

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

CASE STUDY

Tackling Poverty in Hamilton

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Case Study: Tackling Poverty in Hamilton

In Brief – Executive Summary

The City of Hamilton (population 500,000) is tied with Toronto for the highest poverty rate in Ontario. One in five (20%) Hamiltonians live in low-income households. The numbers are even higher among children, seniors and recent immigrants. In the past decade, some of the city's biggest and best-known employers have either filed for bankruptcy protection or closed. The gap between rich and poor has grown.

Hamilton Community Foundation has responded by becoming the first community Foundation in Canada to commit its entire unrestricted Community Fund to a single cause – poverty. Launched in February 2004, the four-year Tackling Poverty Together initiative will provide at least \$3-million to charitable organizations focusing on innovative strategies and programs in poverty prevention, alleviation and reduction.

In an even broader initiative, HCF and the City of Hamilton have co-convened a city-wide roundtable to address the problem of poverty collectively and create a long-term plan. Launched in 2005, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction brings together community leaders in business, education, government and other sectors to create and implement a community-wide multi-year plan for poverty reduction. The plan is expected in Spring 2006.

This case study documents a series of convening initiatives undertaken by Hamilton Community Foundation, beginning in 1998, which positioned the Foundation for this community-wide leadership role. It highlights key learning identified by the Foundation.



The Informants – Voices of Experience

This paper is based on interviews with key players:

Carolyn A. Milne, President & CEO, Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF)

Mark Chamberlain, Chair of HCF and Chair, Hamilton Poverty Roundtable

Renate Davidson, Past Chair of HCF

Hugh Clark, former HCF Board member, HCF donor

Dr. Jim Rice, past member of the Tackling Poverty Together Advisory Committee

Paul Johnson, Project Manager, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

In addition, Betty Muggah (VP Grants and Community Initiatives) and Sharon Charters (Manager of Grants) at Hamilton Community Foundation provided valuable insights, as did Betsy Martin, Senior Advisor and Program Consultant, Community Foundations of Canada, and members of CFC's Social Justice Learning Group.

The Context – Background

Located on Lake Ontario about an hour's drive from Toronto, the City of Hamilton (population 500,000) shares Ontario's highest poverty rate with Toronto. One in five (20%) of its residents live in low-income households. The numbers are even higher among children under 12 (25%), seniors over 75 (29%) and recent immigrants (52%). Clearly poverty is not just a local problem – Canada's poverty rate has hovered between 15% and 17% for more than three decades – but Hamilton has decided to do something about it.

In the past decade, the wealthiest 40% of Hamilton's citizens have experienced increasing incomes, while the poorest 60% have watched their income drop even further. Like most Canadian cities, Hamilton is coping with aging infrastructure, provision of social services downloaded from higher levels of government, and recent amalgamation of outlying towns and rural areas into the urban boundary. At the same time, some of the city's biggest and best-known employers, industrial giants in steel and other manufacturing, have either filed for bankruptcy protection or closed up shop.

Immigration is changing the face of the city dramatically – which, while a challenge, is also a source of hope and renewal. Hamilton is now

Vision of Hamilton Community Foundation

Hamilton Community Foundation's vision is to be a philanthropic leader, catalyst and resource in enabling Hamilton to become a model community.

What is a Model Community?

Hamilton's Vision 2020, developed by the community, has inspired our vision of a model community. Our goal is to create a community that is sustainable – that supports superior quality of life and economic prosperity while maintaining environmental integrity. We aspire to a community that takes pride in, and is made strong by, the diversity of its residents, its neighbourhoods and its economy – a community that promotes creativity and opportunity for all of its residents, and cares for its most vulnerable.

- *Hamilton Community Foundation*



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home to people from all over the world: they bring tremendous skill and creativity to the work force and the community – but often their credentials are not recognized and their cultures not well understood. The increasing differences in population, how the majority culture deals with those differences, and how new Canadians adapt to the unfamiliar culture of their new home are all challenges facing Hamilton (and other Canadian cities).

Balancing these challenges is a community with an extensive network of social agencies and a reputation for innovation and collaboration. It is a community with spirit, a wealth of social capital, and a certain toughness – equally proud of its blue-collar roots and its world-class health care and educational institutions.

Hamilton Community Foundation has been a part of the fabric of Hamilton since 1954 when it was the first community foundation in Ontario. It grew steadily over the years and established itself as a generous, caring and dependable behind-the-scenes presence in Hamilton’s not-for-profit sector.

After decades of asset development and grantmaking, Hamilton Community Foundation began to take a more active community leadership role in the late 1990s. By then its assets were significant – \$35 million in March 1999 – and they grew dramatically during the strong stock market and the dot-com philanthropic boom at the turn of the millennium.

The Story – Steps and Process

The Beginning of A Community Profile

In 1998 Hamilton Community Foundation chose to participate in a nation-wide initiative called *Our Millennium*. In many ways it marked the beginning of a change in HCF’s relationship with the community.

Our Millennium was launched by Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) as a way for its members across the country to work together to

Our Millennium begins a change in HCF’s relationship with the community.



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encourage individuals and groups to mark the millennium with gifts or projects to benefit their communities. By the end of 2000, more than 4.6 million Canadians had participated in a raft of local projects – everything from neighbourhood recycling to permanent endowment funds for children.

Hamilton Community Foundation was one of the leaders in *Our Millennium* and one of the most successful. Through a strong partnership with the Volunteer Centre of Hamilton & District and visionary leaders – like Vincenza Travale, a community volunteer who later became HCF’s Board Chair, and Betty Muggah, who managed the project for the Volunteer Centre and later joined HCF’s staff – *Our Millennium* engaged more than 70% of Hamilton’s citizens in creating gifts to the community. Groups planted thousands of trees, donated steel to fabricate a local Habitat for Humanity home, stitched infant gowns for premature babies, started women’s health days for new immigrants – more than 1,000 projects in all. The range and impact of the *Our Millennium* projects was inspirational – and Hamilton Community Foundation’s perceived role in the community had changed. (See *Endnote 1*)

Developing Momentum – and Focus

The *Our Millennium* excitement, supported by solid leadership and vision from the Foundation’s volunteer and staff leaders, spawned an atmosphere of “let’s do it.” The Foundation had greater profile, new partnerships, and the community knocking at the door. Ideas for community leadership initiatives came from within and outside the Foundation at an almost overwhelming rate.

The Foundation hired a consultant, May Wong, to help them focus their thinking about the Foundation’s potential role and effectiveness. May’s report was the beginning of HCF’s journey toward more strategic grantmaking and community leadership.

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Our Millennium engaged more than 70% of Hamilton’s citizens in creating gifts to the community.

The Foundation’s profile rises, new partnerships are created, and the community is knocking at the door

Confronting Racism

Shortly after the destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York, a number of racially-motivated crimes took place in Hamilton, including the burning of a Sikh temple. The event garnered headlines and distressed Hamilton's usually tolerant population. Hamilton Community Foundation's staff and volunteers were appalled and determined to help the community take a stand against intolerance.

The Foundation had been meeting with community leaders around shared human resources issues, and the local racist incidents were discussed at that table. HCF's CEO, Carolyn Milne, then made a few phone calls suggesting that the city's religious leaders join together to speak out publicly about the burning of the temple. With very quiet leadership from the Foundation, Hamilton's multi-faith community held a joint press conference deploring religious intolerance. Soon after, a group of leaders, including Carolyn Milne, went to see the Mayor. Shortly thereafter, the Mayor announced a city-wide initiative called "Strengthening Hamilton's Community" (SHCI). A public awareness campaign was launched which proclaimed "An attack on one is an attack on us all" on posters throughout Hamilton, in newspaper ads and on television. The TV ads continue. (See *Endnote 2.*)

By sparking the 2001 "Strengthening Hamilton's Community" initiative, Hamilton Community Foundation's catalytic community role had reached a new level.

Influences from Abroad

Carolyn Milne identifies her participation in an international network as a huge influence on her thinking. Beginning in 2000, through CFC, HCF and a few other Canadian community foundations had the opportunity to join the Transatlantic Community Foundation Network (TCFN). It brought together emerging community foundations in Eastern Europe with established ones in Canada, the US, and other parts of Europe. In the post-Soviet era of new nations, ethnic tension and economic fragility, the Eastern European foundations were struggling to build trust in

In response to a local hate crime, with quiet leadership from the Foundation, Hamilton's multi-faith community speaks out against religious intolerance and violence

democratic principles, to define the voluntary sector, and to build community. They were working with few resources but lots of passion and commitment.

CFC's Social Justice Focus

"To see what those community foundations were doing in Eastern Europe to change life for their citizens – with virtually no resources – was truly inspirational," says Carolyn. "And my visits to Europe coincided with CFC's exploration of social justice here at home. I was a panelist at the first meeting in Toronto in 2002 where we, the Ford Foundation and others discussed the role community foundations could play in getting at root causes of social problems, rather than just symptoms. One of my Board members went with me and it really solidified her interest in these issues too. Avila Kilmurray spoke about working in Northern Ireland – and using the community foundation to make change in that terribly difficult environment. That meeting helped me crystallize my thinking as I spoke publicly for the first time about the challenges of measuring the impact of our grantmaking and leadership activities. I looked at the progress HCF had made in the six years I had been CEO and I thought long and hard about what the 'value-add' of the Foundation was and what it could be. Finally, I put all my thoughts down in a paper for my Board – what I had learned through TCFN, what I saw as the opportunities and challenges for HCF, what I was thinking about the future."

An Ongoing Dialogue about Community Solutions

Carolyn's paper was part of a continuing dialogue with HCF's Board about the role and potential of the community foundation. In 2003-04, the Foundation brought back consultant May Wong. She looked at the Foundation's role in the community, interviewed key stakeholders, reviewed its grantmaking practices and priorities, and proposed a series of options for focusing more strategically, stressing "evolution not revolution." It was clear that not everyone was comfortable with social justice language, and HCF quickly decided to use terminology that everyone could relate to: root causes, finding solutions to community problems, leveling the playing field, being a model community and

"You know, I don't think dollars are the issue in this kind of catalyst work. The European foundations had little money, but they had convening capability and multiple perspectives. They were operating in an atmosphere of no trust, and even threats – but they were just passionate about building community. By comparison, we in North American community foundations are so anxious about stepping out in a leadership role..."
- Carolyn Milne

finding ways to give everyone the same chances in life. It was also clear that the “charitable response” inherent in HCF’s traditional role needed to be honoured at the centre of the Foundation’s mission.

The Board reviewed literature and statistics on community trends, and the Foundation began to talk more pro-actively to donors about the scope of problems in the community. Indeed, some of the Foundation’s most interesting initiatives were instigated by donors.

Chances for Aboriginal Youth

In 2002, one of HCF’s most generous donor couples approached the Foundation with concern about Hamilton’s aboriginal youth. The Foundation commissioned a background paper to learn more about the issue. With this knowledge in hand, and generous support from the donors, HCF reached out to Aboriginal leaders in the area and brought them together to explore how the Foundation might help them improve the chances of Hamilton’s urban aboriginal youth. The native leaders identified education as the key – succeeding in school and staying in school. With guidance and financial support from the Foundation, the aboriginal leaders created a program to help aboriginal kids stay in school. Now operating in one public and one separate school, over 100 young people are involved – many of them previous drop-outs. By creating space where aboriginal youth can come together in a safe nurturing environment, and involving elders, student mentors and educators, the program’s web of support has brought them in off the streets and re-established their pride in their heritage. In the first year, the program showed a 20% increase in school credits among participants; in the second year an additional 20% increase.

Anti-Bullying Initiative

Shortly after the Aboriginal project began, another couple – long-time donors to the Foundation and leaders of its Board – came to HCF about bullying in local schools. After discussion, they offered funding to the Foundation to look at the problem in more detail. The Foundation again reached out to experts and commissioned a study of the current

“We brought our donors into this discussion very early. We provided a background paper on the community-building role of community foundations internationally. That excited their imaginations about what we could do here. The interest from donors influenced the Board.”

- Carolyn Milne



literature and possible approaches. HCF then convened a roundtable representing a wide range of community players concerned with the problem: police, schoolteachers and administrators, community groups serving youth, etc. The roundtable, supported by a consultant provided by HCF, eventually became a city-wide coalition of 35 organizations conducting research into bullying, integrating research into practice, and coordinating anti-bullying initiatives across the City of Hamilton. (See Endnote 3.) Following HCF's initial support, the coalition received \$225,000 from the Ontario Trillium Foundation over three years, and a five-year \$1 million federal research grant.

A Common Approach Emerges

"We began to see that we had a successful 'formula' developing in these initiatives," says Carolyn Milne. "We first gathered the information we needed to help us understand the issue. That allowed us to share good factual background with our Board, donors and community partners before deciding to move ahead. With solid knowledge and a grasp of the need, we found that most people were comfortable taking the next steps. Then we brought together the key stakeholders – a wide group including those most affected by the issue, those living with the issue on a daily basis. We presented them with the information we'd collected and said 'Is this accurate? Is this what you experience? Are these the real issues?' The Foundation then made a commitment to provide the resources to make it possible for the group to meet and discuss the issue over the long-term. We provided funding for the research phase, a secretariat function for the meetings, ongoing support with convening and logistics. But the stakeholders explored options for action – we listened and learned and facilitated the discussion."

Small Grants Target Poor Neighbourhoods

Also during this time (as one outcome of May Wong's report), Hamilton Community Foundation was exploring the potential of small grants and community development.

Again, the Foundation did significant research before moving forward, attending conferences and pulling together reports on existing

A convening "formula" develops:

- Research
- Sharing information
- Convening
- Exploring and validating issues
- Support and facilitation



neighbourhood grantmaking models and best practices. It consulted broadly in the community with leaders and frontline staff from a range of voluntary and public sector organizations, and formed an advisory committee. It prepared a comprehensive plan and had that reviewed by three community foundations with successful neighbourhood programs.

Finally in 2002 HCF launched *Growing Roots...Strengthening Neighbourhoods*, making a five-year commitment to grantmaking, community development, and capacity building in four urban neighbourhoods. David Derbyshire is HCF's full-time Neighbourhood Coordinator.

The initiative has been transformative for the Foundation, bringing volunteers and staff into direct contact with the residents of Hamilton's most challenged neighbourhoods. The process of building on strengths, nurturing local leaders, and facilitating grass-roots change efforts – like beautifying blighted streets, cleaning local playgrounds, creating small-scale employment training for immigrant women and after-school programs for children – has hammered home the lesson that asset-based empowerment, while costly and time-consuming, works. It has also raised the bigger challenge: how to bring this work to scale and create even deeper change.

The Poverty Focus Deepens

This series of earlier initiatives primed the Foundation's leaders for an even higher-profile and higher-risk commitment. By March 2004, Hamilton Community Foundation's 50th Anniversary, assets had grown to \$85.7 million and the Foundation was granting more than \$4 million annually from its wide range of donor-advised and unrestricted funds. Its special initiatives were going strong. But the news on Hamilton's social and economic front was grim. Statistics released by the city's Social Planning and Research Council, the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, the national 2001 Census data, and other sources all highlighted an increasing deficit in Hamilton – poverty.

The neighbourhood program is transformative, bringing volunteers and staff into direct contact with the residents of Hamilton's most challenged neighbourhoods

The challenge of bringing change to scale

“Our Board was truly shocked by some of the figures coming out in the paper,” says Carolyn Milne. “It was frankly a very disturbing picture of our community. Food bank usage was skyrocketing, homeless shelters were full to capacity, employment continued to look grim. And I had to say to the Board that I honestly didn’t know whether we were being effective in the face of that reality. We just didn’t know.”

With their experience of strategic grantmaking in other areas, a committee of the Foundation’s senior board leaders and staff (including the CEO, Board Chair, Grants committee chair, Grants Manager Sharon Charters, consultant May Wong and others) continued the discussion of what impact the foundation could have on Hamilton’s most pressing problems. They agreed that the number one problem was poverty. They looked at their grantmaking potential – what would it mean if the Foundation put all the resources of the Community Fund (the Foundation’s unrestricted fund) into that one focus? Following the pattern established in past initiatives, the committee pulled together the current research on poverty, the Foundation’s past history in poverty grantmaking, and possible options, and then made their proposal: that the Foundation focus all its undesignated Community Fund grantmaking on poverty for four years. The Board spent considerable time in discussion of the options, and ultimately agreed wholeheartedly.

The Tackling Poverty Together Initiative

In February 2004, the Foundation officially announced the Tackling Poverty Together (TPT) initiative, making HCF the first community foundation in Canada to commit its entire unrestricted fund to a single cause.

The four-year initiative will provide at least \$3-million to charitable organizations focusing on innovative poverty prevention, alleviation and reduction. Its goal: to identify and support strategies that prevent poverty and to help create and sustain pathways out of poverty for low-income people in Hamilton.

Dr. Jim Rice, then a professor in McMaster University’s School of Social Work and a researcher with interests in social policy and housing, was

Following the pattern of past initiatives, they pull together research on poverty, the Foundation’s history in poverty grantmaking, and possible options, then make their proposal to the Board: that the Foundation focus all its undesignated funds on poverty for four years.

HCF becomes the first Canadian community foundation to focus its entire unrestricted fund on one issue

involved in the Advisory Committee that reviews TPT grant applications. He identifies two factors in the design of the TPT program that have contributed to its success: a balanced approach and a multi-pronged strategy. Focusing on poverty with the Community Fund still means that other priorities are supported by the Foundation's other funds; this balance provides a comfort level for donors whose interests are in other areas and helps the Foundation continue to attract a wide range of support. Within the TPT strategy, a multi-pronged approach to poverty (alleviation, reduction, prevention) allows organizations to find where their work fits in the poverty agenda. He feels the TPT application process also engages and empowers local organizations to focus on poverty and consolidate their efforts.

Dr. Rice identifies a third key factor – courage. “It takes a tremendous amount of courage to take the little bits of resources spread around the community and move those resources to an issue of justice, especially poverty,” he says. “I was dumbstruck when I attended my first meeting. Most organizations like this don't deal with poverty, except in a side-ways fashion. To identify poverty as a goal was terrific – I was excited to be there and it was energizing to work with the Foundation.”

Bringing in the Broader Community – The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction

Even as Hamilton Community Foundation focused its grantmaking, it was all too conscious that poverty was not an issue to be solved by one organization.

As HCF was rolling out the TPT initiative, Joe-Anne Priel, General Manager of the City of Hamilton Public Health and Community Services Department was expressing the City's deep concern over poverty and calling for action. She approached Carolyn Milne and together they agreed on a collaborative problem-solving model.

In February 2005, HCF and the City of Hamilton co-convened a roundtable to address the problem of poverty collectively and create a long-term plan. They brought together 25 community leaders in business, education,

Three success factors in the TPT program:

- a balanced approach
- a multi-pronged strategy
- courage



government and other sectors to discuss the issue of poverty in Hamilton and the need for a community-wide response. “We began with personal invitations to passionate people,” says Paul Johnson, the Roundtable’s top staff person. The participant list is a veritable “who’s who” of the community’s leaders: chief of police, medical officer of health, newspaper editor, United Way, poverty advocates, city council, faith leaders, university faculty, private sector business people, social agency leaders etc. The Tamarack Institute/Vibrant Communities was invited to facilitate the meeting and share their knowledge from working with 15 Canadian communities engaged in poverty reduction initiatives. (See Endnote 4.) The assembled leaders identified both the reasons for poverty in Hamilton and the assets Hamilton brings to the fight against poverty. They explored their personal feelings about poverty and the reasons that motivate each of them to make it a priority. The meeting provided strong endorsement for moving forward to develop a collaborative plan of action.

The organizers presented a proposed framework within which to build the next steps, including required resources. Both HCF and the City of Hamilton offered substantial financial and in-kind support over the development phase. (The initiative resides at the Foundation.) Other participants were asked to consider what they might be able to contribute.

During the course of the next few months, staff and volunteers were confirmed for the project (including HCF’s Board Chair Mark Chamberlain as Chair of the Roundtable), task groups were formed, and three corporate funders were recruited. The group decided to join Vibrant Communities, to take advantage of their experience, and had initial consultations with Niagara and Edmonton – both Vibrant Communities participants.

In an important commitment, the community’s daily paper *The Hamilton Spectator* declared that its “issue of choice” over the next three years would be poverty – marking the first time in the newspaper’s history that it has identified a public policy focus.

HCF and the City of Hamilton propose a collaborative problem-solving model.



By Spring 2006, the Roundtable expects to have a comprehensive plan in place outlining specific collaborative actions to reduce poverty, establishing the long-term leadership and organizational structure needed to implement the plan, and identifying how the implementation will be funded. “Our plan will be focused on systematically tackling the root causes of poverty as opposed to finding quick fixes,” says Mark Chamberlain. (See Endnote 5.)

Says *The Spectator’s* Editor-in-chief Dana Robbins, a member of the Roundtable: “There really is a sense that a window of opportunity has opened in our community, that we have been presented with a unique opportunity to address a pressing social issue, and that’s largely a function of the work of the Roundtable.”

The Roundtable’s work continues.

By Spring 2006, the Roundtable expects to have a comprehensive plan outlining specific collaborative actions to reduce poverty.

“There really is a sense that a window of opportunity has opened in our community, that we have been presented with a unique opportunity to address a pressing social issue”

- Dana Robbins



Some Key Lessons

What can we learn from Hamilton's experience? Here's what HCF identifies as key points:

- Planning and strategy are key to success
- Recognize that knowledge is a strategic asset. The Foundation feels it has a role to play in gathering, interpreting and disseminating knowledge on community issues. It is always learning.
- Provide comprehensive background information to donors, the Board and other participants. Research papers became the centerpiece for convening efforts; the stakeholders saw their issues, concerns, contributions, learning and best practices reflected in the discussion papers.
- Document why you're taking the position you are
- Involve donors and Board every step of the way
- Work collaboratively with key leaders in the community – find allies and partners
- Showcase grantees' work and stories
- Use existing resources: CFC (principles, social justice framework etc.) and Vibrant Communities for example
- Participation in learning networks is important, like Vibrant Communities pan-Canadian learning network and CFC's social justice learning group
- Convening has become a regular part of the Foundation's way of working and has brought them new relationships in the community. The convening role has been a starting point for

- ✓ Planning
- ✓ Information, knowledge, learning
- ✓ Involvement, collaboration, convening
- ✓ Respectful dialogue
- ✓ Story-telling
- ✓ Using existing resources and learning networks
- ✓ Patience, persistence
- ✓ Leadership



many of its strongest initiatives, including the Poverty Roundtable.

- Convening and co-convening requires you to look at differences; create a forum for honest, respectful dialogue
- Leadership and champions are essential. People with vision, skills, and willingness to take calculated risks must champion this kind of initiative.
- Change is gradual (“evolution not revolution”), and it comes from building on strengths and successes
- Take time and think long-term

Additional Perspectives

A Donor’s Perspective

Hugh Clark has been involved with Hamilton Community Foundation since 2000, when he and his brother transferred their private Foundation to HCF. “We had a relatively small Foundation coming out of our successful business and we felt we should return something to the community. We were besieged by applicants and had no resources to deal with that. My brother recommended Hamilton Community Foundation. Moving our Foundation to an advised fund at HCF has been a blessing for us.”

The Foundation soon recruited Hugh to the Board, and during his six-year term, Hugh was involved in the HCF’s tremendous asset growth and its growing leadership role in the community. He points to the Arts Stabilization initiative as one early example, which helped the community come together to strengthen organizations in that sector. The Foundation’s current focus on poverty, through the Neighbourhood Program, TPT and the Roundtable is the latest example.

“Most worthwhile things involve some controversy, but controversy can be overcome if the desire is there and the initiative is done properly.”

- Hugh Clark

“The strength of the Foundation is strategic, long-term thinking on the part of the Board and management,” he says. “It’s always dealing with the community’s main issues.”

What makes it so successful? “I have a business perspective: an organization with good management and a strong board behind it can achieve wonders. When that breaks down, an organization is in trouble. From day one, Hamilton Community Foundation has had excellent management and a strong board. Carolyn Milne is outstanding; she’s a leader with vision, she has built a super management team and has gone out of her way to develop a strong Board, continuing the work that Judith McCulloch started.”

What about moving toward social change issues – is there any fear that dealing with community issues might lead the Foundation into controversy? “Not at all. On the contrary, the great strength of Hamilton Community Foundation is providing that catalyst role in the community. The Poverty Roundtable is a good example – it began with HCF and they brought in others to work together. Most worthwhile things involve some controversy, but controversy can be overcome if the desire is there and the initiative is done properly.”

A Board Member’s Perspective

Renate Davidson was HCF’s Board Chair from 2004 to 2005, when the Tackling Poverty Together initiative was developed and announced. She joined the Board in 2000 and will serve on the Board until June 2007.

“Hamilton is a unique, generous community. That came home to us with *Our Millennium* when Hamilton had the highest number of gifts in Canada. *Our Millennium* coincided with a series of events – the amalgamation of the City, Hamilton 2020 and the Social Vision, and the very generous gift that increased our assets so dramatically. But it’s the research and analysis we’ve done that grounds our work – it makes decision-making comfortable.”

“We said ‘how can we be a model community if we have that serious a poverty issue?’
- Renate Davidson

She points to the Foundation's strategic planning in 2001. "That was when we made the decision to change our vision to the idea of a model community. Everything we've done since then flows from that. May Wong's report and much other research identified poverty as a real problem here. We said 'how can we be a model community if we have that serious a poverty issue?'"

Although there were some concerns expressed about the idea of dedicating the Community Fund to one issue, the Board "reminded ourselves (research again!) that we'd traditionally been granting about 66% to Health and Human Services. TPT would be formalizing that and going into it more deeply, building on the experience of the neighbourhood program and the environment program and others. We're trying to help put everyone on a level playing field and support individuals out of the cycle of poverty, giving people the tools they need to make decisions and participate in issues that affect their lives. As stewards of community money we have a responsibility to address these issues."

Renate identifies a number of key success factors:

- Our Board composition has been important – a wide cross-section of people willing to express opinion in a respectful manner. We continue to dialogue about what the foundation has become and we keep going back to our vision.
- A visionary CEO, constantly challenging us, and a passionate team
- Reviewing the landscape, local research, international trends
- Our convening work (with a dynamo like Betty Muggah!), the follow-up we do, the sharing of information and learning

The most surprising thing about this experience? "I guess I was surprised by the reluctance of a few people. But it may come from personal beliefs, and that's why respectful dialogue is such an important principle. Ultimately, as a Board, you vote if necessary and then all speak with one voice."



Endnotes

1. For more information on Our Millennium and a case study of Hamilton Community Foundation's involvement, see International Year of Volunteers 2001, "Lessons from the Front: Our Millennium & the Mobilization of Canadian Communities." Anne-Marie McElrone, Community Foundations of Canada / United Way of Canada Centraide Canada.
2. In 2004, the Mayor had occasion to call on the members of SHCI to speak out again – this time against a violent hate crime targeting a well-known gay businessman in the city. Through the media the Mayor made a passionate call for understanding, and the leaders of SHCI responded, rededicating themselves publicly to combating hatred.
3. See the coalition's website: www.bullyfreehamilton.ca
4. For more information on the work of Vibrant Communities, see www.vibrantcommunities.ca
5. For more information on the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, see www.hamiltonpoverty.ca