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**Subject:** Niagara Prosperity Initiative Review

**Report to:** Public Health and Social Services Committee

**Report date:** Tuesday, March 9, 2021

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## Recommendations

1. That the Brock University executive summary report titled “Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara”, **BE RECEIVED** for information; and
2. That Regional Council **DIRECT** staff to:
  - 2.1. Complete a comprehensive review of the analysis and recommendations; and
  - 2.2. Present the “Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara” report and staff recommendations to Public Health and Social Services Committee (PHSSC) no later than September 2021.

## Key Facts

- In 2018, Niagara Region, Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities (SAEO), was awarded funding of \$476,763 from the province’s Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF) for a three-year research project, specifically to review the impact of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative program.
- The research project was intended to examine the state of poverty in Niagara using data from the 2016 census, provide analysis on the impacts, outcomes and efficacy of Niagara Prosperity Initiatives (NPI) and offer recommendations on best practices moving forward.
- SAEO contracted Brock University (Brock) to complete the research project (see Appendix A: Executive Summary Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara). The full report is in the final stage of completion.
- From January 2018 to December 2020, Brock University engaged in various methods of data collection and analysis to complete the research, including; an environmental scan, literature and census data reviews, key stakeholder interviews and surveys, analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected by NPI, and regular meetings and engagement with SAEO and NPI staff.
- Within the executive summary, Brock proposed five recommendations to enhance Niagara Region’s response to poverty; develop a comprehensive poverty reduction

strategy, increase investment, offer longer term and more deliberate funding, enhance research and design services for social inclusion aligned with poverty reduction priorities.

- Staff will complete a comprehensive review of the full report and present staff recommendations to Council no later than September.

## **Financial Considerations**

Council, as it considers Community Services' operating budget, reviews the investment of NPI funding annually. Since 2008, Regional Council has invested \$1.5 million annually toward increasing prosperity for Niagara residents living in poverty. In 2020 and 2021, the investment was reduced to \$1.25 million to address other budget pressures in those years. This funding does not include other additional non-mandatory levy contributions that council directs to other poverty reduction/alleviation efforts such as investments in homelessness services, and discretionary benefits for social assistance recipients.

## **Analysis**

### **Brock University Review**

Brock's executive summary report "An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara" includes an assessment of the cumulative impacts of over a decade of grant funding for poverty reduction and alleviation projects through the NPI.

Researchers at Brock completed this review using the following methods:

- Environmental scan
- Census data review
- Literature reviews
- Surveys to program users and program leads
- Interviews with project leads, participants, NPI staff and key informants
- Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected by NPI
- Focus groups
- Quasi-experimental, control group study.

Information gathered from testimonials, surveys and interviews established three major themes on how NPI-funded projects have benefited participants:

1. Helping individuals develop supportive social networks.
2. Facilitated individuals' learning in various ways.
3. Contributed to individuals' growing self-efficacy.

Overall, participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with NPI-funded projects.

The report suggests that NPI has made long-term impacts achieved through supportive interventions that have changed the lives of individuals and families. These individual-level interventions have mainly supported people in the following four ways: through 1) education, training and skills development; 2) direct material benefits; 3) neighbourhood infrastructure and 4) community capacity.

In addition to making a difference to individuals, it is suggested that the NPI has had impacts on neighbourhoods and communities. NPI-funded projects generated amenities that people continued to make use of after a project had concluded, such as educational materials and community garden plots, garden boxes and tools. These projects brought people together and cultivated supportive networks and neighbourhood-based friendship networks emerged through a number of projects that became ongoing sources of material and social supports.

The report also provides information on the state of poverty in Niagara. Drawing largely on 2016 census data, the report delivers updates to the key indicators that measure poverty. Findings suggest that although the prevalence of low-income households and the rate of unemployment have generally remained near or below the provincial average over the past decade, poverty remains a significant problem that continues to impose wide-ranging costs upon the region and negatively impact the lives of local residents.

The data suggests that poverty varies across the region and across demographic groups and family types. Niagara's relatively large proportion of lower income jobs in sales and service is one key reason why the region has a growing number of residents who are "working poor" and an average household income that is lower than the provincial average. Brock has also taken into consideration the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and Niagara's housing market, which has pushed up the rates of "core housing need" and intensified homelessness issues.

## **Brock Recommendations**

The executive summary provides a shortened account of the key findings and recommendations of the research project, whose full rationale, empirical basis and

procedural implications will be explained in much greater detail in the final report to be received no later than September 2021.

There are five key recommendations in the report.

1. Develop a comprehensive Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy - in order to broaden the scope of NPI and establish a more stable poverty reduction program that looks at impacting systems change through conscious coordination and sustained collaboration. The NPI program needs to be re-situated as one component of a larger and more comprehensive Niagara Region poverty reduction strategy that fits within the framework of the provincial and federal poverty reduction plans.
2. Increase investment in poverty reduction – funding through NPI has remained flat since 2008 and was reduced in 2020 and 2021 due to budget pressures. The social determinants of health are expected to worsen due to the impact of the pandemic especially for the most vulnerable members of our community. The Region needs to ensure that ongoing anti-poverty efforts are supported by an appropriate level of staffing that is comparable with other successful anti-poverty programs outside of Niagara.
3. Make deliberate investments and provide longer funding terms – it is recommended that the initiative should reposition funding towards a more deliberate investment model, and offer longer funding terms, which would change the NPI structure and application process and support a larger scale strategy. Shifting these elements within NPI will create a new model which will mitigate unpredictability and fragmentary services in the community, and emphasize collaborative, reciprocal relationships with stakeholders, such as those inspired by a model of Collective Impact and coalition building frameworks. Included in this recommendation is a stronger coordination between government departments and local funders.
4. Guide investments with enhanced research – in order to accommodate a deliberate approach to funding, investment is needed to collect, develop and share data and strategies with stakeholders and providers. Place-based strategies should continue to be part of a deliberate investment model, but use of subject matter expertise as well as transparent spatial and demographic analyses need to also be incorporated.
5. Design all services for social inclusion aligned with poverty reduction priorities – alignment ensures that poverty is a priority and actions are coordinated in areas like transit, social procurement and more. As a two-tier regional government, Niagara Region must also approach systems change with an openness to considering how

lower-tier governments play a role in the delivery of targeted poverty alleviation efforts. Similar to Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office, this recommendation includes the appointment of at least one councillor to act as a 'poverty reduction champion'.

### **Next Steps**

Evaluation is a critical component of any strategy and the results of the "Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara" report offers a starting point from which Niagara Region can better plan for the future and maximize the impact of its investments. The data collected is also intended to contribute to a body of knowledge that will support poverty reduction programs across the province.

The research and its recommendations will contribute to Niagara Region's future responses to poverty. Staff will complete a comprehensive review of the analysis and recommendations and present back to the PHSSC with the intent to implement Council-approved recommendations in 2022.

### **Alternatives Reviewed**

Not applicable.

### **Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities**

Investing funding and collaborative action in neighbourhoods in need supports Council's strategic priority of Fostering an Environment for Economic Prosperity. Outcomes are realized by helping residents thrive through greater opportunities and relate to employment and improved community symptoms.

### **Other Pertinent Reports**

COM 44-2011      Niagara Prosperity Initiative Update (Building a New Legacy: Building Prosperity by Improving the Quality of Neighbourhood Life)

COM C 6-2017      Local Poverty Reduction Fund Application

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**Prepared by:**

Lori Watson  
Director  
Community Services

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**Recommended by:**

Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner  
Community Services

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**Submitted by:**

Ron Tripp, P.Eng.  
Acting Chief Administrative Officer

*This report was prepared in consultation with Marc Todd, Manager Community Services.*

**Appendices**

Appendix 1    Executive Summary Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara