

ALIV(e) Enlivens Opportunities Waterloo Region

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community organizations.

Challenge

Finding time to attend meetings – even assuming a comfort and enjoyment of such things – is particularly difficult for people living on low incomes. As one woman who receives Ontario Disability Support Program benefits said: “Being poor is a full-time job.” But people with lived experience of poverty ensure that poverty reduction work is focused and informed. Vibrant Community convener groups have experimented with models of inclusion and are aware that providing supports – food, child care, transportation – is only the first step to involving people living on limited incomes in their work. Recent successes experienced in Waterloo Region provide some lessons for others to follow.

Priorities and strategies

Awareness of Low Income Voices – ALIV(e) – was founded in 2007 by Opportunities Waterloo Region as a way to learn more about the issues, experiences and concerns of people living on low incomes. With financial, administrative and facilitation support from Opportunities, ALIV(e) is educating its members and the wider community about poverty-related concerns and initiatives aimed at preventing and reducing poverty.

To begin, the group developed a frame of reference for its operations and identified priorities for action. First, they hoped to grow from five founding members to 15 by the end of 2009, and to have 50 members by 2011. Members also want to establish neighbourhood-based ALIV(e) satellite groups that can keep the network tuned in to local issues.

ALIVE(e) members initially thought they might conduct traditional information and recruiting presentations. They later opted to create promotional materials which they continue to display

throughout the community. A few members brought posters and brochures to a community barbeque and spoke with passersby about the network's operations. Both activities proved successful in attracting new members.

The group also decided to hold its meetings in different community locations across Waterloo Region – a three-city, four-township area. They invited community outreach workers¹ to attend and present on local poverty issues. Each outreach worker was encouraged to invite one or two people they thought might be interested in attending ALIV(e) meetings. This last practice has been the most successful in attracting new members. Outreach workers possess a wealth of community resource information and their association with ALIV(e) strengthens the network considerably.

A second ALIV(e) priority is to increase levels of civic participation. For future municipal, provincial and federal elections, Opportunities and ALIV(e) will operate joint awareness campaigns, educate low-income residents about party platforms and candidates, and encourage them to vote. For the 2010 Regional Election, ALIV(e) is developing a plan to interview Regional councillors about their platforms and will make the information available to residents. In order to increase Region-wide awareness of poverty-related issues, network members created a media bureau – a group of volunteers that can be relied upon to supply information and real-life experiences to media contacts that may be preparing stories about poverty.

ALIV(e) recently met with the Region's Commissioner of Social Services (who is also a member of Opportunities' Leadership Roundtable) to discuss how best to approach elected officials. The Commissioner also taught them more about how to engage policy-makers around relevant issues. ALIV(e) is planning its first presentation to Regional Council early in 2010. In another policy-related initiative, ALIV(e) collaborated with Wilfrid Laurier University's Community Research in Action team to identify policies affecting the low-income community. ALIV(e) now acts as an advisory body to the research project and provides input regarding proposed research questions and processes.

Network members are working to make ALIV(e) self-sustaining. In addition to reviewing potential member requirements and membership models, one of their members was recently elected as the network chairperson, replacing Opportunities' Executive Director Mary MacKeigan. To help ease the transition, the new chair will share her duties with Mary for a few months, by which time the group will also select a vice- or co-chair from among the membership. With support from Opportunities, ALIV(e) made a successful application to the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario for funding, some of which was used to create and distribute ALIV(e) recruitment materials. A second application has been submitted to help fund group activities.

As a way to further embed the experiences of people living in poverty into its work, Opportunities Waterloo Region would like to see ALIV(e) members increase their contribution to Opportunities' Leadership Roundtable (LRT) and board of directors. The LRT is going through a reconstruction and has put a temporary freeze on new membership, but as vacancies in the board are announced, ALIV(e) members will be encouraged to move into them, as appropriate.

Outcomes

ALIV(e)'s slow and steady growth – nine members in two years – provided sufficient time for Opportunities to locate the necessary resources the group needed to survive. As network members increased their understanding of the importance of self-sufficiency and sustainability, Opportunities staff were able to move from a support to an advisory position. The pride and excitement this has generated carries its own momentum and group members are optimistic about the future. They have adopted a 'no-blame,' collaborative philosophy and continue to make room for the expression of feelings about the experience of poverty.

The benefits of participation – camaraderie, meal and transportation allowances, sharing strategies that make life easier for people on low incomes, and the chance to advocate for others – keep members coming back. Says one: “You leave [our meetings] and you feel good – you feel that you've done something. You may not be able to change the world, but you can work at that tiny little part that makes someone's – not necessarily yours, but someone's – life a little better.”

ALIV(e) members have spoken at a number of poverty-focused events, including hearings that led to the development of Ontario's provincial poverty reduction strategy and Opportunities' Community Conversations.² The network's upcoming presentation to Regional Council will celebrate both that the voices of poverty are raised and that decision-makers are listening.

Anne Makhoul and Mary MacKeigan

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Endnotes

1. The Community Outreach Program is a community-based program created to prevent and reduce the depth of child poverty in Waterloo Region. This unique poverty reduction initiative is funded and administered by the Region of Waterloo in partnership with 15 community agencies who employ the Outreach Workers. Delivered across 25 neighbourhoods and communities of interest, Outreach Workers engage local families and connect them to a multitude of resources, help address gaps and build family and community capacity.
2. Opportunities Waterloo Region instituted structured lunchtime Community Conversation events in 2002 as a way to stimulate thought and action aimed at poverty reduction.

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