

Poverty in Hamilton: We have the money, but do we have a viable long term solution?

By Sarah Warry-Poljanski

With the growing levels of poverty in the city and province alike, something strategic will have to be done to ensure that all citizens, young and old, have opportunities for growth and the ability to enjoy a quality standard of life. The City Of Hamilton's newest endeavour will be a fifty million dollar Anti-Poverty Strategy that is set to go forward after a vote held by council last week.

Although the proposed strategy will focus on public housing and other unnamed anti-poverty measures, not much will change if cookie cutter solutions are brought forward as usual. It would be unfortunate to see such a great opportunity not reach its full potential because of a rushed time line and too many vested interests calling the shots.

We must realize that poverty is a multifaceted issue and there are some very complex areas that need to be identified and addressed before any plan can be put in place and successfully carried out. If this plan is too simple, pushed forward too soon or with too little details that actually address each of the causes of poverty, not much will change.

There are four main areas of poverty that need extensive focus and work before concrete changes will ever be made. These four things are currently affecting our city, and until they are examined and worked on, no amount of money will be sufficient to provide a long term solution.

Mental health conditions and secondary mental health issues stemming from both physiological and cognitive problems are a major part of poverty that we need to identify, explore, and treat- as it is both a cause and a result of poverty. Once people begin living in poverty, they are at high risk of developing a mental health condition and reducing their chance of getting out of poverty. This affects both adults and children, making the cycle of poverty harder to break.

Here in Hamilton, we have a large newly built mental health hospital on West 5th. Unfortunately, doctors and services are not always readily available and accessible to patients due to our current health care system's wait times and funding. Additionally, with the closing of the St. Joes' east-end general psychiatry clinic, we are doing a huge disservice to those living in the lower city in the "Code Red" identified areas. We have put a road block in front residents who are trying to access much needed beneficial services.

Mental health services are an issue that the city needs to address with the provincial government. Requests for proper funding for programs and services needs to be made so residents can be seen and treated more readily. Requests will have to be steady, predictable, and continuous.

We need to explore the issues of education and skill levels. Ample evidence has shown that those with higher levels of education have much higher paying jobs and a higher quality of life. It is estimated by the city that 25% of Hamilton's working age adults living in poverty did not complete high school, 17% have no post secondary training or education, and 11% do have post secondary education. By having enough adult education centres and access to services to assist with any educational or employment needs, we can make sure all opportunities can be made available.

The city has identified that child vulnerability remains stagnate at 30% according to the Early Development Index, and 22% of all Hamilton children live in poverty.

One of the locations addressed in the "Code Red" series just had to recently close its school for students identified as having learning disabilities and being at-risk. When we stop focusing on providing a quality education to every child in a way that enables them to learn and perform, we set them up for failure. By removing specialty programs for children and youth, whether educational or health care related, we risk putting them in harm.

To ensure we are not setting students up for failure and at-risk of becoming another statistic, the city again will have to push the provincial government to adopt a better curricula, manage the education system better, and give school boards the independence to provide schools like Parkview Secondary and other needed services to students who would benefit from extra supports and specialty programs.

When it comes to jobs, Hamilton is starting to lack opportunities for most citizens. Once rich in well paying factory and manufacturing jobs, Hamilton now has a large number of medical and professional jobs that aren't options for many residents.

Residents in the city used to be able to gain decent employment straight from high school, but with the lack of jobs available, anyone without a post secondary education and reliable method of transportation faces the risk of being jobless and/ or in poverty.

While the provincial government has pushed many well paying companies to leave the province because of high energy prices and other factors, the city itself now needs to start focusing on job growth.

To do this, the city will have to support residents with small businesses and work to bring back manufacturing companies and other well paying private sector jobs into the city. By removing red tape and barriers, more self employment and small business development can develop to benefit residents by providing more local employment

The housing market in the city has become too large and now the cost to rent has increased by 22% in the past five years according to the city. This is leaving many residents scrambling to find a place to live which meets their budget, many spending upwards of 30 to 40% of their income on housing alone. While some in the city marvel at the growth and high cost of homes, this highly driven up market is beyond what many citizens can afford. With moderate income earners not able to purchase homes and now needing to rent, the number of available affordable apartment units is diminishing.

While the city wants to focus on this area and make more affordable public housing available, if it doesn't acknowledge the effect of the high supply and demand for housing in the city, getting all residents into affordable housing just won't be possible soon.

Zoning, city limits, and the City's own regulatory environment are part of the problem. They tend to discourage the building of small, inexpensive "starter" housing. Most of the homes being built by large developers are ranging from the three hundred thousand dollar range and up. By addressing each demographic and their housing needs independently, we can ease some of this and a tiered system can be put in place the better to match the city's income distribution and provide proper housing to those who need assistance.

These are just the starting steps of a multi-rung ladder that leads to a better city that offers opportunity for all residents. Until every single root cause of poverty is identified and addressed, no real tangible solution can be found. Bringing in the involvement of those affected will also be one of the main keys to finding and executing a plan with a viable outcome.

So although we may have the monies available to start the work, do we have a viable strategic plan? Without a well crafted blue print and solid method of delivery, things will stay very much the same but with a higher cost.