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Fighting words on poverty

Non-partisan group wants to force politicians to deal with the issue at election time

The Niagara Poverty Reduction Network wants to make its cause an election issue.

With a federal vote coming sometime before late October, the advocacy group wants candidates to put poverty high on their priority list.

"We're trying to figure out a strategy for what we need to look at in Niagara," said poverty network engagement chair Jennifer Pothier Saturday.

During a session held as part of the eighth annual Niagara Social Justice Forum at Brock University, Pothier said things like a federal housing plan would make a positive difference on poverty in Niagara.

"We're just in the beginning of figuring out where we want to go, but we know that housing is going to be important," she said. "It's not a partisan group in any way, it's to raise the issues and say, 'You don't have a national poverty strategy,'"

The group also wants to push for improved employment insurance, easier tax filing and the return of the long-form census to collect better poverty-related data.

"Without that information, how can policymakers make the right decisions?" asked poverty network co-chair Willy Noiles.

The network identified things like employment, child care, housing, health and public policy as factors that contribute to the problem.

A high school student at the session Saturday said what affects her most is what she hopes will keep her out of poverty in the future. "You need to get an education to get out of poverty. But in order to go to university or college, you need money, so you have to get into debt to get out of it. It's a viscous cycle," said Maddie McNeil, a Grade 11 student from Beamsville.

She said she's working part-time to save because she expects to spend around \$20,000 a year on her post-secondary education.

"If you don't have parents who can help pay for it, then you have to support yourself," McNeil said.

"I'm lucky if I get eight hours a week at work, but I'm saving so I can start early to pay for it."

Noiles said a good education doesn't guarantee work. The reality for many people in Niagara is they're either unemployed or are in minimum wage jobs.

"If you're making \$11 an hour, how is that going to help?" he said.

The poverty network estimates someone working a low-paying, full-time job would earn less than it costs to cover their monthly expenses.

"At the absolute core of poverty is the lack of income," Noiles said.

Those poverty factors often lead to people turning to exploitative solutions like cash advance loans, rent-to-own stores and the drug and sex trades.

But Pothier said poverty also affects people not living in low-income situations.

A Brock research study showed poverty cost Niagara \$1.38 billion in 2012 in health care, law enforcement, lost productivity and social assistance costs.

"If people realize it's affecting their wallets, maybe we can get through to them," Pothier said.

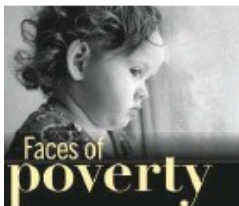
The poverty network says with that much extra money every year, Niagara could build 1,200 new houses for those who need them, buy more than 600 buses for public transit or employ 5,000 people at \$55,000 a year jobs.

Jeff Sinclair, the poverty network research and evaluation committee chair, said what needs to happen is to start fixing the problems before they happen rather than dealing with the repercussions.

"Instead of building more shelters, why don't we figure out how to keep people in their houses?" he said.

The end goal is to eventually get all Niagara residents over the poverty line.

"We know that's not going to happen today or tomorrow, or next year, but it's an ultimate goal," said Noiles.



For more information on the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, visit www.wipeoutpoverty.ca.

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