

Voices for Change Halton

4th Annual Report 2014-2015

Celebrating our fourth year of action, growth and community

After four productive years of enthusiastic provincial campaigns, well-supported local initiatives and innovative outreach activities to eliminate poverty in Halton, Voices for Change Halton (VFCH) is about to expand beyond Burlington and Oakville. VFCH chapters will be established in Milton and Halton Hills (Georgetown and Acton) to continue our mission to prove that poverty is not inevitable. Even as we anticipate exciting days ahead, we look back on the past year with pride. Voices for Change Halton - Burlington (VFCH-B) and Voices for Change Halton - Oakville (VFCH-O) members participated in empowering workshops, public legal education sessions, an information picket and helped pilot the Halton Legal Health Check-Up in our community. VFCH was cited as “an impressive group” in an international report. We are pleased to present our fourth year achievements.

■ Most Livable Town for Who? Oakville Graphic Workshop

Oakville Mayor Rob Burton’s often stated wish that Oakville be Canada’s most livable town raised the question, “Most Livable Town for Who?” among Voices for Change Halton - Oakville members. The question resulted in a discussion in January 2015 and a brochure on the topic with descriptive graphics by artist Tanya Gerber.

The brochure lists reasons why Oakville is not a livable town for low-income people. Reasons include difficult food and healthcare accessibility, and unaffordable housing and transportation. VFCH-O members suggested that Oakville will

continued on page 2

■ Exclusion Mapping Workshop

Voices for Change Halton - Oakville members used an innovative exclusion mapping workshop to mark places in town where low-income residents feel welcome, used to feel welcome, and feel excluded.

Participants were asked: What sites are ‘our’ places? What used to be ‘our’ places but are changed or gone? What are our sites of survival—the places we need to survive such as food banks and shelters? Where do you feel excluded or not welcome?

Tracy Mead and Ron Williams, members of the Health and Strength Action Group, facilitated the workshop. The Group works with the South Riverdale Community Health Centre in Toronto on poverty and health issues.

Ted Matthews felt the workshop in



February 2015 was a valuable source of information. In fact, he joined Voices for Change Halton - Oakville following the event.

“I came away with a positive feeling and decided that I would become involved with this group because it is a worthy cause,” said Ted. “At the workshop, someone told me about the gov-

ernment’s Guaranteed Income Supplement which I didn’t know about. I also found out about the new In-Situ program through Halton Housing. Your apartment can be subsidized instead of waiting for subsidized housing and having to move. It was huge for me. It helped me save \$450 a month on my rent, and I learned about it from Voices for Change.” ■

Information picket at No Frills for the Put Food in the Budget Campaign*

Voices for Change Halton - Burlington members gathered outside Burlington's No Frills on Brant Street on July 30, 2015 to hand out information about social justice on behalf of the Put Food in the Budget campaign. Though initially a protest of Galen Weston (owner of Loblaws and No Frills) not paying a fair share of corporate taxes, the protest became a demonstration to help eliminate poverty in Ontario.

VFCH-B members urged passersby to send a 'recipe for social justice' card to Premier Kathleen Wynne to increase corporate taxes to help pay for social service programs being systematically cut by the provincial government. VFCH-B member Peter Rouleau noted it is groups like Voices for Change Halton that will make society more compassionate.

"The more people get involved in

the conversation, the better chances there are of making changes," said Peter. "When we talked to people on the street, we helped them understand the reality of people in poverty, telling them that being poor is not a crime but an unfortunate circumstance and something a great many of us can slide into. It's a full-time job just to try to get by on what's left

over after housing and medication expenses. Most people I spoke to were kind of shocked that 100 to 150 people go to church dinners in Burlington."

This event may be the model for future outreach activities on issues like transit in Burlington. ■

*Participation in this campaign is not supported by funding from the Trillium Foundation.



James Farrell interviews VFCH members for International Report

Australian lawyer James Farrell, director of the Queensland Association of Independent Legal Services, interviewed members of Voices for Change Halton as part of his research into whether community legal centres could be more effective by partnering with community service organizations. His report *How lawyers Can Support and Empower Communities to Achieve Change* calls Voices for Change Halton, "an impressive group, well supported by two very capable organizers, Mike Balkwill and Alyssa Ginsburg. The participants felt great ownership over the project (and didn't feel it was a project of the legal clinic, as much as a project of their own)."

Members from VFCH-B and VFCH-O, Executive Director of Halton Community Legal Services Colleen Sym and organizers Alyssa Ginsburg and Mike Balkwill met with James at the Burlington Lion's Club on March 28, 2015. VFCH-B mem-

ber Barb Sheehan was one of the people interviewed by James.

"James asked questions such as what has the Voices process done for its members, and what do we need to makes Voices for Change Halton work for our needs," said Barb. "He also asked about the challenges of being in Voices for Change and wanted details about the events we have done. James wanted us to show him the work we do and how we interact."

Barb was pleased to be able to speak with James about VFCH's participation in the Halton Legal Health Check-Up project. She completed several Legal Health Check-Ups with people in her community during the pilot project and sees the useful tool expanding beyond Halton to help people in other places. In his report, James also praised VFCH members for getting involved in many projects including, "administering legal health checkups within their own com-

munity, hosting a 'walking/rolling' tour of several square blocks of downtown Burlington with the Mayor and Councilors which led to some policy changes around accessibility and transit, holding town hall meetings, and regular speaking events." ■

Most Livable Town for Who?

continued from page 1

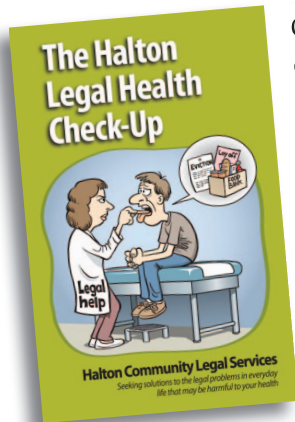
truly be livable for all residents when it offers more full-time work, closes food banks and shelters, and the minimum wage is a living wage.

"It's hard to get services in Oakville, so groups like Voices for Change are good for finding out about services," said VFCH-O member Andria Rowe. "I'm really happy to be in Voices for Change Halton." ■



■ Intermediaries for the Legal Health Check-Up

Members of Voices for Change Halton acted as intermediaries during the pilot project for the Legal Health Check-Up (LHC), a tool developed by Halton Community Legal Services to uncover legal problems common to people with a lived experience of poverty. The LHC is made up of simple questions that can be asked by a service provider to a client or answered by the client on their own. The LHC is sent to Halton Community Legal Services in Georgetown where an intake worker processes it and determines if there is a legal issue. If there is, the matter is sent to a legal caseworker in the clinic. The intake worker can also provide people with resources for non-legal issues shown in



the LHC. VFCH-B member Diane Fyfe introduced people to the Legal Health Check-Up at many community dinners and events over the past year.

“You have to get to know people and develop a rapport with them to build up a trust,” said Diane. “I also had time to really familiarize myself with the Check-Up. I would speak with the coordinator at the dinners who would announce that Voices for Change would be going around with surveys. I would sit at a table and do a few Check-Ups and then move to another table. The majority of people knew they had legal issues, and I made sure they knew how to contact individuals for legal services.”

During follow-up conversations with LHC participants, most told Diane their legal issues had been resolved. ■

■ Public Legal Education session on Power of Attorney & Wills

Seniors at 4100 Longmoor Drive in Burlington learned how Power of Attorney works, the importance of having an estate executor and other matters related to wills in a public legal education (PLE) session spearheaded by VFCH-B member Marie Gailing in June 2015. About 35 people attended and 14 people were motivated to speak with an intake worker from Halton Community Legal Services to learn more about their individual legal needs.

“In conversations with people in the building, we found a lot of people thought because they don’t have much and live in subsidized housing, their children will handle everything as ‘next of kin’,” explained Marie, who lives in the building. “But once you die, Halton Community Housing Corporation, who owns the building, does not necessarily consider next of kin to be the executor.

Now they have a form called Next of Kin, Executor and Power of Attorney. A lot of people don’t realize that it has to be a legal document, so this is what we were trying to bring to people’s attention.”

Many attending the PLE session also did not know that Halton Housing changes the locks on an apartment as soon as someone dies. If the name of someone living in the apartment is not on the lease, they can be locked out of their home and sometimes lose their belongings. Marie hopes to bring this important information to other seniors who rent apartments.

“You have to protect as much or as little as you have,” says Marie. “You don’t know what may happen with family dynamics. I think it is something we have to introduce to a lot of people, not just low-income people.” ■

■ ODSP Action Coalition: Advocating with Confidence

In September 2014, the ODSP Action Coalition facilitated a workshop called ‘Advocating with Confidence’ in Burlington for VFCH-B members and the community. The Toronto-based ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program) Action Coalition is a province-wide network of people with lived experience on ODSP, disability organizations, community agencies, anti-poverty groups and community legal clinics. This workshop empowered people on ODSP to know their rights as recipients and what to do if their application is rejected.

“It was very clear there is a need for this sort of workshop,” said past VFCH co-chair Grace Wilbur. “I was highly impressed. We learned the specific responsibilities of various levels of government. For example, I now know that employment insurance is federal, but employment rights are provincial. We also learned effective tips for meeting with our local MPP. I have no doubt it will improve my participation in VFCH.”

Joanne Vassell-Pittman, past VFCH co-chair, felt there were many benefits in coming together for the workshop.

“We were able to have great conversations over lunch where people were sharing tips about ODSP,” she said. “Some people were even interested in starting a local ODSP Action Coalition. As an advocate, it is great that I now know who to send people to when their ODSP application wasn’t successful.”

The workshop was a success thanks to the participants and excellent facilitators from the ODSP Action Coalition. ■



B.F.A.S.T Transit Users' Forum

About 100 people came out to the B.F.A.S.T. (Burlington For Accessible and Sustainable Transit) Transit Users' Forum on March 28 at the Burlington Public Library to talk about their riding experience and discuss strategies to improve transit. Voices for Change Halton was invited by B.F.A.S.T. to co-sponsor the event.

Forum attendees included Mayor Rick Goldring, Burlington MPP Eleanor McMahon and Councilors Paul Sharman and Rick Craven. The accessibility transit user discussion panel recommended the city's in-demand Handi-Van service be supplemented with taxis when needed and to reinstate the Taxi Scrip Program.

The forum brought together people dedicated to an improved transit system for all users, especially those with accessibility needs and those with low-incomes. This event strengthened the relationship between Voices for Change Halton and B.F.A.S.T. ■



Ideas for the Future

Burlington Drop-In Centre

VFCH-B member Cathy Stokes wants to fill a need in the city by creating a drop-in centre in downtown Burlington that will welcome low-income residents. Drop-in centres are currently in Oakville, Hamilton and on Plains Road in Burlington.

"This is a vision that I have a passion for because I think it's what our community needs," said Cathy. "About three years ago, we did a workshop about a community hub of services for people who live in poverty. That made me think about opening a drop-in centre that would also be a warming and cooling centre. It wouldn't have service professionals on site, but have information for easier access to services. Some people I speak to at community dinners have no idea of what their rights are or where they can go for services in the community."

Cathy is currently researching how to open a drop-in centre and apply for a grant. She wants people of all ages to feel accepted at the drop-in and enjoy a positive, empowering environment.

"This centre can assist people who live in poverty by being a refuge and maybe make life a little easier for them as a place to talk to others and network," said Cathy. "I'm hoping that Voices will support this idea as something that is needed in our community." ■

Health and Wellness Sessions

A seniors' program facilitated by a doctor at her church gave Grace Wilbur the idea to start a series of health and wellness talks on the problems faced by people living with low-incomes. Grace hopes the doctor would like to participate in the venture and maybe bring in guest speakers.

"I think she could help take us out of our poverty mindset for a while," she explains. "We could schedule a topic like mental health issues or how to go through a grieving process. As the idea comes together, I will present it to the Voices group and see how things go. Maybe we could start the sessions with deep breathing so that we are not all coming from our scattered places and trying to focus on the same thing right away."

Grace feels having a fully accessible program would attract many people who have experienced programs with restrictions.

"This would be a no-strings attached program," she said. "You don't pay, you show up if you want to, and you don't have to prove you are living an experience of poverty." ■

4

Voices for Change Halton is a grassroots advocacy group. It is supported by Halton Community Legal Services (a community legal clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario) as an extension of the clinic's commitment to systemic strategies to address poverty and promote human rights.

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www.voicesforchange.ca



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Voices for Change
Halton