



CASE STUDY | Halton Poverty Roundtable

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INTRODUCTION

Located in southern Ontario and part of the Greater Toronto Area, Halton Region is known as an affluent community and desirable place to live. However, poverty in the area is significant, growing and largely hidden. Historically, an understanding of poverty and the lives of those who live in poverty in Halton has been limited. It was not until 2011 that the community coalesced around a coherent strategy led by the Halton Poverty Roundtable (HPRT) to combat systemic poverty, and while challenges remain, the community moves forward today with a deepening commitment and greater degree of collaboration.

Key Points

- Poverty in Halton is hidden
- Information and education efforts by HPRT have been effective
- Developing a common agenda has increased impact

THE HALTON POVERTY ROUNDTABLE

Formed in 2011, the Halton Poverty Roundtable is a composed of a cross-sector of groups (business, people with lived experience of poverty, government, faith, education, and community organizations) and community leaders who catalyse community resources and stakeholders around innovative solutions to end poverty in Halton.

In June 2008, Ontario MPP Kevin Flynn convened the Halton Community Conversation on Poverty Reduction, and in 2009 representatives from Halton participated in the conference, “Reducing Poverty in Ontario — A Place-Based Approach” hosted by the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement. The catalyst for forming HPRT was the Halton Leadership Summit on Poverty Reduction in November,

2010 where 120 participants provided direction for the creation of the Halton Poverty Roundtable. At this meeting it was recognized that the response to poverty required an innovative and collaborative approach. Participants chose the “collective impact” model — an advanced form of collaboration that brings together different sectors for a common agenda — because it had a demonstrated success in Canada and internationally, and is designed to solve complex social problems like poverty.¹ After the successful work of the steering committee, HPRT was officially formed in 2011, and in 2016 became a registered charitable organization.

In 2014, HPRT presented its “Report to the Community 2014” where it indicated its four key levers for change: increasing coordination among stakeholders while finding ways to re-align existing programs and stakeholders to maximize system efficacy; enhancing existing services; advocating for policy change at local or provincial levels; and, to learn through experience through the initiation of pilot programs.

“ People don’t understand that there is poverty here because they don’t see people begging in the streets. ”
—June Cockwell

In its “2017 Community Report” HPRT presented its Theory of Change that updated its strategy with the goal that by 2026 all residents will have a livable income and, as a result, have access to opportunities, resources, and supports to thrive and to fully participate in an inclusive Halton.² Leena Sharma Seth, Director, Community Development for HPRT points out that the Halton Poverty Roundtable has “the responsibility to connect the dots between resources and needs wherever it makes a difference.”

POVERTY IN HALTON

Poverty in Halton is hidden. The Regional Municipality of Halton (Halton Region) is composed of the city of Burlington and the towns of Oakville, Milton, Halton Hills and surrounding rural areas, and is generally considered to be an affluent community and a desirable place to live. However, though it is not immediately apparent, poverty in Halton is both significant and growing. Poverty affects one in ten Halton Residents, yet there is little understanding of the issue of poverty in the community at large.³

People who live in poverty in Halton are largely unseen and the stresses of their daily lives are not understood. June Cockwell, Co-Chair of HPRT, notes that “poverty in Halton is hidden. People don’t understand that there is poverty here because they don’t see people begging in the streets. But it’s here.”⁴ Similarly, poverty in Halton exists both in the traditional definition of poor, and increasingly includes the working, or precarious poor. As a result, a key area of effort for HPRT is in raising awareness of poverty in the community as staff work with partners and stakeholders in a continuing effort to educate and inform.

¹ For more information on Collective Impact, see: <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collectiveimpact>.

² Halton Poverty Round Table, “Theory of Change.” 2017. See: <http://haltonpovertyroundtable.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/HPRT-2017-Community-Report.pdf>.

³ https://haltonpovertyroundtable.com/?page_id=88

⁴ Halton Poverty Round Table and White Oaks Secondary School Drama Class, 2015. *Is There Poverty in Halton?* Video. See: https://haltonpovertyroundtable.com/?page_id=88.

HOW THE ROUNDTABLE WORKS TO REDUCE POVERTY

The Halton Poverty Roundtable staff and members are engaged in several key areas of effort:

- Engaging with community to increase understanding of poverty in Halton and mobilize action
- Developing tools to inform and educate stakeholders about poverty in Halton
- Developing a common agenda between and among partners and stakeholders

Community Engagement Activities: Since 2011, the HPRT has worked with more than 90 community partners, convened 14 community gatherings with solution-focussed dialogues, presented to over 100 community groups that include high school students, school board staff, businesses, government partners, funders, and community organizations. In 2016 HPRT was registered as a charitable organization.⁵

Production of Information and Education

Materials: In addition to meeting with partners, community organizations and government, the HPRT works to produce sophisticated media tools to encapsulate and disseminate its message. Notably, HPRT collaborated with the White Oaks Secondary School Drama Class, 2015 to produce a short video designed to raise awareness about the realities of poverty in Halton.⁶ The video, titled *Is There Poverty in Halton?*, led directly to the issue of poverty in Halton as a feature topic on the program *The Issue* produced by Cogeco Cable Television. Similarly, HPRT has leveraged its relationship with local media to maintain a profile in the community while informing and educating on specific aspects of poverty and solutions in Halton.

A Snapshot of Poverty in Halton

Between 2006 and 2013 the number of low income families in Halton grew twice as fast as the number of families (35.7% versus 17%) to 11,750. This represents 7.9% of the total Halton population. The number jumps to 9.3% of the population in Halton for children under the age of 18.

In 2013 more than 41% of renters spend more than 30% of their income on housing.

In 2010, over 10,000 residents in Halton were working poor.

In 2013, approximately 31% of grade seven students and 47% of grade 10 students in Halton reported not having breakfast every day.

The 2016 living wage of Halton was recently calculated at \$17.95 an hour.

Ensuring a Common Agenda: The Halton Poverty Round Table expends significant resources in engaging with stakeholders to ensure a common agenda and tools for measurement. Historically a common agenda has been lacking in the community; while effective work by Roundtable staff and members has been critical in establishing and adopting a common agenda, this remains a significant challenge for HPRT.

⁵ Halton Poverty Round Table, *HPRT Community Report*, 2017, 1.

⁶ Halton Poverty Round Table and White Oaks Secondary School Drama Class, 2015. *Is There Poverty in Halton?* Video. See: https://haltonpovertyroundtable.com/?page_id=88.

THEORY OF CHANGE 2017

In 2016, HPRT staff and members worked to develop the Theory of Change 2017. This is the second major articulation of a strategy for action for HPRT; it describes an evolved focus where the organization is working to ensure livable incomes for all Halton residents.

Intended Impact: By 2026, all residents will have a livable income and, as a result, have access to opportunities, resources, and supports to thrive and to fully participate in an inclusive Halton community.

The HPRT Theory of Change 2017 has four key strategy areas:

- Scale up Smart Start Halton, the Canada Learning Bond (CLB) awareness building campaign to increase take-up rates,
- Develop a local social procurement and community benefits network,
- Scale alternative High School education programs for disengaged youth at risk for living in low income, and
- Build awareness of and advocate for a Guaranteed Annual Income and a Living Wage.

1. Smart Start Halton and the Canada Learning Bond (CLB) awareness building campaign to increase take-up rates.

In 2013, HPRT began to engage key stakeholders to determine if there was appetite to build awareness of the Canada Learning Bond and to increase the take-up rates. The Roundtable convened the Smart Start Halton working group, a partnership between a range of community stakeholders (community organizations, people with lived experience of poverty, federal, provincial and municipal governments, financial institutions, school boards, etc.), which led to community-wide promotion of the Bond.

The key to increasing the take-up rate was two-fold:

- work with those community service organizations that have the trust of eligible families, and
- make sign-up as easy as possible, which SmartSAVER facilitated through the creation of an online sign-up portal.

SmartSAVER is a national campaign working to make it easier for families to understand and access the government funding that is available for education after high school using a Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) and is facilitated by the online sign-up portal.

Smart Start Halton⁷ partners conducted train the trainer sessions, community presentations, hosted booths at community events, and organized more than a dozen public sign-up events. As of March 2017, 39 percent of eligible children, or 11,619 children in Halton have registered for the CLB. Smart Start Halton is currently working to scale up the action plan to ensure that a further 10,000 eligible children in Halton are registered for the Canada Learning Bond over the next three years (by 2019).

⁷ For more information on Smart Start Halton, see: www.smartstarhalton.com.

Collective Impact

Collective impact is built upon five interconnected components to produce strong alignment and lead to large scale results:

Common agenda — a shared a vision for change

Shared measurement — agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported

Mutually reinforcing activities —A diverse set of stakeholders across sectors

Continuous communication — All players engage in frequent, structured and open communication

Backbone support — An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative of community improvement

2. Develop local social procurement policies and a Halton Community Benefits Network.

In 2015, HPRT raised the idea of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs)⁸ as a community wealth-building strategy; the result was the creation of the Halton Community Benefits Network.⁹ HPRT saw an opportunity to raise awareness about the meaning of Community Benefits Agreements and Social Procurement Programs. Specifically, the opportunity they represent for job creation, capacity-building (training and apprenticeships), increased local economic activity, and a greater property, income and sales tax base.

The Halton Poverty Roundtable received a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to build the case around Community Benefits Agreements and Social Procurement Program in Halton. Public procurement projects are designed to incorporate terms requiring vendors to include apprenticeships, training, and other community benefits, such as guaranteed employment opportunities, to those living in poverty.

As a part of this effort, HPRT has:

- Engaged HPRT volunteer Ian Troop, past CEO of the 2015 Pan Am Games (a project that used community benefits agreements to provide procurement opportunities to diverse minority businesses in the GTA) to serve as the Chair of the Halton Social Procurement and Community Benefits Agreements Working Group.

⁸ CBAs are negotiated agreements between a private or public development agent and a coalition of community-based groups. This coalition may include neighbourhood representatives, single-issue advocates, labour unions, social service agencies, religious congregations, faith-based groups and others. Together, they give a voice to people in infrastructure planning and land development processes, particularly those individuals who have been historically excluded or marginalized from these processes and decisions that affect them. It has been explored and studied in Toronto and in various jurisdictions in the US and Scotland.

⁹ For more information on the Halton Community Benefits Network, see: www.haltoncommunitybenefits.com.

- Convened 65 community members in a community learning and consultation session to learn about social procurement and community benefits agreements from a panel of speakers who have experience in these areas.
- Engaged municipal governments around the concept of Social Procurement and Community Benefits Agreements and is working with a Regional government champion to advance the buy-in for and development of internal social procurement policies and a community benefits framework.
- Formed a working group to research best practices and to explore how to bring social procurement and community benefits agreements to life in Halton so that more of our public spend dollars directly benefit the Halton community economically and socially.
- Participated in an episode of *Oakville Matters*, hosted by Oakville Mayor Robert Burton, focused on Community Benefits Agreements.¹⁰ This supported HPRT's intention is to create a broad coalition of governments, community organizations, equity seeking groups, people with lived experience of poverty, developers, key anchor institutions and labour that support of community benefits agreements and social procurement programs.

3. Scale alternative High School education programs for disengaged youth at risk for living in low income.

The Halton Sport Leadership Program (HSLP) was formed in 2013 when the Halton Poverty Roundtable convened community stakeholders to explore the duplication of a successful Toronto initiative in Halton designed to engage at risk youth between the ages of 15-18 who were on the verge of disengaging from the school system. This new pilot program was designed to help “turn the curve” for youth by providing them with leadership and team-development training, a number of recreation-focused certifications, and employment training. The goal was to inspire young people to make the personal changes needed to thrive, to develop confidence and to give back to their communities through meaningful employment.

The HSLP went on to become a collaborative partnership between the Halton Catholic District School Board, the Halton District School Board, the Town of Milton, the Town of Oakville, and the YMCA of Oakville, with the Halton Poverty Roundtable serving as the backbone support organization. The pilot program launched in Oakville in January, 2015, with three high schools and 19 students participating. The second year achieved completion in May, 2017. The working group's focus for 2017 is to expand the program in Oakville to three more high schools and to pilot the project in Milton, Burlington and Halton Hills.

4. Build awareness of and educate on the value of income security solutions to poverty.

One of HPRT's goals is to build the capacity of the community to have meaningful and open dialogues around the human dignity we unleash when income security solutions such as a living wage or a basic income become a reality. The Roundtable does this through action-oriented education, and by creating inclusive spaces for conversation and collective visioning. With the support of fund holders at the

¹⁰ To view this episode of *Oakville Matters*, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AdGw5Plat8&list=PLjveiXvD9pOehdSSUQPbV-VIG3I5xiElp&index=2>

Oakville Community Foundation, throughout 2018 the Roundtable will be launching a series of modules designed to educate and foster conversations across Halton about income security solutions to poverty that can lead to greater equity and economic inclusion in Halton.

AREAS OF SUCCESS

Leena Sharma Seth, Director, Community Development for HPRT, points to two key areas for measurable success tied to specific HPRT initiatives:

- Fostering collaboration among stakeholders
- Increasing take-up of Canada Learning Bonds

Collaboration is a key element of the Collective Impact strategy. In Halton, the level of collaboration between and among stakeholders has been low. Sharma Seth notes that since its inception in 2011, the level of collaboration in the community has been on the rise and this in part due to the efforts of HPRT. However, ensuring that collaborative practices and networks remain and deepen requires sustained effort and a means to monitor and measure success. HPRT has provided a leadership and support role for collaboration by stakeholders and the community at large.

Since 2013, through its Smart Start Halton collaborative campaign, HPRT has served as the backbone support organization facilitating collaboration between partners seeking to help families ensure every child has the opportunity to access post-secondary education. By September 2017, collective effort has increased the take-up rate for the Canada Learning Bond from 31 percent to 38 percent. 6,557 children accessed their Canada Learning Bond and \$13,114,000 in funds for post-secondary education savings has come into the Halton community for children living in lower income families. The objective over the next three years is to register another 10,000 eligible children for their Canada Learning bond, a potential \$20,000,000 in funds for post secondary education savings.

CHALLENGES

Hidden Poverty. The problem of hidden poverty in Halton continues to be a challenge. The general affluence of Halton masks systemic poverty and remains a barrier to stakeholder engagement; HPRT staff and members engage in a continued effort to raise the profile of the issue of poverty in the community.

Funding. Securing stable and sustainable funding requires ongoing dedication of staff and resources for HPRT. Significant sources of funding include the Trillium Foundation, the Atkinson Foundation, the Halton Community Foundation and other sources, but the majority of this funding is short-term and project based. The United Way represents a small percentage of HPRT's resource base, but this is long-term and includes access to offices and other resources.

Maintaining a profile for HPRT. Developing an understanding in the community of the value of an organization like HPRT represents an ongoing challenge for HPRT. Roundtable staff and members engage in community outreach activities with the awareness that the organization needs to be viewed as an essential actor in poverty reduction efforts and a resource for others to look to in their own poverty reduction activities.

Becoming a Charitable Organization. In 2016 HPRT achieved charitable status. This enables HPRT to better control an ability to sustain itself, but it also means that HPRT must negotiate how to be compliant with Canada Revenue Agency criteria while maintaining an ability to respond to emerging circumstances.

LEARNINGS

Minds can be changed. Organizations like HPRT can have an impact on the thinking of policy makers, such as municipal leaders, and credit for this can be attributed in a large part to the existence of space for dialogue on the problem of poverty in Canadian communities (Leena Sharma Seth pointed to the Tamarack conference, the “Cities Reducing Poverty Summit” held in Edmonton in 2016). HPRT staff have observed that municipal leaders in Halton have increasingly acknowledged the existence of poverty in their communities and have begun to advocate for solutions.

Credibility builds efficacy. As the Roundtable moves in to a new phase as a charitable organization, staff and members recognize that engagement by community members, businesses and government is deepened by the recognition of HPRT as a federally recognized actor in poverty reduction. Charitable status brings new challenges, but allows a greater degree of control over the assignment of resources.

“When organizations can come together while keeping their focus on the person that’s struggling ... and each can offer their expertise, their experience, their resources ... then we have a better chance at moving people, or helping people move, out of poverty to a sustainable life.”

— Gary O’Neil, Executive Director, Kerr Street Ministries

REFERENCES

Halton Poverty Round Table, *Community Report*, 2014. See: <http://haltonpovertyroundtable.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/HPRT-Report-to-Community-Vision-2020.pdf>

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