

'Poverty is a hole'

Living in Poverty is a four-part Metroland series examining the complex issue of poverty in the affluent region's communities. The series examines those who find themselves struggling to survive and who face deprivation, exclusion and isolation as a result. The series looks at poverty's multiple dimensions, those who deal with it on a daily basis, contributing factors and barriers, possible solutions and resources that can offer assistance.

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Most parents don't hesitate to give their child \$15 to go on a school trip, but for those living in poverty, the choice is a difficult one if it means there won't be enough food on the table for family to eat over the next week.

Marc Hamel and June Cockwell, co-chairs of the Halton Poverty Roundtable, say they've heard firsthand the tough decisions families are forced to make when circumstances, often out of their control, lead them to fall below the poverty line.

Though Halton appears to be an affluent community, the Roundtable co-chairs warn poverty exists here and will continue to grow unless the community can come to terms with it, working together to address it.

"Poverty is a hole, like a trap that people fall into," Cockwell said. "It's a hole that can be very deep or shallow, narrow or wide and I think our job in the community is to ensure that hole is as shallow as possible and as narrow as possible because people are going to fall in."

And just because someone happens to fall into the hole, doesn't mean you have stay down there, said Cockwell.

"If that hole is shallow enough we can bend down and put an arm in there and pull them out," she said.

Cockwell and Hamel are among a group hoping to change the way people view the complex social issue in Halton.

The Halton Poverty Roundtable formed about two years ago. Its mission is to be a catalyst in finding innovative opportunities and resources to help integrate community efforts to address poverty in Halton.

The Roundtable is comprised of an eclectic group of 24 people from across Halton— some of whom are or have lived in poverty, as well as those representative of business, labour and non-profit community agencies.

It was conceived against the backdrop of a larger national movement of collaborative initiatives in communities across Canada where dedicated groups have brought about local change by working together to identify issues and how to tackle them.

"It's a way to break down silos to be more effective in the community," said Hamel.

He noted the Halton group is attempting to create a local understanding of what poverty is as well as identify how people can work together to eliminate it.

"A person living in poverty is not somebody different. It's not someone who deserves to live in poverty. It's just somebody the same as you or I, who had a series of prob-

lems and didn't have the supports we have and that's how they end up in poverty," he said.

Hamel admits he came face to face with what poverty truly was while participating in the 2010 Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition social audit.

Through that effort of a faith groups' coalition, dedicated to contributing new public policies for Ontarians marginalized by poverty, Hamel said he heard from 15 people and how they fell into poverty.

Hamel recalls the day as an emotional one, hearing about a mother of three who only had a can of soup to serve to her family for dinner.

It was a familiar scenario several times a month, the woman divulged.

Hamel said what was most remarkable about her story was that the woman also volunteered for Food for Life, delivering fresh produce to 25 other families in the community.

"She said you have to take care of people who are less fortunate than you, which struck me as an incredibly powerful message, this desire to participate in the community,

to give back to the community and be part of the community," he said, adding that the woman's situation could've happened to anyone— his friend, his neighbour or his family.

In that moment, Hamel said he decided to take action. When the opportunity to be a part of creating the roundtable came up, he jumped at it.

Hamel and Cockwell said the Roundtable is working to dig deeper into the issue of poverty, approach it differently and focus on three key

areas— income security, housing and maintaining healthy families.

Complicated by barriers that include inability to access disability or childcare services, lack of transportation, the cost of housing and food, the group is looking to highlight the community's assets and how they can be linked to create synergies.

Last year, the Roundtable hosted a Moving Hope Into Homes forum that looked at affordable housing needs in Halton and identified best practices.

The roundtable held another forum, Empowering and Building Stronger Communities in Halton April 4. It examined income security and improved social assistance.

What is poverty?

Cockwell warns there is no easy answer as many communities define or measure it differently.

One measure states a family of four living on an annual income of less than \$37,000 is living below the poverty line.

The Halton Poverty Roundtable, however, takes it further, saying a person is experiencing poverty if they are being blocked from leading a rich and full life.

"It's an inability to participate equitably in the community," said Hamel. "The barrier is financial, but there are a whole bunch of other barriers associated with it as well."

Cockwell said poverty can mean not having enough money to get housing or healthy food or to access post-

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secondary education.

It can also mean not being able to access services that can help you because you can't afford transportation to get to them.

Hamel said poverty could also be as simple as a child not being able to participate in a school's pizza day because a family cannot spare the fee.

The subtleties of poverty can create barriers to assistance through those who will not believe a problem exists until they see it with their own eyes.

In Halton, Hamel said you will usually not see people begging for change in the streets, but you will also not see the people who are sleeping on a friend's couch because they cannot find affordable housing.

According to Statistics Canada data analyzed by non-profit group Community Development Halton (CDH), the number of low-income families living in Halton increased from 8,700 to more than 10,000 between 2006 and 2009— a jump of 19 per cent.

The recession-related economic downturn left approximately 2,740 low-income families in Oakville, 2,050 in Burlington, 5,490 in Milton, and 350 in Halton Hills.

As of 2011, according to a Halton Region report, there are 3,153 people on a waiting list for assisted rental housing.

The poor aren't eager to advertise their situation, which is another reason why poverty in Halton goes unseen.

"Here, most of the people are not poor and so our society tends to look down on people who are poor...so you don't walk around saying 'Hey, I'm poor.' You hide away and you stay in your apartment, you stay in your sublet basement and you're lonely and you are not healthy because you are perhaps sitting in a moldy place," said Cockwell.

"You can't go to dinner with someone because you can't pay them back so when they invite you out to dinner you say 'No, it's okay. I'm busy.'"

Cockwell said it is hard for Halton residents to acknowledge the subtle poverty at home especially when presented with the more obvious poverty seen in places like downtown Toronto or Hamilton where many Halton residents work.

Even when people do take notice of local poverty many become rooted in the opinion the person could have a better life if they just worked for it.

Hamel said this is not the case stating that in Halton nine out of 100 people live in poverty, but of those nine only three are of working age.

"The others are children, seniors or they have either a mental or physical disability that limits their ability to work," he said.

"Of those three who can work, 1.5 of them is already working full-time at two or three jobs. If you work full-time at minimum wage, you still live in poverty. If you have a family of four and you both work full-time (at minimum-wage jobs), you still live in poverty."

Part Two of Living in Poverty: Discovering the Hidden Poor will share the stories of those who are living in poverty in Halton. It will appear next Thursday.

