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**MEMORANDUM**

**COTW-C 1-2024**

**Subject:** Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy

**Date:** March 7, 2024

**To:** Regional Council

**From:** Adrienne Jugley, Commissioner

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Please find attached the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS) document presented at Committee of the Whole on March 7, 2024.

The goal of Niagara's five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy is: Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara. This strategy reflects concerns, opportunities and actions identified by residents and service partners during a broad engagement process. The community identified eight Areas of Focus for the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy. Each Area of Focus includes one recommendation and a set of actions that addresses the issue of poverty within that area.

During implementation, Niagara Region staff and members of the Poverty Reduction Steering Committee will invite interested and affected parties including United Way, the Niagara Community Foundation and Ontario Trillium Foundation, to identify their role in helping to end poverty.

The NPRS will be used to increase alignment of Regional efforts and investments, improve policies and ensure best practice, enhance programs and services to support effectiveness and accountability, increase poverty reduction efforts across Niagara and determine future Niagara Prosperity Initiative funding.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

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Adrienne Jugley, MSW, RSW, CHE  
Commissioner

# Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy

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2024 - 2028

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	3
Poverty Reduction Steering Committee .....	5
Why Niagara needs a strategy .....	7
Definition and impacts of poverty .....	7
Poverty in Niagara .....	8
Indigenous prosperity.....	10
How we developed the strategy .....	11
Introduction to the strategy .....	14
Areas of Focus .....	14
Indigenous Well-being .....	15
Housing.....	16
Income .....	17
Employment.....	18
Food Security.....	19
Early Child Development.....	20
Transportation.....	21
Mental Health and Addiction .....	22
How to create change .....	23
Service Access, Coordination and Capacity .....	24
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion .....	24
Leveraging Voices of Lived Expertise .....	24
Changing Mindsets .....	25
Advocacy .....	25
Funding.....	26
Moving forward.....	27
Resources consulted.....	30
Appendix A Locations of community engagement .....	34
Appendix B Alignment to Regional reports.....	35

# Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy 2024-2028

## Acknowledgements

### Land acknowledgement

Niagara Region is situated on treaty land. This land is steeped in the rich history of the First Nations such as the Hatiwendaronk, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. There are many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit from across Turtle Island that live and work in Niagara today. The Regional Municipality of Niagara stands with all Indigenous peoples, past and present, in promoting the wise stewardship of the lands on which we live.

The Regional Municipality of Niagara is committed to equity and respect for all by ensuring Indigenous voices are heard and included in our plans and programs. In addition, we are committed to eradicating anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination within our community.

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### Contributors

Residents and community champions made this strategy possible. Thank you to the hundreds of people in Niagara for sharing their time, wisdom, commitment and stories. Thank you to community groups listed in [Appendix A](#) for hosting sessions to increase the reach of engagement and facilitators for leading meaningful community conversations.

Special thanks to

- **Mary Ellen Simon**, Director of Housing, Niagara Regional Native Centre, for leading engagement with Indigenous community in Niagara
- **Olivia Schmidt**, Student, Brock University, for supporting research referencing
- **Rachel Sam**, Former Poverty Reduction Strategy Advisor, Niagara Region (Phase 1), for community engagement and research review

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## **Poverty Reduction Steering Committee**

The Poverty Reduction Steering Committee, made up of individuals from government, Niagara residents, Indigenous community, education and health, is pleased to present Niagara's Poverty Reduction Strategy. It is the mission of this committee and of this strategy that by **working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara** we will create positive change for our community.

This strategy has been shaped by diverse voices of residents in Niagara including those who are disproportionately affected by poverty. The actions outlined in the strategy are supported by research and best practices and inspired by work happening in other communities to end poverty.

The Committee played a pivotal role in developing the recommendations, identifying interconnected strategies and providing input into the development of a picture of poverty in Niagara – what poverty is, what poverty means in people's lives and how poverty affects all of us.

Through the community's voice, the Committee selected the Areas of Focus of this strategy and prioritized eight recommendations aligned with best practice and existing strategies. These Areas of Focus are Indigenous well-being, housing, income, employment, food security, early childhood development, transportation, mental health and addiction. Preventing and ending poverty will be achieved by working together as a community to strategically address factors that impact and induce poverty within these Areas of Focus.

During implementation, the Committee will look at ways to increase opportunities for a network of champions to exchange ideas and harness the power of their successes. The Committee will call on a collaborative approach. To achieve success, we need people with lived expertise, Indigenous peoples, and other residents, along with representatives from government, funders, businesses, health and educational institutions, non-profit organizations, service clubs and associations to collaborate, share leadership, exchange ideas, engage community and mobilize action.

We recognize that ending poverty will take more than five years given the complex nature of poverty and the need for a community-wide response. This strategy provides a major step to achieve this goal. We thank everyone who engaged in community conversations and look forward to continuing our collaborative work to end poverty in Niagara.

## **Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy Steering Committee members**

- Lori Watson (Chair) - Director, Community Services
- Haley Bateman – Niagara Regional Councillor
- Laura Ip – Niagara Regional Councillor
- David Oakes – Chief Administrative Officer, City of St. Catharines
- Arceli Olivares – Niagara resident
- Christina Thomas – Niagara resident
- Mary Ellen Simon – Director of Housing, Niagara Regional Native Centre
- Marie Louise Bowering – Indigenous Community Connections Facilitator, Niagara Catholic District School Board
- Jon Braithwaite – Chief Executive Officer, The Hope Centre
- Jennifer Gauthier – Executive Director, Birchway and Chair, Niagara Poverty Reduction Network
- Vivian Kinnaird – Chief Executive Officer, Workforce Collective
- Taralea McLean – Executive Director, Bridges Community Health Centre
- Mary-Beth Raddon – Department Chair Sociology, Brock University
- Carla Stout – General Manager, Niagara Transit Commission
- Ruth Unrau – Host, Niagara Made, NewsTalk 610 CKTB
- Nadine Wallace – Executive Director, Contact Niagara

## **Why Niagara needs a strategy**

A strategy lays a foundation to build a community of best practice as it relates to how and when we interact and provide service. Recognizing that Niagara Region and many local providers already deliver services to lift people out of poverty, this strategy provides a way to identify best practice, uncover gaps and leverage local knowledge to inform future action. The strategy can play a significant role to inform where to best invest resources in areas such as housing, economic development, child care, transit and the Niagara Prosperity Initiative, to have the biggest impact on poverty reduction.

## **Definition and impacts of poverty**

The Government of Canada's first Poverty Reduction Strategy, released in 2018, describes poverty as "the condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic living standard needed to promote and facilitate integration and participation in society."<sup>1</sup>

Poverty is a complex issue with no single solution. We recognize that everyone experiences poverty differently. Each person's story is unique and a result of multiple complex and interrelated causes. As described by Tamarack, a Canadian institute that supports strategies that enable people to learn with and from each other to solve major community challenges, "There are many interconnected reasons why people are poor. For practically every family, every problem magnifies the impact of the others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original cause. If problems are interlocking, then so must be solutions. A job alone is not enough. Medical insurance alone is not enough. Good housing alone is not enough. Reliable transportation, careful family budgeting, effective parenting, effective schooling, are not enough when each is achieved in isolation from the rest. There is no single variable that can be altered to help people move away from poverty. **If problems are interlocking, then solutions must also be interlocking.**"<sup>2</sup>

The complexity and interconnectedness of poverty was evident during engagement. When talking about the experience of living in poverty, Niagara residents used words such as **depression, hopelessness and despair**, and they linked poverty to negative outcomes such as gender-based violence, discrimination, homelessness, victimization and exploitation. Research reinforces the interconnectedness of poverty with many

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<sup>1</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. (2018). Opportunity for All-Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Loewen, G. (2009). Compendium of Poverty Reduction Strategies and Frameworks. Tamarack An Institute for Community Engagement, 9.



issues. For example, “reducing financial stress may decrease potential for relationship conflict and dissatisfaction, which are strong predictors of gender-based violence.”<sup>3</sup>

Further, participants spoke to elements of social and spiritual poverty through stigma, social isolation and lack of purpose. Social poverty exists where people are isolated and lack the formal and informal supports necessary to be resilient in times of crisis and change. Spiritual poverty exists where people lack meaning and purpose in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

**Poverty is a human rights issue.** Human rights are the basic rights every person has, inherently and universally, to live with safety and dignity. Examples include the right to work, the right to adequate food and the right to housing. In October 2023, the Ontario Human Rights Commission released its Human Rights-Based Approach Framework<sup>5</sup>. We will leverage this framework to bring a human rights approach to ensure an equitable, inclusive Niagara that provides enough for all.

### Poverty in Niagara

The Low-Income Measure After-Tax is an established measure of poverty in Canada. All persons in a household are considered to be living in poverty if their household income **falls below half of median incomes of the same household size**.

To fully comprehend the state of poverty in Niagara, it is important to understand the **impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**. In pre-pandemic statistics of 2016, Niagara had **14.5 per cent of people living in poverty (64,944 people)**. Numbers from Statistics Canada in 2021 indicate that Niagara had 10.4 per cent of people living in poverty (49,706 people)<sup>6</sup>.

The National Advisory Council on Poverty in their 2023 report, “Blueprint for Transformation”, indicated that the temporary increase in government transfers available during the pandemic influenced the 2021 poverty statistics. This growth in income protected people from falling into poverty and helped lift many people out of poverty. In Niagara, **15,238 people in Niagara temporarily moved out of poverty**, a

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<sup>3</sup> Niolon, P. H., Kearns, M., Dills, J., Rambo, K., Irving, S., Armstead, T., & Gilbert, L. (2017). Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>4</sup> Poverty Institute (n.d.). Poverty in Canada. <https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/poverty-canada>

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2023). Human Rights-Based Approach Framework.

<sup>6</sup> Source. Statistics Canada, Census Profiles, 2016 and 2021 Census of Population. Low Income Measure After Tax (LIM-AT).

## **Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara**

change of four per cent from 2016 to 2021. This information reconciles with what local services providers saw. For example, food banks reported a drop in visits during that time; however, since 2021, use of food banks has significantly increased from pre-pandemic visits. This suggests that income-based solutions are key to reducing poverty.

As cautioned by the National Advisory Council on Poverty, the phasing out of the COVID-19 income supports alongside higher inflation and increasing cost of living mean that poverty rates have likely increased. It is important to keep this context in mind when comparing the poverty rate to earlier years.

One Niagara Regional grant program that has a direct goal to alleviate and reduce poverty in Niagara, is the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. Since its inception in 2008, Regional Council approved \$1.5 million annually to fund local projects. This funding resulted in work with over 90 organizations and over 400 innovative neighbourhood-based projects, impacting over 100,000 families and individuals living in poverty in Niagara.

Recognizing local evidence that indicated that the pandemic had exacerbated and amplified many issues caused by poverty, the 2022 Niagara Prosperity Initiative targeted funding into six areas:

- Indigenous well-being
- Early childhood development
- Housing and homelessness
- Food security
- Domestic violence
- Living wage

The Niagara Prosperity Initiative is one funding source that we can use to enhance actions identified in this strategy. Evaluation of outcomes of funded projects will inform future investments. Staff will align the Niagara Prosperity Initiative with the Poverty Reduction Strategy to distribute resources where they can have the greatest effect.

## **Indigenous prosperity**

Prosperity for Indigenous peoples in the Niagara region will require a deep understanding of Indigenous history and culture to incorporate the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being of the individual, family and both human and non-human communities simultaneously. Culturally safe environments for Indigenous peoples are needed to engage and build relationships with municipal governments.

It is well established that existing systems perpetuate colonization and racism, and that many of them fail to support Indigenous peoples. It is important to understand the role that colonialism plays in poverty in Indigenous communities and its continued existence today.<sup>7</sup>

Niagara Region acknowledges that colonialism and past actions and inactions across all levels of government have created discriminatory policies and practices against Indigenous peoples. This has had direct, widespread and devastating effects on the health and well-being of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. We need to move beyond acknowledgement and take actions to change this. Municipal governments, as well as other levels of government in Canada, share responsibility and have a significant role to play in eradicating anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination and fostering equity and respect for all.

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<sup>7</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada. (2021). Understanding systems: The 2021 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty.

## **How we developed the strategy**

In October 2021, Niagara Region staff received Council approval to develop a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy and a new approach for Niagara Prosperity Initiative investments. The Niagara Prosperity Initiative is an annual investment by the Region towards poverty reduction. Development of a Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy meets recommendations put forth in the [Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative](#) report by Brock University and the [Niagara Community Safety and Well-Being Plan](#).

### **Stages of strategy development**

This strategy is driven by diverse perspectives and experiences. We heard from people who are disproportionately affected by poverty and typically underrepresented in research. Recommendations are supported by research.

### **The community spoke. We listened. Together, we developed a strategy**

- Niagara Region Council approves development of a local poverty reduction strategy
- 1000+ residents give input about an ideal future state, challenges, strengths and actions
- 150+ Indigenous people give input about Indigenous prosperity
- Staff engage with Local Area Municipalities
- Staff review research to identify best practice to address poverty
- Staff draft recommendations based on community input and best practice
- 100+ content experts validate recommendations
- Niagara Region staff indicate alignment with other Niagara Region plans
- Steering Committee prioritize recommendations based on impact, effort and community support

 <b>Council Strategic Priorities - Equitable Region</b>				
Economic Development Strategy	Children's Services Service System Plan	Consolidated Housing Master Plan	Community Safety and Well-Being Plan	<b>Poverty Reduction Strategy</b>
<b>Niagara Prosperity Initiative</b>	Transportation Master Plan	Housing and Homelessness Action Plan	Indigenous Action Plan	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Action Plan

## Engaging community

Residents who participated in Community Conversations envisioned an ideal future state, spoke to challenges, identified community strengths and recommended actions. For details about input provided by residents, read the [Interim Report on Community Engagement](#). When asked about an ideal future state, the community envisioned:

A Niagara that is...

- Equitable and inclusive
- Meeting all resident's basic needs
- Supportive, accessible and allows people to live with dignity
- Community-oriented
- Safe
- Prosperous
- Healthy and well
- A great place to raise a family

The Niagara Regional Native Centre's Director of Housing met with Indigenous community in Niagara to discuss Indigenous Prosperity. Respondents emphasized the importance of:

- Indigenous identity
- Non-Indigenous relationships
- Culture
- Community development
- Education
- Equity

## **Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara**

- Self-determination
- Health/Well-being
- Housing
- Safety
- Spirituality
- Financial Well-being

## Introduction to the strategy



The goal of Niagara’s five-year Poverty Reduction Strategy is: **Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara.**

This strategy reflects concerns, opportunities and actions identified by residents during a broad engagement process. The community identified eight Areas of Focus for the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy. Each Area of Focus includes one recommendation and a set of actions that address the issue of poverty within that area.

In total, the community identified over 100 actions to reduce poverty. In the following pages, we list actions that:

- Are supported by research
- Consider impact, effort, and community support to make them happen
- Align with Niagara Region Council priorities

### Areas of Focus

- Indigenous Well-being
- Housing
- Income
- Employment
- Food Security
- Early Child Development
- Transportation
- Mental Health and Addiction

## **Indigenous Well-being**

Most Indigenous people who responded to a survey that asked, “what do you believe is Indigenous Prosperity?” identified that community development, Indigenous identity, culture and self-determination were essential components of prosperity. Respondents talked about the need to improve on services that impact the education, health, housing, income and safety of Indigenous peoples. Not only are more services needed, but we also need to address how we deliver these services. Mainstream services need to be respectful of Indigenous cultural practices and social values of the Indigenous community.

The Indigenous community has called upon the Niagara Region to adopt a bottom-up approach to addressing Indigenous well-being. Indigenous peoples have the right to "pursue their economic, social and cultural development", and so must be able to determine their own futures and develop poverty reduction strategies that meet their specific needs and priorities, enabling them to pursue their own economic development opportunities and carve their own path towards greater independence and self-sufficiency.

### **Recommendation**

Indigenous community to develop a strategy for Indigenous specific poverty reduction initiatives.

Action: Work in partnership with Indigenous community leaders to develop a strategy driven by a community process.



## **Housing**

Residents named housing and homelessness as one of the biggest and most visible poverty-related challenges for Niagara. They expressed concern with the lack of available housing, affordability, accessibility and quality of housing in Niagara. This is especially true for those living on a fixed income.

### **Recommendation**

Provide housing stability services for people living in poverty to maintain their current housing, prevent eviction, improve social inclusion and access income through periods of financial instability.

Actions:

- Improve relationships between tenants and property owners to reduce evictions
- Expand the use of quick reconnects of financial and other supports for people who have previously been homeless
- Increase legal supports for people in low-income households
- Increase early identification of housing related risk
- Address needs of those escaping gender-based violence

Implementation of this recommendation will align with Niagara Region's Housing Master Plan and with the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan which uses best practice approaches, including Housing First<sup>8</sup> and Built for Zero<sup>9</sup> as a foundation.

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<sup>8</sup> Supportive Housing Programs. (n.d.). Niagara Region.

<https://www.niagararegion.ca/housing-homelessness/supportive-housing-programs.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. (n.d.). Built for Zero Canada.

<https://bfzcanada.ca/>

## **Income**

Residents pointed to income as the primary determinant of poverty. They identified two points of focus that affect income, availability of a living wage and adequacy of social assistance. A living wage is the hourly wage a worker needs to earn to cover their basic expenses and participate in their community. Employees that earn a living wage can face fewer stressors and employers that pay a living wage can be confident they are not keeping their employees in poverty.

The rising unaffordability of the basics such as housing, food and transportation are additional barriers. Unfortunately, the gap between income and the rising cost of living has continued to grow. Residents noted that the face of poverty has not changed, just expanded to include more people who used to be “middle-income.”

## **Recommendation**

Increase opportunities for living wage employment in Niagara and advocate for adequate, liveable rates from government income assistance programs.

### Actions:

- Increase awareness, support for and adoption of living wage in Niagara as a poverty reduction effort
- Advocate to federal and provincial governments to:
  - Develop and implement a Universal Basic Income
  - Increase government programs that provide income and benefits (e.g., Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Canadian Pension Plan, Old Age Security)
  - Improve access and eligibility for people living in poverty to access health benefits such as dental services, drug benefits and eyeglasses

## **Employment**

Residents noted a disconnect between existing skill sets and job requirements in Niagara. Others noted that the quality of employment in Niagara is lacking. For people with disabilities, options are not always accommodating. A larger topic of conversation focused on racism and implicit bias that exists in hiring practices in Niagara.

### **Recommendation**

Promote and develop decent<sup>10</sup> work opportunities that provide fair wages and benefits and foster stable, consistent and safe employment.

#### Actions:

- Increase vocation training for those living in poverty, so that they qualify for stable employment opportunities relevant to local industries
- Increase internships and apprenticeship opportunities for foreign trained newcomers to be able to work while obtaining Canadian credentials
- Explore a social procurement policy for Niagara Region that increases opportunities for small businesses and equity seeking groups

Implementation of this recommendation will align with Niagara Region's Economic Development Strategy. Regional staff in Economic Development foster regional growth by attracting and facilitating investment. They promote Niagara globally and support new and existing businesses to create and expand decent jobs. This work supports poverty reduction by facilitating an environment conducive to new job creation, investment and economic opportunities. New investments result in incremental improvements to the economy, new jobs for residents and additional tax revenue.

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<sup>10</sup> **Decent work** involves employment that is productive and delivers a fair income. It also should ensure workplace security, social protection, better prospects for personal development and social integration.” Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development Goals.  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>

## Food Security

Residents indicated that the primary problem with food security in Niagara is income and affordability. With the cost of living exponentially increasing and incomes largely staying the same, an increasing number of residents are having to choose between paying their bills or purchasing groceries.

### Recommendation

Improve access to fresh, culturally appropriate, affordable and nutritious foods through income-based solutions to food insecurity.

#### Actions:

- Advocate to federal and provincial governments to implement evidence-based policy solutions to reduce food insecurity
- Pilot interventions that reduce barriers to food access in identified priority neighbourhoods
- Continue to monitor and report the prevalence and severity of food insecurity and effective interventions to build awareness and knowledge about the problem and support for actions

To better understand the issues of food security, Niagara Region Public Health is mapping the food environment to determine locations of food deserts.<sup>11</sup> This work can inform service, planning and decision making.

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<sup>11</sup> “**Food deserts** are geographic areas that have limited access to healthy food. In some neighbourhoods, lack of economic resources and transportation can cause geographical barriers to access affordable healthy food. In these cases, residents may be dependent on convenience stores and fast-food restaurants resulting in lower quality of diets. This may be especially true for individuals living in rural areas.” Source: National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. (2017). Food Deserts and Food Swamps: A Primer.

## **Early Child Development**

Residents identified the need to address intergenerational poverty and to focus prevention efforts at childhood. Service providers noted that Niagara's children are vulnerable in many domains of childhood development, and this is often tied to socioeconomic status. Parents expressed how impossible it feels to keep up with the cost of raising children. Not just parents, but grandparents as well who are in custody of their grandchildren and parenting again. A major issue residents identified was the cost and availability of licensed child care in Niagara.

### **Recommendation**

Improve access to affordable, high-quality child care for families living in poverty or at risk of poverty.

#### Actions:

- Continue to implement the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care program in Niagara, including a reduction to the cost of child care to an average of \$10/day by 2026
- Continue to develop and implement an Early Childhood Educator workforce strategy in Children's Services to expand the system and increase child care spaces.

Implementation of this recommendation will align with Children's Services Service System Plan.

## **Transportation**

Residents indicated that transportation is a significant poverty-related pressure point in the region. They noted that cost, timing and coverage of transit create barriers to use. Residents from rural communities expressed frustration over the difficulty and time commitment to travel to other municipalities and barriers to using On-Demand Transit. These barriers can impact employment; residents indicated that some employers in Niagara will not hire people who take public transit, because it is unreliable. Overall, residents emphasized the importance of equitable transportation to access resources and social connectors.

## **Recommendation**

Continue the work of Niagara Region Transit to achieve affordable and equitable access to services across municipalities.

### Actions:

- Provide concession fare products for people who are living in poverty
- Improve access to transit and active transportation
- Increase hours of service, smoothing out evening, weekend and holiday hours across all levels of transportation services

## **Mental Health and Addiction**

Links between mental health concerns and substance use and abuse concerns are generally complex. For example, although people with mental illness have a higher likelihood of also having an addiction<sup>12</sup>, not all people with a mental illness have a co-occurring addiction.

Residents frequently discussed the impact of living in poverty while dealing with mental health and addiction challenges. The stress of not having enough money, being in a constant state of survival and hopelessness about living in poverty, can lead to anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide. Service providers and people with lived expertise indicated that the situation is worse than it has been in a long time, and residents have lost hope that it will improve any time soon.

To address the effects of poverty, residents and service providers emphasized the need for mental health and addiction treatment supports within a better coordinated system of care. These supports need to address social determinants of health that are the root causes and stressors for people living in poverty or at risk of poverty such as housing, transportation and income.

### **Recommendation**

Enhance core service capacity and offer a choice of timely, early recovery interventions and treatments for people who are living in poverty or at risk of poverty.

Actions:

- Address gaps and streamline local mental health and addiction services
- Continue to promote wellness and safety of people experiencing problems with substance use and addiction

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<sup>12</sup> CAMH. (2023). Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics.  
<https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

## **How to create change**

During engagement, residents identified essential conditions needed to end and prevent poverty in Niagara. These conditions for change affect **how** we incorporate actions in the Poverty Reduction Strategy's recommendations throughout the Areas of Focus:

- Service Access, Coordination and Capacity
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Leveraging Voices of Lived Expertise
- Changing Mindsets
- Advocacy
- Funding



## **Service Access, Coordination and Capacity**

A person's ability to access services can impact their experience of poverty. A more coordinated and integrated network of health, justice and government funded social services would make it easier for people to navigate services they need to move out of poverty. In addition, those services need capacity, with funding, staffing and resources, to meet the needs of people seeking support.

Organizations, institutions and governments can improve ease of system navigation and access by increasing opportunities for people to access multiple services at the same time and location e.g., polyclinics or community hubs using mobile services as needed.

Other areas where this condition of change can enhance service is in:

- Strengthening supports for those escaping gender-based violence
- Strengthening transition supports such as discharge planning for people leaving hospitals and the justice system
- Building capacity to identify children at risk of poverty or living in poverty and strengthening referral pathways for families to a network of services such as income, housing, parenting and mental health supports

## **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Residents noted that attention to diversity, equity and inclusion in Niagara is important and needs to continue. The intersections of identity, such as age, culture, gender, race, ability and other social aspects, shape how people experience poverty. Addressing poverty must consider diverse experiences of poverty.

Public and private sectors can integrate diversity, equity and inclusion into program design and delivery as it relates to ending and preventing poverty. This can include increasing learning opportunities for staff, elected officials, agencies and community members to make services more equitable.

## **Leveraging Voices of Lived Expertise**

Lived expertise refers to “personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations

constructed by other people.”<sup>13</sup> It includes “the experiences of people on whom a social issue or combination of issues has had a direct impact.”<sup>14</sup>

Creating opportunities for people with lived expertise to provide input in policy development, planning and decision-making is crucial to addressing poverty. This can include expanding opportunities to integrate peer support models into existing community work.

### **Changing Mindsets**

Residents identified stigma as one of the most significant poverty-related issues in Niagara. The stigma of poverty can have a profound impact on a person’s sense of self and self-worth. Stigma is not only a result of living in poverty but can also perpetuate poverty by impacting a person’s mental well-being, ability to access services, relate to others, maintain housing or keep employment.

Poverty is a socially isolating experience that can significantly impact a person’s well-being. Not only is social isolation a result of living in poverty, but a lack of social connection can mean that people do not have support in times of crisis. Staff heard that people living in poverty feel alone and lack connection to their community.

The intent of changing mindsets is to bring people together to better understand the experience of poverty and the role they can play to help lift people out of poverty. Poverty is discriminatory in nature. Addressing false belief systems that feed into negative stereotypes is an important predictor of successful poverty reduction efforts. Changing mindsets that feed into the stigmatization of people living in poverty can decrease discrimination and allow for better community connections, thereby reducing isolation and loneliness.

### **Advocacy**

Residents emphasized the need for income-based solutions to poverty. They highlighted the importance of using a human right’s lens when speaking about and advocating for poverty-related issues. The strategy calls for advocacy to federal and provincial governments for improvements to income, employment and food security such as:

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<sup>13</sup> Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). Oxford: A dictionary of media and communication (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Sandu, B. (2017). The value of lived experience in social change: The need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector. Retrieved from [thelivedexperience.org/report/](http://thelivedexperience.org/report/)

## Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara

- Implementing a Universal Basic Income
- Increasing social assistance rates and benefits
- Increasing minimum wage to a living wage
- Making accreditation processes easier and more affordable to help newcomers with employment
- Implementing evidence-based policy solutions to reduce food insecurity

### Funding

Adequate funding for outcome focused programs based on best practice is a critical component of any poverty reduction strategy. Addressing funding gaps and methods of funding applies to all levels of government and all funding bodies.

Brock University's report "Connecting the Pieces; An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara" recommended:

- Increased funding investments in poverty reduction
- Longer funding terms for programs help address the "unpredictability and fragmentary nature of services provided through time-limited contracts" <sup>15</sup>

Service providers noted the importance of collaborative funding opportunities and the need to break down competition among agencies.

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<sup>15</sup> Raddon, MB, Soron, D & Petrina S. (2021). Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara. Report prepared for Niagara Region. Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario. <https://brocku.ca/npi-evaluation>

## **Moving forward**

### **Strategy in motion**

During implementation, Niagara Region staff and members of the Poverty Reduction Steering Committee will invite interested and affected parties, such as United Way, Niagara Community Foundation and Ontario Trillium Foundation, to identify their role in helping to end poverty. Other interested and affected parties who are critical to successful implementation of this strategy include people with lived expertise, Indigenous peoples, and other residents, along with representatives from government, funders, businesses, health and educational institutions, non-profit organizations, service clubs and associations.

It is our hope that readers of this document will find inspiration to further align their work with actions identified in this strategy. Using Collective Impact, an approach used around the world to address complex issues such as poverty,<sup>16</sup> we will explore with community champions ways to best implement actions listed in this report along with other actions that emerged during community engagement.

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<sup>16</sup> Tamarack Institute. (2019). Collective Impact in Practice.  
<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/tool-collective-impact-in-practice>

## Measuring change



### How we will measure impact on poverty

Featured below are outcomes we can use to identify long-term success. We selected these indicators based on a scan of what other communities are using, reputability of the sources, availability of data for Niagara and the power of these indicators to tell the story of change.

Decrease the number and percentage of people who:

- Live in poverty
- Work but still live in poverty
- Experience homelessness
- Live in food insecure households
- Experience financial concerns as a primary stressor

### How we will measure benefits of working together

In addition to reducing poverty, we expect that by working together in different ways, we can increase:

- Local capacity to implement community work, policies and practices
- Public support to end poverty

## **Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara**

We will bring implementation champions together to determine methods such as facilitated conversation and client feedback to capture these benefits and better understand the impact of our collective work.

### **How we will create our evaluation plan**

We recognize that poverty is a complex experience, making it difficult to determine success. We will capture qualitative and quantitative measures during implementation to help tell the story of change in our community. We will create a Theory of Change to further articulate how and why we expect change will happen to increase well-being in Niagara.

### **How to get involved**

Moving this strategy forward will involve many interested and affected parties. We invite YOU to join us on this journey and share your commitment to change. To learn more about how you can get involved or lend you skills, email [endpoverty@niagararegion.ca](mailto:endpoverty@niagararegion.ca) or visit [www.niagararegion.ca/community-safety/poverty-reduction-strategy/default.aspx](http://www.niagararegion.ca/community-safety/poverty-reduction-strategy/default.aspx)

Together, we can end poverty in Niagara.

## **Resources consulted**

This is a partial list of resources staff reviewed to inform recommendations. These resources complimented the direction staff received from residents on how to best address poverty in Niagara.

### **Poverty Reduction**

Canadian Poverty Institute (n.d.). Poverty in Canada.

<https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/poverty-canada>

Employment and Social Development Canada. (2018). Opportunity for All-Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy.

National Advisory Council on Poverty. (2023) Blueprint for Transformation. Government of Canada.

Ontario Campaign 2000. (2020). Child Poverty Rates in Ontario.

Raddon, MB, Soron, D & Petrina S. (2021). Connecting the Pieces: An Evaluation of the Niagara Prosperity Initiative and Call for a Broader Poverty Reduction Strategy for Niagara. Report prepared for Niagara Region. Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario.

<https://brocku.ca/npi-evaluation>

Vibrant Communities. (2022). The End of Poverty: Eight Pathways That Are Ending Poverty in Canada. Tamarack Institute. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/the-end-of-poverty-eight-pathways-that-are-ending-poverty-in-canada>

### **Service Access, Coordination and Capacity**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Preventing Adverse Childhood

Child and Parent Resource Institute. (n.d.). Trauma-informed care.

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/trauma-informed-care-child-and-parent-resource-institute>

Experiences: Leveraging the Best Available Evidence. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/82316/cdc\\_82316\\_DS1.pdf](https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/82316/cdc_82316_DS1.pdf)

Niolon, P. H., Kearns, M., Dills, J., Rambo, K., Irving, S., Armstead, T., & Gilbert, L. (2017). Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

University of Alberta Centre for Healthy Communities, & Alberta Health Services. (2019). Building Financial Well-Being: A Community Planning Toolkit.

## **Diversity Equity and Inclusion**

Employment and Social Development Canada. (2021). Understanding Systems: The 2021 report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/national-advisory-council/reports/2021-annual.html>

## **Lived Expertise**

Homer, A. (2019). 10 Engaging People with Lived/Living Expertise: A guide for Including People in Poverty Reduction. Tamarack Institute.

Sandu, B. (2017). The value of lived experience in social change: The need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector. <https://thelivedexperience.org/report/thelivedexperience.org/report/>

## **Changing Mindsets**

Alliance for Healthier Communities. (2020). Rx Community - Social Prescribing in Ontario Final Report. <https://www.allianceon.org/Rx-Community-Social-Prescribing-In-Ontario>

World Health Organization. (2022). A toolkit on how to implement social prescribing.

## **Indigenous Well-being**

Niagara Chapter – Native Women Inc. (2021). Mno Bmaadziwin: Living the Good and Healthy Life. <https://niagararegion.ca/community-safety/pdf/mno-bmaadziwin.pdf>

National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. (2020). Poverty as a Social Determinant of First Nations, Inuit and Metis Health.

## **Housing**

Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. (n.d.). Built for Zero Canada. <https://bfzcanada.ca/>

The Homeless Hub. (n.d.). Housing First. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/solutions/housing-accommodation-and-supports/housing-first>



## **Income**

Cross, P. (2021). The Minimum Wage, Lost Jobs, and Poverty in Canada. Fraser Institute.

Lee, C. R., & Briggs, A. (2019). The Cost of Poverty in Ontario: 10 Years Later. Feed Ontario.

Ontario Living Wage Network. (n.d.). What is a living wage?

<https://www.ontariolivingwage.ca/about>

## **Employment**

Block, S., Galabuzi, G.-E., & Tranjan, R. (2019). Canada's Colour Coded Income Inequality. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Ontario.

<https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/12/Canada's%20Colour%20Coded%20Income%20Inequality.pdf>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences: Leveraging the Best Available Evidence. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/82316/cdc\\_82316\\_DS1.pdf](https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/82316/cdc_82316_DS1.pdf)

National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2022). Determining Health: Decent work issue brief. Antigonish (NS): NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University.

<https://nccdh.ca/resources/entry/determining-health-decent-work-issue-brief>

Olsen, D., & MacLaughlin, J. (2020). When Training Works: Promising workforce development practices. Metcalf Foundation. <https://metcalffoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/When-Training-Works.pdf>

Stapleton, J., & Yuan, Y. (2021). Ending Working Poverty: How to get it Done. Tamarack An Institute for Community Engagement.

<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/ending-working-poverty-in-canada-how-to-get-it-done>

The Conference Board of Canada. (2023). Opportunity for All: Improving Workplace Experiences and Career Outcomes for Canadians with Disabilities.

[https://www.conferenceboard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/opportunity-for-all\\_2023.pdf](https://www.conferenceboard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/opportunity-for-all_2023.pdf)

University of Alberta Centre for Healthy Communities, & Alberta Health Services. (2019). Building Financial Well-Being: A Community Planning Toolkit.

## **Food Security**

Feed Ontario. (2022). Hunger Report 2022: The Deepening Cracks in Ontario's Economic Foundation.

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health. (2020). Position Statement and Recommendations on Responses to Food Insecurity: Executive Summary.

National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. (2017). Food Deserts and Food Swamps: A Primer.

PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research. (2022). Food Security: A problem of inadequate income, not solved by food.

## **Early Child Development**

Robinson, R., Tranjan, R., & Oliveira, T. (2021). Poverty in the Midst of Plenty: A report card on child and family poverty in Ontario. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Ontario Office.

Workforce Collective. (2022). Childcare workforce in crisis: Our economy won't work without ELCC workers. <https://workforcecollective.ca/childcare-workforce-in-crisis-our-economy-wont-work-without-elcc-workers/>

## **Transportation**

Pei, N. (2023). Innovative Rural Transportation Strategies Aid in Poverty Reduction. Tamarack Institute. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/innovative-rural-transportation-strategies-aid-in-poverty-reduction>

University of Alberta Centre for Healthy Communities, & Alberta Health Services. (2019). Building Financial Well-Being: A Community Planning Toolkit.

## **Mental Health and Addiction**

Association of Municipalities Ontario. (2022). An Integrated Approach to Mental Health and Addictions: AMO's Submission to the Ministry of Health. [https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2022/Integrated\\_Approach\\_to%20Mental\\_Health\\_and\\_Addictions\\_20220802\\_RPT.pdf](https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Reports/2022/Integrated_Approach_to%20Mental_Health_and_Addictions_20220802_RPT.pdf)

CAMH. (2023). Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics. <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

## **Appendix A Locations of community engagement**

### **Thank you to community organizations for hosting community conversations**

- Ailanthus CASTLE Community
- Adverse Childhood Experiences Steering Committee
- Bethesda Clients
- Children's Services Sector Network
- Coalition to End Violence Against Women
- Elmview CASTLE Community
- Employment-Focused Roundtable through Workforce Collective
- Future Back Female
- Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Prevention Group, Lived Experience Advisory and Taskforce
- Human Service & Justice Coordinating Committee
- Lived Experience Advisory Network
- Local Immigrant Partnership
- Mental Health and Addictions Working Group
- Newcomers through Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities
- Niagara Children's Planning Council
- Niagara Emergency Medical Services Huddle
- Niagara Food Security Network
- Niagara Francophone Interagency Table
- Niagara Ontario Health Team
- Niagara Poverty Reduction Network
- Niagara Region Mental Health Client Advisory Committee
- Niagara Suicide Prevention Coalition
- Overdose Prevention and Education Network of Niagara
- Project Share Clients
- Port Cares Clients
- Queenston Neighbourhood Roundtable
- St. Catharines Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Stronger Fort Erie Neighbourhoods: Lived Experience and Service Providers
- Westview Centre 4 Women Clients
- Youth Advisory Committee through Niagara Region Public Health
- Youth Advisory Committee and Lead through the Youth Wellness Hub

## **Appendix B Alignment to Regional reports**

The Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy aligns with Niagara Region's:

### **Children's Services Service System Plan**

Staff from Children's Services informed the Poverty Reduction Strategy to align with local efforts that address child care service system management.

### **Community Safety and Well-Being Plan**

Action Five of this plan calls for a local Poverty Reduction Strategy which sets local targets and aligns investments to measurably reduce poverty. The Poverty Reduction Strategy aligns with work identified in the Community Safety and Well-Being Plan such as Situation Tables, gender-based violence, mental health and addiction, housing and homelessness, income and systemic discrimination in Niagara.

### **Consolidated Housing Master Plan**

The affordable housing strategy brings together the work of many partners to address local need for affordable housing. Affordable housing is housing that fits the budget of low to moderate-income households while leaving enough money for them to meet other basic living costs such as food, clothing, transportation, medical care and education. The plan includes work to increase the number of affordable housing units and provide a mix of housing that is appropriate for the various sizes and incomes of households in Niagara.

### **Council Strategic Priority: Equitable Region**

An action of this priority calls for a Poverty Reduction Strategy that ensures the Region is inclusive, welcoming and free of discrimination.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan**

Staff from Niagara Region's, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Indigenous Relations team informed actions throughout the Areas of Focus in the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

### **Economic Development Strategy**

Staff from Niagara's Economic Development team informed the recommendation related to Employment to align with opportunities for future workforce around emerging sectors.

### **Gun and Gang Prevention Strategy**

The Poverty Reduction Strategy aligns with the work of the Gun and Gang Prevention Strategy to support an increase in youth and young adult-focused prevention and early intervention programs and services.

### **Housing and Homelessness Action Plan**

The Poverty Reduction Strategy aligns with the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan's action to increase affordable housing and reduce homelessness. The Poverty Reduction Advisor and Homelessness Action Plan Advisor worked closely together to exchange research and results from community engagement.

### **How We Go – Transportation Master Plan**

The Poverty Reduction strategy aligns with the Transportation Master Plan's action to address demand-responsive transit and pedestrian and cycling facilities.

### **Indigenous Relations Action Plan**

The Poverty Reduction Plan includes a recommendation for Indigenous Well-being. Staff from Niagara's Region's, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Indigenous Relations team and the Director of Housing from the Niagara Regional Native Centre led work to identify actions that address Indigenous Well-being. This action is driven by the voices of Indigenous peoples as led by the Director of Housing, Niagara Regional Native Centre. It is informed by The Joint Roundtable which continues to work on the Indigenous Relations Action Plan based on recommendations from the 2021 report, [Mno Bmaadziwin: Living the Good and Healthy Life.](#)

2024-2028

# Poverty Reduction Strategy

## How we got here

Niagara Regional Council approves development of a local poverty reduction strategy

1000+ residents give input about an ideal future state, challenges, strengths and actions

150+ Indigenous people give input about Indigenous prosperity

Staff review research to identify best practices to address poverty

Staff draft recommendations based on community input and best practices

Staff engage with Local Area Municipalities

100+ content experts validate recommendations

Niagara Region staff indicate alignment with other Niagara Region plans

Steering Committee prioritize recommendations based on impact, effort and community support

Poverty is unique to each person, complex with no single solution, a human rights issue.



### Council Strategic Priorities - Equitable Region

Economic Development Strategy	Children's Services Service System Plan	Consolidated Housing Master Plan	Community Safety and Well-Being Plan	<b>Poverty Reduction Strategy</b>	<b>Niagara Prosperity Initiative</b>	Transportation Master Plan	Housing and Homelessness Action Plan	Indigenous Action Plan	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Action Plan
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2024-2028

# Poverty Reduction Strategy

## How to create change

Service Access, Coordination and Capacity

Leveraging Voices of Lived Expertise

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Changing Mindsets

Advocacy

Funding

Our goal: Working together to prevent and end poverty and increase well-being in Niagara.

## Areas of focus



### Indigenous Well-being

Indigenous community to develop a strategy for Indigenous specific poverty reduction initiatives.



### Early Child Development

Improve access to affordable, high-quality child care for families living in poverty or at risk of poverty.



### Food Security

Improve access to fresh, culturally appropriate, affordable and nutritious foods through income-based solutions to food insecurity.



### Employment

Promote and develop decent work opportunities that provide fair wages, and benefits and fosters stable, consistent and safe employment.



### Housing

Provide housing stability services for people living in poverty to maintain current housing, prevent eviction, improve social inclusion and access income through periods of financial instability.



### Mental Health and Addiction

Enhance core service capacity and offer a choice of timely, early recovery interventions and treatments for people who are living in poverty or at risk of poverty.



### Income

Increase opportunities for living wage employment in Niagara and advocate for adequate, livable rates from government income assistance programs.



### Transportation

Continue the work of Niagara Region Transit to achieve affordable and equitable access to services across municipalities.

## Measuring change



Working together to decrease the number of people living in poverty, including those who are working but still struggle financially.

Working together to increase local capacity to implement community work, policies and practices.



Equals an Equitable Region that ends poverty by responding to community needs.

