

# COMMUNITY PRIORITIES FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

## RESPONDING TO POVERTY IN CAMBRIDGE



Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries

May 2008

### Introduction

At our first Poverty Symposium in 2006, the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries, along with local residents, service providers and local politicians recognized the need for greater advocacy and protection for people living on low incomes.

As a result, the working group, “A Community Response for Fair Income” group was formed and since its inception two years ago, the group has been raising awareness about the needs and issues facing a growing number of people who despite a thriving local economy, are living at or below the poverty line. In Cambridge and North Dumfries, this applies to more than 13% of the population.

**“We must go beyond anti poverty initiatives that only lead to marginal improvements in the lives of people living in poverty”** – Social Planning Network of Ontario, April 2008

There are several factors contributing to the growing gap among high and low income earners in our community. Over the past six years in Waterloo Region there have been an estimated 6475 manufacturing jobs lost (Labour Program Waterloo Region, 2007) as a result plant closures and relocations. With one third of Cambridge’s labour force employed in the manufacturing sector, the impacts have been significant.

The scarcity of safe affordable housing has also become a serious concern, putting more than 36% of our community at risk of homelessness. We know that many families, despite full time employment are struggling to make ends meet and local social service agencies are overburdened as they strive to meet the increased demands for service.

**“Poverty Reduction is about making serious progress on the eradication of poverty in our society”** – Social Planning Network of Ontario, April 2008

In 2007, the Ontario government announced its commitment to develop a focused poverty reduction strategy by the end of 2008. Their Provincial Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction led by the honourable Minister Deb Matthews will spend the summer months traveling to cities across the province to consult with communities.

With the political momentum and will that currently exists in the province the Fair Income group set out gather feedback and solutions from Cambridge residents with lived experience. Recognizing the strength of community mobilization as an effective way to address large-scale public issues, the Fair Income group wanted to bring together concerned citizens and local decision makers to discuss the issue of poverty. A town hall meeting is a particularly effective forum that allows local citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions, in the hopes of being able to

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influence elected officials in their decision-making. As experienced community organizers, The Fair Income group wanted to reduce barriers that often prevent the voices of vulnerable/marginalized groups from being heard. As a result, "mini" town hall meetings were planned in strategic locations across Cambridge. The project was named "Community Priorities for Poverty Reduction" and reflected the commitment of the Fair Income group to promote values of inclusion, social justice, and equality.

### METHODOLOGY

In January 2008, the Fair Income group partnered with social service agencies and groups throughout Galt, Hespeler, and Preston to provide safe and accessible meeting spaces for the mini town hall meetings. Staff members at the participating agencies shared our enthusiasm and were extremely helpful in terms of participant recruitment - in some instances, staff went door to door to promote the event. The Fair Income group determined that the information gathered at the mini town hall events would be synthesized into a presentation and fed into discussions that would take place at the larger town hall meeting in April.

### RESULTS

**"When you're poor, eating nutritiously is impossible - fresh fruit and vegetables are expensive - I go without meals so my children can eat"** - participant comment, March 2008

### *Mini Town Hall events*

During the months of February and March 2008, 7 mini town hall meetings were held throughout Cambridge. Seventy-seven people from various walks of life gathered at The Bridges, The Self Help Food Bank, Christopher Champlain Community Centre, Conestoga College (Cambridge campus), Langs Farm Village Association, Popcorn House and Southwood to share their personal experiences of living on low incomes.

Common themes related to income, childcare, employment, health care, housing, feelings of exclusion and hopelessness, and social assistance, emerged. Participants expressed the need for more subsidized childcare spaces and housing units. Newcomers shared feeling undervalued and discriminated against as they try to establish themselves and deal with health and social welfare systems in our community. Working people shared their feelings of hopelessness as they struggle to provide for their family's basic necessities on inadequate incomes. ***This would be the place to insert the quote about going without food....*** People receiving social assistance - especially those living with disabilities - spoke of the

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many challenges they face as they access supports that seem to perpetuate a cycle of poverty, rather than help them get ahead. The mini town hall meetings helped to raise awareness in the community about the provincial poverty reduction strategy and participants brought forth recommendations that were presented at the large town hall meeting held on April 3, 2008.

### *Large Town Hall Meeting*

The Fair Income group's large Town Hall meeting, held at the Cambridge Newfoundland Club on April 3, 2008 was designed to raise awareness about growing rates of poverty in Cambridge and North Dumfries. As panellists, MP Gary Goodyear, MPP Gerry Martiniuk, Regional Councillor Claudette Millar and City of Cambridge Mayor, Doug Craig, joined eighty-three concerned citizens who came out to hear the results from the mini town hall meetings and discuss ways in which the community can work together to address poverty.

The almost two hour meeting provided a forum for audience members to share their concerns with local politicians who unequivocally agree that poverty is a growing concern in Cambridge and North Dumfries. Mayor Craig highlighted the city's commitment to ensuring all citizens have access to quality services - their ongoing funding of Cambridge Memorial Hospital (despite health care being a provincial, rather than municipal

responsibility) and Mayor Craig's membership on the Poverty Reduction Roundtable are just two examples. Councillor Millar shared how pervasive and complex an issue poverty is. Councillor Millar recognized that addressing poverty is something the Region of Waterloo has been doing for the past thirty years. MPP Gerry Martiniuk affirmed his party's commitment to reducing the growing gap among rich and poor in Cambridge as he discussed his efforts to bring more physicians to the area. MP Gary Goodyear expressed his desire to learn more about temporary employment agencies when he responded to audience concerns about the high number of manufacturing job losses. At the end of the event the Fair Income group felt optimistic about the level of support and commitment from local politicians to deal with poverty related issues in Cambridge and North Dumfries.

The event was well received by local media. On April 4, 2008 Rogers Television aired a segment focusing on the town hall meeting on their daily newscast "First Local" and the Waterloo Region Record and Cambridge Times both ran stories about the event in their Saturday editions.

### *Next Steps*

The Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries and the Fair Income group continue to take action and raise awareness surrounding the issue of poverty

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reduction. In June we are hosting our third annual Poverty Symposium. This year we are bringing speakers from Newfoundland and Labrador to share their experiences with poverty reduction. Our participation on the Poverty Reduction Roundtable ensures the voices of those affected by poverty are heard by local decision makers. Please visit our website, [www.socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org](http://www.socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org) to stay informed of the progress we are making to ensure our community is inclusive and one that provides opportunities for all citizens.

**“I’ve worked my whole life, paid taxes, and raised two children. Now I’m living in my car. I used the system [Ontario Works] when I needed it and I’m worse off for it.”**

(Audience member comment, Town Hall Meeting, April 3, 2008)

**“There are a lot of factories shutting down... the government should step in and provide assistance to workers”**

(Participant feedback, mini town hall meeting, March, 2008)

**““I need help to assume my profession here in Canada. I need Canadian experience.”**

**“A decent minimum wage would make it easier for those who can work to work. Leave assistance to those who can’t”**

**“Working for minimum wage is hard. You work full time, live in poverty and have no health coverage”**

- participant comments from mini town hall meetings, February 2008