

# Building a Better Thunder Bay for All:

## A Community Action Strategy to Reduce Poverty



With Support From



October 21, 2013



Poverty impacts people's lives in every way

Approximately **15,100** individuals in  
Thunder Bay live in poverty

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Once you open doors people really want to help themselves

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## STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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**CHAIR**

**COUNCILLOR PAUL PUGH**  
City of Thunder Bay

**SANDRA ALBERTSON**  
United Way of Thunder Bay

**REBECCA ARTHUR**  
Ontario Native Women's Association

**LISA BECKWICK**  
City of Thunder Bay

**GLADYS BERRINGER**  
Our Kids Count

**TERRI-LYNNE CARTER**  
Poverty Free Thunder Bay

**SALLY COLQUHOUN**  
Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic

**BRENDA CRYDERMAN**  
Creighton Youth Services

**CANDACE DAVIES**  
Ontario Native Women's Association

**BERNICE DUBEC**  
Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre

**COUNCILLOR REBECCA JOHNSON**  
City of Thunder Bay

**ELAINE KERR**  
Thunder Bay and District Labour Council

**MARIE KLASSEN**  
Lakehead Social Planning Council

**EUGENE LEFRANCOIS**  
Thunder Bay and District Injured  
Workers Support Group

**KAREN LEWIS**  
City of Thunder Bay

**STEVE MANTIS**  
Thunder Bay and District Injured  
Workers Support Group

**GWEN O'REILLY**  
Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre

**AARON PARK**  
Thunder Bay District Social Services  
Administration Board

**COLLEEN PETERS**  
Thunder Bay Youth Strategy

**BETH PONKA**  
Urban Aboriginal Strategy

**CHARLA ROBINSON**  
Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce

**AMY SICILIANO**  
Thunder Bay Crime Prevention Council

**IAN THOMPSON**  
Age Friendly Thunder Bay

**FRANCES WESLEY**  
Urban Aboriginal Strategy

**JOHN ROBERT WHEELER**  
Thunder Bay Accessibility  
Advisory Committee

## LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL



The Thunder Bay Poverty Reduction Strategy Steering Committee is pleased to present **Building a Better Thunder Bay for All: A Community Action Strategy to Reduce Poverty.**

Poverty diminishes our community. Beyond those directly living in poverty, it touches all aspects of society—the economy, housing, social structure, youth, elderly, and future generations.

This report is the product of empirical research as well as consultations and interviews with many individuals and groups, including persons experiencing poverty and representatives of organizations concerned with the effects of poverty on our community. This report is a collaborative work by the Lakehead Social Planning Council (LSPC), Poverty Free Thunder Bay with support from the District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board, and the City of Thunder Bay.

The Steering Committee was formed by inviting a broad cross-section of the community to draft terms of reference. This was followed by extensive research, interviews, consultations and community forums.

Thunder Bay is not the first municipality to embark on a poverty reduction strategy. We have gained from reviewing the valuable work of others. However, while benefitting from the experience of others, Building a Better Thunder Bay for All is firmly based on Thunder Bay data and input from Thunder Bay residents. This report sets forth a made-in-Thunder Bay strategy for reducing poverty.

We hope that Building a Better Thunder Bay for All will be endorsed by Council and embraced by the community. Poverty reduction is an endeavour we must undertake together.

I would like to thank each member of the Steering Committee, and the organizations they represent, for their valuable contributions, time and energy devoted to this project. I would also like to thank the approximately 440 individuals who took part in forums and interviews, putting forward their views and suggestions on this important issue. Finally, I would like to thank Margaret Wanlin for coordinating many focus group discussions, LSPC researcher Mike Jones for preparing the statistical appendix to the report, LSPC researcher Saku Pinta, PhD, for researching and writing the report, and Kari Chiappetta for coordinating a number of key events, including the Community Forum.

We set out to create a community-specific poverty reduction strategy, and we are confident the Building a Better Thunder Bay for All is such a strategy.

Sincerely,

**Paul Pugh**

Chair of the Poverty Reduction Steering Committee

## VISION

A Better Thunder Bay for All

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### UNIQUELY OURS

We will seek out evidence-based actions and solutions that respond to the needs of our community.

### ACHIEVABLE

We will build new strengths and collaborate to leverage existing and available resources, services, and programs.

### RESPECTFUL

We respect and value each individual, each story, and acknowledge the collective contribution to our diverse community.

### INCLUSIVE

We strive to acknowledge our different journeys in a way that creates a sense of belonging for all.

## WHY DOES THUNDER BAY NEED A POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY?



**P**overty is a complex social problem that reduces the quality of life for all residents, not just the most disadvantaged. As such, a Thunder Bay Poverty Reduction Strategy is critical to raise the quality of life for the most disadvantaged which improves the social, economic, and health outcomes for the rest of society.

From Vancouver to Halifax to Iqaluit, municipalities around Canada are grappling with the issue of poverty. While the causes and solutions that are bound up with this issue seem overwhelming, municipal governments have recognized that there is much that can be done on the local level. There is also a growing awareness that the strong ethical and moral obligation to help those in need is prudent from an economic standpoint.

How we treat the most disadvantaged, vulnerable, and marginalized people is a reflection of who we are as a society. We have a moral imperative to help those in need. Poverty in a developed country like Canada is unacceptable. However, income inequality also has much broader social consequences that impact those who are not living in poverty. As many studies have demonstrated, we pay a high price for the levels of poverty that we tolerate. According to one recent

Canadian study, “the money it would have taken to bring everyone just over the poverty line [in 2007] was \$12.3 billion. The total cost of poverty that year was double or more using the most cautious estimates.”<sup>1</sup>

One obvious example is the burden that poverty and related issues place on the publicly-funded health care system. Preventable illnesses caused by malnutrition or exposure are treated more humanely and in a more cost effective way through the provision of proper supports and housing—in other words, preventative approaches—rather than by a reliance on emergency services. Similarly, several well-documented Canadian studies have shown that the annual costs for a chronically homeless individual can exceed \$100,000, given that homelessness frequently results in declining physical and mental health, addictions, and consequently, an increased use of health care and corrections services.<sup>2</sup> The provision of housing is not only a cheaper alternative but also provides a stable environment necessary for improving well-being and health outcomes.

Some of the major barriers to addressing poverty arise not from a lack of resources but rather from a lack of understanding. The causes of poverty are complex and cannot be reduced to personal failings or bad choices. Genuine efforts at alleviating the harmful effects of poverty must be sensitive not only to the shared consequences but also the structural root causes of this social issue.

Poverty results from a complex mix of institutional and structural causes, obstacles, and barriers. There is no single cause of poverty just as there is no single area of life that it does not impact. The social determinants of health theory

suggests that the health and well-being of individuals and communities is determined by social conditions shaped by wealth distribution and access to power and resources.<sup>3</sup> These social determinants account for disparities in health outcomes which are regarded as being unfair and preventable. The underlying theory is that there is a direct connection between income levels and health. By being compelled, under economic circumstances, to focus on meeting basic needs, individuals living in poverty are unable to address other important areas resulting in a decline in their overall quality of life. One Canadian study showed a 21-year age difference in life expectancy between affluent and poor neighbourhoods.<sup>4</sup> Children from low income families often have less access to nutritious food, which can lead to lower educational attainment, ultimately resulting in fewer employment opportunities, thus repeating the cycle of poverty. The cyclical and intergenerational dimension of poverty is demonstrated by the fact that if you are from an impoverished background you are much more likely to be poor later on in life. In Canada, about one-third of children from low income families will remain so in adulthood.<sup>5</sup>



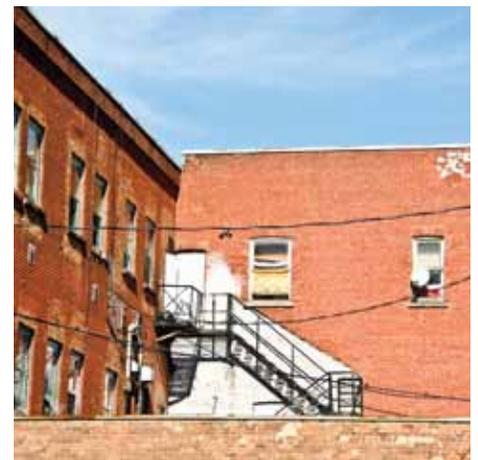
Thunder Bay, like any other community in Canada or the world, is subject to massive geo-political and economic pressures and trends. For example, fluctuations in the price of minerals or other primary resources on the world market can have tremendous impacts on our community, leading to prosperity as well as periods of economic hardship. To take a familiar regional example, mass unemployment resulting from the closure of a mill cannot be said to occur because of personal failing or choice but through a combination of economic and political forces that are beyond the scope of the individual.

The Thunder Bay Poverty Reduction Strategy was formulated to develop community-specific recommendations for immediate, medium- and long-term community poverty reduction. Four major areas, or “pillars,” were chosen as priorities for these efforts:

- Housing
- Income and Community Economic Development
- Infrastructure
- Inclusion and Engagement

The recommendations in this report seek to address these key areas.

This poverty reduction work will only succeed through partnerships, collaboration, and as a community effort. We can build the kind of world that we would like to live in, and that work begins with our community. We invite you to join us.



## DEFINING POVERTY



Presently, the Canadian government does not have an official definition of poverty, instead offering a variety of measures based on income-related terms. The Low Income Measure (LIM) is one such indicator of low income. Statistics Canada defines the LIM as “a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted household income, where ‘adjusted’ indicates that household needs are taken into account.”<sup>6</sup> According to this measure, 12.8% or approximately 15,100 individuals in Thunder Bay live in poverty. While the LIM is useful in its statistical merit, it does not provide the context of poverty: Why does poverty exist? How far does it reach? How do we address it? None of these questions can be answered by one statistic and it is essential we dig deeper so as to provide a contextual basis for these figures.

### POVERTY AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Specific groups in our community experience poverty at a greater rate than others, including: new Canadians, lone-parent families, youth, Aboriginal peoples, women, racialized peoples and individuals with mental health issues and disabilities. It is essential we recognize the structural barriers which maintain poverty.

The structural barriers that prevent individuals from rising beyond poverty are numerous, including: the health of the current labour market; low social assistance rates; high rates of substance use; lack of food security and basic needs; and insufficient housing stock. These barriers act in unison to collectively maximize the effect of poverty on individuals and families.

### SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Some of the most significant systemic barriers that influence poverty are the rates of Ontario Works (OW), Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and minimum wage. Ontario Works is a social assistance program designed to assist individuals who are unable to find work, while ODSP is designed to assist individuals with disabilities that prevent them from working.<sup>7</sup> An Ontario government-sponsored Commission for the Review of Social Assistance (2012) concluded that social assistance rates were inadequate, while also identifying a number of barriers which limit recipients’ ability to overcome poverty.

The Ontario government has suggested that Ontario Works be used primarily as assistance for individuals that have temporarily fallen on hard times.<sup>8</sup> Yet, one of the many barriers associated with Ontario Works is the necessity of applicants to sell off a prescribed amount of assets before being eligible. A single individual applying for Ontario Works cannot have more than \$2,500 in liquid assets in order to meet eligibility criteria.<sup>9</sup> When individuals are mandated to rid themselves of assets which may eventually help them transition out of social assistance, it only reinforces the cycle of poverty.

Another barrier is the low rates for individuals receiving social assistance. A single individual will receive \$626 monthly for Ontario Works with \$376 of that amount required for shelter allowance.<sup>10</sup> The average price of a one-bedroom apartment in Thunder Bay as of October 2012 was \$676.<sup>11</sup> While this discrepancy reveals the extreme difficulty individuals on Ontario Works have in affording housing, it simultaneously reveals their limited ability to spend on basic needs and food. It becomes increasingly difficult to break the cycle of poverty when social assistance rates are not adequate to address basic needs like food and shelter.

### THE WORKING POOR

In discussing who is affected by poverty, individuals with employment are frequently overlooked. Despite this, the working poor represent a large portion of individuals living in poverty. Individuals working full-time at minimum wage still fall into the low income category. One province-wide study revealed that the wages for the bottom 40% of income earners in Ontario have stagnated or declined despite working longer hours.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, many well-paying, full-time positions have been replaced with part-time jobs in the period after the 2008 recession.<sup>13</sup>

### HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Another area of concern for individuals and families living in poverty is housing. In terms of the rental market, a 2012 report published by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation stated that “Thunder Bay’s vacancy rate has been on a downward trend since 2006” and predicted that the vacancy rate will continue to decline.<sup>14</sup> Between the years 2000 and 2007 the vacancy rate



fluctuated between roughly 6% and 4%. Between 2008 to the current period, the vacancy rates have gradually declined to below 2%. The decreased vacancy rate is related to the growing number of people on wait lists for social housing. According to the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, there were 441 active households on wait lists for social housing in Thunder Bay in 2003. This number dramatically increased from 610 to 1127 in 2009. In 2013 there were 1170 active households on the wait lists.<sup>15</sup>

The housing gap extends far beyond market rental and social housing. Emergency shelters are routinely at capacity and services are limited for some populations. Due to a lack of demographic-specific shelters and limited shelter capacity, men with children, women and youth are often left without safe and adequate housing. These groups are often faced with the decision of whether to be vulnerable in shelters dominated by an adult male population, or become homeless.<sup>16</sup> Presently, the necessary services are not in place to accommodate individuals and families in need of safe and suitable housing.

Homelessness (also referred to as street-involvement) can be the result of a number of life events that can

occur as a result of divorce; domestic violence and abusive relationships; transitions out of institutionalized care; affordable housing; workplace injury and/or disability; economic conditions and a wide breadth of other life circumstances.<sup>17</sup> Also contributing to street-involvement is discrimination by landlords, insufficient social assistance rates, excessive utility costs and a lack of food security.<sup>18</sup> Despite individuals falling into homelessness through no fault of their own, a very wide cast of systemic barriers exist that reinforce the cycle of poverty. When individuals are street-involved, they are far more likely than the general population to develop substance use and mental health issues.<sup>19</sup>

### FOOD SECURITY

Food is an essential need and the effects of a non-nutritious diet are numerous, including devastating effects on both morale and functioning. When children are sent to school without a meal it has detrimental effects on their ability to learn. The workforce participation rate for youth aged 15-24 that are without any certificate, degree or diploma is 37.6%; a very low figure compared to a high school educated student whose employment rate is 72.5%.<sup>20</sup>

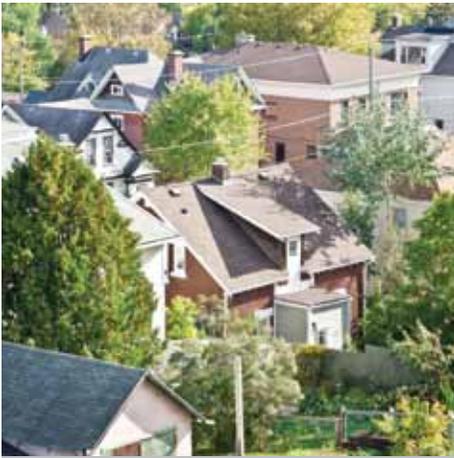
Individuals living in poverty also commonly live with a more negative health outlook, some of which is attributable to a non-nutritious diet.<sup>21</sup> There are often more budget, low-price grocery stores and fast food restaurants in areas where low-income individuals and families live.<sup>22</sup> The foods sold at these grocery stores are often cheap, processed and pre-packaged. Correspondingly, these meals or fast food become the primary choice for individuals and families living with low-income. Despite the fact that eating fast

food and cheap, processed and pre-packaged foods can lead to detrimental health effects in the future, they are often the main option for low-income individuals. The cost of a healthy diet for a single individual in Thunder Bay is \$267, rising to \$795 for a family of four with two adults and two children.<sup>23</sup> For many in the community, a healthy, nutritious diet is unaffordable.

The cost of food has increased by 30% since the year 2000 and as a result, a lack of food security has increased.<sup>24</sup> In March 2012, some 412,998 Ontarians received food from a food bank; 43% of which were living on social assistance and 39% were children and youth aged 18 and under.<sup>25</sup> Since 2002, the increasing trend of food bank users has been positively correlated to the increased cost of food, as food banks have seen a 39.9% increase in usage.

The ultimate repercussion of poverty is that it forces individuals and families into decisions they should never have to make: for example, choosing between food and heat; adequate clothing and necessary medication; or child care and a minimum wage job.

# 1 HOUSING



It became clear through the data collection and consultations conducted by the Poverty Reduction Strategy that affordable housing is a major concern in our community. The lack of affordable housing was the most frequently identified issue through focus groups, key informant interviews, the community forum, and open house. During this process it was not unusual to hear about overcrowding and unsuitable living conditions: for example, a mother and three children living in a one-bedroom basement apartment. One focus group participant stated that “housing is in a crisis situation in Thunder Bay.” This sentiment has been echoed by other sources and with reference to housing-related data.

A 2012 report published by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation stated that “Thunder Bay’s vacancy rate has been on a downward trend since 2006” and predicted that the vacancy rate will continue to decline.<sup>26</sup> This parallels an increase in the number of households on wait lists for social housing.<sup>27</sup> The housing gap also extends beyond market and social housing. Emergency shelters are routinely at capacity, and services are limited for some populations. As one interview participant noted:

There’s definitely a huge housing gap and we face that on a daily basis with our clients, especially with our addictions and violence against women programs. There’s a huge gap accessing safe housing, even around shelters. There are restrictions around what they can and can’t do, in terms of even age and gender. Youth, for example, struggle with going to Shelter House. There isn’t adequate shelter for women, especially women with children.

The housing situation can decline further if it is not adequately addressed, especially when considering the anticipated mining boom in the region and the increased demand for housing that will accompany it. As stated in the Mining Readiness Strategy document, “Thunder Bay needs to focus effort on establishing additional rental housing and be sure to stay ahead of the demand for additional homes for sale.”<sup>28</sup>

Solutions to the housing issue were summed up by an interview participant who simply stated that we should “put [our efforts] into bricks and mortar. Housing is the need.” Cooperative housing modeled on the successes of Castlegreen and Superiorview was suggested as one method to increase affordable housing and vacancy rates in the city. New emergency shelters for youth and families would serve to address another serious gap. The Housing First approach – which has shown promising results elsewhere in Canada – also received several endorsements from key informant interview participants.<sup>29</sup> Housing First is defined as “an approach to ending homelessness that centres on quickly providing homeless people with housing and then providing additional services

as needed” based on the “underlying principle ... that people are better able to move forwards with their lives if they are first housed.”<sup>30</sup> Immediate actions on the local level revolve around determining how much new housing is needed; creating partnerships with developers, community organizations, and/or senior levels of government; and securing adequate funds for new builds.

## HOUSING RECOMMENDATIONS

### Commitment 1: Increase non-market, affordable, and social housing stock

- 1.1 Create and maintain a comprehensive inventory of all currently available social housing from all sources including information on the status of operational funding agreements.
- 1.2 Develop partnerships with community organizations and the private sector to build affordable housing or to convert/ retrofit other buildings into social housing units.
- 1.3 Examine funding arrangements to leverage capital and use existing assets as collateral for new social housing and retrofitting.



**Commitment 2: Promote affordable market rental housing and home ownership opportunities for low income individuals and families**

- 2.1 Raise awareness amongst landlords to promote, expand, and encourage the creation of more rent supplement units.
- 2.2 Encourage credit unions and other non-profit or financial organizations to assist those with low incomes with moving into home ownership.

**Commitment 3: Develop short-, medium- and long-term solutions to homelessness**

- 3.1 Develop partnerships for the purpose of determining the number of homeless people in Thunder Bay, to be updated on an annual basis.
- 3.2 Support the Thunder Bay Drug Strategy Accommodation Needs Assessment.
- 3.3 Support the creation of a Youth Shelter and Family Shelter.
- 3.4 Support the Housing First approach.

**Commitment 4: Enhance the quality of life with respect to housing**

- 4.1 Encourage the construction of one fully accessible floor in new builds, the objective that new building plans fast track the goals of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the Ontario Building Code, and that retrofits are in compliance with accessibility standards in order to better serve the needs of the disabled community as a whole including the wheelchair-abled, elderly, mentally challenged, and visually impaired.
- 4.2 Assist in the increase and development of supportive housing



options for those with disabilities, mental health and addiction issues.

**Commitment 5: Advocacy**

Through the offices of the municipal Intergovernmental Liaison Committee, and in collaboration with the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, the Association of Municipalities Ontario, First Nations communities and urban Aboriginal organizations, lobby the provincial and federal orders of government for the following:

- 5.1 A comprehensive federal housing strategy.

5.2 A reevaluation of funding formulas concerning the allocation of federal homelessness reduction and prevention funds for Thunder Bay, recognizing the city's unique needs and challenges.

5.3 Increased provincial and federal funding for social housing.

5.4 Restore mandatory and needs-based provincial funding for programs to assist low income individuals in setting up a new residence or maintain an existing residence, as per the former Community Start Up and Maintenance Benefit.

## 2 INCOME AND COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



**P**overty by definition denotes a lack of adequate income. According to Statistics Canada, 12.8% of Thunder Bay's population lives in poverty. Alarming, between the years 1981 and 2012, the province of Ontario had the largest increase in income inequality and the second-highest increase in poverty in Canada.<sup>31</sup>

During community consultations, the low social assistance rates in Ontario emerged as one of the main areas of concern. One interview participant stated that "Without a doubt, an increase in the social assistance rates would make a tremendous difference" in reducing poverty. Although the rates of Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program are set by the provincial government – and other programs like Employment Insurance fall under federal jurisdiction – advocacy remains an important component of ensuring that adequate social programs are in place. On the local level, a trustee program can help to remove barriers for youth accessing Ontario Works.

In terms of earned income, much can be done to improve the conditions of the working poor, as even those working full-time for minimum wage fall below

the Low Income Cut-Off. As a first step, determining a local living wage calculation and promoting living wages with community partners was suggested by several participants in the community consultations as a way to improve levels of earned income in the city. Increasing support for and coordination between existing adult education, skills, training, and employment services was another frequently mentioned recommendation. One interview participant observed that "If you are coming from a disadvantaged background, unless there are little steps put out for you to step up, it's hard to just jump up to the next rung by yourself." The lack of a Grade 12 diploma can act as a major obstacle to gaining employment, especially in sectors of the labour market that are projected to grow in the coming years. As the Mining Readiness Strategy noted, "The more skilled workers that are trained within the Region, the higher their participation rate will be in the labour force, and the broader the economic benefits to the Region."<sup>32</sup>

Another more innovative area that the Poverty Reduction Strategy focused on for the Income Pillar was Community Economic Development (CED). To these ends Dr. John Loxley, an economics professor at the University of Manitoba and CED expert, was invited to give a presentation to the community on the various successful cooperative and social enterprise initiatives that have been launched in Winnipeg in recent years. Winnipeg has demonstrated excellence and leadership in CED on the national level. Loxley discussed programs like BUILD (Building Urban Industries for Local Development) and Manitoba Green Retrofit. These are social enterprises and non-profit contractors that provide training and skills to populations who face barriers to

the labour market while simultaneously providing paid employment and a useful, environmentally sound service. The Aboriginal owned and operated Neechi Foods Workers Cooperative is another well-known Winnipeg social enterprise that specializes in bannock, fresh and frozen wild blueberries, wild rice, Manitoba-caught fish, and other products. In this regard, Thunder Bay has a long tradition of cooperatives and municipally-owned institutions, as well as more recent social enterprises from which to draw inspiration.

### INCOME AND COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Commitment 6: Promote living wages

- 6.1 Create, and regularly update, a living wage calculation specific to Thunder Bay.
- 6.2 Partner with employers and agencies to promote Thunder Bay as a living wage city.

#### Commitment 7: Improve access to social assistance and earned income opportunities

- 7.1 Create a trusteeship program for youth applying for Ontario Works.
- 7.2 Support local agencies to provide additional employment opportunities.
- 7.3 Enhance small-scale economic opportunities.

#### Commitment 8: Develop collaborative approaches to employment training

- 8.1 Partner with school boards, colleges, skilled trades, and employment services to create more coordinated approaches to training, apprenticeship, and educational opportunities.



8.2 Enhance outreach strategies to various sectors of the city on employment services, training, skill building, education programs and services.

**Commitment 9: Promote Community Economic Development strategies**

9.1 Develop partnerships aimed at the creation of cooperatives and social enterprises as vehicles for local economic growth, job creation, and employment skills development.

**Commitment 10: Advocacy**

Through the offices of the municipal Intergovernmental Liaison Committee, and in collaboration with the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, the Association of Municipalities Ontario, First Nations communities and urban Aboriginal organizations, lobby the provincial and federal levels of government for the following:

- 10.1 Increased rates and access to Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program, indexed to inflation.
- 10.2 Increased program and income supports for seniors living on low incomes.



- 10.3 Reformed provincial welfare surveillance policies aligned with cost-benefit analyses and evidenced based practices.
- 10.4 Increases in the provincial minimum wage to a living wage.
- 10.5 Investigate the feasibility of a guaranteed annual income as an alternative to income assistance.
- 10.6 Improved access to Employment Insurance and Workplace and Insurance Safety Board compensation.

### 3 INFRASTRUCTURE



**A** number of recurring themes were apparent in discussions about barriers low income individuals face and how infrastructural improvements can help to alleviate the effects of poverty. Along with mental health services, transportation, and food security, there were thought to be limited recreational opportunities for those on fixed incomes; “siloe” approaches to complex problems that result in gaps to services; and other programs and services were said to often be located far away from the people that need them. In addition, common sentiments included the desire to “link strategies” and create “new ways to communicate so everyone can be engaged.” Another interview participant observed that “You find that when you really connect with people, everyone wants to make things better for themselves. I find that once you open doors people really want to help themselves, if they have a chance they would...you empower them to become part of that solution.”

One of the proposed innovative solutions to these issues that emerged during focus group sessions was the notion of multi-sector community hubs, an idea that has gained considerable traction in Southern Ontario. London’s

Child and Youth Network describes community hubs as centres that “bring together a variety of integrated services for children, youth, and families in one convenient location.” Community hubs engage in “service integration” by bringing a number of community-specific services together. In so doing, they effectively remove barriers from accessing programs and services, like transportation, contribute to stronger neighbourhoods, and through multi-sector partnerships, can result in improved outcomes per dollar invested per client.<sup>33</sup> The services that community hubs provide vary widely as they depend on identified community needs. The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, which was cited by some members of the community as a particularly successful example, “strives to increase access to healthy food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds health and community and challenges inequality” through the provision of services such as a food bank, community cooking, and urban agriculture.<sup>34</sup>

The lack of appropriate mental health services was, after housing, the most frequently identified gap during the data collection stage of the poverty reduction strategy. A large percentage of homeless, vulnerable, and at-risk individuals suffer from mental illnesses, and these illnesses are often exacerbated by living on the street or otherwise living in substandard conditions. The general consensus among interview subjects was that there is a lack of integrated and transitional services, particularly for those individuals with a mental illness and a concurrent disorder. This leads to people “falling through the cracks” and difficulties in navigating the system. Also, funding formulas and criteria for treatment often tend to place major

barriers on the ability of some individuals to access services.

The geography of the city, the distance to some services, and the cost of public transit were identified during our consultations as real barriers for low income people. Also related to this was the issue of food security, and the ability of low income individuals to access healthy food. Aside from the cost of purchasing healthy food, some low income areas are effectively “food deserts” with limited options and many low income individuals require significant travel to retail grocery outlets. Solutions to these barriers ranged from encouraging affordability in public transportation, the facilitation of alternative transportation methods, enhanced urban densification to reduce distances to programs and services, and coordinating transportation to retail grocery outlets from low income neighbourhoods.

#### INFRASTRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

##### **Commitment 11: Enhance communications capacity for low income individuals and families**

- 11.1 Promote and expand existing programs and services such as Phones for Families, 211 Ontario North, and various free public internet access locations.
- 11.2 Assist in the development of the expansion and affordability of Internet access and education.

**Commitment 12: Improve transportation affordability and accessibility**

- 12.1 Encourage public transportation accessibility and affordability for low income individuals and the integration of all public transportation methods.
- 12.2 Facilitate alternative methods of transportation through the expansion of pedestrian walkways, bike paths, and commuter trails.
- 12.3 Support urban densification strategies.

**Commitment 13: Develop multi-sector community hubs**

- 13.1 Explore the potential of enhancing community centres to become “community hubs” featuring after school programs, recreational, childcare, educational and training opportunities and access to other programs and services.
- 13.2 Assist in the development of partnerships to realize multi-sector community hubs.

**Commitment 14: Promote food security coordination and access**

- 14.1 Support the recommendations of the Food Charter.
- 14.2 Develop partnerships to facilitate transportation to retail grocery outlets from low income neighbourhoods.
- 14.3 Explore the expansion and coordination of community gardens and edible landscapes with appropriate supports such as access to vacant land and water.

**Commitment 15: Increase recreational opportunities for low income individuals, people with disabilities, and disenfranchised groups**

- 15.1 Encourage and promote more free or discounted events in the community year round and enhance public space.

**Commitment 16: Strengthen collaborative and preventative approaches to public safety**

- 16.1 Support the recommendations of the Crime Prevention Council.

**Commitment 17: Promote enhanced coordination and partnership among health providers**

- 17.1 Support the development of integrated and transitional services, particularly for individuals with a mental illness and a concurrent disorder.
- 17.2 Support the development of improved transitional support with regards to child and adult mental health, foster care, and remedial health care services.

**Commitment 18: Advocacy**

Through the offices of the municipal Intergovernmental Liaison Committee, and in collaboration with the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, the Association of Municipalities Ontario, First Nations communities and urban Aboriginal organizations, lobby the provincial and federal levels of government for the following:

- 18.1 Increased federal and provincial public transportation infrastructure investments.



- 18.2 A province-wide, affordable childcare program.
- 18.3 Public health funding formulas that are not “siloed” and that take cost savings from preventative measures into account.
- 18.4 Tax incentives to encourage active modes of transportation.
- 18.5 OW and ODSP supplements for transportation.
- 18.6 Work in collaboration with school boards to advocate for a universal hot meal program.

## 4 INCLUSION AND ENGAGEMENT



**P**overty is always about a lack of adequate income. It is also about a lack of choices and decision-making power that contribute to marginalization. Indeed, as one interview participant noted, “Poverty impacts people’s lives in every way. I don’t think that there is a single aspect of a person’s life that isn’t impacted by poverty.”

One common sentiment expressed by many participants in the Poverty Reduction Strategy was the notion that fostering community engagement can effectively help to address social exclusion, increase civic engagement and empowerment, and improve decision-making outcomes. “The grassroots know best about their situation and their environment,” said one interview participant, continuing that “There has to be a better way of channeling those ideas and implementing them. There is no better way of doing anything unless you have the stakeholders involved.” This sentiment also featured prominently in the Community Engagement Sessions Report.<sup>35</sup> The belief in an “informed and involved people” is one of the stated principles of the 2011-2014 City of Thunder Bay Strategic Plan.<sup>36</sup>

An increasingly popular method of enhancing civic engagement, used by over 1000 municipalities around the world, is through a process known as participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is defined as “a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget.” The process works as follows: “residents brainstorm spending ideas, volunteer budget delegates develop proposals based on these ideas, residents vote on proposals, and the government implements the top projects.”<sup>37</sup> Participatory budgeting is “budget neutral,” in that it does not seek new money or extra money. Rather, it is simply a different way of spending a portion of the public budget. In Ontario, this process has been used by a social housing complex in Toronto, by community groups in Guelph, and most recently, on a ward-wide level in Hamilton.

The negative stereotyping of low income people, and the ignorance surrounding the true causes of poverty, were overwhelmingly the most common responses by interview respondents to questions surrounding barriers to addressing poverty. The idea that poverty is caused by personal failings was seen to be a common, harmful attitude. One interview participant maintained that, as a society, we often “assume that if people are poor, somehow they’re the authors of their own fate ... even though we have never had 100% employment ... or have we ever had a minimum wage that provided people with a standard of living that would accommodate food, shelter, transportation, and the basics of life.”

Racism, particularly racial stereotyping of Aboriginal people who are statistically overrepresented in the low income

category, was identified as a major barrier to addressing poverty by most respondents.

In addition to the positive steps that the City has taken to forge a meaningful dialogue with Fort William First Nations, urban and regional Aboriginal communities, supporting a welcome centre or “one-stop shop” for Aboriginal services was suggested as an initiative that would make a real difference. Other efforts to raise awareness about the various structural, root causes of poverty, including the legacy of residential schools, should be encouraged in order to counter harmful stigmas and stereotypes while enhancing social inclusion.

Education, as mentioned in the Income Pillar, is a critical ingredient necessary for realizing and maximizing the local potential of projected growth areas in the economy of Northwestern Ontario. As one interview participant stated, “I really think that education is the foundation for people to move up ... You have more options with education than without. It opens more doors for you.”

### INCLUSION AND ENGAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Commitment 19: Enhance educational opportunities and promote lifelong learning as a public good

- 19.1 Support existing programs that encourage people to complete their high school education and to continue learning.
- 19.2 Support existing programs that do arts in the schools.

19.3 Raise awareness about the root causes of poverty in order to combat stereotypes and stigma including the history and legacy of residential schools.

19.4 Assist in the development of grassroots educational opportunities delivered in public spaces such as libraries and community centres.

#### **Commitment 20: Support a welcoming community**

20.1 Assist in the development of a welcome centre and “one-stop shop” for Aboriginal services including English as a second language training for residents from remote communities whose first language is not English.

20.2 Partner with community agencies to provide a welcoming environment for new Canadians.

#### **Commitment 21: Increase opportunities for community dialogue and engagement**

21.1 Expand the use of proactive community forums, town hall meetings, and open houses.

21.2 Support the formation of grassroots neighbourhood groups to enhance social inclusion and empowerment.

21.3 Explore participatory budgeting as a decision-making model for the City of Thunder Bay.

#### **Commitment 22: Make racism and discrimination unacceptable in Thunder Bay**

22.1 Support the recommendations of the Thunder Bay Anti-Racism Advisory Committee.



22.2 Continue to engage in meaningful dialogue and relationships with Fort William First Nation, urban and regional Aboriginal communities.

22.3 Encourage the development of elementary and secondary school curriculum addressing cultural awareness.

#### **Commitment 23: Advocacy**

Through the offices of the municipal Intergovernmental Liaison Committee, and in collaboration with the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association, the Association of Municipalities Ontario, First Nations communities and urban Aboriginal

organizations, lobby the provincial and federal levels of government for the following:

23.1 Provincial government investments in elementary and secondary education.

23.2 Investigate the feasibility of free tuition and debt forgiveness for post-secondary students.

23.3 Address the stigma and social isolation associated with living in poverty.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

This Strategy is a long-term framework for reducing poverty in Thunder Bay. The Strategy sets out a vision, guiding principles and a series of commitments under four pillar areas. To be successful, this Strategy will require broad-based collaboration with support from the City, the District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board, other orders of government, and other community organizations.

An Implementation Panel should be established to set priorities, provide leadership to further the commitments, and to monitor and evaluate progress on the Strategy.

The following is an Initial Report Card, which should be updated annually.

### INITIAL REPORT CARD

	2011	2010	2009	2008
<b>Vacancy Rate</b>	1.7 %	2.2 %	2.3 %	2.2 %
<b>Active Households on Waitlist for Social Housing</b>	1,420	1,126	1,127	610
<b>Unemployment Rate</b>	6.9 %	6.6 %	8.3 %	5.9 %
<b>Ontario Works Caseload</b>	2,504	2,596	2,425	2,114
<b>ODSP Caseload</b>	-	-	-	-
<b>Median Total Family Income (All low income family types)</b>	\$ 12,970	\$ 12,730	\$ 12,040	\$ 12,080
<b>Low Income Measure (After Tax), Thunder Bay CMA*</b>	12.8 %	12.4 %	14.1 %	13.8 %
<b>Number of children aged 0 to 17 years in low income families</b>	4,780	4,540	5,380	5,270
<b>Unique Individuals Accessing Emergency Shelters</b>	1,267	1,252	N/A	N/A
<b>Emergency Medical Service Visits</b>	N/A	101,785	93,771	N/A

\* The Low Income Measure is a fixed percentage (50% of median adjusted household income. Where "adjusted" indicates that households needs are taken into account.)

### SNAPSHOT OF POVERTY IN THUNDER BAY

The Volunteer Income Tax Clinic is administered by the Lakehead Social Planning Council. Consent to collect the data from individuals will be incorporated, effective for the 2013 tax year. This data will augment information gathered from other sources, and provide a snapshot of the low income population in Thunder Bay.

For the 2012 tax season, the team processed 3,162 returns for individuals, generating \$386,039.84 in refunds that benefitted our community.

#### Recommended Data To Be Collected Through Volunteer Income Tax Clinic

- Income (Employment Income, Pension Income, Social Assistance [OW, ODSP, WSIB])
- Gender
- Age
- Marital Status
- Dependents Under 19
- Accommodation Type (Home Ownership, Rental Accommodation, Other)
- Use of Public Transportation
- Internet Access
- Total Number Served
- Total Number Refunds

### OTHER INDICATORS

The implementation and monitoring of the Strategy should be aligned with the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is currently under review and in the community consultation process. A set of common indicators that will allow for comparison with province-wide data. Another set of social indicators that should be included to monitor the progress of the Strategy is currently being developed by the GIS Mapping for Strong Neighbourhoods Working Group. The following is a list of indicators from these sources and others to be collected.

- Birth Weights
- School Readiness
- Educational Progress
- High School Graduation Rates
- Depth of Poverty
- Standard of Living (Deprivation Index)
- Ontario Housing Measure
- Annual Living Wage Calculation
- Social Assistance Caseloads and Social Housing Availability Comparative

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## ADDITIONAL REPORTS

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During the creation of this Poverty Reduction Strategy, additional reports were prepared on the following:

- Various Focus Groups, December 2012 to February 2013
- Open House, February 12, 2013
- Community Forum, February 13, 2013
- Key Informant Interviews  
January to March 2013
- Thunder Bay Poverty Report Profile,  
December 2012

These additional reports are available for review as Appendices to the Poverty Reduction Strategy at the following locations:

**Lakehead Social Planning Council**

*See address below*

**Brodie Resource Library**

Thunder Bay Public Library  
216 Brodie Street South

**Chancellor Paterson Library**

Lakehead University  
Northern Studies Resource Centre  
955 Oliver Road

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For more information:



**Lakehead Social Planning Council**

125 Syndicate Avenue South  
Unit 38, Victoriaville Centre  
Thunder Bay, Ontario, P7E 6H8  
[807] 624-2330

[www.lspc.ca/poverty](http://www.lspc.ca/poverty)

