

Group puts poverty on the agenda

The Hastings Prince Edward Poverty Roundtable wants to make poverty a part of the conversation this election.

The roundtable's is co-ordinating a strategy to get provincial candidates and parties talking about poverty for the 2018 Ontario election. Themed "Fairness and Dignity for All," the strategy aims to educate and encourage engagement on issues of poverty as well as strengthen relationships and collaboration with the province.

"Our primary objective is to make sure that as candidates present themselves asking for our support, and as members as all of our communities are talking to candidates and finding out where they stand on issues, that issues related to poverty in our communities are part of the conversation," said roundtable steering committee member for the strategy Ed Bentley.

The strategy focuses on five key area related poverty needs, he said. They include access to affordable housing, income security, food security, transportation and health and wellbeing.

Bentley said the strategy was first released in March with plans for its development and implementation in the coming months. The announcement of the strategy came with the release of the roundtable's *Leaning In* report.

It states "more than half of participants estimated between 40 and 60 per cent of the population were living in poverty in their community, commonly citing how normal poverty has become as costs of living surpass incomes." The report featured feedback from more than 400 people dealing with poverty across Bancroft, Maynooth, McArthurs Mills, Coe Hill, Madoc, Belleville, Deseronto, Picton and Quinte West.

"The numbers take your breath away when you see them," Bentley said. He listed more than a fifth of people in the counties are paying more than what some economists argue is the "ideal range" to keep their roofs over their heads, 10 per cent of people are living with food insecurity, higher rates of diabetes, asthma and mental health disorders and a high volume of working poor, low-income children and families.

"There's lots of evidence out there about the relationship between poverty and health? The general wisdom is that the greatest single factor that affects health and wellbeing is poverty," he said.

Bentley said the roundtable is looking to host all candidates meetings, publish infographics and information resources and partner with organizations and voters to talk to their candidates. He wants to change the conversation from drama and politics and to the hard-hitting issues, he said, but that might be challenging.

"We're already seeing that the issues are not being discussed. It's all about whether or not people don't like Wynne or whether or not they trust Ford," he said suspecting it would be harder to shed light on crucial issues as voting day nears.

"In the meantime, there are these extraordinarily important issues that affect not only poverty in our communities but all the rest of us, because the extended poverty in our communities affects the quality of life in our communities for all of us and those things are not going to be talked about unless we get them on the agenda."

Bentley said he's heard from people asking why they would vote, asking what difference it would make. But, he said, the people who are the ones who make a difference "that includes those struggling in poverty.

"Voting rates among people living in poverty tend to be one of the demographics that famously are not good at getting out to the polls," he said. "We can't assume that the people who are asking for our votes are aware of the poverty in our communities or the kinds of solutions that particularly the provincial government can offer."

He added, "Even if somebody wins, it's important for them to know that a certain percentage of the population held these views about important issues. Hopefully that would inform whoever wins if they're looking to represent their entire constituency after being given the privilege of representing us that they'd want to know that ". Whatever percentage of the population feels strongly about this particular issue."

To volunteer with the strategy or learn more about it email ebentley@cogeco.ca. For more on *Leaning In* look up povertyroundtablehpe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PRT-Report-LEANING-IN.pdf. To view the committee's released election tools, sample questions and infographics for the public to use now that the writ has been drawn up. For more visit www.povertyroundtablehpe.ca/prt/2018-election-tools/.