

Shared Prosperity: The Role of Municipal and Regional Government to Reduce Poverty in Niagara



Prepared by the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (NPRN) September 2018.

Poverty is experienced by individuals, but impacts the entire community. The root causes of poverty are complex and pervasive and the solutions should be intentional and collaborative. The federal and provincial governments have important roles to play as poverty reduction responses include systemic reform of income security and housing stability. However, without the collaboration of all levels of government vulnerable people will continue to be left behind and the inequity in our communities will grow wider.

Municipalities have an important role to play in reducing poverty and are best positioned to define what poverty looks like in their communities, to develop a plan to reduce poverty and to manage effects of experiencing poverty. However, with more people struggling and limited resources through a smaller tax base it is evident that federal and provincial investments must be leveraged with improvements to social infrastructure if efforts are going to move the dial on poverty and *Foster Economic Prosperity in Niagara*¹. Delivering this prosperity is reliant on a comprehensive approach to reducing poverty in Niagara where vulnerable people would have opportunities to not only meet their basic needs, but to move forward in their situations for themselves and future generations. This would be most responsibly done through a local poverty reduction strategy that would include long term actions to reduce poverty, short term solutions to reduce the effects of poverty and a mechanism to monitor progress. Several ideas and recommendations of how municipal/regional governments can make a difference in poverty reduction are included in three sections:

1. Address the root causes of poverty through public policy.
2. Reduce the impact of poverty through programs.
3. Increase social awareness and engagement.

Useful Poverty Reports in Niagara:

Uncertain Job, Certain Impacts: Employment Precarity in Niagara, Poverty and Employment Precarity in Niagara, April 2018. <http://www.niagaraknowledgeexchange.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/05/Uncertain-Jobs-Certain-Impacts-2018-online.pdf>

Calculating The Cost of Living in Niagara Region, Niagara Poverty Reduction Network, 2017. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/8ea78d_0681716cee7a4ea091752109297ee221.pdf

Are the Consequences of Poverty Holding Niagara Back? Brock Niagara Community Observatory, Niagara Connects and Niagara Workforce Planning Board, 2012. http://www.niagaraknowledgeexchange.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/05/Policy_Brief_Poverty_Holding_Niagara_Back.pdf

Other resources:

A Guide for Cities Reducing Poverty, Tamarack Institute, 2016.

https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Resources/Publications/TEN/10_guide_cities_reducing_poverty_final_shareable.pdf

¹ Niagara Region: Council strategic priority projects, 2018.

<https://www.niagararegion.ca/priorities/documents/council-strategic-priority-projects-term-in-review-2015-18.pdf?topic=1>

1. Address the Root Causes of Poverty through Public Policy

Shifting public policy is necessary to break the cycle of poverty. Municipalities can use their policy levers to implement public policy at the local level to assist with the reduction of poverty, while bolstering local efforts by influencing policy at the provincial and federal levels of government.

- **Direct participation in the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network**
- **Develop a local poverty reduction strategy with targets and timelines that can allow for coordination with provincial and federal strategies.** A poverty reduction strategy provides a conduit to ensure specific needs of local communities are regularly identified and raised through the provincial and federal channels to improve the impact of programs funded at other levels of government. The recent release of the National Poverty Reduction Plan² calls for partnership with provincial³, territorial and community leaders and their strategies. The plan demonstrates new commitments to poverty reduction through a definition and measurement of poverty and investments in critical areas, however local impact can only be maximized when parlayed with a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy that identifies the specific needs in Niagara. The City of Edmonton's poverty reduction strategy⁴ calls for communication among municipal, provincial and federal governments to improve how housing, food and child care services are funded and delivered. London, Ontario's strategy⁵ outlines roles for federal and provincial government in creating more employment training programs using an equity lens to target those who experience barriers to employment. Thunder Bay's strategy⁶ emphasizes federal investment in local public transportation to improve people's access to necessities (work, school, food, health and social services). Effective poverty reduction strategies identify pillars beyond income including access to safe and affordable housing, child care, transportation and food.
- **Leverage inter-governmental collaboration**
Efforts to influence public policy at provincial and federal levels will have the most impact when evidence based and informed by people who are experiencing or have experienced living in poverty. Working with local MPPs and MPs to identify and advocate for solutions to address poverty in Niagara would be well supported by a local strategy that takes this approach. Recently, both the Federation of Canadian Municipalities⁷ and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario⁸ have outlined that bold, decisive leadership at the local level will be the key to advance poverty reduction efforts. Both bodies recognize that all levels of government have a role to play to reduce poverty and create the environment for communities to prosper. While priorities may be set locally, investments will likely come from the provincial and federal budgets, as with the National Housing Strategy⁹.

² *Opportunity For All: Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy*

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/strategy.html>

³ *Realizing Our Potential: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy (2014-2019)*.

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/realizing-our-potential-ontarios-poverty-reduction-strategy-2014-2019-all>

⁴ *End Poverty in a Generation: A Strategy*, 2015. <https://www.endpovertyedmonton.ca/our-strategy>

⁵ *London For All: A Roadmap to End Poverty*, 2016.

<http://www.informationlondon.ca/Uploads/ContentDocuments/London%20for%20All.pdf>

⁶ *Building a Better Thunder Bay for All: A Community Action Plan to Reduce Poverty 2018-2020*.

<http://www.lspc.ca/poverty-reduction-strategy-report/>

⁷ *Ending Poverty Starts Locally*, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, July 2017.

https://fcm.ca/Documents/issues/Poverty_Reduction_EN.pdf

⁸ *Imagining a prosperous future for our communities*, Association of Municipalities of Ontario, May 2017.

<https://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-PDFs/Local-Share/Reports/AMO-Local-Share-Proposed-Action-Plan-2017-05-25.aspx>

⁹ *Canada's National Housing Strategy: A place to call home*, 2018 <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/pdfs/Canada-National-Housing-Strategy.pdf>

2. Reduce the Impact of Poverty through Programs

Addressing the immediate needs and making everyday life better for people who are experiencing poverty are necessary measures as policy changes and broad investments take time. The social infrastructure is a key component affecting quality of life and well-being in local communities for all people, but particularly vulnerable people and are the most common ways municipalities work to reduce poverty¹⁰.

➤ **Administration of programs, internal policies and practices**

Model equitable employment practices and administer public programs and social supports with a person centered focus. Reasons which include administrative compliance and budgetary constraints result in discretionary holds, suspensions and denial of service, particularly for social assistance and income support programs. Taking away an individual's income and access to social supports, when in a vulnerable situation will likely make the situation worse, and strips away all dignity. There are other practices municipalities can engage in to encourage program "compliance" including considering the social determinants of health and individual circumstance.

➤ **Transportation programs**

Review affordable and accessible transit programs and ensure transportation options are available for rural communities and people with limited incomes. A lack of affordable, reliable, public transportation and access to transportation options is directly linked to poverty. While transit systems are a substantial municipal/regional expense they also represent opportunities to give people access to employment, attend medical and social wellbeing appointments and participate fully in community life. The ten year Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan notes this importance: "Maximizing transportation affordability for residents of all income levels will boost social equity and economic opportunity."¹¹

➤ **Housing programs**

Promote responsible growth and ensure affordable housing remains a priority of Niagara Region's ten year housing action plan.¹²

Specific recommendations include:

- Review, strengthen and enforce by-laws and building codes regarding the health and safety of building used for low income housing, as being done by the City of St. Catharines.
- Explore a municipal housing action plan. The City of St. Catharines has adopted a housing action plan, informed by review of municipal purview of housing and the specific housing issues in the City. It is recommended this approach be adapted and implemented by all Niagara region municipalities.¹³
- Explore options for the expansion of rent supplements in Niagara.¹⁴

➤ **Health benefits**

Growing research is demonstrating that poverty is a public health issue. People who are unemployed or are in precarious, unstable, low paying work more often have poor health than those with good employment. People working in lower paying, precarious jobs are also less likely to receive employer-provided health benefits such as

¹⁰ Niagara Prosperity Initiative Projects

<https://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/niagara-prosperity-initiative/projects.aspx>

¹¹ Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan, 2017 <https://www.niagararegion.ca/2041/pdf/tmp-executive-summary.pdf>

¹² Niagara's Homelessness and Housing Action Plan: A home for All, 2013.

<https://www.niagararegion.ca/social-services/action-plan/Report-PDF/HHAP-Condensed.pdf>

¹³ St. Catharines Housing Action Plan 2017 <https://stcatharines.civicweb.net/document/49007>

¹⁴ Rent Supplement Position Paper 2018, Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

https://docs.wixstatic.com/uqd/8ea78d_7bd84b52d7124cd8955b7c24c5d35794.pdf

dental, vision, and prescriptions drugs. The Niagara Dental Health Coalition recently reported the top barriers to accessing dental health care were “cannot afford” and “procedure not covered by their benefits”¹⁵.

Specific recommendations include:

- Investigate implementing a Municipal or Regional Extended Health Benefits program for people living on a low income and without health benefits. Other municipalities that have developed programs to support meeting the health needs in their communities include: Ottawa, Toronto, London and most recently Kingston¹⁶.

➤ **Child care**

The Region of Niagara provides subsidies for licensed child care to eligible families. The child care and subsidy systems in place do not meet the needs of all parents, particularly those who have unpredictable schedules and work shifts outside of a typical work day including evenings and weekends. ¹⁷

Specific recommendations include:

- Increase the number of infant child care spaces in Niagara.
- Improve flexibility of child care options to allow shift workers to access care.¹⁸

➤ **Recreation**

Review and expand fee assistance programs or discounted access to all municipal recreation facilities and programs.

¹⁵ Niagara Region Adult Dental Health Care Barriers Survey Report, 2017

https://niagaradentalhealthcoalition.weebly.com/uploads/2/1/7/3/21738986/ndhc_dental_health_report_2017_final.pdf

¹⁶ The City of Kingston Extended Health Benefits Program Report to Council, 2018

https://www.cityofkingston.ca/documents/10180/25792476/City-Council_Meeting-13-2018_Report-18-136_Extended-Health-Benefits-Program.pdf/4b84aab8-4b32-4512-a360-377fa7d0df6f

¹⁷Work Around the Clock, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2015.

http://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Work%20around%20the%20clock_executive%20summary_Eng.pdf

¹⁸Little Start Child Care Inc., 24hr licensed child care <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/small-business/sb-growth/rare-24-hour-daycare-has-800-families-on-wait-list/article34471413/>

3. Increase Social Awareness and Engagement

Shifting attitudes towards poverty and educating those who may not understand the complexity of the issue is imperative and a practical way municipalities can lead by example.

➤ **Shift attitudes through education.**

Specific recommendations include:

- Offer training and develop internal best practices to challenge misconceptions and shift attitudes toward poverty through education about the root causes of poverty.¹⁹
- Offer anti-oppression and safety training to all municipal/regional staff and volunteers to recognize power imbalances that exist and how to remove class system barriers that keep particular members of society oppressed. The City of Edmonton uses a human rights lens to define poverty and emphasizes poverty is not the fault of an individual, as this attitude is discriminatory and contributes to keeping people who are experiencing poverty, living in poverty.²⁰

➤ **Encourage and incorporate voices of lived experience:** meaningfully engaging people with lived/living experience in leadership roles and decision-making opportunities to move poverty reduction work forward.²¹

➤ **Promote civic engagement:**

Specific recommendations include:

- ensure election polling stations are located in lower income neighborhoods and along transportation routes²²
- create channels for open dialogue between residents and elected officials and accessible ways for feedback on community issues and developments to be submitted^{23 24}

¹⁹ The Root Causes of Poverty Workshop, 2018. Niagara Poverty Reduction Network <https://www.wipeoutpoverty.ca/speakersbureau>

²⁰ Simcoe County Cultural Competency Learning Symposium Keynote and Workshop Presentations
<https://www.simcoe.ca/ChildrenandCommunityServices/Pages/cultural-competency-learning-symposium.aspx>

²¹ Creating a Culture of Inclusion, 2017. Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership
http://vibrantcanada.ca/files/creating_a_culture_of_inclusion_0.pdf

²² Niagara Prosperity Initiative Mapping Tool
<https://niagararegion.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=2de2531468a84b6ba26efd714ed97787>

²³ Towards Digital Transformation and Opportunities for Ontario's Municipal Governments, 2017, AMO.
<https://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-PDFs/Reports/2017/OnMuni-Online-Towards-Digital-Transformation-2017.aspx>

²⁴ Let's Talk Niagara Falls <https://letstalk.niagarafalls.ca/>