safe
8. Prosperous
9. Healthy and well
10. A great place to raise a family

[2] Understanding systems: The 2021 report of the national advisory council on poverty. (2021). Employment and Social Development Canada.

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Figure 3. Word cloud from answers to the question, "What would a Niagara without poverty look like?". Most common responses include affordable, people, place, housing, living, food, community, poverty, services, care, need, look, streets, support, access, health.

Equitable and inclusive

A Niagara without poverty would emphasize equity and inclusion. It would be *"an integrated community of people from diverse class, race, ability, and gender." "A community that is inclusive of all citizens to enable them to live an economically, socially and culturally healthy life that is aligned to their own personal needs and goals."* It means that services would be culturally appropriate and readily available to diverse groups.

Niagara without poverty would be decolonized, and a place of reconciliation with Indigenous communities. It would be anti-racist, in provision of services and in planning. Newcomers would feel welcomed and supported. It would provide accessible services for those with a disability. Niagara would also have greater income equality and be *"inclusive regardless of income or ability to participate."* We would adequately *"address oppression and the unequal distribution of resources."*

Where basic needs are met

A Niagara without poverty is *"without the pervasive and unending need to address basic necessities of life."* It is one where people *"wouldn't have to choose between paying rent, paying bills, or buying groceries"* and *"begging for a chance to survive."* Everyone would have their basic needs met.

Housing

A Niagara without poverty would be one where *"everyone who wanted to be housed, would be housed."* There would be *"no individuals living on the street without shelter"* and housing would be affordable, safe, and of good quality. Housing would not be discriminatory and would be supportive for those who require additional support with mental health or addictions. *"Every family would be able to rent or buy a decent house to raise their family in"* and *"no one would be left outside in the cold."*

Food Security

Residents would have food security. Community members *"could eat fresh foods without having to sacrifice other important things in their life."* It would be a place where *"families have consistent meals for themselves and their children"*, where *"kids would not go hungry."* That people would eat together and *"community dinners are not aimed at just feeding the poor or unwelcomed."* A Niagara without poverty would be one where people can consistently and reliably access affordable, healthy, and culturally-appropriate food.

Transportation

A Niagara without poverty would mean that transportation is available and financially accessible to all. It would mean that people have *"accessible transportation to get to school, work, or grocery stores"*, or that people can access medical services, especially in rural areas.

Supportive and accessible

A Niagara without poverty provides a variety of necessary supports to residents. Services would be *"accessible and mobile, collaborative and supportive, with low barriers to access."* There would be *"public knowledge of how to access the*

supports available" and *"less red tape and wait times"* when it comes to accessing services. Supports would take an outreach approach and *"community agencies would bring services to people instead of making people travel for services."*

Dignifying

A Niagara without poverty would be one without the stigma associated with poverty, and where individuals can experience dignity and positive self-esteem. *"All residents would hold their heads high and walk with confidence. They would no longer look worn out with trying to make ends meet." "Individuals in recovery would be helped to better themselves so that they see themselves as value to the community." "Children would eat better and not feel different from other children that can't afford clothes."* People would feel like they are valued in their community: *"that me and people like me don't have to struggle to feel like we are worth anything in society."*

Where people have choice and hope for the future

It would mean that individuals have agency and autonomy over their life. *"Everyone would have the opportunity to pursue the life they wish for themselves, their family, and their children."* It would be one where *"people could focus on their life goals, rather than worrying about their next meal, or having a roof over their head."* It would allow people to be able to *"pursue their interests, relationships and/or expressive activities."* People could *"have a birthday party for their child"* or *"have the little things, like being able to go for coffee."* People would have access to recreational activities; we would *"see people out doing their hobbies."* Residents would have the *"freedom to move", "housing choice",* and *"could cut off toxic people that they currently rely on."* People would have the option to give back: *"you could donate and help others, which would bring pleasure."*

Community-oriented

A Niagara without poverty would be community-oriented in the way it feels and in the way it is designed. Niagara would be *"a thriving community where everyone is engaged and participates in a way that is meaningful to them."* Niagara would

have more *"community engagement as a means of empowerment"* and residents of Niagara would have a *"sense of belonging".*

Niagara would be a *"collaborative community with less divide and more people working together to help one another."* It would look like a *"caring, welcoming community."* One where *"neighbours willingly help neighbours, with no one being left behind."* Niagara would be *"united"* and *"judgement-free"*, where *"the public understands concepts of privilege and stigma to become a more compassionate community."*

In terms of the built environment, it would look like *"hybrid community planning"* and *"mixed income neighbourhoods." "All neighbourhoods would be welcoming and inviting"* with *"more green spaces and less cement buildings, so we can build a community."*

Safe

A Niagara without poverty would feel safe. Niagara would have *"safer neighbourhoods and schools"* and *"safe paths and parks."* Respondents feel that crime and violence would decrease and *"people could relax instead of being hyper vigilant all the time."* Additionally, *"low income families could live in safe homes without fear of higher crime rates in their areas, and their actual accommodations would be safe both structurally and not in a state of disrepair."*

Prosperous

A Niagara without poverty would be *"thriving economically, leading from a place of wellbeing and abundance."*

Niagara would have adequate income and income supports. *"People would have access to programs to assist them with income security and other social supports."* Additionally, a *"Niagara without poverty would look like no one having to work 2 and 3 jobs just to get by."* People would have *"meaningful employment"* and be making a *"fair wage, so individuals can make ends meet and have a little extra to enjoy life."* We *"wouldn't see announcements that such and such business was paying a living wage, because they all would be doing that."* Individuals on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) would have more than enough to survive. *"No families on social assistance would be unable to have secure living conditions and proper*

nutrition." People would also be able to *"make more money while on assistance to rise up out of poverty."*

Niagara would be *"full of businesses with good paying jobs". "Jobs that paid more than it cost to purchase food and housing."* People would be supported to enter the workforce and would be compensated adequately, with employment that is safe and not precarious. People would find *"satisfaction in work and family-balanced lifestyles."*

Healthy and well

A Niagara without poverty would be one that is *"happier and healthier".* It would mean that *"people can afford healthier food options, medications, gyms, or sports programs."* People would be more equipped to *"move from surviving to thriving."* People would experience *"less stress and anxiety"* and a *"sense of stability overall."*

Specifically, there would be greater support for mental health and addictions. There would be greater *"strategies in place to support people with substance abuse", "safe supply and safe injection sites", "more resources and education surrounding harm reduction",* and *"comprehensive addiction services".* In the same way, a Niagara without poverty would mean that all *"persons with mental health challenges could get the help they need"* through adequate and *"high quality, evidence-based services that promote healing and improved mental health."*

A Niagara without poverty would also mean that people have access to timely, quality health care. People would have *"easy access to all medical services so families could get the help they need and community partners working together to provide care and help where it's needed."* It would mean that people have transportation to necessary medical appointments, and that rural populations have access to essential health care services. People would not be *"worried about healthcare, wondering if it will soon be for the wealthy only."* Niagara residents would have *"access to non-judgemental healthcare"*, especially for those who are on a lower income.

A great place to raise a family

A Niagara without poverty would mean that children and families would thrive. It would mean that *"children would have better environments to grow up in", "children would have better health",* and *"children could worry about homework instead of hunger." "Children would not have to do without things like birthday parties."* We would see fewer child development inequities based on income, and *"all children born to poverty would have equal opportunity for education." "Different classes of society wouldn't exist with kids"* and all schools would be *"beautiful, welcoming and well-equipped."*

As a family unit, there would be *"less stress and fewer family challenges."* Parents would not be experiencing the toxic stress of trying to survive and *"children would not be in the care of child services because parents are not enduring the stressors of making ends meet."* Families would be adequately supported through income supplements and family programming. Additionally, *"people could work and be able to have affordable and accessible childcare. There would be a spot for every parent who needs their child cared for."*

Impact of Poverty on Health and Safety

In the section above, participants described a Niagara without poverty, and noted that the community would be *healthy* and *safe*. In conversation, residents often spoke to the impact of poverty on health, safety, and gender-based violence. The following section expands on feedback received in these areas specifically.

Health

Health is linked to poverty in many ways. Experiencing the toxic stress of living in poverty has a negative impact on health. Additionally, living on a low income often means a lack of accessible, low-cost physical activities, healthy food, and safe and clean living conditions. Accessing healthcare when living in poverty can be even more difficult. For the general population, we heard about challenges accessing a family doctor in Niagara and long waitlists for medical services. For someone living in poverty, there are added barriers related to transportation, health literacy, and stigma. *"You are flagged at the hospital when you are on OW or ODSP as soon as they swipe your health card, which perpetuates stigma." "When having to go to a doctor's office out of town, who helps you? What*

services?" Specifically, residents in rural areas of Niagara noted the lack of available healthcare options and difficulty specifically with getting to specialist appointments which are almost always out of town.

Affordability is an additional barrier, specifically in accessing dental care or medications. *"Long term deterioration of your teeth makes it difficult to be accepted when you are looking for work."* Participants noted that medication is costly, especially when it is no longer covered. *"I'm on 12 different medications, and I'm going in for throat surgery in a month, so if I go on old age pension I won't be able to afford any of those medications."*

Outreach models such as the dental bus or REACH health bus were noted as successful models of intervention, along with Community Health Centres, Community Health Brokers through Public Health, and the Niagara EMS community paramedicine / altered response approach. *"The dietitian at Quest helped me learn how to eat properly and I went from diabetic, to pre-diabetic, to not diabetic at all."* Participants called for **greater healthcare capacity, increased outreach services, and a focus on prevention**.

Safety, Crime and Gender-Based Violence

During engagement, participants connected safety, crime and gender-based violence to the impact of poverty in our community. *"There is desperation."* Many people with lived expertise communicated that they feel unsafe in their community. *"It's not safe to sit outside in the evening, or walk by yourself. You don't feel safe in your community. It's not even safe to let pets out."*

Participants also discussed policing and the justice system. Residents suggested a greater focus on rehabilitation in the justice system and having **more support for people reintegrating back into community** after incarceration. Others discussed the impact of criminalizing poverty and the need for **trauma-informed responses**.

Gender-based violence is another facet of community safety tied to poverty. *"Gender-based violence is connected to all the rest."* Participants noted that without adequate supports, a survivor may return to their abuser out of a place of financial dependence. Poverty perpetuates gender-based violence. Suggested recommendations included adequate **safe housing for people leaving an abusive relationship** and **aftercare** once leaving shelter. Additionally, a focus

on **early education** in schools, proper **support for children** who have been exposed to or are victims of domestic violence, **better ways to report and protect** victims of domestic violence, and **increasing resources for survivors**.

Social and Spiritual Poverty

As previously described, social poverty exists where people are isolated and lack formal and informal supports that are necessary during difficult times. Spiritual poverty is a lack of purpose and meaning in life. Throughout community engagement, it was clear that the stigma of poverty and the experience of social isolation are significant issues in our community. These are examples of social and spiritual poverty that exist in Niagara.

Stigma

Stigma was noted as one of the most significant poverty-related issues in Niagara by the community. The stigma of poverty can have a profound impact on a person's sense of self and self-worth. Stigma is not only a result of living in poverty, but can also perpetuate poverty by impacting a person's mental wellbeing, ability to access services, relate to others, maintain housing, or keep employment. "*Stigma keeps people from asking for help or reaching out. You're worried about what people will think and how they'll react."*

During engagement, a common theme from people with lived expertise was that *"you could be me in a flash."* Often pathways to poverty involved a health crisis, loss of a loved one, or other traumatic event. *"First is your health, then you lose your belongings, then you move somewhere and someone takes advantage of you, then police are involved and you have to flee and lose all your belongings." "I used to live a good life, and now I don't feel like a human. There is no where to go for relief. There is no where to help. When you're down, everyone wants to kick you. I now know what that saying means, it's a never-ending cycle."* Instead of empathy or kindness, people living in poverty are often met with a lack of humanity or respect from other Niagara residents. *"People look at you like you are worthless".*

In order to address stigma in our community, participants suggested **greater education and awareness of the issues of poverty** for the public, government, and local politicians. This might look like increased media coverage, public campaigns, and education on the realities of living in poverty. Residents also

suggested that promoting social engagement may increase understanding and empathy, and importance of using a human right's lens when speaking about and advocating for poverty-related issues.

Social Isolation

Poverty is a socially isolating experience that can significantly impact a person's wellbeing. Staff heard that people living in poverty feel alone, and a lack of connection to their community. *"Poverty feels totally isolating".*

Not only is social isolation a result of living in poverty, but a lack of social connection can mean that people don't have support in times of crisis. Having connections to family or friends as social resources are important during major life events such as a health crisis, loss of a loved one, or other trauma. These informal supports are paramount. *"Crisis strikes and there is no one to take care of you."*

As a result of COVID-19 and service closures, getting connected and experiencing community was made even more difficult. *"Clients are socially isolated, no connections to community and family. Missing piece for healthy communities where people feel welcomed and important."*

Participants noted good examples of opportunities for social connection such as community BBQs, BINGO, movie nights, and community programming. *"Westview is not just services, it is safe, social connection, good for mental health, community belonging. It's a place to have friends."*

In order to improve community connectedness, residents suggested **increasing community hubs or central locations for social connection**. Residents also suggested **inter-generational programming** (e.g., seniors and youth), **removing barriers** to participation (e.g., providing transportation or making sure events are free), **increasing awareness** of available services and opportunities, and **empowering/supporting residents** and neighbourhoods to develop their own community programs.

Pillars of Poverty

As previously stated, there are foundational "pillars" that the community identified as areas for action. The following sections outline discussion on these core pillars that influence poverty.

1. Income and Financial Security

The Problem

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."*

Unfortunately, the gap between income and the rising cost of living is continually growing. The general sentiment from residents is that the face of poverty has not changed, just expanded to include people who used to be "middle-income". Residents feel that income inequality has increased, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. *"We're setting people up to fail because their wages are way too low to support them and their families." "A lot of people haven't had a raise in their income in years." "I have rent geared to income housing, and am a single parent with a full time job, making more than minimum wage and I can barely keep up with everything financially."* As a result of living paycheque-to-paycheque, many people in Niagara do not have emergency savings. *"It only takes one crisis for people in minimum wage / no benefits / fixed monthly amount to experience poverty." "Life events can bring you to poverty. Loss of family, death, divorce are all things that can happen to anyone. One incident and your whole life can change."*

At the core of this conversation are the rates of social assistance. *"The people who need liveable incomes the most are often those who are not or cannot be employed; need increased OW and ODSP. Parts of our population require assistance and can't work. If we want to eliminate poverty, we need to increase support for people without work."* Individuals living on OW or ODSP are often living in destitution. *"We still live in deplorable poverty. Even with the ODSP increase I'm living on under $1000 a month. I'm seriously considering Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). I'm worth nothing to society. I might as well die."* During the pandemic, income replacement through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided $2000 a month, which is drastically different than an OW or ODSP payment and further perpetuated the damaging ideology of "deservability". *"During COVID-19, the government said the*

minimum someone should be receiving is $2000 a month, but this wasn't available to people on ODSP and OW. So we are not considered people. We receive less than what the government is giving." "CERB was $2000, but we're only worth $1000 per month?"

The Solution

Firstly, residents pointed to a necessary **raise in social assistance rates** in order to impact poverty. *"Need to have programs like OW and ODSP increase their rates. People can't survive on these amounts. People lose ambition to do anything when they are living in poverty." "The social safety supports that exist are not sufficient, such as ODSP and OW… how can we advocate for living wages and eliminate any claw backs for those able to supplement those incomes?"* Others suggested that a guaranteed annual income would be more supportive than the current social assistance program. *"Basic income might help, would help people who don't have money to pay rent – rent is more than ODSP and OW."* Given the impact that rates have on poverty, **greater advocacy** in this area would be impactful. We need to *"strengthen lobbying work." "Advocacy tables need to lobby the province for funding."*

Providing a living wage is another strategy to increase incomes and decrease poverty. A living wage is the hourly wage a worker needs to earn to cover their basic expenses and participate in their community. A living wage is not the same as the minimum wage, which is the legislated minimum all employers must pay and is set by the provincial government. A living wage reflects what people need to earn to cover the actual costs of living in their community.[3] Participants noted that although Niagara is ahead of other regions in Ontario in terms of number of living wage employers, there should be more. *"Living wage commitment… Niagara is a tourist-focused economy where residents work low paying service jobs over the summer with the hope that it will get them through the winter. We are not doing enough to address this, however the living wage commitments do help and should continue." "Implementing a living wage strategy would go a long way to improve employment and income, especially in the lower paid jobs."* Participants recommended incentives in order to promote living wage adoption. *"I wonder if Council can do something to promote or provide incentives for more employers to offer living wages to their employees."* Others expressed concern that the current living wage calculation does not take into account consumer debt and student loan repayment, something to consider for future calculations.

[3] What is a living wage? (n.d.). Ontario Living Wage Network. Retrieved from: https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/about

To address income inequality, other participants suggested a focus on **wealth redistribution**. This would require increasing taxes on high-income residents and providing additional benefits for people on low incomes. *"Increase taxes on the very wealthy that then subsidizes programs for the lower income folks." "People shouldn't be allowed to be absurdly wealthy. People are generally overworked and under payed*."

Finally, participants identified **financial literacy and money management skills** as an area for intervention. It is important to recognize that for people living on low incomes, there is nothing left at the end of the month to save. Rather, financial literacy was primarily discussed as a means for preventing poverty and equipping young people. People with lived expertise also expressed that they would appreciate support with managing money if they had more of it: *"Lack of life skills and knowing how to manage money [is the biggest challenge for people living in poverty]. My main trigger is money."*

2. Housing

The Problem

Housing and homelessness was consistently one of the biggest poverty-related challenges identified for Niagara. It is also one of the most visible. Participants expressed concern with the lack of available housing, affordability of housing, and quality of housing in Niagara. This is especially true for those living on a fixed income. *"How can you pay rent anywhere other than subsidized housing with a low income on assistance?" "Subsidies provided to aid people in their housing don't reflect change in market, leaving many people struggling to maintain or find housing."* The waitlist for affordable housing is painfully long, *"we are on the waiting list for a 2 bedroom apartment and have another 11 years to wait*." Residents noted the need for not only affordable housing, but accessible housing. *"We often hear about the importance of affordable housing. But it is also important that we have affordable, accessible housing. Affordable housing should include accessible options (bungalow, have the ramp built in, etc.). Need to tie in that accessibility word."*
Many noted the number of people experiencing homelessness is unacceptable. *"Because all these people lost their jobs, people are sleeping under bridges."* Service providers felt that youth are at a particular risk of homelessness, especially youth in the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. People with lived expertise expressed concern over shelter safety and explained that they preferred to stay elsewhere. *"Shelters aren't safe and there's limited vacant beds / rooms available."* Couples and families with children felt like there is no place to go. Moreover, encampments in Niagara were a significant topic

of conversation, with participants expressing a need for alternative solutions to tearing them down. "*City workers destroying tents that the homeless have – this is just wrong. Homeless shelters are scary and there are sometimes waitlists if you don't register and if you show up late, you are out of luck and have to sleep outside."*

Other challenges in this sector include evictions and accountability for landlords. Residents talked about being evicted in order for the landlord to "renovate", and then increase the cost of rent for a new set of tenants. This has been termed *renoviction*. People who are renovicted are then faced with a new market that is exponentially higher than the rent they had been paying. *"Most people are worried about where they're going to be housed. You could be serviced with a notice to vacate anymore. Landlords are getting greedy." "I'm going to lose my housing because he is renovating and there is no option for me."* A number of participants referred to landlords in Niagara as *"slumlords"*, and feel there is no accountability for health hazards, privacy, or landlord-tenant agreements.

Staff heard clearly that housing is foundational for life stability. *"Home life has to be stable in order to sustain a job. Foundation is stability first, sense of control over your life." "It's the number one pressure point that needs to be addressed because having a secure home is the foundation for everything else. Having a warm bed at night is safety, comfort, security, affordability, etc."*

The Solution

Firstly, participants noted the importance of **Housing First**. Housing First is a proven recovery-oriented approach to ending homelessness. It focuses on moving individuals experiencing chronic homelessness into independent and permanent housing.[4] *"Housing First should be broadly implemented." "Before people can take a step forward, they need stability. Housing First without judgement or requiring criteria."* Moreover, there is a need to address the quality and quantity of affordable housing in Niagara. Some noted that part of the problem is the definition of 'affordable': *"Clarify what we mean when we say affordable housing – affordable to who? Affordable is 30% of income, not 10% below market."* Further, residents called for a greater **investment in social housing stock** and a focus on rent-geared-to-income (RGI). Suggestions to address vacant buildings and unused land were also made. *"Do something with*

[4] Supportive Housing Programs. (n.d.). Niagara Region. Retrieved from: https://www.niagararegion.ca/housing-homelessness/supportive-housing-programs.aspx#:~:text=Housing%20First%20is%20a%20proven,Goal%20setting

abandoned buildings, either charge owners or turn it into something useful like a shelter or housing."

Specifically, residents pointed to a need for **more supportive and transitional housing**. *"Those with chronic mental health issues should have a safe place or access to safe people to be properly housed. Those that are in transitional housing should be transitioned." "House people in a dignified way and support people with addictions and mental health issues who need extra support while housed." "Housing First is the best strategy, but housing needs to be coupled with mental health, trauma, financial and addiction supports so people can be successful."*

For those that are currently housed, **additional support to maintain housing and prevent eviction** was recommended. People with lived expertise expressed that rent and housing subsidies and supplements are extremely helpful. Participants recommended continuing / expanding rent and utility supplements, providing subsidized rent, and consider implementing rent banks. Beyond financial support, tangible support in the form of community housing workers can help people maintain housing. *"So much value in having support dollars beyond just the cost of housing – transitional support workers, community support workers, system navigators, helping people maintain housing, when people are struggling with mental health and the impact of trauma, they may fall behind on rent or fight with neighbours." "You need to have a worker even after you find housing. Just because you find housing doesn't mean that you won't repeat the same issues again and end up homeless. People need supports to stay housed."* Furthermore, participants suggested **greater landlord engagement**. *"Incentives and support for landlords, with case managers that can help mediate/navigate circumstances. Building socially-aware landlords and incentivizing could be helpful."*

Specific recommendations for the homeless population had to do with encampments, **shelter policies, capacity and safety**. In terms of encampments, residents noted that tents should not be removed until a viable option is available. In terms of shelters, participants widely supported the need for wet shelters. *"Need more wet shelters, as many people who are homeless are using substances. Although you are dealing with the behaviours that come with drug use, there is more trust among staff and clients. Provides the opportunity to create safety plans and protect people if/when they use. Definitely prevents overdoses and reduced strain on EMS."* Other suggestions primarily included safe spaces for specific populations, including females, non-binary individuals, BIPOC individuals, and other diverse communities.

Finally, several recommendations for **housing policy changes** were made. Participants called for stronger enforcement of rent control, regulation of group homes, safety of rental apartments, illegal rent raises, and illegal evictions or renovictions. Residents also noted the need for greater policies to prevent discrimination and consequences when landlords do not rent to newcomers or BIPOC populations. Further, some recommended greater taxation for people who own multiple properties, policies that require a certain percentage of new builds to be affordable, and amendment of zoning laws to allow secondary units on properties.

3. Employment & Education

The Problem

In terms of employment and education, participants noted an apparent disconnect between existing skillsets and job requirements in Niagara. *"There is a mismatch for employment skills and the jobs that are available. Jobs are not paying enough or providing appropriate benefits to meet people's needs."* Additionally, a number of individuals spoke about a history of manufacturing in Niagara that has since dissipated, leaving a noticeable gap in the labour market. *"Niagara was manufacturing-based historically, therefore losing a lot of jobs more recently. Lack of opportunities for higher paying jobs."* Moreover, others noted that employment quality in Niagara is lacking. *"Local economy is based on low skills, low paid labour, precarious work, no benefits, etc. This is not serving local communities well, including the aging population. Need to think more strategically about local economy and move away from the tourism industry."*

Participants listed several barriers to employment in Niagara, including transportation, child care, criminal records, disabilities, needing a fixed address, health, addictions, etc. *"Employment may be one of the most important as it is key to being able to afford to live; however there are many barriers that impact employment as well (e.g., needing a fixed address, healthy, free from addiction that might prevent work) – really, we need to get people into stable income, but there are so many challenges."* One of the major barriers discussed was transportation. *"A lot of the time the job is not close by, and if it's not, you have to take transit, which could take hours because you have to be there so early."* Staff heard from participants that some employers in Niagara will not hire people who take public transit, because it is unreliable. Another barrier to employment is education inequity; having the skills, knowledge and training for the job. Many participants talked about the cost of post-secondary education and the barrier this creates for future employment opportunities.

A larger topic of conversation was about racism and implicit bias that exists in hiring practices in Niagara. *"Racism and bias… looking at bias within hiring practices would better help racialized groups." "Experience with the Black community shows challenges, first racism, and also individuals who are new immigrants – with all the experience individuals bring in (many with post-secondary education and graduate education) while facing the barrier of requiring Canadian education. Addressing this in the region will help people access employment, at least in the field that uses their expertise. We need to use the experience individuals immigrating to Canada have."* Participants recalled examples of when they have experienced racism first-hand in applying for employment. For example, one participant was offered a job over the phone at a company in Niagara, however when they went in to sign paperwork, they were abruptly told that the job was filled. *"Bias is a big one – we have local, government-funded employment organizations who do not / will not help with blinding resumes and are not educated on ways to reduce bias in the hiring process."* Additional barriers exist for newcomers to Niagara, as their international credentials are often not recognized. *"The immigrant experience and the fact that their accreditations are not being recognized… they can be contributing to our economy and getting paid and making a living at the same time."*

Furthermore, participants noted that the lack of child care spaces in the region, along with low-wage work targeted to females, is creating employment inequities. *"When schools closed, many times, moms stayed home. Mothers have not been able to return to work due to lack of available childcare."* For people with disabilities, options are not always accommodating. *"Options are labour-intensive and have working conditions that are not optimal for someone who may have cognitive issues or specific behaviours."* Participants noted the importance of having employment opportunities that meet their needs.

Finally, employment is important not only in terms of income and the direct impact on poverty, but for self-esteem. Many participants spoke about the impact that employment has had on their sense of self-worth. *"I miss working, owning my own money. There's only so much you can do on ODSP." "I felt amazing when I went to work." "Having a job and being able to provide for self and family is an important part of personal identity."*

The Solution

In order to address employment barriers, participants recommended **diversifying the labour market and increasing job opportunities**. For example, increasing job opportunities that are not service, seasonal, or tourism-based jobs, and rather focus on manufacturing, professional and technological sectors. *"Employment would improve if we were less of a service-based (i.e., tourism) economy and more goods-based (factories, not call centres)." "As a resident of Niagara Falls, I am concerned that we have done little to attract long-term, well-paying jobs such as those in the light industrial or tech sectors. Instead, we chase tourism with minimum wage jobs and incentives based on tips. The city of Brantford has done great work luring light industry and manufacturing to its area, providing decent jobs with a living wage, why can't we?"* In general, residents called for an increase in job opportunities that match existing skillsets. *"We need more jobs for people with different skills."* Others recommended a focus on increasing social enterprises. *"More social enterprises – provide an opportunity for individuals to build skills and to move onto other employment opportunities. Has a positive impact on the community as well."*

Residents spoke about the importance of **ensuring reliable employment** and doing away with inconsistent, precarious work. *"We need regulation of the dubious no-guarantee hours." "More year-round good paying jobs. Ensure employers guarantee enough hours through the summer so lay-offs are eligible for unemployment." "Eliminate on call shifts for part time employment to ensure that people can get 2 or 3 part-time jobs if they need to survive."* Many also mentioned the need for employment benefits, flexibility in work schedules, health benefits, and paid sick days.

Participants called for a **more inclusive labour market** in Niagara. Specifically, through addressing racism and bias in hiring practices, creating culturally relevant job postings, implementing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training at all levels of staff, and removing barriers for newcomers. *"Include equity, diversity and inclusion in their hiring policies and address hidden biases that make it harder for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) to get employment."* Moreover, participants noted the need for supportive and inclusive workplaces for people with disabilities as well. There should be a greater emphasis on flexibility, accommodations, and meeting people where they are at in terms of capacity for employment.

To address barriers to employment, residents recommended improving public transportation in terms of reliability, timing and coverage. There is also a need to increase child care capacity in the region in order to increase female employment. To **increase employee knowledge and skills**, many suggested offering ongoing professional development in existing workplaces. *"Training and investing in the employees they currently have… apply to have grant funding for training for staff. There is a lot of money out there to invest in training; it also helps with employee retention and prolonging employment."* For those who are not currently employed, easier access to employment programs was recommended. Great examples of successful employment programs across the region were mentioned, and need to be promoted. Employment preparation was noted to also important, in terms of appropriate clothing, interviewing, and support with the process.

Furthermore, many called for **more programs to upgrade work skills, education across the lifespan**, and free training programs such as smart serve, CPR, etc. *"Facilitate training and skill development that is more accessible for those facing barriers in our employment / education systems."* Increasing accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education could improve employability, in addition to robust and early career counselling. *"Increase social support and career counselling in schools starting in grade seven, so students know they have real options. This can help break the cycle of poverty."*

4. Food Security

The Problem

The primary problem with food security according to residents in Niagara is income and affordability. With the cost of living exponentially increasing and incomes largely staying the same, residents are having to choose between paying their bills and eating that month, or eating very little. *"Many, many, many people are struggling to choose between paying bills and paying for groceries, and I myself am in that category. And I am a single person with a full time job! More needs to be done to make produce available across the region to reduce the stress that many people are feeling, which then they can focus their energy on their mental health and wellbeing and their families."* Especially for individuals with a fixed income; *"I have $40 left per month for groceries".*

Residents noted that even with food access programs, the need is overwhelming, and people are desperate. *"I don't think anyone in Canada should be going hungry."*

Participants explained that accessibility is also a significant issue; Niagara's large geography and transportation barriers have created food desserts. *"Since bus/transportation isn't accessible, I need to order food from the grocery store for delivery. Over $50 in groceries is a $15 fee."*

The Solution

It is clear that the primary solution to food insecurity, according to residents, is to increase income. Because income is covered earlier in the report, this section will focus on other recommendations to improving food security.

Residents called for a need to address the rising cost of food through **stronger policy and advocacy**. *"Have our local MPPs and MPs lobby against the increasing cost of producing and transporting food." "Policies to stabilize the food industry and control costs." "By requesting the other levels of government to legislate limits that grocery stores can unnecessarily raise the price of food."*

Improving accessibility to healthy food was also another significant recommendation. Most notably, increasing transportation around the region would improve food access and decrease food deserts. Other food access suggestions included emergency food supply, pop-up produce markets, gardens, school food programs, and community kitchens. Residents noted that emergency food access points have saved them when there was no other option, but did recommend that frequency limitations (e.g., once a month) be removed or amended if possible. *"Community Care got me through."* Pop-up food markets were mentioned often as an excellent source of affordable, healthy food. Similarly, residents would like to see pop-up markets expanded and happen more frequently. *"People love it when the pop-up market is on, people can get fresh vegetables and fruit to eat, count on it each month."* Residents noted that it is important for food access programs to include culturally relevant food and produce. *"Food security is an issue, particularly with cultural differences in foods (e.g., not familiar with food here and how to prepare it, but that is sometimes all that is provided at places like food banks, etc.) – need to work with groups to understand how to best support individuals as they arrive."*

Participants also noted that the entire **food access system needs greater coordination and collaboration**. Many people noted that there is often duplication of services in certain areas which inadvertently results in food waste, where other areas may get missed entirely. Participants called for *a "broader food support strategy that*

brings partners and programs together" and breaks down competition and *"territorialism."*

Participants suggested **addressing food waste** in Niagara, and noted this to be a significant issue. Specifically, a strategy to prevent grocery stores, restaurants and farms from disposing of fresh fruits and vegetables based on appearance, or food that is still safe for consumption. *"Reducing or redirecting the amount of food that is wasted (i.e., maybe Government assisted programs in partnership with farmers)."*

Others recommended a focus on **supporting local agriculture**. *"An intentional strategy for engaging farmers – farmer led for expansion and creation of partnerships and food providers across the region."* Specifically, supporting farmers in distributing and selling their produce throughout the region at affordable prices. *"Ensure that our local farmers are protected and supported, and that we have good distribution systems to get food out to the community at retail, wholesale, and charitable levels."* Participants also noted the need to protect farmland from development.

Furthermore, **food co-ops** were mentioned often as a solution to food security. A food co-op is a store (such as a market or grocery store) that is democratically owned and controlled by members of the community. Some are owned by their workers and may share decision-making with their customer-members. The purpose of a co-op is to meet the goals and aspirations of its members and the community, and not to accumulate profit for owners or investors.[5] *"We need food co-ops where the food is less expensive than in the stores run by the giant grocery chains. We need to involve the people who are food insecure in any programs being designed to help them."* Innovative solutions such as food co-ops or the model employed by Small Scale Farms in Niagara (as mentioned by many participants) may help address food insecurity.

Finally, residents pointed to **food literacy** as a factor in food security. *"If people are not familiar with the foods, they won't know how to prepare them. We need to provide information as well."* Many suggested opportunities to improve food literacy: *"Cooking classes or support for people to understand how to cook certain types of healthy food"; "nutrition programs at the public library"; "education on the benefits of prepping meals ahead of time, growing your own food, and budgeting";* and *"lobbying the Ministry of*

[5] What is a food co-op? (2022). Food Revolution Network. Retrieved from: https://foodrevolution.org/blog/what-is-a-food-coop/

Education to ensure the grade 9/10 course on Food and Nutrition is a mandatory course in high school."

5. Mental Health & Addictions

The Problem

Mental health and addictions was frequently discussed as being heavily tied to poverty. The impact of living in poverty has a profound impact on a person's mental wellbeing. The stress of not having enough money, being in a constant state of survival, and hopelessness about the situation can lead to anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide. We also heard from people that the impact of COVID-19 exacerbated these existing issues. *"People dying by suicide due to the stress of experiencing poverty and homelessness." "Mentality and state of mind in poverty is that, it is hard to see an out." "When crisis hits, everything is gone in a minute. And it's devastating to lose everything."* Hopelessness and despair were common themes among the different groups and people who participated in the focus groups. Service providers and people with lived expertise alike both felt that the situation is worse than it has been in a long time, and have lost hope that it will improve any time soon.

Along with mental health, the experience of poverty is tied to addictions. *"There are a lot of people out there on drugs, because they don't feel like they're somebody, and they're looking to address the hurt."* Participants spoke about the stigma of mental health and addictions and the lack of understanding around these issues. The assumptions and judgements from the wider community can prevent someone from accessing help. *"Stigma keeps people from reaching out for help and makes mental health worse. Being stereotyped and discriminated against. Society needs to understand that addictions and mental health are huge issues. Need to incorporate coping and life skills into schools." "Society does not have an open attitude toward helping people who are experiencing addiction."*

It was clear that mental health and addictions services are at capacity and therefore residents are waiting, sometimes a very long time, for help. *"Too much need for services (mental health) it's impossible to get help. And if you need something specific, forget it. My medicine is not covered."*

The Solution

In the area of mental health and addictions, many programs and services were named as making positive change in Niagara, including the A Better Choice (ABC) Program, Community Addiction Services of Niagara (CASON), Positive Living Niagara, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Safe Beds, and others. *"CMHA saved my life."* There are good examples of coordination and collaboration in this area as well (the Port Colborne Situation Table, the mobile crisis response team working with Niagara Regional Police Service (NRPS), etc.) and innovative service delivery (e.g., Pathstone's pop-up clinics).

In terms of solutions, participants called for an **increase the availability of long-term, cost free mental health and addictions services** including counselling, rehabilitation, detox, programming, and case management. Residents noted that services should be free so that people are able to access help, and provided long-term. *"Free long term mental health support doesn't exist here. Short term mental health issues don't exist! It will cost the system longer because people will be in some sort of crisis or in the hospital by the time they get referred to someone else. Twelve weeks is not enough to 'fix' mental health issues. It can be very traumatic to have a new worker every 12 weeks because you would be repeating the same story again. This is not effective."* Specifically, Niagara residents pointed to the need for greater mental health and addictions support for children and youth, such as an eating disorders clinic that is local, AA for teenagers, counselling, etc. Residents noted that **advocacy to the province for increased funding** is needed.

Participants recommended **expanding harm reduction programs** across the region and considering how to take this approach in other areas of service, such as moving away from zero tolerance drug policies. Great examples from participants of harm reduction initiatives in Niagara include availability of Naloxone, the Consumption and Treatment Services site in St. Catharines, and the StreetWorks needle syringe program.

6. Transportation

The Problem

Participants from across Niagara noted transportation to be a significant poverty-related pressure point in the region. Transportation has the power to facilitate access to resources, programs, social connection, employment, food access points, education, and more. Thus, it is an important underpinning factor in poverty reduction. *"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. I can't expand my social network because I can't get to the places where I can do this, and then get more contacts."

We heard from residents that the cost of transportation in Niagara has made it an inaccessible option for people with low and fixed incomes. Not only cost, but timing and coverage are also barriers to use. Participants communicated that current hours of operation are limited for employment on evenings and weekends, or on holidays to allow seeing friends and family. *"Being conscious for holiday and after-hours because it does impact people's ability to be social in their community."* Residents also noted that needing to walk a distance to a bus stop may inaccessible for those with mobility concerns.

A main point of discussion was the length of time it takes to get from A to B taking public transit. *"What used to be a 15 minute car ride turns into 3 hrs each day. It's a lot of idle time both ways so people get frustrated and stressed."* Residents noted that the thought of missing the bus increased anxiety. *"People get really stressed to miss the transit because then they have to wait an hour."*

Transportation is strongly tied to employment. Staff heard from several residents that they were denied a job because they rely on public transit. Staff heard the same from employers, *"when I hire at my job, I have to ask how they will get to work. I've had too many days where half my shift is an hour late due to the busses."* Unreliability of public transportation is impacting employment.

Specifically, rural populations in Niagara noted significant concerns with transportation. Residents expressed frustration over the lack of transit in South Niagara, the difficulty and time commitment to travel to other municipalities, and barriers to using NRT On Demand.

The Solution

Participants discussed some existing efforts to improve transportation in Niagara as being successful. Specifically, the **amalgamation of transit services** to Niagara Regional Transit was considered a positive step. Additionally, free bus tickets provided by organizations, and the option to purchase a family pass helps reduce cost barriers. In terms of accessibility, staff heard from some participants that transit has made positive

change in terms of physical spaces on the bus and upgrades to some of the bus stations.

However, there is still change to be made in this area. Through discussion, it is clear that one of the largest barriers to transit is cost. Participants called for ***free, or significantly subsidized*** **transit, for people who are living on a low income**. *"Continue to work on low cost public transit across municipalities."* Additionally, several people suggested extending the transfer on a bus ticket as a way to encourage more use.

Moreover, **evaluating and improving the current system in terms of reliability** may improve ridership and employment. Participants recommended that routes go to areas most in need of transportation, more often. The availability of more frequent busses at "off times", including evenings, weekends, and holidays, would reduce transit barriers. *"Realize that the majority of people who use public transit in fact don't work at high paying jobs at banks and government offices which are located downtown. Rather the majority of the people who require public transit working the low paying industrial and agricultural jobs which are not serviced by busses."*

Implementation of bus alternatives (smaller scale transport, e.g., van and taxi-type services) were also suggested. NRT On Demand, an existing bus alternative, was identified as a useful service in Niagara. That said, users of NRT On Demand noted that timing can be unreliable, the service does not accept cash, and options for pick-up/drop-off have limitations. *"I tried to use NRT On Demand and they took me to the St. Catharines depot for transit to the St. Catharines hospital. Could not drop me off at the hospital due to transit rules?"* Participants suggested evaluating, improving and expanding NRT On Demand.

Finally, it is necessary to **address transit limitations in rural Niagara communities**. Staff heard that where NRT On Demand is the only service provider, given its limitations, transportation is extremely difficult. Inter-municipal travel does not operate frequently, therefore making travel to another municipality for work, school, or an appointment a long and stressful ordeal. *"Public transportation in West Niagara, Lincoln and West Lincoln… if you do not have a car, you can truly be stuck. There is NRT [On Demand] but that service appears to be overwhelmed, with clients reporting that NRT [On Demand] is late or does not come at all. It is difficult to schedule appointments or job interviews without there being reliable transportation." "There isn't a proper taxi service in Fort Erie. So if Uber doesn't show up and the Regional bus isn't coming until*

noon and your appointment is a school day, you cannot go. It is dire." Therefore, participants recommended improving transportation within rural communities and from rural communities to other municipalities more frequently.

7. Families, Children and Youth

The Problem

Intergenerational poverty and the need to focus prevention efforts at childhood was identified by residents. Service providers noted that Niagara's children are vulnerable in many domains of childhood development, and this is often tied to socioeconomic status. Others discussed the lifelong impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are experiences that can include things like physical or emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver mental illness, and household violence.[6] According to service providers, ACEs can impact a person's likelihood to go to postsecondary education, achieve a job with a liveable wage, etc. *"In Niagara, children are more vulnerable and do not have the essentials to be ready for school. Often children are born into poverty. If we can support children at a younger age, we can do some preventative work."*

Participants noted a lack of access to supports and programs in Niagara, specifically for children who are neurodivergent or have special needs (autism, ADHD, etc.). Parents noted that alternate learners have a difficult time in school, especially online, and with limited support. *"School resources continue to reduce and families who are unable to afford private services are falling behind, while the gap continues to increase."* Residents expressed concern over the stigmatization of certain schools and children in schools who come from low income homes. *"As a kid who grew up in a complex… it was the absolute worst thing you could have done for me, my family and my friends. It guaranteed my school had less than my cousin's, who was in a rich neighbourhood (we had to share textbooks and had desks and chairs that were in desperate need of repair). It guaranteed that there were zero expectations on me to be anything other than poor."* The pandemic also had a significant impact on students, particularly those who were without access to technology or a stable home environment during lockdowns. *"There are so many lost students since COVID-19. Social anxiety and addictions are things that I'm seeing. Mainstream schools are not going to help with that though, it needs to come from somewhere else. Students are missing school and learning."*

[6] ACEs and Toxic Stress. (n.d.). Centre on the Developing Child; Harvard University. Retrieved from: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/

Parents expressed how nearly impossible it feels to keep up with the cost of raising children. Not just parents, but grandparents as well who are in custody of their grandchildren and parenting again. A major issue identified was the cost and availability of childcare in Niagara. *"When school closed [during the pandemic], it was moms who left work and now still can't access childcare, and now households have fewer income earners per family."* Furthermore, parents talked about how trying to keep up with the cost of living is impacting their families negatively. *"Parents are struggling to make ends meet and have no quality time with kids, couples divorce all the time, they're like ships passing in the night." "Way too much stress when you're working two jobs and your family is falling apart." "There's no time for teaching and encouragement when raising kids anymore, no discipline, parents are working." "The cost of living has gone too high and has eroded the family unit. We need to start giving people enough money so that they can live."*

The Solution

In order to impact poverty, participants recommended a **focus on early identification and connecting families to wraparound supports at every opportunity**. *"Targeted education and employment programs for children living in social housing could disrupt multigenerational use / multigenerational poverty." "This is a generational problem that needs to begin in the schools at a very young age."*

Furthermore, residents called for **more funding in schools** to ensure children have supports early in life. Funding for **after-school programming, mentorship programs** like Big Brothers Big Sisters, and recreational programs can provide **development opportunities for children**. *"More opportunities for children to thrive together. I was often left out of sports and other fun school activities due to growing up in poverty. It ostracized me from my classmates."* In Niagara, supportive programs such as Brighter Futures, EarlyON Centres, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, Boys and Girls Club, and Enrichment Workers through YMCA were mentioned by parents as being helpful for them and their children. Parents also mentioned that the school boards provide programs to connect families with funding and services.

Participants also suggested that Niagara could benefit from **more support for youth**. Specifically, safe spaces for youth, bus passes for transportation, programming for mental health and addictions, training and education, and support with family reunification.

Finally, residents recommended **increasing child care opportunities** to support women and families to participate in the labour market. Residents suggested that a number of child care centres should expand hours for parents who work overnight. *"Affordable daycare helps parents focus on their work along those difficult years and avoid families falling into poverty because of loss of income."*

Mechanisms for Change

Finally, residents identified various mechanisms for change to move from poverty to prosperity. These include **advocacy**, **funding**, **service access/coordination**, **diversity, equity and inclusion**, and **leveraging voices of lived experience**. These mechanisms for change can be used within each of the pillars (e.g., in transportation, housing, income, etc.).

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."* It is important to consider how diversity, equity and inclusion is embedded as a determinant into the pillars discussed above (income, employment, food security, etc.).

During engagement, discussion around newcomer experiences in Niagara was a significant topic. Newcomers face numerous barriers to prosperity in Niagara, some of which include a lack of recognition for international education and training, language barriers, lack of credit history to find housing, lack of available housing, and racism. *"The biggest challenge for me and for others is getting started in a job. I worked for 21 years as a correctional employee in my home country but I have no education to show that I know how to do this job. I was forced to leave because of gangs so I lost everything when I left. I am now 50 years old and it is very difficult to start over."*

Residents identified racism and discrimination as a significant concern in Niagara. Participants discussed racism in hiring practices, racial profiling, and overt racism in interactions with other residents. *"People of Colour don't want to stay in Niagara because we have not created an inclusive society." "People are so racist… you cannot sit in the arena, and some drivers try to drive you off the road when walking."*

Others talked about discrimination based on religion. *"I have gotten close to getting a job, but when they saw I had a hijab and wasn't the stereotype of a white woman with blonde hair, I wasn't hired."* People with disabilities are also disproportionally represented in those experiencing poverty and experience significant barriers to prosperity. *"Cost of participation for people with disabilities is considerably higher than those who are able-bodied."* Finally, a gendered-lens is important as women and female-identifying individuals face extra barriers, more poverty, access to child care, and low wages.

Participants noted that **attention to the issues of diversity and inclusion in Niagara are important and need to continue**. Residents expressed the need to include representation in all levels of government and hire diverse populations to elevated leadership positions. Residents called for systemic change in businesses, organizations and other systems (i.e., schools and hospitals), to recognize prejudices in our current structures and work to break down barriers. Furthermore, participants recommended stronger enforcement of inclusive policies, collection of disaggregated data, awareness and education, and additional funding.

Service Access & 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.).

In Niagara, participants noted three major concerns. Firstly, an increase in demand for services coupled with staffing shortages have led to strained community programs and staff burnout. Moreover, there are significant barriers to accessing services in Niagara. This includes limited hours of operation (services unavailable on evenings and weekends), requiring technology to access services, complicated system navigation, and inequitable service access in rural areas. *"Having a phone to access services is a barrier, and everything is automated. There isn't someone you can actually talk to."* Finally, participants noted that disjointed systems are resulting in missed opportunities, wasted energy, duplication of service, and the constant need for clients to repeat their story to different providers. *"Integration of services… they never talk to each other. Housing, OW, ODSP, they spin you around."*
Participants called for an **increase in funding** to address waitlists and staffing shortages. Service providers also noted the importance of **collaborative funding**

opportunities and the need to break down competition among agencies. *"Any funding has to be contingent on coordination with others. No silos. Agencies should be required to track the process for a client and see where the gaps, poor hand offs, and overlaps lie and work to eliminate them."* Strategies to improve staff capacity are also important, including higher wages, additional support to prevent burnout, and cross-training. Although participants noted several examples of excellent coordination in the region, more of this is needed. **Greater communication, collaboration, and willingness to work together** is critical for systems change. *"A need for a coordinated approach: a multi-pronged strategic plan that includes both prevention and intervention supports working together for a common goal."* **Hub models of service** were mentioned often as an example of how to work more collaboratively. There are some successful hub models of service throughout the region, and participants felt this should be replicated as a best practice. *"A hub model for services works better for coordinated services. Helps people to not have to tell their story 10 times. Fewer barriers."* Finally, there is a need to **improve knowledge and awareness of programs and services** that are available in the community. *"It can be challenging for individuals to know where to go / what services to utilize / what is available depending on their needs."*

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."[7] It is also defined as "the experiences of people on whom a social issue or combination of issues has had a direct impact."[8]

Embedded within many conversations throughout community engagement was the importance of valuing lived expertise. Not only lived expertise of poverty, but lived expertise in all the pillars that intersect with poverty (homelessness, mental illness, early childhood, etc.).

Residents made it clear that **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. Providing a voice to people who are typically

[7] Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). *Oxford: A dictionary of media and communication* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
[8] Sandu, B. (2017, July). *The value of lived experience in social change: The need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector.* Retrieved from thelivedexperience.org/report/

underrepresented is also an empowering experience, as staff heard from people with lived expertise that participated in the focus groups.

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.

Date	Action Item
February – March 2023	Identify best practice strategies through research and a scoping review
April 2023	Convene a Steering Committee
April – May 2023	Validate through further community engagement
June 2023	Create Theory of Change
July – August 2023	Collect community feedback on proposed plan
September – October 2023	Finalize strategy, monitoring plan and report
December 2023	Present the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy to Regional Council
June 2024	Align Niagara Prosperity funding with Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy