

# Making Choices Together

## Re-imagining Poverty Reduction in Simcoe County

# Community Engagement Report

2016

### County of Simcoe, Social and Community Services

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A special thanks also goes out to the event presenters including facilitation by Michael Jones, opening remarks from Warden Gerry Marshall, the keynote speech from Forrest Willett, success stories from Cassandra Clark, Michael Simonds and Kaitlynn Kavanagh and the main data presentation by Dr. Lisa Simon. Acknowledgments also go out to the contributors of the Voices of the Poverty Experience Project who supplied pieces of art that were also on display at the event.

### Community Engagement Event Planning Committee

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## Executive Summary

On October 1, 2015, 104 community members from across Simcoe County came together for the first community engagement event called Making Choices Together – Re-Imagining Poverty Reduction in Simcoe County (herein “Community Engagement event”). Held at the Simcoe County Museum and organized by a community partner planning committee, the goal of the day was to engage with the broader community to identify priorities around poverty reduction for Simcoe County and to build on existing collaborative activities already having an impact.

Facilitated by Michael Jones, the day incorporated a mixture of presentations, activities, and discussions, such as opening remarks from Warden Gerry Marshall, stories of lived experience from speakers Kaitlynn Kavanagh, Michael Simonds, and Cassandra Clark, keynote speaker Forrest Willett, presentation from Dr. Lisa Simon, and a learning wall and café discussions throughout the day.



### Community Engagement Process

Through a conversation café format theme, participants were engaged through a number of activities and group discussions such as:

- Learning Wall
- Story Café
- System Thinking Café
- Pro-Action Café

## What We Heard

### Community Initiatives and Aspirations

Through an interactive engagement activity, 79 sticky notes were posted on a learning wall highlighting community initiatives. Over half of the notes posted indicated a program or initiative currently underway in their community. Many of the initiatives related to housing and homelessness prevention. On a second learning wall focusing on community aspirations, 65 sticky notes were posted. Many of these notes focused on aspirations toward affordable housing and effective cross-sector collaboration.

### Story Café

As the first group discussion of the day, 15 groups shared different stories of overcoming adversity and creating new possibilities. Some participants shared personal stories while others shared stories of other individuals. Most stories included descriptions of support that was needed or was provided to those who faced adversity. Participants indicated that educating others using both personal experience and organizational knowledge is important.

### System Thinking Café

Six group discussions included community member feedback to identify the barriers and levers for system change. Barriers related to the difficulties of accessing social services, securing employment, health and mental health issues. Levers related to community and family supports, and the services already provided within the community.

## Pro-Action Café

Participants discussed a number of issues related to poverty in Simcoe County. In total 13 group discussions took place, with 32 community members indicating they would be willing to continue working together on their issue. The topic areas included affordable housing, access to child care, education, living wage, access to resources, access to medical/dental resources, access to affordable and healthy food, meaningful employment opportunities, safety, policy analysis and equity, women in poverty, and creating a sense of place.

## Community Feedback

Based on feedback, participants indicated that they wanted to participate and attend future meetings, receive email updates, or to lead specific issues, such as affordable housing. A few participants stated they would like to join the Planning Committee.

One week after the event an on-line follow-up survey was distributed to all participants and about a third of participants completed the survey. The majority were satisfied with the overall outcome of the day, and also indicated that their expectations were matched or exceeded. Reflecting on the whole day, participants were satisfied with those who shared lived experiences, the keynote speaker, and with the ability to network and share experiences.

## Overall Takeaway

With robust feedback from participants collected throughout the day, several key themes were revealed from the event:

- Continue community collaboration to reduce poverty
- Wraparound support, either community or family, is important
- Meeting an individual or family's basic needs is essential
- Share stories of lived experience to inform poverty reduction
- Access to resources is vital to those who are in poverty

## Recommendations

1. The adoption of an equity framework supporting full participation for people with lived experience of poverty in program and policy development.
2. The development of a Community Round-Table on Poverty Reduction for Simcoe County.
3. The prioritization of four Domains of Poverty during the first phase of action
  - Affordable Housing
  - Income Security
  - Affordable and Accessible Transportation
  - Food Security
4. Collaboration and creating a common agenda through collective impact, and measuring how the work of multiple stakeholders affects community outcomes.

## Introduction

Members of the community gathered on October 1, 2015 for the event Making Choices Together – Re-imagining Poverty Reduction in Simcoe County. It was the first community engagement event on poverty reduction bringing together a broad collection of stakeholders from across Simcoe County. Held at the Simcoe County Museum and organized by a community partner planning committee, the goal of the day was to engage with the broader community to identify priorities around poverty reduction for Simcoe and to build on existing collaborative activities already having an impact.

The event began with Warden Gerry Marshall's opening remarks, which highlighted the need to identify priorities, strategies, and actions that can be undertaken to better the outcomes of our most vulnerable residents.

The Warden's remarks were further reinforced later in the morning, through a powerful keynote presentation by Forrest Willet in which he shared his inspirational insights of overcoming challenges with hope and action. Passionate and powerful expressions were also shared from speakers Kaitlynn Kavanagh, Michael Simonds and Casandra Clark that provided glimpses of their own lived experience and personal stories.

The rest of the day included a presentation from Dr. Lisa Simon of the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, as well as facilitation by Michael Jones, who incorporated musical interludes while 104 participants engaged around Conversation Café style table discussions centring on personal stories, systemic thinking, and developing action steps towards poverty reduction. The Café format used was a blend of

Conversation Café and World Café methods including the principles of Café Setting; Table Discussions; Specific Questions; and the Harvest stage of sharing.

The community engagement event underpinned the vast array of poverty reduction efforts happening across Simcoe County. System wide initiatives such as the 10-Year Affordable Housing and Homelessness Prevention Strategy, the 20,000 Homes Campaign, the Voices of the Poverty Experience Project and the Living Wage Working Group are just a few of the impactful initiatives that align with the feedback highlighted in this report. In addition, the frameworks of Collective Impact and Results Based Accountability have been helping these initiatives achieve meaningful results through collaborative planning and outcome based evaluation. The strong engagement shown

by community partners focusing on common agendas and measuring performance-based contribution toward social impact has been a great demonstration of Simcoe's commitment to supporting positive outcomes for vulnerable people.

The event was not just a day of conversation and planning, it also provided sensory inspiration through sight and sound. Facilitator Michael Jones, an accomplished pianist /composer, used his music throughout the day to stimulate thought and conversation. In addition, the room was filled with graphic representations and art of individuals with lived experience of poverty, who created their own unique expressions of their experiences for the Voices of the Poverty Experience Project.



**“ Don't be ashamed of your story...it will inspire others... ”**

In the hallway, one was immersed in an array of powerful and impactful images depicting the lives and situations of homeless people living in Simcoe County. Through a collaboration with the David Busby Street Centre and the Visibly Unseen exhibit, these images were captured by the Photography students from Georgian College. The exhibit raises awareness about the needs of those in our community that often go unseen or are misunderstood.

## Community Engagement Process

The concept of Conversation Café has taken strong root in Canada in helping to connect stakeholders around common and important social issues. Café type conversations incorporates various formats, including the use of facilitators, established rules and guiding principles. The original format includes lively, hosted, drop-in conversations with diverse groups of people usually in a public environment such as a café, a meeting space or a conference.

In order to engage participants attending the community engagement day, concepts were borrowed from the Conversation Café and World Café formats and incorporated throughout the day to facilitate group discussion and collaboration. The main theme utilized was the café sense of space, including the use of small table groups and the cross pollination of ideas through free movement.

The flow of the day took on a building block method of learning, where the thoughts, expressions and ideas generated in the early part of the day, were used to feed the problem solving and strategy generation in the later part of the day. This ensured ownership over the strategies and action plans and led to meaningful participation from attendees.

The day was structured with interactive activities in the morning and more collaborative group discussions in the afternoon.

### Engagement Activities:

#### Learning Wall Activity

Community members were asked to answer questions about initiatives and aspirations for their community by writing their answers on post-it notes and attaching them to the learning wall under either initiatives or aspirations. Questions included:

- **What initiatives are you doing for your community?**
- **What aspirations are you seeing for your community?**

#### Pro-Action Café

Final group discussion involved community members choosing a table that focused on a particular poverty-related issue. During group discussions, attendees worked through three questions to determine action steps could be taken to have the greatest impact. One member acted as note-taker. Questions included:

- **What are the possibilities that we could imagine or think of that would create impact or progress toward this issue? Think beyond our current abilities or resources.**
- **What would be three major priorities or priority areas that would need our attention first?**
- **What action steps could you take that would hold the greatest impact?**

#### Story Café

Community members discussed questions which focused on stories of adversity and unique gifts they could provide. One member acted as note-taker. During the second questions, attendees were asked to write their answers on post-it notes and place on the Story Café wall. Questions included:

- **Share a story when you overcame adversity and created a new possibility**
- **What unique gifts, assets and resources can you bring towards reducing poverty in Simcoe?**

#### System Thinking Café

Similar to the Story Café, members were asked to discuss questions with their table group, focusing their thinking more at system levels. One member of the group took notes to capture the discussion. The question included:

- **What are the barriers and levers for system change?**

## What We Heard

This section presents a summary of the feedback received throughout the day. With 104 community members from across Simcoe County in attendance, 208 sticky notes were filled out, and 34 separate group discussions occurred throughout the day.

### Learning Wall - Initiatives and Aspirations

Community member feedback identified a number of initiatives and aspirations for their community. 79 sticky notes indicated community initiatives, and 65 sticky notes indicated community aspirations.

When discussing community initiatives, over half (53%) of community members indicated a program or initiative currently underway in their community. More specifically, housing and homelessness prevention was mentioned as a community initiative by over one-third of members (35%). Other initiatives related to food security, income and employment, family, safety, health and mental health, children, youth, community outreach, education programs, women, immigration, transportation and seniors.

Community members had clear visions of what aspirations they had for their community. 35 percent of community members aspired to have more affordable housing options in order to reduce homelessness, while 26 percent aspired towards seeing more collaborative action between different sectors to reduce poverty in Simcoe County.

Other aspirations noted included ideas related to living wage, child care, education, health and/ mental health, safety, women's issues, food security and transportation.

### Story Café

The Conversation Café table discussions began with the first of three – Story Café. Questions were posed at each table eliciting personal stories of strength and struggle. In total, 15 groups shared different stories of how they overcame adversity and created new possibilities. Some chose to share their own personal experiences while others shared the stories of other individuals in their lives. Concepts and ideas which came out of the discussions included:

- Receiving support when facing adversity or providing support to those facing adversity
- Sharing experiences with others to help them overcome adversity
- Taking action and risks to improve personal situations
- Providing opportunities to help others improve their situation or taking opportunities to improve situations
- Engaging in personal reflection to realize what gifts and goals one has, and making a plan for the future based on these



**“ Individuals with lived experiences inspire us to action, keep telling and sharing the stories with others, so they'll keep sharing the stories. ”**





## System Thinking Café

The second of the Conversation Café table discussions focused on System Thinking. With six group discussions, tables were asked to identify barriers (circumstance or obstacle that inhibits progress) and levers (a means used to achieve a desired result) for system change. Table feedback centered on the following themes:

### Levers

- Community and family support
- Flexible workplaces for childcare
- Social services such as food banks, housing supports, legal aid, and counselling
- Integrated model of care
- Access to information and resources

### Barriers

- Age restrictions such as for housing, and employment income
- Restriction to social assistance
- Lack of employment opportunities and income
- Government funding, or expectations for services
- Lack of supportive housing
- Health and mental health issues
- Financial issues such as lack of bank accounts

## Pro-Action Café

The third and last Conversation Café table discussion focused on priority area themes that were identified throughout the day. These areas were specifically labeled on individual tables, giving participants full choice over where they wanted to sit to discuss action plans. Community members worked collaboratively at their tables determining steps of actions for a number of areas of poverty related issues. 12 different table groups discussed specific priority areas identifying potential action plans that included the following:

### Access to Affordable and Healthy Foods

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Combine efforts
  - Secure access to food
  - Teach food skills and food knowledge
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Teach food skills
  - Collaborate with others doing similar work
  - Provide food education in different areas
- **Action:**
  - Continue collaboration to solve issues
  - Focus on best practices, high standards of service and resources provided
  - No duplicate services
  - Be “client-centered”

### Access to Child Care

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Provide reliable, available and affordable quality child care
  - Create flexible childcare to meet parents needs
  - More supportive workplaces of child care
  - Increase awareness of where to find child care information and resources
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Provide quality child care such as safety, early development education/learning, and inclusion of all children
  - Available spots
  - Affordable subsidy
- **Action:**
  - Include parent(s) in community child care planning
  - Support/volunteer child care
  - Support women and transitional housing

## Access to Resources

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Facilitate connections within the community
  - More community hubs, community centres, and community cafés
  - Integrate community resources
  - Promote information services
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Creating a sense of community through community hubs
  - Bring resources close to communities (i.e. community hubs)
- **Action:**
  - Approach government (i.e. send a message to MPPs)
  - Build community
  - Have private sponsorship
  - Apply for a grant provided by Ontario Trillium Foundation

## Affordable Housing

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - More government involvement and funding
    - Policy Change (i.e. Landlord Tenancy Act)
    - Government grant (i.e. incentives for upgrades, insulation in low income rentals)
    - Build more affordable housing
    - Provide more transitional housing
  - Co-ordinate services with other organizations
  - More support through social services to clients and landlords in private rentals
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Provide supportive housing for both tenants and landlords
  - Have safer and more affordable housing
  - Promote partnership to have more people involved in housing issues
- **Action:**
  - Take action to reform policy
  - Increase awareness

## Creating a Sense of Place or Neighbourhood

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Increase communities' sense of belonging
  - Have community hubs/welcome centres that are community driven

- Give communities the tools to create sense of belonging
- Create space for conversations
- Provide insight into how change can occur in the community
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Conduct pilot projects in small communities with their input
  - Give people the tools to create sense of community themselves
  - Start with a project for collective action
- **Action:**
  - Increase social awareness at the ground level
  - Create projects that will unify communities to help themselves and/or others (i.e. community gardens, graffiti cleanups, rallying around a neighbour in crisis)

## Increasing Rate of Graduation and Access to Education

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Provide training and required experience for teachers
  - Have Child and Youth Workers in schools to assist students who suffer from social isolation
  - Try to engage all students
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Have parents engaged in the school process (i.e. authentic parenting)
  - Integrate services with communities
  - Have formal mentor program with other organizations outside of school
  - Teacher training related to teaching diversity, empathy and understanding
- **Action:**
  - No information provided

## Living Wage

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Advocate for employers to pay a living wage
  - Establish a living wage rate for Simcoe County
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Establish a living wage for Simcoe County
  - Help people to access dental care, medications, food, clothing, shelter, and housing

- Raise awareness about income and its importance
- **Action:**
  - Achieve a level of decent income to be an engaged citizen
  - Advocate to the province for the employment act to be upheld to protect citizens
  - Find living wage champions
  - Gather information to build understanding of living wage in Simcoe County
  - Revisit past initiatives that demonstrated success
  - Complete living wage calculation for Simcoe County

### Meaningful Employment Opportunities

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Establish a coordinated approach to health care
    - High level of data integration
    - Navigate patients
  - Equity and policy analysis
    - Offer positive services at an equitable level
    - Evaluate needs and outcomes, use data to inform policy changes
  - Collaborate with other public organizations
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Approach to policy barriers
    - Integrated model of care
  - Integrate networks of care
- **Action:**
  - Focus on health care
  - Conduct environmental scan to integrate agencies/services

### Safety

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Connect other agencies (i.e. work with police officers)
  - Incorporate “safety” into planning at all levels of government
  - Establish a more positive police presence
  - Bring services to areas with high police calls
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Increase communication (i.e. get messages out)

- Collaborate with other organizations (i.e. school, police)
- Build safety into planning at all levels of government
- **Action:**
  - More police presence
  - Build connections with communities by getting to know them

### Women in Poverty

- **Ideas for Impact:**
  - Address value-teaching (i.e. respect, empathy)
  - Provide more supports, flexibility, and alternatives for education
  - Provide universally available, accessible child care
  - Integrate all supports to offer them at community hubs
  - Foster families to keep them together through teaching parenting skills
- **Priority Areas:**
  - Focus on young people
    - Provide education/skills development, role models
  - Address issues such as sexism
  - Have community hubs that are accessible, sensitive to women’s needs and provide child care
- **Action:**
  - Establish community hubs for service collaboration
  - Integrate services for accessibility

## Community Feedback

Understanding participant expectations and satisfaction is important in order to gain some insights into the experience participants had while engaging throughout the day as well as to get an idea of their level of commitment. In order to achieve this, three methods of feedback were employed. The first method of feedback was collected as part of the Pro-Action Café, where in addition to the table topic questions, participants were asked for their commitment to continue working on their table topic issue in the future. The second method of feedback was collected through an Exit Ticket which was completed at the end of the day. The third method of feedback was through a short follow-up online survey, which was emailed to all attendees one week after the event.

### Topic Specific Commitment

In order to keep the momentum and synergy going and to empower the community to continue working on identified priority areas and action ideas, participants were asked for their interest in contributing to specific activities on their chosen table group topic. In total, 32 participants indicated that they would be willing to continue working together in the future on their discussion topic.

### Exit Ticket

With so many different components incorporated into the day, it was important to understand what the experience was like for participants and what, if any, action plans they were willing to commit to. After the final discussion of the day, community members were asked to fill out a short ballot known as an exit ticket, and hand it in before leaving. The objective of this ballot was to determine how participants would like to be involved in future poverty reduction events. Community members could indicate if they would like to receive updates, attend future events, lead a specific issue, or join the planning committee. Of the 104 community members who attended the event, 50% completed the exit ballot. Of these individuals, 87% expressed interest in participating in and attending future events, 75% would like to receive email updates, and 42% would commit to leading a specific issue, for example, affordable housing, living wage, community involvement, or youth and child poverty. Finally, 29% of community members would like to join the planning committee.

### Survey

Feedback from the community engagement event was also collected from a follow-up online survey that was sent five days after the event to participants. Of the 104 members who registered for the day, 35% completed the survey. Overall, 94% of those who completed the survey indicated that the event either matched, exceeded or greatly exceeded their expectations for the day, while 82% were satisfied with the overall outcome of the day.

In terms of specific components of the event, 97% were very satisfied or satisfied with those who shared their stories of lived experience. Over half (56%) of respondents appreciated the storytelling and lived experiences the most. In regards to the keynote presentation, 89% were very satisfied or satisfied with the key note speaker. Reflecting on the day, the majority of respondents (97%) made a positive commitment regarding taking, or continuing to take, action to help reduce poverty in Simcoe County.

## Voices of the Poverty Experience

In 2014, with a heavy emphasis on learning from those with lived experience, the County of Simcoe contracted with Kathryn Manners and Vireo Research to execute the Voices of the Poverty Experience Project. The overall goal of the project was to understand the experience of people living in poverty in Simcoe County through their own views and perspectives. Through a combination of peer interviews, focus groups, and surveys, the project was able to get an in-depth look into the issues of poverty. Some key findings of the research directly tie into what participants discussed during the community engagement event, including:

- Limited financial capital can be alleviated by leaning on other more plentiful capitals to move closer to goals, social and human capital which can offer support. However, accessing the essential elements of life without financial capital is much more complicated and time consuming.
- Basic needs are necessary priorities, without which individuals are unable to address larger challenges, such as completing their education, or accessing daycare or mental health services.
- The goal of any change should not be to fix or service people, but to make room for who they are and what they value within a system that provides access to a variety of services and supports.
- Helping people navigate the system by building stronger communities and peer networks would have a big impact
- Keeping people in their own community and finding a way to bring services to them would reduce complexity in the poverty experience and decrease the needs for investment in substantial transportation infrastructure.
- Pushing for equality and creating opportunities for all is key. It is not just about serving those living in poverty, but about empowering and enabling all of us, and understanding that the situations that those living in poverty find themselves in, could happen too many of us

BE KIND. FOR EVERYONE YOU MEET IS FIGHTING A HARD BATTLE.

“ I’ve been everywhere looking for a job, but it’s the same story everywhere, I don’t have experience and I don’t know anyone to give me a chance. ~ Male, Collingwood ”

“ I’ve gone as far as I can with school now, I can’t get any further without support for daycare or other financial support. ~ Female, Midland ”

## Overall Take Away

The Community Engagement Event has created a solid foundation to plan and implement future actions towards reducing poverty in Simcoe County. With robust feedback from community members, the following key themes can be taken from the event:



Continue community collaboration to reduce poverty



Share stories of lived experience to inform poverty reduction



Wraparound support, either community or family, is important



Access to resources is vital to those who are in poverty



Meeting an individual or family's basic needs is essential

## Continue community collaboration to reduce poverty

In most communities, increasing equitable access to resources and moving toward community wellbeing involves stakeholders and partners working together toward common outcomes. Effective collaboration is usually a win-win situation for all, providing opportunities to participate and be involved in solutions that matter. Giving people and groups a voice and a chance to engage in decision making helps to solve community problems and leads toward overall empowerment.

During the engagement event, participants often made mention of “collaborative action” throughout the day. With collaborative action, people work together toward tangible action plans using the discussion and brainstorming stages as the means to the end. First mentioned as an overall aspiration during the learning wall activity, collaboration here meant not using meetings and committees as an end in itself, but rather having poverty reduction action plans as the goal. Some community members shared stories of collaboration, working as a team to overcome adversity, as well as indicating collaboration as a unique gift they can bring to reducing poverty in Simcoe County. Beginning the conversations on

poverty reduction, especially the pro-action café, shows how community members can work together to develop strategies and action steps to focus on key issues of poverty.

Ontario’s new five year Poverty Reduction Strategy focuses on breaking the cycle of poverty for children and youth. The Local Poverty Reduction Fund, a \$50 million, six-year initiative, provides funding to organizations and communities to support and evaluate their poverty reduction initiatives and creative partnerships. The first round of funding included a successful project application in Simcoe County. The successful project included a collaboration between the Simcoe County Local Immigration Partnership, the County of Simcoe, Georgian College Research Analyst program and Employment Ontario service providers. The project is a poverty prevention initiative designed to increase employment and decrease poverty rates for newcomers living in Simcoe County. The initiative hopes to increase employment resource access by newcomers through the training and skill development of staff in Employment Ontario service agencies.

## Wraparound support, either community or family, is important

Support received through the community, family and friends is important in helping individuals to step out of poverty and access the resources they need. Many stories shared throughout the event highlighted the benefit of having a support network and accessible services within the community. Existing networks of professionals have the potential to act as mentors, advisors and supports for people in providing that

guidance through decision making or advice. Just being there to listen, or to provide a helping hand to individuals wanting to make a change can be empowering to their lives. It is the connections with services and family that show people that they have the supports they need to take action and make changes in their lives.

## Meeting an individual or family's basic needs is essential

The importance of meeting the basic needs of an individual or family has been identified as a priority in Simcoe County for over twenty years. The Child, Youth and Family Services Coalition of Simcoe County through the Basic Needs Task Group (BNTG) has been working with key community partners to address access to basic needs for families and individuals. Multiple community partners come together as the BNTG to identify barriers, to increase access and to identify strategies for families in Simcoe. Similarly, at the community engagement event, community members discussed different topics of where focus should be directed for poverty reduction. The majority of these topics related to the basic needs of an individual or family such as food, employment, transportation, child care, housing, health, and safety just to name a few. Stories shared during the day included how individuals were not able to meet one of these basic needs, or how in order to cover one basic need they had to relinquish another. This was also seen as a barrier to system change. These basic needs are also the social determinants of health (SDH) which are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.

## Share stories of lived experience to inform poverty reduction work

Nothing tells the story of community impact and outcomes more powerfully than the experiences of real people. Too often, programs and policies are funded, developed, implemented and evaluated without the input and participation of those who are using those programs or those who are directly affected by those policies. Incorporated into the day, sharing stories and hearing from those with lived experience were vital components for setting the focus on what action steps need to be taken to reduce poverty in Simcoe County. Not only can the stories inspire focused action, create a sense of urgency and provide insight into service provision, but

they can also provide insight into how those with lived experience are able to work towards making a change in their lives.

**“ Mentors or champions that believed in the story-tellers & supported them. Normally the change happened with the support of someone else. ~ Group Discussion Notes ”**

## Access to resources is vital to those who are in poverty

The definition of poverty from the Bridges Out of Poverty (Bridges) framework states that poverty is: “The extent to which an individual does without resources”. Bridges trainers in Simcoe County, in conjunction with the Bridges Leadership Group, have been actively engaging with cross-sector stakeholders in Simcoe County since 2010, training thousands of individuals, raising their awareness of poverty and related issues. Community awareness of the importance of equitable access to resources helps to move applicable programs, policies and initiatives forward. Access to resources is a vital

step for individuals on the road to strong social and financial capital, and is an important base to forming sustainable family assets.

In addition, the County of Simcoe’s Social and Community Services Division administers a Social and Community Investment Fund (SCIF) to help local organizations develop community-based initiatives that address poverty. It is recognized within SCIF that access to resources and services is the ideal approach toward a responsive system to support low income families.

## Recommendations

### 1. Full Equitable Participation

People living in poverty and with previous experience of poverty have a vital role to play in any cross-sector poverty reduction work. They have a right to be included and involved in programs or policies that directly affect their lives and the lives of their families. The concept of “nothing about us, without us”, support this right, which is a concept from the disability rights movement and which supports the notion of meaningful participation and shared decision making. These concepts also call for equitable participation, which focuses on meeting the individual needs of people. The concept of equity is being promoted by various community partners including the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit and Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions. People with lived experience of poverty can experience discrimination, social exclusion, isolation, stigma and decreased access to services that provide the conditions for overall health and well-being. Policies of equity help to support the specific needs of individuals living in poverty, providing people with resources, contributing to inclusion and supporting them in the ways they need it.

**It is recommended** that people with lived experience of poverty be included and provided with a forum for their voice in program and policy development and be given access to meaningful participation in poverty reduction related activities.

## 2. Community Round Table on Poverty Reduction

Most regions in the Country looking to address poverty move toward some type of community engagement process and the eventual development of community based planning networks. For the case of poverty reduction, this is often the creation of a poverty taskforce or roundtable. Community members working together to create actionable steps towards poverty reduction need strong community leadership and various coordinated strategies that complement each other. From the robust discussions throughout the day at the community engagement event, the majority of community members expressed a desire to continue engagement around the issues they discussed during the table activities, and were willing to come together on a regular basis on a planning committee or a more formally structured steering committee or roundtable.

As part of the Child, Youth and Family Services Coalition of Simcoe County, the Basic Needs Task Group (BNTG) has been planning and coordinating poverty related activities focusing on the basic needs of children and families for many years. The scope of BNTG centers on activities that educate and empower community and help to raise individuals and families out of poverty. Recent examples of these activities include Bridges Out of Poverty community sessions, Canada Learning Bond registration events, supporting a living wage calculation, and a service delivery environmental scan. This focus on tasks and activities would align perfectly with the system and community coordination of a poverty reduction roundtable. Therefore, the BNTG would continue its work on poverty reduction activities and would feed-up information and support the mandate of an established poverty reduction roundtable.

**It is recommended** that a formal structured poverty reduction steering committee be created for Simcoe County by way of a lead community organization. It is also recommended that the BNTG act as the 'working group' and/or become the steering committee. Participants at the event who identified a willingness to take part in the Planning Committee should be specifically invited to take part in the Basic Needs Task Group as well as the creation of this steering committee.

## 3. Prioritizing Domains of Poverty

With an extensive list of important issues under the umbrella of poverty, it is important to prioritize the domains surrounding poverty, identifying a top four to five main areas to begin focusing on. Actions and strategies are already occurring within the community to address some of these issues. Through feedback from the discussions and engagement activities, community members identified the following two top areas of focus:

- Affordable Housing
- Wages

Affordable housing is and has been in the national spotlight for some time. In Simcoe County, significant focus has been put on housing and homelessness for many years. The Simcoe County Alliance to End Homelessness (SCATEH) is a group of public, private and non-profit organizations and individuals that develop and implement plans to help the homeless and those most vulnerable to homelessness in Simcoe County. With multiple chapters across Simcoe County, SCATEH has had a positive impact on the community. SCATEH took the lead on bringing the 20,000 Homes Campaign to Simcoe County. Over 120 volunteers and professional staff were involved in the local 20,000 Homes Campaign Registry Week on January 13 to 20, 2016. Close to 300 surveys were completed with individuals experiencing homelessness, which will be used to help connect these individuals to housing and related services in the community. A report of the campaign details and the findings, along with four key recommendations was developed.

In addition, the County of Simcoe is working on implementing the 10-Year Affordable Housing and Homelessness Prevention Strategy which outlines steps for the development and implementation of creative solutions for increasing affordable housing for all residents in Simcoe County. This will increase the range of

affordable housing options for Simcoe County.

Income security is another national and provincial focus. The Province of Ontario Mandate Letters 2014-2015 outlining the key priorities for each ministry, have been identified and are being worked on. Several mandates have a focus on wages, including the Ministry of Labour focusing on decreasing the wage gap for women, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care focusing on increasing wages for personal support workers and the Treasury Board Secretariat, who recently increased the minimum wage, indexing it to inflation. Nationally, a Canadian Living Wage Framework has been developed to bring a standardized methodology to regions wishing to calculate a living wage. The living wage is an hourly wage which is sufficient to meet a household's basic necessities of life, and also takes into account government transfers and deductions. To date, 44 different areas in Canada have calculated a living wage, including fourteen in Ontario and another nine who are beginning the calculation. A living wage calculation has been completed for Simcoe County and is currently being reviewed.

**The Voices of the Poverty Experience Project** (Voices report) was a research project conducted in 2014 designed to gather expressions, experiences and opinions from people who have experienced living in poverty in Simcoe County. The project was comprised of three research components including a survey, a series of one-on-one interviews, and a series of small focus groups where participants provided input into the most pressing struggles of their day to day living. The report highlighted three top issues from the individual perspective of those living in poverty:

- Affordable Housing
- Affordable and Accessible Transportation
- Food Security

Most regions nationally and provincially identify between four and five top priority areas in poverty reduction to focus on at a given time. Therefore, **it is recommended** that, based on the work currently underway in Simcoe County on the issues identified above, the following four domains of poverty be prioritized for Simcoe County during the first phase of action:

1. Affordable Housing
2. Income Security
3. Affordable & Accessible Transportation
4. Food Security

## 4. Collaboration and Common Agenda

Simcoe County community agencies and groups have a strong history of working collaboratively. Many community partners have achieved their desired outcomes, engaged with their stakeholders and achieved meaningful impact with individuals and families. Over the last several years, the concept of **Collective Impact** has been taking hold. It promotes organizations and people working together toward common goals. Supported by innovative leading networks such as Tamarack, An Institute for Community Engagement, and Innoweave, the Collective Impact framework has provided a template for communities to identify a common agenda, a backbone organization, continuous communication and a shared measurement system. One such measurement system, that partners in Simcoe County are engaging in, is **Results Based Accountability (RBA)**. RBA utilizes the strength in collaboration and outlines how communities can identify and contribute to common population level outcomes. It simplifies the evaluation process by establishing common language, highlighting the importance of meaningful indicators and showing how the work of multiple stakeholders can lead toward impactful community outcomes.

Since the power of the community engagement process is based on collaboration, **it is recommended** to continue using the evidence based tools such as Collective Impact and RBA in order to establish the foundation of the roundtable approach and to be able to achieve the general aspirations articulated at the community engagement event.

**Making Choices Together**  
Re-imagining Poverty Reduction in Simcoe County

**Community**  
Engagement Report

2016

