

CFUW-Hamilton Poverty Advocacy

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My presentation will focus on advocacy to address poverty in Hamilton and the role of CFUW-Hamilton.

But first some context: there are 1.6 million people living in poverty in Ontario.

Just this week, Feed Ontario (Ontario Association of Food Banks) reported that poverty costs the Ontario Government \$ 27.1 to 33 Billion per year. It makes the case (one that CFUW has been making for decades) that investing in people by reducing poverty is not only socially responsible but also financially sound. In 2010 the Hamilton Spectator published a landmark series called Code Red which involved the University researchers, hospitals and many stakeholders. Code Red confirmed that chief among the determinants of health is income. One of the most startling findings was the difference in life expectancy for people living in more affluent areas of Hamilton as compared to those in areas with high concentrations of poverty. Code Red resulted in numerous initiatives but sadly 10 years later a follow-up report showed that there are approx. 87,000 people living in poverty in Hamilton, down only slightly in 10 years probably because of the Federal Child benefit which topped up the Ontario Child Benefit.

CFUW-Hamilton has a long history of partnering with Hamilton agencies and other advocacy groups to reduce poverty and I will describe how we have done this and what is the outcome, if any.

In 2004 the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton released a report analyzing poverty rates.

They were looking for a way to dramatically illustrate poverty in one fact that would wake up the community to take action. In what has been described as a "water-cooler" moment, someone asked "How many people can fit into Copps Coliseum? (For those of you not from Hamilton, Copps is our arena/entertainment Centre and can seat 20,000 people). The conclusion was that the # of people living in poverty in Hamilton could fill Copps 5 times! 100,000 people! This hit the headlines and moved many hearts and minds resulting in the formation of The Hamilton Round Table on Poverty which represents agencies, advocacy groups and those actually experiencing poverty.

CFUW-Hamilton was represented right from the beginning. Many focus groups, petitions, visits to MP's and MPP's resulted with CFUW part of many of them, both with partners and on our own.

In 2016, five Hamilton anti-poverty groups, including CFUW-Hamilton, formed a partnership to address and advocate for raising social assistance rates which have been continuously shrinking in relation to inflation since the mid 90's with a particular emphasis on single recipients of OW and ODSP because this is the group most severely impacted. Poverty rates for single adults and families without children have increased by 24% since 2014. Hundreds of letters were sent to members of parliament-many of you signed letters that I brought to this meeting and visits to politicians continued. We got behind a Private members Bill proposed by Hamilton NDP MPP Paul Millar- Bill 6 would establish a Social Assistance Research Commission to bring social assistance rates into line with the cost of living across different Ontario communities. Every MPP was petitioned and despite reaching 3rd reading with the support of all parties it was never passed.

Every Public Health Dept. in Ontario participates annually in a survey on the current cost of food and accommodation in their community and submits a "The Nutritious Food Basket Report". The latest report which is part of this week's Feed Ontario report states that since 2008 the proportion of single person households accessing food banks has increased by 45%. In other word, things including food insecurity are getting worse despite all of the energy expended in advocacy.

There was great jubilation when in March, 2016, Premier Kathleen Wynne announced in Hamilton the Ontario Basic Income Pilot which would run for 3 years and provide a basic income to 4000 low-income people, 1000 in Hamilton. My big reservation was my past experiences with pilot projects that even though supported by good research and recommending improvements never saw the light of day. I worried how those 4000 people would handle the cancelling of the project after 3 years, despite what the research would show. Well, something worse happened.

Shortly after being elected the Conservatives cancelled the pilot project. To make it worse the Liberals, if re-elected, had promised a 3% raise in rates which was reduced to 1.5%, an amount that continues to leave recipients of social assistance in dire straits.

Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? Where are our advocacy efforts going?

There is one piece of good news. Just this week the Ont. Government reversed a decision to eliminate a Transitional Child Benefit of \$230 a month.

I won't go into the details of this particular benefit except to say that it would have affected 32,000 children in Hamilton, 50% being from refugee families. The sceptics are saying it is only a temporary effort tying it to the federal election but for now it is good. The only other glimmer of hope is the increase in awareness of the value of a basic income in the media and as a topic on talk shows, etc. It is discouraging but we cannot give up or for sure these measures will never be implemented.

As an aside, CFUW-Hamilton has pledged to take 100 advocacy actions in 2019 as one of our ways to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of CFUW.

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