

St. Stephen's Community House Community Development and Social Action

January 2010

Volume I, #1

Inside this issue:

- Social Assistance: 2
Time for Reform
- A New Way to 2
Measure Poverty
- Conversation Circles 3
at St. Stephen's
- Action for 3
Affordable Housing
- Seniors Talk about 4
Old Age Security,
Public Transit and
More
- Working with LINC 4
Students
- Childcare 4
Subsidies At Risk
- Youth Arcade 4



St. Stephen's
COMMUNITY
HOUSE

Creating Opportunities
Strengthening Communities



The Corner Town Hall – Team Work from the Ground Up

The Corner Drop-In is taking action for change from the ground up. The results of a survey of 114 drop-in users are in and have been presented at a Town Hall to Corner members. The presentation was led on November 22nd by the Corner's Member Advocacy Committee (MAC). Joey, John, Martine and Solomon led the discussion.

Drop-In users want to see a sleep/quiet room, longer hours, small groups where they can engage in games and crafts, discussions, learning about



Drop-In's Member Advocacy Committee

employment and training options, harm reduction and addictions. Sports activities including floor hockey were given strong support. There is also strong interest in a business run out of the drop-in, peer-led activities and advocacy.

The survey process is an example of client engagement. Corner staff,

with support from Helen, worked for a number of months with the MAC. Together they devised the survey as a way for service users to give input to the drop-in. Corner members assisted service users in filling out the survey.

Results were put into the computer by Receptionist Resa Chan, and were analyzed by Helen, with charts developed by our placement student Marco Bianchi. This has been a real team effort! The results are being presented to Corner staff to decide on action for change.

Community Development 101 Training

We extend a big "thank you" to all staff who have taken part in one or more learning circles. By now, most House staff have been introduced to the ideas of community development and social change. Of course, some programs have already been working in these areas, while others find the daily service delivery challenges keep them very busy. The Community Development

(CD) Committee wants to give you another chance to learn hands-on about CD and social change. We are rolling out CD 101 training for staff. The training involves looking at the root causes of social disadvantage, through the Problem Tree exercise, identifying partnerships for social change, social service vs. social change work and more. Training will start in January 2010 and continue through March. We hope to work closely

with managers and key staff to ensure the training is useful. Staff from across The House will help co-facilitate these trainings with Helen.

Bridget Sinclair and Helen led the first CD 101 training session in June 2009 with 32 Employment & Training Centre staff. This session led to a follow-up meeting with ETC staff to discuss strategies to get participants more involved in feedback and program direction.

Social Assistance: Time for Reform

In December 2008 the Ontario Government introduced a law to reduce poverty in this province. One of the best ways to reduce poverty is to raise the rates for people living on Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). This would benefit single adults and couples without children, as well as people who have children.

Agencies and anti-poverty activists are calling for a review of social assistance. The Government says it will announce a review but has not set a date. The Ontario

Government has a new expert panel to advise on welfare reform. The Social Assistance Review Advisory Council is headed up by Gail Nyberg, from the Daily Bread Food Bank, Pedro Barata of the Atkinson Foundation; Colette Murphy of the Metcalf Foundation; former senior provincial social services bureaucrat John Stapleton; Michael Oliphant of the Daily Bread Food Bank; Michael Mendelson of the Caledon Institute; Grace-Edward Galabuzi of Ryerson University; Mary Marrone of the Income Security Advocacy Centre;

and Kira Heineck of the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association. Pat Capponi from the 25 in 5 Network is working with the Food Bank to set up an expert panel of Ontarians on social assistance to give the government first-hand information about what needs to change.

The Advisory Council will help the Government decide what the review will look like. The review is expected to be complete by the end of 2010. We will plan events and activities to give SSCH service users a chance to participate.

“A good social assistance program would set rates that reflect the true cost of living in Toronto and would allow people to have more assets when they join the program.”

A New Way to Measure Poverty in Ontario

The Ontario Government has published the “Ontario Deprivation Index,” a list of items considered part of an adequate standard of living. If a family is missing two or more items from the list, then the children are considered to be living below the

poverty line.

It is based on research carried out by The Daily Bread Food Bank with regular food bank users. They started with a list of 29 items and narrowed it down to 10. It's an interesting idea. It may be a good measure for working poor

families with homes, but some of the items (# 4, 7 and 8) are not relevant if you don't have a home. It's an interesting way to start a discussion with people living in poverty, but does it reflect the lives of the poorest people in our community?

The Deprivation Index consists of the following items:

1. Do you eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day?
2. Are you able to get dental care if needed?
3. Do you eat meat, fish or a vegetarian equivalent at least every *other* day?
4. Are you able to replace or repair broken or damaged appliances such as a vacuum or a toaster?
5. Do you have appropriate clothes for job interviews?
6. Are you able to get around your community, either by having a car or by taking the bus or an equivalent mode of transportation?
7. Are you able to have friends or family over for a meal at least once a month?
8. Is your house or apartment free of pests, such as cockroaches?
9. Are you able to buy some small gifts for family or friends at least once a year?
10. Do you have a hobby or leisure activity?



Conversation Circles at St. Stephen's – A Call for Social Assistance Reform

Clients and staff at St. Stephen's are already speaking out about social assistance reform. Conversation circles have been held since the summer: one with

Corner Drop-In staff, Corner members, LTNS and Connections staff and several managers from The House. Helen also met with Connections participants, as well as two

groups from LTNS: a Chinese group and a Latin American group. Circles were also held with Wellness Settlement Assistants, and perinatal program participants.

Themes emerged across the groups. Each group reported similar problems:

- Ontario Works (OW) rates are too low to live on
- Workers do not provide enough help for people on ODSP or OW to get into programs and jobs they are suited for
- People are sometimes cut off social assistance for the wrong reasons
- People on ODSP get slightly more to live on, but not enough to meet the cost of living in Toronto
- Both programs allow people to work, but don't allow people to keep enough of the money they earn
- A travel allowance is provided to people if they volunteer. It should be part of the basic social assistance allowance
- People who volunteer have been told they have to change agencies every three months. Once a year should be standard
- People aren't allowed to have much money saved (assets) when they join OW and ODSP, resulting in extreme poverty
- Many newcomers who use our services at St. Stephen's are unable to get a job in their field despite being highly qualified as teachers, doctors and more. They are forced to go on social assistance and not given access to meaningful training and volunteer opportunities. Their foreign credentials are also not recognized.

A good social assistance program would set rates that reflect the true cost of living in Toronto and would allow people to have more assets

when they join the program. This program would also employ more workers who can spend time with people – to partner with them in setting

goals for positive action. Newcomers would see more access to volunteer activities in their field and relevant training.

Action for Affordable Housing

Housing advocates were joined by people with lived experience of housing insecurity in a community meeting on November 16th. Helen was joined by a Corner Drop-In participant and six newcomers from LTNS took part. MPP Rosario Marchese, for Trinity-Spadina, told the group we must write and phone our members of the Ontario Government if we want to see an affordable housing strategy.

A number of people who have experienced housing problems in

downtown Toronto spoke out. Together we gave suggestions that will be included in a submission to the Ontario Government's consultation on affordable housing. We want a program that creates truly affordable housing, especially in downtown Toronto.

Five people from The House, including Corner staff, a Corner participant and two placement students, took part in a province-wide housing strategy day on November 30th. We learned that action for affordable housing is taking place across the Province.

St. Stephen's has made a written submission to the Ontario Government calling for more supportive housing, more rent supplements, inclusionary zoning that mandates developers to create a certain number of affordable units when they build condominiums, and uploading of repairs and maintenance costs of social housing back to the Province.

We sent 131 letters from staff and participants to the Minister of Housing urging action on affordable housing.

Seniors Talk about Old Age Security, Public Transit and More

Helen met in November 2009 with 12 seniors who take part in our Seniors Program. The seniors, with help from staff person David Cheng, identified a range of issues that impact their lives, including lengthy delays with repairs and maintenance in

their social housing, a growing problem with bed bugs in housing, TTC fares becoming unaffordable with the idea of making TTC free to seniors in off-peak times, and a need for quicker access to Old Age Security (OAS). At present

immigrant seniors must have lived in Canada for 10 years to be eligible for OAS. A campaign is underway to reduce this waiting time to five years. The seniors Helen spoke with are strongly in support of this proposed change to OAS.

Working with LINC Students



Volunteer Winnie Qui and Board Member Tracey Rees make a deputation to City Council on February 18, 2009.

Helen and Marco Bianchi, our placement student, talked with 15 students in December 2009, about getting action from the City government. Students were informed they have the right to speak out about their needs to their local government. They can write letters to politicians, and speak to a City government committee.

They were encouraged to call their local City Councillor, who must provide service even if the caller is not a Canadian citizen. Students were also encouraged to call the new 311 service to get information about City services.

Childcare Subsidies At Risk

Parents on low incomes may lose their childcare subsidies. A new City report warns 5,000 child-care subsidies in Toronto, including a number at St. Stephen's, are at risk. There are 16,000 children waiting for child-care subsidies in Toronto.

The Ontario Government is being called on to replace the \$15.4 million in federal child-care funds set to run out April 1. Prime Minister Stephen Harper vetoed the previous Liberal government's \$5 billion national child-care plan and federal funds have run out.

Staff and participants at St. Stephen's are encouraged to contact your Member of Provincial Parliament to speak out for long term stable funding to protect these subsidies and to expand affordable childcare.

Alternatives to Hate

Over this last year the Youth Arcade began a program that worked towards social change for youth. The Alternatives to Hate Program addresses the root causes of criminal behaviour by exploring issues of hate and oppression based on racial, cultural and gender identity.

It is a safe program where youth can be in a creative, youth-driven, supportive environment. They are challenged to think critically about the issues that affect them. This program also equips youth to do more anti-oppression work in their own communities.

The Community Development and Social Action Program works to engage our staff and program users in a process of social change. For more information, please contact:

Helen Armstrong
Community Development and
Social Action Worker
260 Augusta Avenue
Toronto, ON M5T 2L9
Phone: 416-964-8747 ext. 254
Fax: 416-966-2178

E-mail: ahelen@ststephenshouse.com

<http://www.ststephenshouse.com/neighbourhood.shtml>

Supported by the City of Toronto Community Service Partnership