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# Niagara Region

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**REPORT TO:** Co-Chairs and Members of Public Health and Social Services Committee

**SUBJECT:** Update on “Increasing Prosperity for Families Living in Poverty”

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## RECOMMENDATION

That this Committee recommend to Regional Council that this report be received for information.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In September 2008 Regional Council authorized staff to reinvest the cost savings in social assistance of approximately \$900,000 in 2008 and \$1.5 million afterward as a result of the implementation of the Ontario Child Benefit (OCB) toward increasing prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty.
- Seven strategies for investment were approved from the Niagara Region Council Planning Session and were linked to the recommendations outlined in the report “*A Legacy of Poverty? Addressing Cycles of Poverty and the Impact on Child Health in Niagara Region*”<sup>1</sup>.
- Community Services staff were to work with Opportunities Niagara and the Business Education Council (BEC) to implement the seven strategies and to establish an Advisory Committee consisting of community stakeholders who would oversee the implementation of the prosperity strategies. Due to the closure of Opportunities Niagara, Community Services staff have been working with community stakeholders to find an alternate for the work that was to be done by Opportunities Niagara.
- In December 2008, the Province of Ontario released its poverty reduction strategy report entitled “*Breaking the Cycle*”<sup>2</sup>. This report outlines the province’s strategies and measures in the commitment to reduce the number of children living in poverty in Ontario by 25% over the next 5 years.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

As noted in COM 32-2008, Ontario Child Benefit Financial Analysis (June 3, 2008) cost reductions in Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) has provided stable funding of approximately \$900,000 in 2008 and \$1.5 million afterward.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.niagararegion.ca/living/saao/reports/pdf/PovertyReport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.growingstronger.ca/english>

This cost savings has been committed to ongoing reinvestment in prosperity focused strategies as noted in COM 53-2008.

## PURPOSE

This report has been prepared to provide information to Committee and Council regarding Community Services' response to the closure of Opportunities Niagara and the alignment between Niagara's prosperity projects with Ontario's poverty reduction plan.

## BACKGROUND

In June 2008, a Niagara Region Council Planning Session was held to examine the strategies from the Legacy of Poverty report. From that session it was recommended that Community Services staff work toward achieving the following two main deliverables for 2008:

- the creation of an Advisory Committee consisting of community stakeholders to oversee the implementation of prosperity strategies for Niagara families living in poverty and to inform the development of future strategies for investment; and
- the investment of social assistance savings into seven strategies in 2008 aimed to increase the prosperity of families living in poverty in Niagara.

In September 2008 (COM 53-2008 Increasing Prosperity for Niagara Families Living in Poverty) Regional Council authorized staff to reinvest savings as a result of the implementation of OCB in the amount of \$900,000 for 2008 and \$1.5 million afterward toward increasing prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty.

The strategies are:

FRAMEWORK	STRATEGY	LEGACY OF POVERTY REPORT RECOMMENDATION
Inclusive and Accessible Community Infrastructure	Breakfast programs	3c Equitable, affordable and subsidized childcare, school readiness and recreation/leisure programs
	Back to school or winter clothing funding for children	
	Completion of an integrated inventory of services offered to parents through the Ontario Early Years Centres and family resource centres	3b Coordinated and equitable access to parenting resources
Improved Living Conditions	\$100/month gift card to grocery store for sole support parents in receipt of social assistance with earnings for up to 12 months if they remain employed	3a Decrease costs of essential supports and services such as housing and food security
	Good Food Box – creating a link with local farmers to provide nutritious food	
	Emergency Energy Fund – to assist with individuals who are facing disconnection of gas or hydro	2e Increase access to social supports and social capital among marginalized adults
	Free bus passes for youth (high school) during summer months (June to August)	2f Contribute to community through volunteer work, involvement in community initiatives and leisure opportunities

Community Services staff were to work with Opportunities Niagara and the Business Education Council to create an Advisory Committee and to implement the seven approved prosperity projects. An agreement between Community Services, Opportunities Niagara and the Business Education Council was intended to increase the participation of business, education and non-profit agencies to allow greater input from the community in developing future strategies. The Business Education Council's role was to provide the operational management of the funding for the prosperity projects. Opportunities Niagara's role was to develop and implement a community engagement strategy regarding the prosperity projects including the creation of an Advisory Committee that would oversee the implementation of the prosperity strategies

## **REPORT**

### Working with Community Partners

In late September, Opportunities Niagara ceased operations thereby leaving vacant the community engagement role. In response, Community Services staff met with nine community partners representing services across the region to receive recommendations regarding the community engagement role. These community partners recommended that a larger discussion with community agencies would need to occur in order to receive the best advice regarding next steps.

A follow up discussion with sixteen Niagara wide community agencies occurred in early December 2008. During this meeting, there was strong agreement to move forward in establishing an Advisory Committee and that there was a need for coordination services to support the work of the Committee. The coordination would include capacity building priorities identified by community partners to be:

- Develop and enhance community partnerships with business, funders and service providers as a means to create capacity
- Explore alternative solutions as a means to extend current resources, or create new resources
- Build capacity within employment, housing, education and health sectors to better integrate health and prosperity responses
- Establish and oversee an Advisory Committee that will guide the investment of funding to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty
- Engage people living in poverty in meaningful ways in order to ensure that investments reflect need
- Educate and engage stakeholders regarding strategies to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty
- Work to create trust and reduce competitiveness between service providers
- Inform advocacy activity based on the outcomes achieved and stakeholder feedback

To this end, Community Services has engaged BEC to carry out not only the administrative role previously negotiated but also the coordination of the Advisory Committee and the convening of community stakeholders to increase prosperity for Niagara families living in poverty.

### Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy

Niagara's commitment toward increasing prosperity complements the Province's vision: *Breaking the Cycle – Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* authored by Deb Matthews, Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Poverty Reduction and Minister of Children and Youth Services. The report "...is a comprehensive plan, combining significant short, medium and long-term investments and innovative new programs and initiatives. It establishes a clear goal – where the province does its part, in partnership with the federal government, to reduce child poverty by 25 per cent over 5 years while improving the quality of life for all children living in poverty"<sup>3</sup>.

Some highlights of the report include:

- The commitment to reduce the number of children living in poverty in Ontario by 25% over the next 5 years. That means moving 90,000 children out of poverty.
- Increased spending on education and early learning. The government will be implementing full-day learning for four- and five-year olds.
- Investment in building stronger communities.
- The establishment of a Social Policy Institute that will focus on evidence-based social policy development and the evaluation of social policy interventions.
- A long-term commitment which includes the government's intention to table legislation that would include requirements to measure and publicly report on the progress being made in implementing the strategy.
- The roll out of a 10-year infrastructure plan, which is expected to embrace a variety of bold new initiatives, including social housing.
- A review of all programs with a person-centred approach in order to give an improved understanding of how to better align programs so they address the issues of those they are designed to help.

Furthermore, the report validates Niagara's approach to increasing prosperity by focusing on neighbourhood development. "*Research in other jurisdictions has shown that involving people in the revitalization of their own neighbourhoods should be a critical component of any poverty reduction strategy. Strong communities can be an extremely positive influence on the health and economic prospects of the people who live in them and inviting people to take responsibility for the strength of their own communities can only increase their social cohesion and mobility*"<sup>4</sup>.

### Next Steps

In Niagara, Community Services and Public Health staff are working to develop neighbourhood profiles identifying the assets and risk factors within each community. These profiles will be used to guide the Advisory Committee in recommendations for investment and implementation of the approved prosperity strategies. The Advisory Committee will be comprised of local residents, business partners, community agencies and Niagara Region staff. This configuration will "*encourage neighbourhood revitalization through partnerships between local business, governments, volunteers, community agencies and...local residents*"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Hon Deb Matthews. (2008) *Breaking the Cycle – Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, 6

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p 19

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

The contract between the Niagara Region and the Business Education Council is complete and the recruitment of a convener has begun. The process of establishing the Advisory Committee will commence in February 2009. Work has begun to solicit interest from the community in the seven approved prosperity strategies. Niagara's early focus on engaging stakeholders toward increasing prosperity for families living in poverty has resulted in good will and an eager anticipation for work to begin.

Submitted by:

Approved by:

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Commissioner, Community Services

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Chief Administrative Officer

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