

## **Forget policy makers, civic leaders are spearheading the fight to end poverty**

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Slowly but surely, civil society leaders in this country are taking over what used to be the preserve of public servants and politicians. They are revamping the blueprint for social policy in order to help people escape poverty. In the process, they are creating solutions that bridge left and right.

In cities across Canada - from Saint John to Kingston, Hamilton, Toronto, Winnipeg and Calgary - business leaders are joining forces with the United Way, community foundations, faith groups, school boards, local governments and thousands of volunteers. Their goal is to strengthen poor neighbourhoods and help their fellow citizens shake off the shackles of welfare.

As one community leader explained: "We need these workers for the future of our communities. They have amazing skills and abilities. We'll do better with their help."

The national poverty rate is about 16 per cent. It's been stuck there since 2000, even though the economy and employment have continued to grow. Meanwhile, poor Canadians have become highly concentrated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods - poverty by postal code.

Most of the city initiatives, financed mainly through private donations, encourage residents in poor neighbourhoods to take action on safety, recreation, housing quality, and/or environmental clean up. Even a day to clean up the trash (often one of the first objectives) becomes an opportunity to get to know and trust each other and to share a potluck lunch.

"Caring people exist in a neighbourhood, but they need a vehicle for coming together," says Linda Bruins, a resident of the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood in Thunder Bay, Ont. - one of the 15 communities participating in the Vibrant Communities Initiative of the Tamarack Institute and the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

As the residents learn how to work together, problems are identified and solutions implemented. But these place-based successes must be complemented by people-based programs like health, education and income supports, which foster independence. The trouble is that the people-based policies today prevent people from escaping poverty.

John Stapleton, a Fellow at the Metcalfe Foundation in Toronto, is the author of a paper called "Why is it so tough to get ahead?" He points out that welfare recipients have to live by a different set of rules from the other Canadians. For example, any move a welfare recipient makes to become self-sufficient - form a spousal relationship, get a job, get help from their family or encourage a high-school graduate to go to college - is considered by callers to snitch lines to be cheating on welfare. For most families, these choices are normal.

Welfare recipients also face a different tax regime. When the average family earns more income, it pays tax at about 35 per cent. But welfare rules claw back 50 per cent of earnings, and, at the same time, the higher income triggers reductions in other benefits such as subsidies for rent or child care. The overall impact can be an effective tax rate of more than 100 per cent.

Mr. Stapleton also illustrates the tangled web of social programs provided by the silos of governments: "We cannot claim to have people-centred government policies. Not when an 18-year-old lone parent refugee is considered to be an adult under four policies, a child under two, a student under a third policy, a dependent adult under two others, a non-resident under two and a legal resident of Ontario under four more."

Governments have set the rules for social assistance and employment insurance to control costs. But the rules are perverse - they raise the costs of health care and mental health, crime and policing, and encourage high-school dropouts. These effects have mobilized business leaders and their civil society colleagues to advocate social policies designed to encourage self-reliance.

The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction is calling on the province of Ontario to break down the silos within and between governments in order to address the unacceptable levels of poverty in the province.

The Mayor's Task Force on Poverty in Kingston, Ont., said the "complicated bureaucratic system creates an environment that is unhealthy for the recipient and the administrator alike." The Toronto City Summit Alliance has itemized specific changes in social assistance and related programs in its report "Time for a Fair Deal."

In Calgary, the Task Force to End Homelessness is preparing a blueprint on housing policy. And Vibrant Communities Calgary is working hard to create consensus on what constitutes a fair wage.

In Saint John, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative has become the incubator for successful investments to lift children and young adults out of poverty. BCAPI members, like J.D. Irving Ltd., have adopted elementary schools, providing volunteers to support the students and teachers. As a result, high-school completion rates are rising. Now, it's up to the province to take these successes to the rest of New Brunswick.

Civil society leaders have done their homework. They have witnessed the revitalization of desperately poor neighbourhoods and they are revolted by the shackles of welfare. Their message to governments is that the status quo on social policy is not acceptable. And, by the way, here's the blueprint.

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