



POVERTY LIVES HERE

A MUNICIPAL FORUM ON POVERTY

Presented by the Town of Amherst, NS on March 22, 2018

SUMMARY REPORT

Presented by:



Purpose and Goal for the Day

Amherst Town Council identified Poverty Reduction as a strategic priority. Organizing the first municipally-led forum on poverty is a first step in the process. The forum theme “Poverty Lives Here” was created to provide participants with a greater awareness of the significant level of poverty in our community. Invitations targeted those with influence on policy, including elected municipal representatives, town senior management, stakeholders and community champions.



We engaged a facilitator to lead participants through a process designed to help raise awareness of poverty. Speakers included Robert S. Wright MSW RSW and Dr. Christine Saulnier, The Nova Scotia Director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Four participants agreed to share their firsthand accounts of the challenges of living in poverty.

50 participants registered which was robust considering we were hit with the biggest snowstorm of the season.

Participants were asked to complete a pre and post forum survey with identical questions about opinion and several additional questions pertaining to the forum to determine if awareness of the issue had changed.

The Survey: What We Learned

There was an 80% response rate to the survey and the comparison between the pre- and post-survey results clearly show there was an increased awareness about the existence of poverty in Amherst, a greater understanding about the effect of poverty on the entire community and the responsibility lies with many.

SURVEY RESULTS		
QUESTIONS	PRE-SURVEY	POST-SURVEY
Strongly agree that poverty exists in Amherst	65%	88%
Strongly agree that poverty affects the health of the community	78%	88%
Poverty is the responsibility of the individual	41%	31%
Poverty is the responsibility of charitable organizations	20%	14%
The goal of the day was to raise awareness about poverty and it's affects in our community. The Goal of the day was met.	-	91%
The Conversation should continue at the municipal level	-	100%

When asked if the municipality was to consider the development of future policy to reduce the effect of poverty, the top four suggested priorities included:

- Housing
- Food security
- Public transportation
- No charge inclusive recreation



Table Conversations

Throughout the afternoon participants were separated into five small table conversations around some difficult first voice scenarios.

The groups were asked to read their scenario and consider a day in the life of the person in the story. Following very rich discussions each group was tasked with considering;

If the municipality was going to look at the development of future policy to reduce the effects of poverty on the community, rank your top three priorities.

The themes that emerged were:

- Housing
- Food Security
- Transportation
- Inclusive recreation programming particularly for youth
- Employment
- Communication
- Advocacy



Housing

“43% of renters spend more than 30% of their income on shelter costs.”

Statistics Canada 2016

Housing was a priority in every conversation identifying the need for several types of supports including transitional, emergency, safe and affordable housing. The need for a homeless shelter that could accommodate people regardless of age or gender was a priority

There is so much stigma and far too many barriers attached to being homeless or being on the verge of homelessness. These are a few examples shared during the forum: not knowing where to go, no phone, no constant address, no IDs, no money, no food, no shelters available, no transportation to even look for a home, lack of family support or social isolation and lack of communication, lack of credibility/reputation, addiction, mental health and suicide risk, anxiety because of no income, fear of physical safety, embarrassment, having only short term, one off options, constantly worrying and wondering who can I stay with.

Housing can be particularly difficult for teens as many landlords aren't prepared to rent to them and they aren't able to find accommodations within their budget as it is often difficult for them to access income assistance. Some rent supplements should be earmarked specifically for young families through Cobequid Housing and individuals in crisis should be pushed up to the front of the housing waitlist.

Food Security

“72% of female lone parent families with children 0 to 5 years live in poverty.”

Statistics Canada 2016

Food insecurity is a reality for many in our community. People face extremely difficult decisions daily around buying food or paying for utilities like heat and lights. That stress alone leads to a cycle of poor health, potential for more illness, and lost time from work.

Lack of access to food was a concern because there is no longer a downtown grocery store. It was also noted that our food bank has limited hours that may not be practical for many and the pantry may not be accessible to all because of the location.



There is a need more barrier-free services so we can eliminate the requirement for youth and families living in poverty having to complete several forms before accessing benefits.

There needs to be a place for youth to go to be out of the cold where they can eat and share their stories without fear of judgement.

A universal school food program makes sense. According to some of the data up to 47% of school kids are hungry and although most, if not all, schools in Cumberland County have some sort of breakfast and or lunch program they are not all equal.

More money needs to be earmarked into programs and services that increase community supports such as Maggie’s Place and the YMCA.

Transportation

“I don’t own a car so my children and I walk everywhere – this is extremely difficult and dangerous for my family when the sidewalks are snow-covered and icy and I have to walk on the road pushing a stroller.”

First Voice Story

Transportation came up as a concern in every table conversation. Lack of affordable transportation impacts the ability to access food, health services, employment, education and social opportunities.

A bus route that operates on a regular basis through town and out to the hospital should be a priority. Taxis are expensive and Cumberland County Transit Society (CCTS) can be inconvenient and/or impractical as you have to call at least one day in advance to book transportation.

Groups suggested an active transportation policy that includes a walkability plan, bike routes and a bike share program. We heard stories about people having to walk on the road because sidewalks were not cleared. Making sidewalks and walkways a priority for snow clearing and repair would allow much safer access to resources.



Inclusive Youth Programming Recreation

“34.7% of all Amherst youth 17 and under live in poverty.”

Statistics Canada 2016

Fear, shame and stigma were a big part of every table conversation. When discussing youth, isolation and not knowing where to turn were added to the list.

It is important to improve supports for youth so they can stay in school. Free childcare programs, fair access to youth income assistance and more resources for the SchoolsPlus program would all go a long way to help.

Lack of community supports and networks for people without family or friends within the area only increases the sense of isolation and loneliness. Funding should be increased for programming that provides individuals and families with barrier free activities allowing them to be more connected to their community. Build a greater sense of belonging.

Employment

*“A job is not an automatic ticket out of poverty.
86% of those making minimum wage are 20 or older.”*

Christine Saulnier



The first voice stories we heard and the broader perspective shared by Christine Saulnier all highlighted the inequity of poverty. There are higher rates of poverty among women, visible minorities and people with disabilities. Many are unemployed or under-employed.

In order to have an impact, it is important that employers consider our hiring policies. There is a need for a process that will help those most impacted acquire jobs.

Employers should prioritize hiring employees within the community not just for a single position but also for contract work such as building contracts, consultants etc.

There should be supports in place and enable individuals to complete their education in order to increase the likelihood of obtaining employment. Encourage employers and community groups to offer inclusive volunteer opportunities that can help individuals gain experience and enhance social skills to improve their employability.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS - WE DID THE MATH:

<http://behindthenumbers.ca/2017/10/04/15-minimum-wage-in-nova-scotia/>

Communication

“If you do not have internet or phone, you cannot access 211, or contact a support service without finding a way to get there and without money...”

Forum Participant

All five groups cited communication as a concern. When living in poverty there was often no access to phones or internet to reach out for services or help. Without these services that many take for granted, people cannot access 911, 811 or 211 let alone contact family doctors or other professionals. It was suggested that more payphones be available and more access to free internet.



Along with lack of access to phone and internet, there is also a need for a better way to share knowledge. Many are not aware of services that are available to them or who to call when they need help. Several groups suggested a navigator for the county to help link services. The library may be a great place to maintain lists of available services. The town could consider taking a leadership role in pulling partners together.

There should be a place a person can go when they find themselves in a crisis to obtain access to phone and internet.

Advocacy and Awareness

“There is a lack of community supports and networks for people without families/friends within the area makes.”

Forum Participant

Throughout the afternoon conversations sparked lots of idea around the need for advocacy at different levels of government. Participants noted they would like to see the municipality advocate for:

- Increased SchoolsPlus programming.
- Addiction services for youth particularly around smoking.
- Fair processing of youth applications for DCS.
- Increase CPP, guaranteed living wage.
- Uniform school food programs.
- Fluoride in water.
- Access to health care including prenatal services, mental health and addictions.
- Sensitivity training for first responders to help reduce personal bias and judgement.
- Education system that can prepare individuals for a career change help people earn a living wage.
- A DCS navigator that would enable people to get the benefits they are entitled to and feel they have someone advocating for them. This navigator could also point them toward other programs that could be useful in their particular circumstance.
- Shift the culture of poverty; suspend judgement.

