

LOCAL HEROES

FIGHTING POVERTY IN MISSISSAUGA

Poverty is just getting worse but without more funding, what can be done? For volunteers in the Mississauga Summit, the first step toward poverty reduction is a practical, saleable idea.

Words by Carol Kotacka

Each new year typically encourages us to reflect on both the successes and challenges of the year past. We look at our bank balances, our career goals, and (dare I say it?) our scales and resolve to make changes in the areas going in the wrong direction.

This same internal reflection can be applied to our city. If one ponders the current demographic trends, we realize that the face of Mississauga has changed. Our sleepy suburb has grown to become the sixth largest city in Canada. We welcome approximately 11,210 new residents every year, 80% of whom are new immigrants. And Mississauga has the fastest growth rates for children and seniors in Ontario. Our city has become a major urban area with all the benefits and challenges that go along with that.

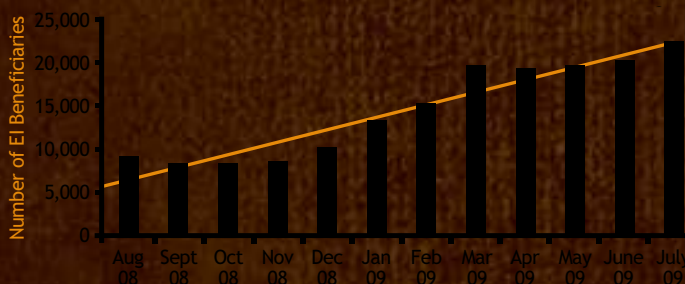
While Mississauga continues to be a great place to live with equally great potential, the reality is that poverty is at an all time high, and if current trends continue, will only get worse.

FACING THE FACTS

- IN 2009 UNEMPLOYMENT RATES SOARED FROM 6.6% TO 10.8% - HIGHER THAN THE GTA, THE PROVINCE AND THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE
- OVER 21% OF OUR CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN POVERTY
- THE MISSISSAUGA FOOD BANK HAS SEEN A 20% INCREASE IN USERS OVER 2 YEARS
- IN PEEL REGION OVER 13,500 PEOPLE ARE WAITING FOR SUBSIDIZED HOUSING.
- IN 2007, PEEL'S HOMELESS SHELTERS HOUSED 1,122 FAMILIES INCLUDING 2570 CHILDREN.

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE RECIPIENTS IN MISSISSAUGA

Source Services Canada Centre, Halton Peel Region



Employment insurance figures don't present the full picture. These percentages don't represent people whose employment benefits have run out or youth and newcomers unable to break into the labour market.

A group of concerned citizens have recognized this trend must not continue. The Mississauga Summit is a volunteer organization where people from all walks of life join in their shared commitment to creating a series of transformational ideas that will ensure the city's sustainability and quality of life.

Born of the interest and energies of Mayor Hazel McCallion, and led by Shelley White, CEO of the United Way of Peel Region and Brian Crombie, a local business consultant the Mississauga Summit evolved and developed into purposeful teams of experts and lay people and the Human Services Task Force would emerge to tackle poverty.

Poverty in Mississauga is one of the challenges that the Summit has undertaken.

Armed with research and a willingness to think innovatively, the group met monthly for over a year to identify one "Big Idea" that will turn the tide on Mississauga's rising poverty rates. No easy task.

Paula DeCoito, Chief Visionary Officer of the Social Planning Council of Peel recognized the merit of this joint collaboration and volunteered to act as Co-Chair of the Task Force. "We have to change the current trajectory on child poverty. We hear all the time that investing in our kids means investing in our future.



Bottom line: our children shouldn't have to face things like eviction or going to school hungry on a daily basis. Some things are just common sense," she said.

Their work has come to fruition and their resulting Big Idea is - to strengthen our city by concentrating resources on one deserving neighborhood at a time.

A neighborhood Task Force will identify priority areas and work with residents to understand each neighbourhood individually. Community development teams will support residents in determining their own priorities. By systematically evaluating quality of life issues such as food, housing, employment, and access to education, the goal is that future investment and services will be customized to the specific needs of each neighbourhood.

Anita Stellinga is Director, Community Investment for the United Way of Peel Region and a member of the Task Force. She has worked in our city for over fourteen years and has seen the societal changes up close. "Poverty is hidden in Mississauga. We don't have 'ghettos' per se. We have to look more closely because several families can live in the same home to make ends meet; people with low incomes sometimes live across the street from those with much higher incomes. Mississauga's large homes give the perception that affluence abounds in our City. But you have to get into the neighbourhoods themselves to understand that poverty is a harsh reality here. By providing support for people to come together, leverage their assets and act on their priorities - the residents themselves lead the change. This process has proven successful in neighbourhoods across the country. Mississauga has a lot going for it. It will work here."

Successful neighbourhood level work can be seen in areas as different as Toronto, Halifax and Thunder Bay.

Priorities can be as simple as identifying where residents are afraid to go and reclaiming that space with increased lighting and resident patrols, or ensuring access to a library and early learning services.

We've seen examples of the readiness of Mississauga residents to act to make their community a better place. In Roche Court, a location near the Sherwood Forest area, over 300 residents mobilized to save their local library. In another neighbourhood, parents and local social services agencies such as Boys and Girls club of Peel consulted with community developers from New Orleans around best practices and revitalized their playground. The goal is to empower residents - to replace alienation and isolation with opportunity and resilience.

Gerry Townsend, Co-Chair of the Human Services Task Force and CEO of the Living Arts Centre feels this work is completely in line with the vision of the Mississauga Summit. "The goal of the Mississauga Summit is to tap into the combined mental power of community leaders to develop transformational ideas for the city. The work of the neighbourhood task force is just that, a transformational idea. Investments at the grass roots, community level will yield significant results financially but also have implications for future generations. It's a game changer."

Investing in our kids means investing in our future. Not only is it the right thing to do, the return will yield significant results. Resilient families pay more tax dollars, rely less on social services and contribute more to their community.

The Neighbourhood Task Force is a game changer alright because all of us will win.

For more information visit www.mississaugasummit.ca