

From crisis to success: Oakville groups help break the cycle of poverty^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When you're trying to raise a family, put food on the table each day and simply make ends meet, it can be overwhelming, especially when you're doing it all on your own.

"One of the biggest challenges a single mother faces is getting the parenting down, that scheduling down," said Sharlene Gumbs, a senior program manager with Home Suite Hope (HSH), about the struggles of a low-income, single-parent family.

Gumbs has been working one-on-one with single moms over the last five years to improve their lives through HSH programs aimed at lifting low-income, single-parents out of poverty.

Gumbs is currently working with 10 families and connects regularly with another 10 - graduates of HSH's two-year ReStart program.

"The work we do is to help these families work towards a place of more freedom, more choices, more opportunities," said Michelle Pommells, HSH president and CEO.

HSH also provides long-term refuge (average stay of up to 24 months) for low-income, precariously-housed, single-parent families so the family has time to stabilize.

Gumbs added staff helps families set, and achieve, goals, whether that's getting help for mental health or addiction issues or financial or career aspirations.

"A lot of it is just getting them into a pace where they can be productive," she said, noting it can be difficult for single parents when they are responsible for another person with no one to help. Sometimes personal tragedies, such as sexual assault and other violence adds another layer of challenges, Gumbs said, noting she often calls upon other agencies for additional support.

"So many times these families have dreams so far away they can't see any way to realize them," said Pommells.

Although they may have talents, strengths and goals they want to reach, Pommells said they are often mired in bills and responsibilities while trying to put on a brave front for the sake of the children.

ReStart Program participants come from all walks of life, said Gumbs.

"ReStart is more tailored to the individual. That's what makes it really special," she said. "A person in ReStart can be in college, they could be in university, they could be someone immigrating here from Canada, who hasn't been able to get their credentials assessed, and we might be part of that process. It could be a mom returning to the workforce or even a mother regaining custody of her children."

One in eight families in Halton are led by single parents, according to HSH.

Of that, women make up 22 per cent of lone-parent families living below the poverty line compared with seven per cent of men, Statistics Canada 2013 reveals.

Pommells said HSH programs help single parents lay a foundation to enable improved outcomes and futures for their children.

Children from low-income families tend to have their "horizons more restricted," she continued, noting HSH's programs level the playing field by providing doorways and paths to realize talent and creativity.

It calls this brand of support the "wrap around" social services needed to help break the cycle of poverty.

Sara Cumming, a Sheridan College sociology professor, agrees that to lift low-income, single-parent families out of poverty, there needs to be a coordinated effort of social support services.

Through extensive research on low-income, single-mother-led families over the past 10 years, Cumming said she found women don't necessarily need a financial assistance cheque from Ontario Works as much as they need a supportive network to bring them out of crisis.

"The women who did the best in my study were women who were in shelters and the reason they did the best was because once you're admitted into a shelter, generally that shelter has all the links provided right to you," said Cumming of the 40 women she studied intensively over the course of five years.

"So subsidized housing, subsidized child care, legal aid, English-as-a-second-language, any kind of training courses, they could access right at the shelter."

She noted that meeting people going through the same thing and talking with compassionate shelter staff and social workers helped put women on the right path towards self-sufficiency.

Cumming thinks HSH's Homeward Bound Halton program will be successful in providing single mothers with a path towards successful careers and self-sufficiency.

Now in its third year, the program, modelled after a successful Toronto program run by WoodGreen Community Services, provides homeless or struggling single mothers and their children with a furnished apartment for up to four years and free daycare while each mom gets a fully-funded college education, job internship opportunities and career placements.

Ten women are currently going through the program, with another five expected to be added later this year.

"I'm really interested in seeing how this plays out for women because my prediction is there's a whole lot more likelihood of them being successful than women who are just getting a social assistance cheque," said Cumming, who is closely following the program and its relationship to Sheridan College.

She has also been working with the Oakville Community Foundation (OCF) and other community initiatives that aim to tackle poverty in Oakville.

Along with colleague Michael McNamara, professor of creativity and creative thinking with Sheridan's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, she has been working to put the OCF's 2015 Vital Signs report into "vital solutions" by looking at real and effective change that could be possible.

The report, released in October 2015, notes equity gap, housing, mental health and inclusion are issues in the community.

"Usually, if they're poor, they also don't have housing, they also don't have childcare, they also don't have education," said Cumming, who will begin working with philanthropists, community groups and those receiving support this September to participate in problem-solving sessions on what effective solutions may be.

She's also working with Halton Poverty Roundtable and Kerr Street Mission (KSM) to put together a pilot project program for students at risk of not obtaining their high school diploma.

Cumming notes the work she's doing outside her role as a professor at Sheridan stems from a passion to help those who are struggling get back on their feet and succeed.

She personally knows what it's like.

"My mother and father were 15 and 16 when I was born, and they separated when I was two or three, and so I grew up on social assistance for a big portion of my life with a lone mother and watched her struggle and us struggle. It's not a fun way to grow up and you're highly stigmatized," she said.

Cummings also had her children young while she was in her early 20s, but calls herself lucky because she decided to start school after having children.

"I fell in love with the discipline I was in and was really able to substantially change my own financial life and I feel like people (living in poverty) are never really given a fair shot in society and so it's sort of my goal to work as hard as I can in this area, whether it's just to get people to be kinder or make effective change."

Gumbs notes how rewarding it is to be able to help families in crisis be in a better place.

One case that has stuck with her was a single mother with a Grade 4 education.

She had fled a domestic violence relationship and sought out help and support through the ReStart program. By the time she graduated from the ReStart program, she was in college.

"She went through a lot... She really worked hard within the program and even had a better relationship with her children by the time she had exited the program," said Gumbs.

Pommells said people are starting to recognize that it's virtually impossible for low-income families to escape poverty without help.

That person, she noted, using the analogy of someone falling into quicksand, can't get themselves out on their own. No matter how hard they work, they continue to sink unless a rope, or a helping hand is offered.

It is only then that transformation can happen, she said.

Pommells said she's proud of being in a community that is actively trying to tackle poverty.

Thanks to supportive funding from the OCF and other community partners, HSH has delivered results, with 72 people being housed in 2015 after homelessness or precarious housing and a number of single parents having graduated from its ReStart program.

Its Abolish Homelessness 2016 campaign is close to reaching its goal with 90 per cent of \$200,000 raised to help struggling families put a roof over their heads.

-reprinted from the Oakville Beaver

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