



BROCKVILLE AND AREA
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Final Report Vital Conversation

November 24, 2021

Discussion and Action On Local Poverty Reduction Initiatives

This Vital Conversation is supported by Leith Wheeler Investment Counsel Ltd



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OF CANADA

VitalSigns.

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Acknowledgements

Leith Wheeler Investment Council Ltd has partnered with Community Foundations Canada to assist Community Foundations such as ours in hosting Vital Conversations, and we are grateful for their support. Mike Baker, portfolio Manager for Leith Wheeler based in Ontario, attended this event.

We would also like to recognize the technical support provided by Jonathan Bullock and Tracey Bickle of BrockIT, who have donated their time and resources to host this zoom event. Many thanks!

Our keynote and theme speakers set the stage for some very thoughtful and focused discussions. Their input, along with the participation of all who attended, is gratefully acknowledged.

And finally, to all those who work tirelessly to deliver programs and support to vulnerable populations struggling in our community, our heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

Erik Wang, Executive Director,
On behalf of the Board of Directors
Brockville and Area Community Foundation

Introduction

“A Vital Conversation is a facilitated community conversation. Vital Conversations may be used to collect insight from the community about priority issues, gather insight from specific demographics within the community, as a conversation starter, and/or as a tool to spark connections and collaborative action on identified community priorities. They may be inclusive of local decision makers (including donors, municipal government, politicians, and others). Vital Conversations are also an effective tool to bolster community engagement, as an opportunity to connect local organizations and resources and build new relationships”¹. Conversations allow us to:

- Explore an emerging issue in our community
- Learn about the experiences of specific constituents
- Identify pressing community issues and co-create next steps for potential solutions
- Generate qualitative data and paint the picture of issues and trends in our community
- And most importantly, to Inspire a call to action.

The Brockville Community Foundation was established in 1974 by a group of community leaders, as a fund to "provide relief to poverty, assistance to the destitute and aged, or financial aid to educational and cultural projects in the community". From 1974 to 2000, the Foundation made small grants from the investment income that was earned on the fund. In 2001, the Board of Directors decided to join the rapidly growing Canadian Community Foundation movement and re-established the organization as the Brockville and Area Community Foundation, recognizing the areas surrounding Brockville that they were supporting.

Donations are managed through endowment funds which are pooled with a larger investment portfolio managed by the Ottawa Community Foundation. Each year returns from these investments are used to provide grants to local charities within the area served by the Foundation.

Our purpose, like all 191+ Community Foundations across Canada, is three-fold:

1. Establish endowment funds;
2. Support charitable initiatives; and
3. Provide leadership on key local issues.

Over the past few years, in particular with the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic and all of the attendant impacts, organizations within our area have been focused on supporting populations in our area who are vulnerable to these impacts. In particular, those experiencing poverty-related issues such as food and shelter insecurity, lack of financial literacy, and physical and mental health challenges have felt these impacts most acutely. While these challenges did not originate with Covid-19, the impacts, particularly related to the isolation effects, were greatly intensified.

In order to explore these issues, and in particular to identify ways and means to address solutions cooperatively, a Vital Conversations event was organized to facilitate a **“Discussion and Action on Local**

¹ Overview: Vital Signs and Vital Conversations. Community Foundations of Canada Document

Poverty Reduction Initiatives”. Specifically, the intent was to explore answers to the following questions²:

1. Who gets ahead and who gets left behind in our local economy?
2. What does a decent quality of life look like in our community?
3. What does a community miss out on when so many people can’t meet basic needs?
4. What strengths and advantages do we have in our community that will help with this issue?
5. What are one or two things we can change to make an impact?

Covid-19 restrictions required that this event be held virtually, via Zoom. Invitations were extended to organizations in the Brockville and surrounding area that deal with these challenges on a daily basis. The response was very gratifying, with representatives from 21 different organizations registered to participate.

| Organization | Representative(s) |
|--|--|
| Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Leeds & Grenville | Jane Fullarton, Executive Director |
| Brockville and Area Community Food Bank | Hailie Jack, Manager |
| Brockville Housing Partnership/Cooperative Care Centre Project | Tony Barnes, Secretary-Treasurer |
| Brockville Public Library | Emily Farrell, Chief Executive Officer |
| Career Services | Cynthia Sparring, Executive Director |
| Connect Youth | Robyn Holmes, Interim Executive Director |
| Employment and Educational Centre | Jane Rudolph, Employment Services Manager |
| Every Kid in Our Community | Marg Fancy, Coordinator |
| Food for All Food Bank Prescott | Bonnie Pidgeon Cougler, Executive Director |
| Girls Inc of Upper Canada | Lesley Hubbard , Executive Director |
| Hamilton Community Foundation | Terry Cooke, President and CEO |
| Leeds and Grenville Interval House | Bev Heuving , Director |
| Leeds Grenville Lanark Health Unit | Tanis Brown, Health Equity Coordinator Marie Traynor, Public Health Dietitian |
| Leeds Grenville Lanark Mental Health and Addictions | Patricia Kyle, Chief Executive Officer |
| Leith Wheeler Investment Counsel Ltd | Mike Baker, Portfolio Manager |
| RNJ Youth Services | Sue Poldervaart, Executive Director |
| Senior Support Services (CPHC) | Tina Montgomery, Executive Director |
| Social Housing Leeds and Grenville | Chris Morrison, Manager |
| Society of St Francis de Paul | Larry Sauve, President Jan Van Stralen, Fundraising Coordinator |
| Upper Canada district School Board | Brandy Herbison-Smith, Secretary - Lyn Public School Council |
| Volunteer Centre St. Lawrence Rideau | Mary Lynn Villeneuve, Centre Manager |

² Proceedings of an event held by the Peterborough Community Foundation

Presentations

Following introductions and opening remarks, our keynote speaker, Terry Cooke, President and CEO, Hamilton Community Foundation, shared some of their experiences in building their organization. This included their poverty reduction initiative launched in 2002 with a focus on strengthening low-income neighborhoods, community development, and engaging and supporting residents to take leadership roles and have a voice in the changes needed.³

Terry emphasized that simply chasing after donations is not the answer. Investment and granting programs must be aligned with organizations' charitable purposes. Further, there is much strength in numbers, and organizations working together can achieve much more. And most importantly, to achieve real and lasting change, all must be dealt with in the context of public policy.

Following Terry's inspirational remarks, presentations from four theme speakers helped set the stage for the group discussions which followed. These speakers focused on four key poverty-related issues in our area.

1. Food Insecurity: Hailie Jack – Executive Director, Brockville and Area Food Bank

In describing their programs, Halie emphasized that food banks will never be the answer to ending hunger, and people should not have to choose between feeding their families and paying their bills. Advocacy for social change needs to occur to truly end poverty in our communities. Hailie outlined how various housing support programs could reduce poverty in our area and increase funds for individuals and families to purchase their own foods.



³ <https://hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca/>

2. Financial Literacy: Mary Lynn Villeneuve – Manager, Volunteer Centre of St. Lawrence-Rideau



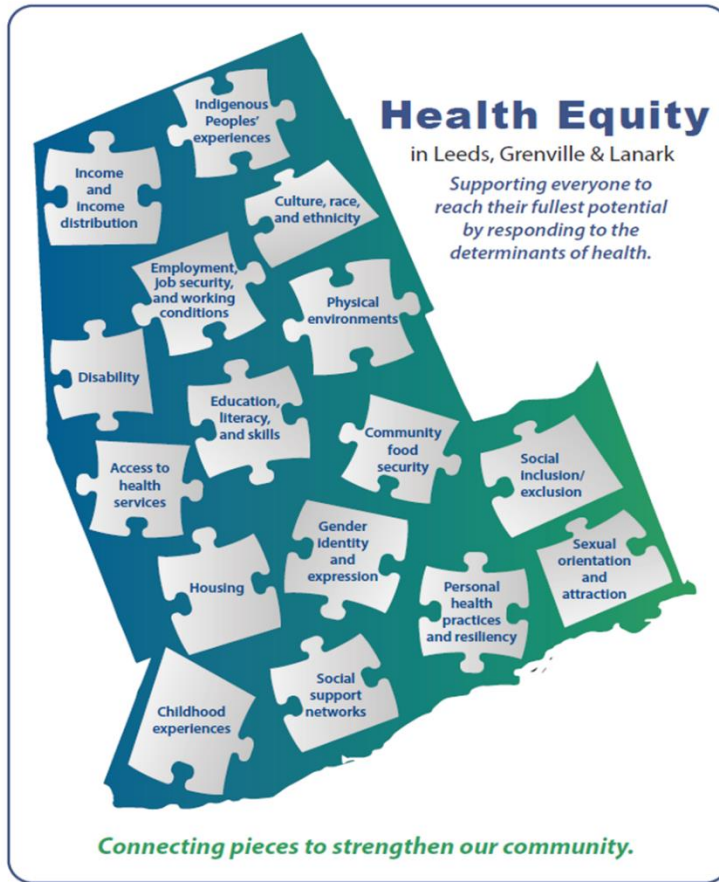
Mary Lynn outlined the role that the Volunteer Centre plays in supporting volunteerism in our community, and in particular their community volunteer tax program for low-income filers, and most recently their Financial Literacy and Empowerment Program. Both of these programs are helping low income clients gain more confidence and knowledge with financial matters such as banking, savings, credit, debt and budgeting.

3. Shelter Needs: Tony Barnes – Secretary Treasurer, Brockville Housing Partnership/Cooperative Care Centre Project



Tony outlined the evolution of their program, from the initial establishment of a Warming Centre during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, to the shelter facilities offered through the current Cooperative Care Centre Project, providing a safe, consistent and secure place where folks with no permanent residence can stay warm overnight.

4. **Physical/Mental Health Equity: Tanis Brown, Health Equity Coordinator, Leeds Grenville, Lanark Health Unit**



Tanis contrasted Health Equity, when everyone has the opportunity to attain their full health potential, with Health Inequity, the differences in health status experienced by various individuals or groups in society. People experiencing these inequities are often not heard or seen. Those of us with the visibility, power, and connections can be their allies, raising awareness, starting conversations and creating change.

The full slide show for all presentations can be accessed by clicking on [Slides](#). It may take a few seconds to open.

Breakout Discussions

Following these thoughtful and informative presentations, participants separated into four groups to address the 5 questions posed earlier. The following is a summary of the results of these discussions.

1. WHO GETS AHEAD AND WHO GETS LEFT BEHIND IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Who Gets Ahead?

Clearly, we are an income/wealth-based society. Those with access to employment opportunities, the higher educated and those with established social connections and media access are most likely the ones who get ahead in our community. Paradoxically, in some cases, Covid-19 expanded the wealth of those with means.

Who is Left Behind?

Lack of income and financial resources is the primary factor causing sectors of society to fall behind. Those who are unemployed or precariously employed and singles and seniors are most at risk, particularly those without family representation. Many are living on a fixed income and are prone to isolation from family, society and social/media connections.

Those in our community suffering from mental health issues and/or addictions may be unaware or unable to access social services. These impediments often create unstable and dangerous family environments, particularly for children and spouses.

Limited or no access to information from internet and media sources further isolates people with inadequate income in our community. Isolation is immediate for those lacking shelter. In our community, 6 out of 10 people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 25.

2. WHAT DOES A DECENT QUALITY OF LIFE LOOK LIKE IN OUR COMMUNITY?

At a minimum, being able to provide for one's own and family needs is a prerequisite to enjoying a decent quality of life. This includes a basic living wage, currently set at \$18.25/hour in our area. The current minimum wage of \$15.00 clearly falls short of this target.

However, quality of life goes beyond this goal, and includes opportunities to participate and contribute to community benefits, including recreation and leisure activities, education and skills development and access to support groups.

While short-term temporary shelter solves immediate emergency needs, access to adequate and affordable housing is critical. New housing development must include a mix of market and geared-to-income rent.

Food banks, short-term shelter and crisis support will likely always be needed to respond to emergency situations. However, achieving the above sustainable goals will reduce reliance on these support services.

3. WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY MISS OUT ON WHEN SO MANY PEOPLE CAN'T MEET BASIC NEEDS?

Everyone in the community suffers when those struggling to meet the basic needs are unable to contribute to the vibrancy of the community. People miss out on opportunities to be employed, to learn new skills to improve themselves. Our society in turn misses out on individual

contributions from these people – musicians, artists, mechanics, authors, health professionals, athletes. Our community becomes segregated, and misses opportunities to attract new businesses and citizens. People and businesses are less likely to locate to a community with high poverty levels.

Collective joy and a feeling of well-being are impacted if we worry about our neighbours. Society is not as rich and cohesive, and individuals' self-esteem suffers.

4. WHAT STRENGTHS AND ADVANTAGES DO WE HAVE IN OUR COMMUNITY THAT WILL HELP WITH THIS ISSUE?

Smaller communities such as ours find it easier for service providers to work together, as we tend to work outside of silos and institutional constraints. Informal relationships among organizations and individuals make this happen. People come together to find solutions to problems.

We have great community support agencies, as evidenced by those who participated in this discussion, and the many more who were not available to participate but contribute daily to improving the quality of life for all.

The committed generosity of businesses, church groups and individuals in providing support, through financial giving and volunteer efforts, is inspiring! Anchor institutions such as hospitals, schools and colleges are strong and well supported.

5. POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS: WHAT ARE ONE OR TWO THINGS WE CAN CHANGE TO REDUCE AND ULTIMATELY ELIMINATE POVERTY

- i. We can be a collective voice in advocating for adequate living wage policies. By taking positions on tough policy issues, we can raise awareness and promote positive change. We must continue to improve communication between agencies such as those participating in this conversation. All of us know one another and what we do. We need to reach out to others.
- ii. Supportive housing efforts should be a priority. We can support private/ government partnerships to repurpose some of the existing housing stock, in cases where such buildings can be made suitable/ safe for housing. Having new units built with a mix of “geared to income” and “market rent” and some supportive housing is an important part of the solution.
- iii. Access to support services can be enhanced through the development of a community HUB, providing a point location for those seeking support. The word needs to get out more about the programs and services available in our communities. Reducing/simplifying paperwork and removing bureaucratic obstacles for those seeking help and support makes it that much easier.
- iv. We can share the thoughts and information collected during this conversation with elected officials, including a presentation to Leeds and Grenville Joint Services and Municipal Councils in the Foundation Catchment area.

6. IMPLEMENTATION: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION TO REDUCE AND ULTIMATELY ELIMINATE POVERTY

All of the organizations who participated in this conversation are working at capacity to provide services to our communities. The Brockville and Area Community Foundation could serve as a host/administrator to facilitate communications between these organizations. Such a collective voice could work together to find and support advocates for change, including not only families and professional groups such as teachers and health professional organizations, but most importantly representation from those affected groups in our communities.

Summary

There are many initiatives underway in our community to help those experiencing poverty. However, as evidenced by the statistics and observations presented today, much remains to be done. For example:

- ✓ Six out of 10 people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 25.
- ✓ 1090 families per month access the Brockville and Area Food Bank.
- ✓ 30% of food bank visitors in our area rely on social assistance.
- ✓ 53% of householders in our area are renters, 49% of these are in core need of housing assistance, and 379 householders are on the wait list for housing.
- ✓ 10-12% of Canadians do not even file their taxes, missing out on approx. \$1.7billion for families and individuals.
- ✓ Many youths have limited knowledge of even basic financial topics and as a result, are unaware of how to access or make the most of their resources

As emphasized in these presentations and breakout discussions, there is strength in numbers. Continuing conversations such as those experienced in this workshop not only shed light on problems but help us to collectively identify solutions. To make systemic change, however, requires that these issues are addressed in the context of public policy. So, extending these conversations to include those who set or at least influence policy is essential. **Such further discussions must include spokespersons for those affected in the ways shown above.**

Thank you again to all who participated in this Vital Conversation, and let's continue with the dialogue and cooperative efforts among our organizations.



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