

**RETHINKING POVERTY 2: IMMIGRANT PERSPECTIVES
COMMUNITY FORUM
Ottawa, Ontario, April 23rd, 2009**

What did immigrants say? Input from participants

Presented by: The Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres of Ottawa, Ottawa Immigrant Settlement Agencies and community partners. This report highlights suggestions from participants on how to reduce poverty and make Ottawa a more inclusive City.

Introduction

Ottawa is the second largest destination for immigrants in Ontario, and the fourth largest in Canada. In 2006, 178,545 immigrants were living in Ottawa, representing 22.2% of the total population. In Ottawa, over half of the children living in poverty are members of a visible minority.

Immigrants are THE main source for population growth in this city, as well as the major source for professionals in the coming years for an expanding job market and yet, immigrant and racialized communities are experiencing a disproportionate level of Poverty.

The Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres of Ottawa, in partnership with settlement agencies and other groups who provide services to immigrants hosted *Rethinking Poverty 2: Immigrant Perspectives*, a community forum held at City Hall on April 23rd, 2009.

Following the success of the first *Rethinking Poverty* forum in September 2007, this second forum addressed the issues of poverty in immigrant populations in Ottawa. The goal of this event was to raise awareness about economic and social exclusion and to work together to find ways of making our communities more inclusive *from an immigrant's perspective*. The RP2 Steering Committee gratefully acknowledges City of Ottawa for funding the event and for the use of City Hall to host the event.

A total of 247 people attended this action-oriented event, with majority representation of community members from various ethno-cultural communities and 78 service providers who work with immigrants. Information on advocacy and community resources was made available via speakers, presentations, workshops, kiosks and an advocacy information kit.

The recommendations that follow were taken from the afternoon focus groups, in answer to the following questions:

1. What would make me feel like I belong within the City of Ottawa? / *Qu'est ce qui me donnerait le sentiment d'appartenance à la ville d'Ottawa?*

2. What changes/improvements are needed to make this happen? / *Quelles sont les changements/ameliorations necessaires pour réaliser cette vision?*

We hope that these recommendations will be considered as input into the City of Ottawa Poverty Reduction Strategy. Recommendations from *Rethinking Poverty 2: Immigrant Perspectives* will be forwarded to the Provincial Government, as local input from the low-income multi-ethnic community into the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy. These recommendations will also be shared with the decision-makers as noted on page 5.

RECOMMENDATION 1: INCREASE INCOME SECURITY AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

Access to services, regardless of income, can improve the quality of life for Ottawa's immigrants. Increasing access to social services was noted in participant feedback, requesting that office hours be expanded to include after hours or weekends. Parents want to see more city funded social programs, including free activities for youth, camps for kids and a better outreach strategy to ensure there is more community awareness about free programs. The City of Ottawa's Poverty Reduction Policy must be created and implemented as soon as possible. Mental health supports with a focus on prevention are required. Finally, services that reflect the needs of the people who use them by becoming "Institutions that reflect the community and that speak my voice" are necessary to create a sense of belonging among immigrants in Ottawa. To address these issues, participants noted the following recommendations to ensure needs are met:

- a) Take immediate steps to increase the minimum wage and keep it in line with the cost of living increases. Create policies that directly address the growing gap between the rich and the poor.
- b) Make child care affordable with flexible schedules and create more subsidized spaces.
- c) Reduce costs associated with participating in city-wide recreation programs to allow more access. Revise the application process for City of Ottawa Parks & Recreation subsidies. Make application visible and accessible and reduce stigmatizing elements. Look at best practice models in other municipalities.
- d) Add and expand late night/weekend bus routes to accommodate shift workers.
- e) Create new affordable housing units and invest in the upkeep and maintenance of stock.

RECOMMENDATION 2: CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF INCLUSION

Belonging comes about through inclusion. The goal of creating a sense of belonging needs to be supported by all levels of government. Opportunities must be made available to all residents (free, affordable, and accessible) to draw people out, allowing immigrants and those affected by poverty to connect with others and not feel isolated in their own communities. It was suggested that those who are settled could support the people who are new. Immigrants want to be part of a community that embraces diversity and encourages one to flourish without barriers or losing one's culture. Participants shared that this could be accomplished through strong social networks, including arts, culture and social activities. Finally, feeling safe and being able to trust were both very important aspects to feeling a sense of belonging in one's

community. All agencies and individuals need to make a conscious effort to become more aware of our city's rich diversity and how to embrace it.

In order to create an atmosphere of inclusion, it was suggested that Ottawa:

- a) Explore and build on the skills and talent of newcomers.
- b) Develop a public awareness campaign of the barriers some immigrants face through language or culture. This is crucial in identifying how all members of our community can welcome new Canadians.
- c) Invest in mentorship programs linking newcomers with other people from their own culture to further help with settlement in Canada.
- d) Foster civic engagement by helping immigrants understand their rights and responsibilities. For example, offer workshops on municipal decision making structure. Support successful initiatives that promote civic engagement such as "City for All Women".

RECOMMENDATION 3: CREATE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMMIGRANTS

A significant part of feeling like we belong has to do with finding our "place" in society and being able to contribute in a meaningful way. Employment plays a large role in creating a sense of belonging. Securing employment suitable to one's education and having legitimate access to government contacts and jobs were expressed frequently in some facilitation groups. Also necessary is fair pay for employment and adequate recognition for volunteer roles especially those that are mandatory for the institution to function. Many immigrants encounter challenges of belonging to a place or finding employment. A shift in attitude among employers towards immigrants is imperative. Governments should lead by example towards creating this shift. It is important to have opportunities for new immigrants to be involved in their communities. This can be achieved through volunteering and internships.

Recommendations to improve employment opportunities for new immigrants are:

- a) Offer employment that corresponds to one's education.
- b) Professional associations must change to allow for inclusion of skilled immigrants.
- c) Employment equity needs to be enforced through accountable hiring practices that ensure staffing reflects the diversity of the city.
- d) Paid internships to create more opportunity for immigrants to expand their Canadian employment experience. For example, a participant noted that the City of Ottawa could serve as a role model for other employers by providing internships opportunities.
- e) Improve supports for immigrants living in poverty to facilitate their transition towards better employment through skills development, language training, scholarships or micro loans.

- f) Consider policy change surrounding language and security clearance to allow immigrants to compete for better jobs. Language and security screening creates long term barriers for immigrants who tend to be multilingual but not in Canada's official language and do not meet the residency requirement for security clearances.
- g) Volunteer positions could be turned into paying jobs or expand supports for volunteers in their placements with training opportunities and assistance with transportation costs.

RECOMMENDATION 4: REMODEL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT/PARTICIPATION

It is important for all community members to have the opportunity to be involved in the decisions which affect them and their everyday lives.

In this respect, the participants believe:

- a) Government should encourage and increase public participation in the political sphere through new initiatives and by creating a sense of collective responsibility.
- b) Community members need more workshops on how to participate in our city. It is important to recognize and support the individuals and groups working to initiate change such as City for All Women Initiative.
- c) There should be a stronger representation of immigrants and women in government.
- d) Permanent residents should be given the right to vote.

RECOMMENDATION 5: MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITIES

The low attendance from politicians and decision makers at RP2 was concerning to participants as they felt it demonstrated a lack of interest from these arenas in improving the lives of immigrants in Ottawa.

Participants want to be consulted and want more opportunities to connect with decision makers and service providers.

It was recommended that decision makers and service providers:

- a) Embrace opportunities like Rethinking Poverty 2, as a form of community consultation. Ensure adequate representation by staff and politicians at events and forums like RP2.
- b) Make community consultations mandatory and regular.
- c) Creating more opportunities to build relationships between decision makers, service providers and communities.

CONCLUSION:

Rethinking Poverty 2 successfully engaged 168 community members in a consultation about how issues of poverty among immigrant communities can be addressed. By creating an opportunity for dialogue between immigrants, newcomers, other concerned citizens and service providers, the RP2 Steering Committee has received valuable feedback on how to increase a sense of belonging and the changes and improvements that are needed to make this

happen. An effort needs to be made to maximize the benefit of this community consultation for all decision makers and service providers. As stated by one of the participants, “I would like to see a follow up with all stakeholders at the same table with residents”. Finally, once information has been gathered it is important to share models of what works across agencies and communities.

From this feedback collected from participants, the RP2 Steering Committee will prepare a short action oriented document to identify strategies that would increase community capacity to address the needs of Immigrants living in poverty.

The Coalition of Community Resource Centres of Ottawa would like to thank our many partners who made this event possible:

- The Coalition of Community Developers
- The members of LASI World Skills, Ottawa Immigrant Settlement Agencies
- The City of Ottawa
- Social Planning Council of Ottawa
- Newcomer Information Centre
- West End Legal Clinic
- City For All Women Initiative
- Economic and Social Council of Ottawa-Carleton
- Logistics Coordinators: Jyoti Singh and Valérie Assoi
- Students from Carleton School of Social Work, Natalie Steele, Matt Hollingshead and Gwang Shin Lee
- RP2 speakers, workshop leaders, volunteers and participants

Rethinking Poverty 2: Action Items for Decision Makers and Service Providers

Decision Makers	RECOMMENDATIONS																						
	#1					#2				#3							#4				#5		
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	A	B	C
City Councillors		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
City Parks & Recreation			•			•				•	•	•	•			•		•			•	•	•
Ottawa Police Services						•			•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•			•	•	•
City Managers			•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•
Com. & Protective Services						•				•	•	•	•		•			•			•	•	•
Ottawa Public Health						•				•	•	•	•			•		•			•		•
City Settlement Agencies						•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•			•	•	•
Ottawa CHRCs						•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•			•	•	•
Social Housing					•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•			•		•			•	•	•
Ottawa MPs	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Ottawa MPPs	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Ministry Child & Youth ON		•				•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•			•			•	•	•
Com & Social Services ON	•					•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•	•	•
Dept. of HRSDC						•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•	•	•
Mun. Affairs & Housing ON					•	•			•	•	•	•	•					•			•	•	•
Alliance to End Homelessness						•		•		•	•	•	•					•			•		•
Health & Longterm Care ON						•	•			•	•	•	•					•			•	•	•
OC Transpo					•	•				•	•	•	•					•			•	•	•
Ministry of Labour ON	•					•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•	•	•
Citizenship & Immigration						•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•
Ottawa Public Library					•	•		•		•	•	•	•			•		•			•	•	•
United Way					•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•		•			•		•

- Note: A black dot indicates that the recommendation is relevant for the decision maker or service provider