



## ***Shared Leadership – Collaborative Governance: Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction***

*Vibrant Communities (VC) initiatives are dynamic processes, bringing community leaders from business, government and the nonprofit sector to join with low-income residents in developing and delivering strategies to reduce poverty, foster inclusion and improve quality of life. How might representatives of government – federal, provincial, regional, municipal – participate most appropriately and effectively in such initiatives? How might a department’s or organization’s objectives be pursued while also linking immediate objectives with longer-term goals? This series of VC stories explores these questions and the engagement of governments in four VC sites: Saint John, Hamilton, BC’s Capital Region and Calgary.*

### ***Introduction***

How can governments participate in the messy task of addressing complex, multi-faceted issues? Poverty is commonly referred to as a “wicked” challenge – for reasons beyond its harmful effects. It is often understood as more than income deprivation. Multiple factors, including poor health, low education levels and poor housing, frequently combine with poverty to make its effect more profound.

In order to respond more effectively to the complexity of the challenge, many communities are embarking upon comprehensive community initiatives. These efforts generally seek to engage diverse sectors in working together on a collaborative basis, over the long term, to tackle a wide range of interrelated issues [Torjman and Leviten-Reid 2003]. Multiple actors have unique roles to play in these initiatives; many policies and programs designed and delivered by all

orders of government have an impact upon poverty, and thus each becomes a potential focus for intervention.

Acknowledging a shared responsibility for solutions, comprehensive community initiatives are premised upon the importance of collaborative models of governance. Who, then, best plays the role of convening these roundtables, particularly around poverty reduction? The story of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, especially around the role assumed by the City of Hamilton as both convener *and* partner, provides a window for learning and reflection. In playing both roles, the City is helping to create a culture that enables collaborative governance and a sense of shared responsibility.

***Background: Leading up to the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction***

Many local governments across Canada recognize that a community's viability is determined by the presence of a good quality of life, and by an ability to both attract and retain talent. In Ontario, the role of local governments, now with major responsibilities for social assistance, child care, social housing and home care, has expanded over the past 15 years. Led by former Mayor Larry Di Ianni, and now Mayor Fred Eisenberger (elected in November 2006), the City of Hamilton has embraced its role as a community leader, becoming ever more active in articulating and delivering on its social responsibilities.

Municipal managers frequently find themselves at City Council meetings, reporting, answering questions and ensuring an aware-

ness of Council directives. There was nothing particularly unusual about Community Services Manager Joe-Anne Priel's presence at a Hamilton City Council meeting discussing social issues in early 2005. On that date, Council members were discouraged by the high rates of poverty and social challenges facing the City. They asked her what could be done to tackle the problem. Priel offered the idea that first came to mind. "We need a poverty task force," she responded, immediately setting for herself, her Department and the City, a set of high expectations and demands.

In her role as Community Services Manager, Priel had already developed strong relationships with community leaders, and immediately contacted Carolyn Milne, President and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation. Together, they presented their ideas to the Foundation's Board of Directors. The Board endorsed the co-convening leadership of the Foundation with the City in this poverty reduction effort. This endorsement provided the impetus for both Priel and Milne to contact Mayor Larry Di Ianni to secure the City's political commitment. Together, they set out to establish the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction (HRPR), a multisectoral and collaborative forum by which the community could come together and establish a proactive, preventive approach to tackling poverty in Hamilton.

Before exploring more fully the nature of the HRPR and articulating the role of the City, it is helpful to know some of the history that led to this moment. Earlier steps taken by the City and other community leaders already had created some of the conditions necessary for this idea to become a reality.

### ***Human Services Manager Group and Hamilton's Social Vision***

In the early part of the new millennium, a great deal of work was already under way in Hamilton to advance a social vision. Representatives of social organizations – both within and outside government – recognized the importance of collaboration, and had built powerful, effective and often informal relationships.

The Senior Human Service Managers Group was an excellent example of these relationships at work. This group brought together representatives of federal and provincial ministries, local government, the Trillium Foundation, Hamilton Community Foundation, local United Way, Hamilton District Health Council, and the Social Planning and Research Council to talk about holistic initiatives that crossed the mandates of multiple organizations.

The group worked cooperatively and with a degree of flexibility. While the Social Planning and Research Council sent out agendas, meetings were chaired by diverse members at different times. Leaders of its various initiatives were also self-selected on a case-by-case basis within the group. Information-sharing allowed for connections to be made between programs and initiatives, while managers linked the work of the group to their own individual and organizational networks (e.g., youth; seniors). Unfortunately, this group and others like it, such as a joint funders group, the Intergovernmental Employment Planning Committee and the District Health Council, no longer meet. However, through its activities, the group has left a legacy.

One of the organizations represented around that table was the Social and Public Health Services Department in the City of Hamilton. Recognizing the importance of local government to the urban quality of life, the City supported an external group to undertake a process whereby the City might define for itself a social vision. This exercise helped create a vision of Hamilton as safe, healthy and caring, culturally rich, diverse and vibrant [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002]. The paper identified the importance of strong physical and social infrastructure for economic growth. Linked to the City's new Economic Development Plan, the social vision articulated a rationale for engaging on issues related to poverty and its disproportionate impact on children and families, youth, Aboriginals and newcomers to Canada. The Social Vision was approved by Hamilton City Council in October 2002.

Building on collaboration that had occurred to date, the Social Vision recommended a number of roles for the City, including that of champion and leader. While holding some of the levers to pursue social change, the City was encouraged to work with the provincial and federal governments, while also engaging citizens, the business community and voluntary sector to develop a broad social plan – fostering among all a sense of responsibility for social well-being [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002].

### ***Building on relationships***

The strength of relationships in the community was surely demonstrated by Joe-Anne Priel's and Carolyn Milne's enthusiastic efforts in co-establishing the Hamilton

Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. However, relationships among service managers and other government officials have been demonstrated in other spaces as well. Arising from linked mandates and common interest, Jan Potts, Director of the local Service Canada Centre until 2006, had developed strong links with senior representatives of both the local and provincial government. These ties arose from common objectives about social foundations. Shared objectives made it easier to work with representatives of other governments than with one's own colleagues from departments that may be addressing very different priorities. At issue was not *how* one works – but the *what* of one's work, and the recognition of collective or linked objectives driving the local efforts.

Collaborative relationships were already established in various networks of leadership on issues including income security, early childhood development and affordable housing. Working relationships reached outside of government as well. Staff of the Hamilton Service Canada office recognized early the importance of connections with the community – in order to support their own organization's mandate. This work frequently was pursued without departmental directives, but was recognized by the community as enabling new synergies and greater impact.

The group of leaders went beyond organizational representation. Even in the midst of job changes, those like Liz Weaver, current Director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, and Paul Johnson, its first Director, moved with ease across boundaries and into new roles, building on previous relationships and experiences, and taking the value of past experiences into current challenges. Johnson had already been serving –

and continues to do so today – as Chair of the Best Start Network (a provincial initiative aimed at increasing investment, awareness and collaboration in early learning and child care) and had become a natural community convener. Mark Chamberlain, the current Chair of the Roundtable, is regarded by many as “hooked on community.” Private sector leader in the Hamilton area, he has earned the respect and admiration of officials, politicians and colleagues within the private sector. The Hamilton Community Foundation itself is regarded as a dynamic catalyst. All of the individuals noted here are regarded as voices of credibility and integrity.

Without doubt, these community leaders had all developed powerful and effective relationships, often informally, and were driven by a desire to work collaboratively in order to attain shared goals. These individuals had, and continue to have, a sense that what can be accomplished together is greater than what can be achieved alone; goals otherwise unattainable become possible. Even beyond its characteristic as a formal mechanism, support for the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction arises in part from the engagement of community leaders, including public sector officials, operating from personal convictions and a values-based framework. While Joe-Anne Priel is often identified as the “glue” of the Roundtable, other participants in this and earlier ventures certainly indicate a willingness to stick.

### ***Taking it to the next level: The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction***

In their articulation of a potential Social Vision for the City of Hamilton, Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler [2002] identified a

number of roles the City could play on its own or with others including leader, champion, exemplary employer, investor, convener and partner. While cities have many of the levers to achieve social goals, and while they are on the front line in terms of creating vibrant communities, they ultimately cannot achieve these objectives on their own.

The paper proposed that local government seek to foster social capital and act as a bridge among neighbourhoods, diverse organizations and social institutions, including the provincial and federal governments, encouraging the broader building of a social vision. One of the guiding principles was to “achieve the visions, goals and actions through collaborative relationships, coordinated actions and integrated programs involving diverse sectors and community organizations.”

After working with Carolyn Milne, Paul Johnson and others, Joe-Anne Priel went back to City Council later in 2005 recommending the creation of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR). City Council, led by the vocal support of Mayor Di Ianni, embraced the role of convening a community-led process to find innovative solutions to Hamilton’s higher-than-national-average poverty rate. Mayor Di Ianni pointed to the need for all organizations – representing business, government, the voluntary sector and advocates – each influencing a piece of the puzzle, to come to a common table and identify synergies between and among the groups. The HRPR became a mechanism to support the principles embedded in the Social Vision.

The City demonstrated its support by contributing \$107,000 towards convening the Roundtable and developing an Action Plan. A

comprehensive community initiative was born as a result. Council has since repeated this support, and made its contribution annual, demonstrating a willingness not just to be engaged as convener, but also as part of a collaborative leadership team.

The City’s willingness to participate as a leader and partner in the HRPR has opened up opportunities for a number of community initiatives complementary to poverty reduction to be more tightly knit together – maximizing potential synergies. For example, the City’s leadership in two other initiatives on affordable housing and skills development, first proposed in the Social Vision document, has made possible the linking of these initiatives. Both of these flagships now have been identified as *Starting Point Partners* – leaders in the work of one aspect of Hamilton’s poverty action plan discussed below.

While some municipalities continue to point to provincial downloading as the source of municipal challenges and place full responsibility for addressing social challenges at the feet of senior levels of government, Hamilton City Council chose to claim responsibility – not necessarily for the problem of poverty, but for being a leader in working for change. Without “owning the problem,” the City is championing a response. This is a particular kind of leadership – a servant leadership – whereby Joe-Anne Priel and her Department seek to enable the Foundation to act as co-convener and allow a process of community development led by participants in the Roundtable, to naturally take its course. Together with the community, the Roundtable is embarking upon the joint venture of ‘making Hamilton the best place to raise a child.’

### *Political champions*

Since its inception, the Mayor of Hamilton has supported the HRPR, even using the September 2005 “State of the City” address at the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. Following the fall 2006 municipal election campaign, featuring a Mayor’s debate on poverty in October, Fred Eisenberger was elected Mayor. Eisenberger has stated his commitment to furthering the work in his role as champion, even citing the Roundtable in his electoral platform as pivotal to ensuring successful poverty reduction efforts. Since assuming office, he has made himself available on numerous occasions to advance and further the Roundtable’s efforts.

City of Hamilton Councillor Brian McHattie is another HRPR champion, participating as an active member of the Roundtable and even its Steering Committee. As a Ward Councillor, McHattie furthers the goals of the HRPR with City Council colleagues and, in many respects, has facilitated access to Council and the City. However, reporting back to Council is only one aspect of his work. As an elected representative, McHattie keeps close ties to the ward and broader community he serves. He continues to devote considerable time and effort to the community and to the HRPR, bringing citizens’ perspectives to the Roundtable and Steering Committee membership.

Local elected representatives are not the only politicians involved in the HRPR. MPs and MPPs have also been significantly engaged. Several successful briefing sessions with candidates were held during the 2006 federal and municipal elections.

In each of these engagements, candidates and elected officials are reminded of

the need to work with their colleagues in other orders of government. While each department and government can contribute to successful efforts, none can do it alone and sole responsibility is not ascribed to any one person. These efforts have paid off. Responding to a “no blame and all responsibility” message, local MP David Sweet repeated an interest in the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction soon after being elected in January 2006, while meeting with HRPR stakeholders to discuss housing and homelessness-related priorities. MPP Ted McMeekin has been very intentional in his involvement, speaking and facilitating opportunities for members of the Roundtable to bring local stories to provincial Liberal caucus colleagues on pertinent issues. Both of these representatives, along with colleagues at the federal and provincial levels, were present at the March 2007 launch of the HRPR’s Starting Point Strategies.

Community backing has helped to make possible this political leadership and continuous engagement. Creating and sustaining a comprehensive, multisector poverty reduction strategy requires long-term effort. As Councillor McHattie suggests, elected representatives may struggle in articulating early gains or outcomes. All of the politicians involved noted the need for a long-term time horizon and a strong foundation in order to achieve sustained success. In a political environment, this work is not necessarily easy. Their commitment is both admirable and farsighted.

### *Joint commitment to process, and to each member’s role*

The Roundtable has chosen not to duplicate the work of service providers or other funders and simply allocate funds to

particular projects. Rather, it has embarked upon a process of supporting the community and organizations to consider how they might influence the policies and systems with the potential to reduce poverty.

In spring 2006, the Roundtable invited Jay Connor, founder and CEO of the Collaboratory for Community Support in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to bring to Hamilton his knowledge of comprehensive community change and innovative collaboration. He conducted interactive sessions with the business sector, government and funders, services providers, Roundtable members and the broader community on the value of working collaboratively. More than 40 community and government representatives were involved in learning and reflection sessions on new approaches to collaborative arrangements and influencing systems. The HRPR has also joined the pan-Canadian Vibrant Communities initiative to share and learn from collaborative models in communities across Canada.

Focused on policy and systems, the Roundtable's Action Plan entitled *Starting Point Strategies* and released in March 2007, seeks not only to engage those working in community and social services. It also aims to enlist less traditional government offices, including municipal departments like Public Works (e.g., regarding issues of purchasing) and Economic Development (e.g., investing in human capital), along with individuals and organizations across the city. Sustained efforts will require Council endorsement, and broad engagement and leadership across the City Corporation and beyond the public sector. In support of the vision to make Hamilton the best place to raise a child, organizations and external initiatives (e.g., McMaster Innovation Park) are all being challenged to think of how their work sup-

ports the community vision. Together, efforts are under way to make the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction a prosperity initiative.

Collaboration involves new ways of working. As one official in the City's Community Services Department suggests, everyone at the Roundtable needs to hold up a mirror to ask themselves: "How will this change the way I work?" Joe-Anne Priel as the City's lead representative and Co-Convener of the Roundtable, speaks about influencing policy change as one of her roles. She takes HRPR deliberations and directions back to the Corporate Management Table and identifies linkages, such as with the City's Business Plan or between the City's Economic Development Strategy and Social Development Strategy. In an example in late 2006, Priel ensured that the City's homelessness strategy would align with the template and direction of the poverty strategy approach.

### ***The City of Hamilton: A willingness to play its part***

Joe-Anne Priel's work, and that of her officials, demonstrates the role the City of Hamilton has taken in the HRPR beyond that of co-convener. The City has also accepted the role of active participant, and even partner, at the table. The City is journeying with the community in a process marked by a strong vision, and an openness to the steps required to get there. They are not just asking community members and other orders of government to do their part; they are leading by example, willing to examine their own policies and practices to ensure that these support the identified effort. Such a task does not come easily.

Governments are often conflicted in participating in comprehensive community initiatives, or other joint government-community policy development processes. Critique of existing policies, programs and human resource practices may be directed at these government representatives. They may feel pressure to comment on, or even commit to, reform of policies and programs in the interest of poverty reduction. Even simple presence at the table may mean having to acknowledge a need for revised practice. Yet public servants are often not empowered to make the changes or are reluctant to face criticism. Such risks are acutely felt by governments, especially public servants. In Hamilton, City Council has expressed and clearly acted upon its willingness to journey with the community in a relatively uncharted direction. It is examining its own policies and initiatives as they influence poverty.

Many point to City Council as courageous – e.g., its delivery on a commitment to return the municipal portion of the provincial clawback of the Canada Child Tax Benefit, while also maintaining municipal social services (e.g., programs for at-risk children and families) once funded by the clawback (close to \$1 million in 2006). The creation of a Social Services Emergency Fund further demonstrates its courage to respond to social pressures. This programmatic response, an annual line item in the City's operating budget, makes available limited financial support to unforeseen social pressures.

Finally, the implications of a municipal endorsement of a 'living wage' campaign could be costly, requiring the City to ensure that all of its workers, both internal and contracted, receive a living wage for their employment. However, a City Councillor recently tabled a motion urging Hamilton to consider and ensure

that a living wage is offered through all municipal contracts. The motion has been deferred, currently being reviewed for further discussion and a better understanding of its implications. Calls for other organizations and the private sector to be exemplary employers are surely more effective when made by a local government willing to model effective human resource practices.

### *Others are also playing their part*

Other participants on the Roundtable are also identifying and assuming roles appropriate to their own mandate, recognizing that participation at the table means action within their own spheres of influence.

Through the efforts of its former editor Dana Roberts, as well as the publisher, senior management and staff, *The Spectator*, Hamilton's daily newspaper, has invested in a three-year project to convene a community conversation on poverty and social justice. A full-time reporter has been assigned to reflect and write upon issues of poverty, and has even set up a community blog on which issues can be debated. The Hamilton Community Foundation's work as co-convenor of the HRPR follows from its earlier adoption of poverty and partnership building as core to its work. School Boards have joined the table, and have themselves created a poverty task force. The Chamber of Commerce has set up a Community Development Committee to align with the work of the Poverty Roundtable, realizing that poverty is bad for business.

The arts community has stepped forward in supporting *One Book One City* – an invitation to every resident to read and discuss the same book – and is working

towards a month (May 2007) of arts-related activities focused on the theme. Schools' and libraries' involvement in the *One Book One City* initiative will further enable the community to come together to learn about an issue, and about each other as the different interpretations are shared. The arts community's engagement will also contribute to building community and rekindling hope. Together, public and publicly funded institutions are facilitating dialogue.

### ***Public sector participation doesn't necessarily come easily***

The City of Hamilton's commitment to the HRPR is strong. Instilling a similar commitment within other orders of government has been more challenging – in part because of the limitations that provincial and federal officials face in manoeuvring within rigid departmental structures. Political-level championing has not always resulted in the active engagement of public servants with the Roundtable.

Of course, as noted by a representative of Service Canada, meaningful participation need not be limited to formal membership on the HRPR. Information on policies, programs and eligibility can still occur through other means, such as information exchange or participation on advisory committees. Federal and provincial involvement may be expedited through the identification of strategies linked to critical points of investment, as articulated in the recently released *Starting Point Strategies*. As Hamilton City Councillor Brian McHattie suggests, there may be opportunities for further engagement when sub-tables or working groups are created, and when each of these is linked to a strong tracking mechanism and the reporting of results.

While sharing of information and resources can occur outside of the Roundtable, participation in its processes can still enhance efforts toward a sense of shared ownership. Questions of membership and political engagement remain an issue. In one case, a (former) Regional Director with the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services had been named liaison to the Roundtable – a response both to the recognized need for participation and to the uncertain implication of membership.

There are many questions that arise in considering the potential role and contributions of provincial and federal governments at the Roundtable or similar processes. Participants may be seen as departmental rather than government representatives. Senior level officials or even Ministers may be unavailable or unwilling to represent other departments within their government. Roundtable members may not be vested with the authority to speak on behalf of their department. While these collaborative processes may be more effective with smaller rather than larger numbers, questions of representation may leave out certain voices or organizations. Governments will need to continue working to ensure a joined-up approach in these situations, enabling a community to determine how it might best partner with the public sector in achieving its priorities.

### ***Conclusion***

The founding of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, following earlier bodies like the Senior Human Service Managers Group, embodies an organic process of coming together – not unlike processes of self-organization. In such pro-

cesses, partners accept the challenges of travelling on uncharted pathways and playing their role in supporting the group to reach long-term visions. The City of Hamilton, as both co-convenor with the Hamilton Community Foundation and fully fledged partner in the Roundtable, has accepted the risk of involvement. In so doing, the City is sharing responsibility for poverty and its multiple solutions. At the same time, it is enabling the entire community to move closer toward achieving a collective Social Vision.

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