

**Vibrant Communities Hamilton:
Shared Leadership = Collective Governance
The Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction
April 11, 2007**

Conversations with
Joe-Anne Priel, General Manager, Community Services, City of Hamilton
Rick Beauchamp, Program Manager, Children's Services, Ministry of Community
& Social Services, Ministry of Children & Youth Services
Commentary by
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Interview with Joe-Anne Priel

Tell us a little bit about how you (and the City of Hamilton) became active in the work of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. What drew you to the work, and what does it mean to you to be involved in this initiative?

- I was new to Hamilton – I came here 6 years ago from Edmonton, and was originally responsible for a large department that included public health.
- Child poverty rates for Hamilton surpassed the national average. Nearly half of the aboriginal community and ¼ of the visible minorities were poor. Teen pregnancy, low birth weight babies, and infant mortality were higher than the national average. I couldn't just publish this report and not do anything about it.
- A group including the federal government, the province, and the Community Foundation was coming together in an ad hoc way. I approached them with these numbers and said, "I need help."
- We approached the Caledon Institute to help us develop a social development strategy. It focused on children and families, skills, and affordable housing. It never took off to the level we'd hoped, and in hindsight I don't think the right people were at the table.
- At Council one day, I was asked about a poverty issue, and a poverty task force arose from that.
- The Hamilton Community Foundation had begun dedicating their unrestricted funds towards poverty, and the president, Carolyn Milne, was well-connected and able to bring influential people to the table. From that came our multisectoral roundtable.

How are your department's objectives pursued within the context of this collaborative approach? How does it help you to implement your mandate more effectively?

- My department includes child care, housing, Ontario Works, etc – it is a big department, and our goals are similar to the work of the Roundtable.
- We have an affordable housing flagship. There is no way I could bring credibility to the issue of affordable housing the way that collaborative group can. They are the ones who make things happen.
- Working with community is very helpful in terms of us meeting our mandate.

Are there any barriers or challenges to working in this way? How do you resolve any tensions?

- There are many difficulties. I am learning that once you get a lot of people involved, it isn't always going to go your way – but even if they aren't going my way, they are GOING - so I am learning about letting go. You have to give up some of your power and control.
- Because of the different types of people at the table, some want to get out and do things, others want to study things, some are living in poverty and want something done right now, but systemic change takes a long time.
- There is difficulty working across many provincial and federal departments. At the local level, I can meet with people regularly. But at the provincial and federal level, connections don't happen in the same way – there are not weekly meetings of all the deputies.
- In terms of the faith community, Aboriginal community, etc., there is difficulty in determining who to bring to the table.
- We worked a long time to come up with a common aspiration – making Hamilton the best place to raise a child – and no one disagrees with us on that, so it helps to unite us. We are also a no-blame group, and we communicate openly and honestly.

Which of the learning themes for this series most resonates with your experience in Hamilton?

- One of our counselors sits on the roundtable. He can argue strongly with his colleagues about implementing a living wage, for instance, which I cannot do. I can support him if he wins on the council floor, but I cannot raise those issues. We network with all politicians regardless of political party.

Interview with Rick Beauchamp

Tell us a little bit about how you (and your organization) became active in the work of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. What drew

you to the work, and what does it mean to you to be involved in this initiative?

- It was not a formal or elaborate process – Joe-Anne asked me to be a part of the work, and I agreed.
- The two ministries that I work for have common visions, and many of the services that we provide have vulnerable populations associated with them. Both ministries also see collaboration with partners as imperative for social change. Poverty is too large for any one organization, or for government alone, to address.

How are your department’s objectives pursued within the context of this collaborative approach? How does it help you to implement your mandate more effectively?

- When I was first approached, I was acting as Regional Director here, and had a number of corporate tables where I could convey information about the work.
- The main task for me has been as an information conduit – to inform colleagues about this work and the connections it has to a range of other initiatives.

Are there any barriers or challenges to working in this way? How do you resolve any tensions?

- At this point in the project, there is some tension between a desire to be seen to do something v. playing the role in group development that the Roundtable has chosen. I have been impressed by the group’s resistance to the temptation to just leap into a project. That would make headlines, but I am not sure it would have long-term impact. The Roundtable is working to link people and groups together in a different way, to create change.

Which of the learning themes for this series most resonates with your experience in Hamilton?

- Organizational culture that enables this work. In the Ministry of Community & Social Services, which is largely dedicated to adult programs, we have a strategic direction paper entitled “Thriving Communities.” It has provided strong encouragement and permission to the ministry to be engaged in this sort of work. There was a feeling that we had not been as connected to a range of community development work as we might be. At the same time, for this ministry as well as Children & Youth Services, these are two decentralized ministries. That is a tremendous advantage for community development, because we have a local presence. Although I am a provincial official, I am a local citizen.

Commentary, Katherine Graham

This initiative demonstrates a real spectrum of activity, from highly informal to relatively formal thinking about how to proceed, how to conceptualize the issues and the agenda. The informality is conducive to a flexibility and openness that gets the ball rolling. At the other end of the spectrum, there are some formal processes at work, and I would be interested in learning more about how the Roundtable has thought about who should be at the table, and who should be working with the group but not actually at the table. That has obviously been a complex question. Also at the more formal end, there seems to be an underlying conceptualization of how the Roundtable fits in. It seems to see itself as a bit of a policy forum, thinking about issues and policy responses. There seems to be, implicitly at least, a real concept map of how this will roll out in the community, which is quite impressive.

I would also mention the theme of working across governments. Rick is in an advantageous position, being part of a decentralized ministry and a member of the community. Talking to senior public servants in Ottawa, I frequently hear that because of the nature of their jobs, they lack environmental intelligence about what is really happening in communities. Being big systems, provincial and federal governments can experience a gulf between themselves and the localities.

Finally, there is the notion of “glue” to hold this together. It may be that Joe-Anne is the glue, she is certainly a champion. We need to think about what kinds of supports need to be in place to sustain these cross-sectoral initiatives.

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