

REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF OTTAWACARLETON
 MUNICIPALITÉ RÉGIONALE D'OTTAWACARLETON

REPORT
RAPPORT

Our File/N/Réf.
 Your File/V/Réf.

DATE 31 March 1998

TO/DEST. Community Services Committee

FROM/EXP. A/Co-ordinator,
 Community Services Committee

SUBJECT/OBJET **REPORT ON PEOPLE'S HEARINGS ON POVERTY,
 MARCH 1998**

REPORT RECOMMENDATION

For Committee discussion.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting of 25 March 1998, Regional Council approved the following Motion:

RESOLVED THAT Regional Council express its thanks to the organisers and participants of the People's Hearings for their work and for communicating their findings to Council; and

FURTHER THAT the recommendations of the People's Hearings be referred to the Community Services Committee of Council for its consideration of measures needed to fight poverty in our community.

Attached are the Recommendations from the report by the Organising Committee, "*People First/Les gens d'abord*," distributed at the 25 March 1998 Council meeting. Copies of the full report are available from the Committee Co-ordinator on request.

Approved by
Jennifer Bionda

Attach. (1)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are the result of four meetings with a focus group made up of three presenters, two Regional and two Local panellists, one moderator and one member of *Faith Partners*. The following principles guided them in their work:

- People are the most important priority.
- Keep the recommendations rooted in what presenters expressed at the hearings.
- Be positive and constructive, and acknowledge what the Region and the community have been able to achieve together thus far.
- As much as possible, given that the end result of the downloading of services by the Provincial Government onto municipalities and regions is still not clear, ensure that each recommendation falls within the Region's mandate.
- Hold the Region accountable for what is in their mandate.
- Ask the Region to lobby, alongside community and social action groups, for change at the Provincial and Federal levels.
- All recommendations will apply equally to all members of our diverse community.

Our recommendations can be summarized as:

*Government is the only body,
elected by us,
which can and must act for the common good*

Cuts are hurting people more than ever

*Invest in people first
for the well-being of the whole community*

EMPLOYMENT

Rationale:

- Full employment should be a priority for our community.
- People want to work, and yearn for real sustainable jobs with a living wage, job security and benefits.
- When employment programs (e.g. voluntary ones such as *Action for Careers and Training, Opportunity Planning*) lead to such sustainable jobs, people are eager to participate, thus rendering mandatory programs such as *Ontario Works* irrelevant.
- There are many potentially productive people who are being under-utilized (e.g. new Canadians, the unemployed, youth).
- Many people in the community don't see a viable way of entering employment due to such barriers as illiteracy, disability, discrimination due to age, race or gender, physical and mental health problems, lack of work experience, and lack of basic education.
- Job training schemes and actual employment opportunities don't always match, leaving those who are actively seeking employment to struggle against despair despite their best efforts.
- Most part-time, casual and contract work is virtually impossible to live on.
- A gross inequality exists between those who work too much, and those who long to be employed.

Recommendations:

- Establish a Task Force, the membership of which would include people who have lost jobs, the underemployed, business (e.g. *OCEDCO*), unions, disability community, secondary and post-secondary school representatives, immigrants, etc. whose mandate would be to recommend job training and job creation schemes rooted in what makes sense to our community with its diverse needs and characteristics.
- Support an accountable body to monitor the effectiveness of regionally-funded job creation/training schemes.
- Establish a revolving fund for local micro-level community economic development, e.g. *Grameen Bank*, to support those who are denied access to traditional banks to create small businesses.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Rationale:

- The amount currently received by those on social assistance prevents adequate shelter and food needs from being met, and prevents the development of strategies and resources necessary to escape poverty.

- Social assistance regulations often present barriers to recipients genuinely attempting to get ahead (or to simply survive) by, for example, hindering their access to post-secondary education or their ability to hold on to assets; these barriers lead to recipients feeling stuck, stigmatized, punished, and judged.

Recommendations:

- Restore Special Assistance/ Supplementary Aid to their pre-1995 level.
- Continue to oppose the devolution by both Federal and Provincial Governments of the responsibility for social programs, and demand that the Federal Government reinvest in social programs for all Canadians.
- Lobby the Provincial Government to base welfare rates on a “market basket approach”, i.e. the rates would reflect *actual* market costs for shelter, food and other necessities.
- Lobby the Provincial Government to change the regulations so that social assistance recipients will be permitted to keep a higher percentage of their earned income so that they can begin to get ahead.

HOUSING

Rationale:

- The Provincial Government has devolved responsibility for social housing onto the municipalities.
- Housing costs take up a disproportionate amount of poor families’ budgets, leaving inadequate income for food and other necessities of life.
- Adequate shelter is a basic need and must be established before people can get on with their lives and be productive in society.
- People struggling with psychiatric illness are especially vulnerable to homelessness.
- Some private landlords exploit people living in poverty, e.g. boarding home operators who “double-bunk” in order to increase their revenue.
- Current waiting lists for social housing, including co-ops and private non-profits, are unreasonably long (up to five years or longer).
- Social housing should be a high priority for the Regional Government.
- The Region has already demonstrated a willingness to provide social housing for its citizens through the *Ottawa-Carleton Housing Authority*, and has the necessary infrastructure to make positive changes.
- The Community Services Committee of Regional Council has shown their commitment to this issue by recently striking a social housing task force.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that the Community Services Committee's social housing task force includes and consults with people living in poverty, social housing tenants, housing providers, and developers in order to explore ways to ensure that everyone in Ottawa-Carleton is adequately housed, and to develop a local social housing policy.
- Establish regulations for licensing and inspecting boarding homes.
- Commit to safeguarding existing social housing, building new social housing, and ensuring that funding as much as possible goes to housing and maintenance, and not administration.
- Commit to providing more supportive housing for people struggling with psychiatric illness.
- Change the assessment process for housing subsidies so that they are based on net rather than gross income, thereby reducing the strain on low-income families to meet other essential needs.
- Demand that municipalities enforce property standards.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Rationale:

- The Regional Government has already shown forward thinking by establishing and funding a network of community health and resource centres, day programs and drop-ins for vulnerable people, food programs such as community kitchens and community gardens, community developers who forge links between vulnerable people and community groups and services, and public health services such as pre-and post-natal clinics and sexual and reproductive health clinics.
- These services are extremely effective in a variety of ways: improving quality of life, increasing a sense of self-worth and self-determination, decreasing isolation, promoting a sense of community and mutual support, preventing the development of more serious physical and mental health problems, and they are *cheaper* than more elaborate and more invasive mental and physical health interventions, i.e. emergency services and hospitalization.

Recommendation:

- Make the maintenance of community health and resource centre services and public health services, including but not limited to the services listed above, *top priority*.

EDUCATION

Rationale:

- Communities in which an “educational culture” is endorsed and supported, tend to be prosperous and healthy.
- Access to high quality education, both public and post-secondary, is essential for everyone, especially those struggling with poverty.
- Children from poor families are stigmatized as more and more public schools demand that families subsidize the educational system through pizza and hot-dog days, user fees, etc.
- Post-secondary students struggle under a huge burden of debt, the spectre of which prevents many people who are struggling with poverty from even considering entering college or university.
- Welfare penalizes families on assistance who have a family member with a student loan by considering this loan as income, and therefore reducing benefits to the entire family.

Recommendations:

- Establish a liaison between the school boards and the Social Services Department, to include representatives from among social assistance recipients and low-income families, to find solutions to the stigma experienced in the public education system.
- Ensure that families on social assistance not be penalized if a family member attends post-secondary education and assumes a student loan, and allow the student to put the loan in trust.
- Create an easily accessible directory of locally-available bursaries for post-secondary students, and invite/encourage local corporations and citizens to offer new bursaries.

CHILD CARE

Rationale:

- Universally available and accessible child care is a given in almost all other western industrialized countries.
- High-quality child care is an investment in our children and our future, by supporting employment and the mental and physical health of both parents and children.
- People are so desperate for child care in order to seek and maintain employment that they are at risk of entering into unsafe child care arrangement with untrained and unsupervised providers.

Recommendations:

- Maintain, and work towards expanding, existing child care services in both official languages.
- Strictly monitor for-profit child care services.
- Establish flexible child care programs which reflect our changing work patterns and the prevalence of shift work, on-call casual work, etc.
- Lobby both the Provincial and Federal levels of government for the establishment of a universal national child care program, and to take responsibility for their respective shares of the costs.

TRANSPORTATION

Rationale:

- Public transportation provides essential access to school, job training, employment, health and community services, and stores offering the best prices for their goods.
- People struggling with poverty are often "imprisoned" in their neighbourhoods because they cannot afford the costs of public transportation, in particular families with several children.
- The current level of service provided by *ParaTranspo*, e.g. a limit of three rides per day, limits access of the disabled to employment and services.
- Transit services are underutilized in off-peak hours, and *OC Transpo* regularly reports being in financial difficulty, thus threatening existing services and fare structures.

Recommendations:

- Recommend to *OC Transpo* that they develop a bus pass available on a sliding scale to families to enable parents/caregivers and children more access to public transportation.
- Recommend to *OC Transpo* that they make a bus pass available at a reduced price to the general public, and free to recipients of social assistance and Employment Insurance, and which would only be accessible in off-peak hours. This pass could be supplemented during peak hours with bus tickets.
- Recommend that *Para Transpo* expand its services so that disabled people have greater access to employment and services.

TELEPHONE & HYDRO

Rationale:

- Telephones are an essential link between those seeking and those offering employment and services.
- Telephones provide critical access to emergency services such as ambulance, police and fire departments, which is especially important for women and children fleeing abuse.
- Adequate heat is essential to life in the winter months as we have seen in the recent ice storm.

Recommendations:

- Have Hydro subsidize their services for social assistance recipients and low-income families, and prohibit the cutting-off, due to payment arrears, of these services during the winter months.
- Negotiate a mutually acceptable arrangement with a telephone company (e.g. via public tender) to subsidize basic telephone services for social assistance recipients and low-income families.
- Ensure that every household has a phone by making available, through Special Assistance/Supplementary Aid, phones with a special line which permit only local or toll-free calls.

PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC POLICY

Rationale:

- People living on social assistance and low-incomes are acutely aware of the gaps, double-binds and red tape which sometimes exist in government programs, and which often frustrate efforts to climb out of poverty. Therefore, they have expertise to offer towards finding solutions and producing better public policy for everyone.
- Both the Federal and Provincial governments have made cuts to social programs which have had a disastrous impact on the Regional Government and our community.

Recommendations:

- Establish ongoing consultation with social assistance recipients and people on low incomes to ensure an end to "Catch-22s".
- Lobby the Federal and Provincial governments, in partnership with citizens' groups, to restore social programs to a reasonable level of support for everyone, based on the principle of universality.

POVERTY

Rationale:

- People struggling with poverty need to know that their elected representatives are addressing their needs and taking action.

Recommendation:

- Establish a Task Force on Poverty which would bring Regional Councillors and people struggling with poverty together with other community representatives to oversee what Council is doing to resolve poverty in our Region, and to oversee that these recommendations are being taken into account.