

Preface

On November 22, 2017 Oxford County Council passed a resolution committing to zero poverty in Oxford County, an achievement to be mapped out through the development of a community-led Zero Poverty Oxford Plan. With the adoption of the report, the CAO, along with the directors of Human Services, Public Health and Community Planning, in collaboration with community partners across various sectors (municipal, health, social, education, business and others), committed to work together to develop a strategy to ultimately eliminate poverty in Oxford County. Such a commitment is similar in nature to the visionary goals of 100% Renewable Energy and Zero Waste initiatives, which all contribute to the *Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan*.

Community Declaration

Eliminating poverty in Oxford County is the responsibility of the whole community. It will take the collective efforts of all sectors to address the long-term root causes of poverty. The poverty reduction declaration arose from the Poverty Reduction Town Hall sessions sponsored by Operation Sharing on September 26 and 27, 2017.

“Poverty reduction in Oxford County is achievable and will strengthen well-being for all. It’s the right thing to do. Through leadership, innovation, and the transformation of relationships, in working to eliminate poverty, Oxford County will deliver improved health and well-being for all residents and enhance community prosperity.”

Implications

Eliminating poverty in Oxford County is an essential component to improving the quality of life and wellbeing for all current and future generations. The social determinants of health influence the health of populations and include income and social status, housing, social support networks, education, employment/working conditions, social environments, healthy child development and the environment.

Eradicating poverty is an achievable action that supports Oxford’s growing commitment to the *Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan* and the intention to bring greater community well-being for all. In the fall of 2015, County Council adopted the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan and recognized that “*addressing poverty in our community is a key element to community vitality.*”

Role of Zero Poverty Oxford

The Zero Poverty Action Committee is a steering group of community partners established to oversee the development, and direct the implementation, of the Zero Poverty strategy. This committee identified the eight key areas of the plan element (Table 1), which prioritize the strategies that have been embedded into the *Zero Poverty Oxford Plan*. All of these elements are essential to eliminating poverty in Oxford and are part of a new understanding and vision towards poverty reduction. The Zero Poverty Oxford Support Team, made up of County employees, was established to put the ideas of the Zero Poverty Action Committee into a structured plan/framework, to be molded by the steering group, and eventually become a living, breathing document that is referred to for generations to come.

The plan has been designed to be a living document as the transformational nature of the challenge demands a **concurrent “plan development – plan implementation” approach**. Clear goals and a comprehensive strategy are essential for community capacity building and are fundamental steps along the road to progress.

Defining and Understanding Poverty

It is important to acknowledge that a national standard for defining and measuring poverty in Canada does not exist. However, it is widely acknowledged that low income is the key contributor to living in poverty, as the root issue is the inability to afford the basic necessities of life (shelter, food, clothing, etc.). What is not as well understood is that across Canada an estimated **70% of those living in poverty are “working poor.”** These individuals are working one or more jobs and are unable to adequately support basic needs.

Social exclusion is a key factor contributing to the existence of poverty, and an obstacle to eliminating poverty. Also, a key factor and obstacle to elimination is the degree of personal/family poverty experienced. There are also well-established relationships between socio-economic status, health and well-being to consider in defining poverty.

- **Absolute poverty** was defined by the United Nations after the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 as “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.” The concept of absolute poverty is not concerned with broader quality of life issues or with the overall level of inequality in society.
- **Relative poverty** is often defined as a lack of resources to achieve a standard of living that allows people to play roles, participate in relationships, and live a life that is deemed normative of the society to which they belong. Relative income is often considered the easiest way to measure the level of poverty in an individual area as criteria will change with economic growth.

Absolute poverty refers to a minimum level of essential resources or income that is needed for one to survive. A major drawback to this definition, however, is that it is a static measure and does not account

for how poverty differs over time as societal wealth changes. Conversely, relative poverty refers to the minimum amount of income needed in order for one to maintain an average standard of living and it is typically measured as the proportion of society's average or median income during a particular point in time. This definition also has its drawbacks, as it suggests that even as societal wealth rises, a proportion of a population will always be poor.

An additional limitation to both definitions is that income is indirectly used as the only measure of poverty. It is widely understood that poverty consists of multiple dimensions. For example, in addition to income, poverty also consists of social exclusion, food insecurity, housing and homelessness, employment, education, health, mobility and equality of opportunity, among other dimensions.

An important initial step for this plan is to define poverty in a manner in which encompasses the various dimensions detailed above. Defining poverty during the initial stages, will provide project members with the requisite information to establish goals, objectives, baselines, targets, indicators and milestones. In other words, defining poverty will enable project members to ensure that activities are aligned with all aspects of the *Zero Poverty Plan*.

Poverty in Oxford: Low Income as a Health Concern

The November 2017 *Oxford Community Health Report* summarized the following statistics. Oxford County has a lower per cent of people living with low income in comparison to Ontario (10.8% vs 14.4% respectively). Specific Oxford County estimates include:

- 11,835 (10%) residents are living with low income
- 3,260 (27%) are children under the age of 17
- 4,270 (4%) residents live on an income too low to cover basic needs

Of Oxford's 11,835 low income residents, the 4,270 residents with incomes unable to meet basic needs comprises an estimated:

- 4 out of every 10 low income residents
- 1,140 children under 17 years of age
- 425 children under 5 years of age
- 2,620 residents 18 years and older are "working poor" (61% of low-income adults)

Navigating this document

The 2018 *Zero Poverty Oxford Plan* provides a strategically detailed plan for Oxford County to move towards the successful elimination of poverty, as good intentions and government support alone will not sustain a long-term commitment to zero poverty. This plan was developed as both a policy and reporting document modeled from the [100 RE Building Blocks](#) plan structure. Like the Kassel Criteria before it, the 100 RE Building Blocks process is fully applicable to the development of any long term strategic initiative and when properly utilized can provide guidance for policy makers, governments and community champions to develop their own initiative roadmap. The goal is to create a living document that can serve as an interactive tool box for stakeholder implementation and monitoring.

Emphasis in this first draft was placed on promoting transformation and stakeholder engagement in working towards zero poverty as well as integration of several zero poverty strategies across sectors. Eliminating poverty in Oxford County is without a doubt a long term vision, completely consistent with the *Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan*. Using both a lens of near and far vision, this plan is focused on reducing and eventually eliminating poverty in Oxford County as opposed to alleviating the hardships of living in poverty. As a result, solutions are complex; require the cooperation and commitment of multiple stakeholders; and, the efforts of all levels of governments and individual citizens of our community alike.