


#HACKPOVERTY

**A PLAN TO
END
CHRONIC
POVERTY
IN TORONTO**

Participatory Action Based Research
Conducted January – September 2022

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A photograph of a person sitting on a wooden bench in a park, looking out over a dense forest towards the Toronto skyline. The skyline features several tall skyscrapers, including the CN Tower, under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The person is seen from behind, wearing a dark t-shirt and blue jeans. The park has lush green trees and a grassy area in the foreground.

*"We are all visitors to this time,
this place. We are just passing
through. Our purpose here is to
observe, to learn, to grow, to love...
and then we return home."*

Aboriginal proverb

YSM believes that it is our responsibility to give thanks and respect to our Creator, and to those who first occupied this land we are upon.

We give thanks to the Anishinabek, the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee and Ojibway/Chippewa peoples; the Metis; and the Mississaugas of the Credit, the first people of this land.

We commit to demonstrating an acknowledgement of this truth through our ongoing work to bring inclusive prosperity and full participation in society for all peoples in Toronto.

We commit to seeking this in all we do, with thankful and respectful hearts.

YSM
YONGE STREET MISSION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Yonge Street Mission would like to thank the following individuals who have contributed to this report, the event and its findings.

Single Parent
Advisory Review
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- Lesha Grant
- Malcolm Fischer
- Melissa Quibell
- Robert Hylton
- Alisa Velthuisen
- Brian Gonzales
- Jennifer La Trobe
- Justin Wang
- Marzia Khan
- Mayesha Ahmed
- Shania Bhopa
- Tim Casswell

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Finastra
- Ashley Curran
- Brendan Kennedy
The Toronto Star
- Brent Fearon
The Foundation Office
- Caitlin Patterson
- Christine Cooper
BMO
- Claire Barcik
Catherine Donnelly
Foundation
- Derek Ballantyne
DKGI Inc.

- Giuliana Carbone
City of Toronto, Retired
- Gordon Simmonds
- Graham Singh
Trinity Centres
Foundation
- Jason Chapman
640 Toronto
- Jesse Rosenberg
Wellesley Institute
- John Stapleton
Open Policy
- Julianna Sprott
The Sprott Foundation
- Karen McCullough
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Toronto Star, Retired
- Leila Sarangi
Family Service Toronto
- Megan Lorus
The Sprott Foundation
- Mike Kolm
Ernst & Young LLP
- Mitchell Cohen
The Daniels Corporation
- Paul Burns



- Peter Roebbelen
The Charis Foundation
- Ross Anderson
Starbucks
- Sean Meagher
Ontario For All
- Sharon Simmonds
- Tom McCullough
Northwood Family Office
- Ugo Bizarri
Hazelview Investments
- Wayne Chu
- Wolfgang Klein
AM640
- Zoe Sparrow



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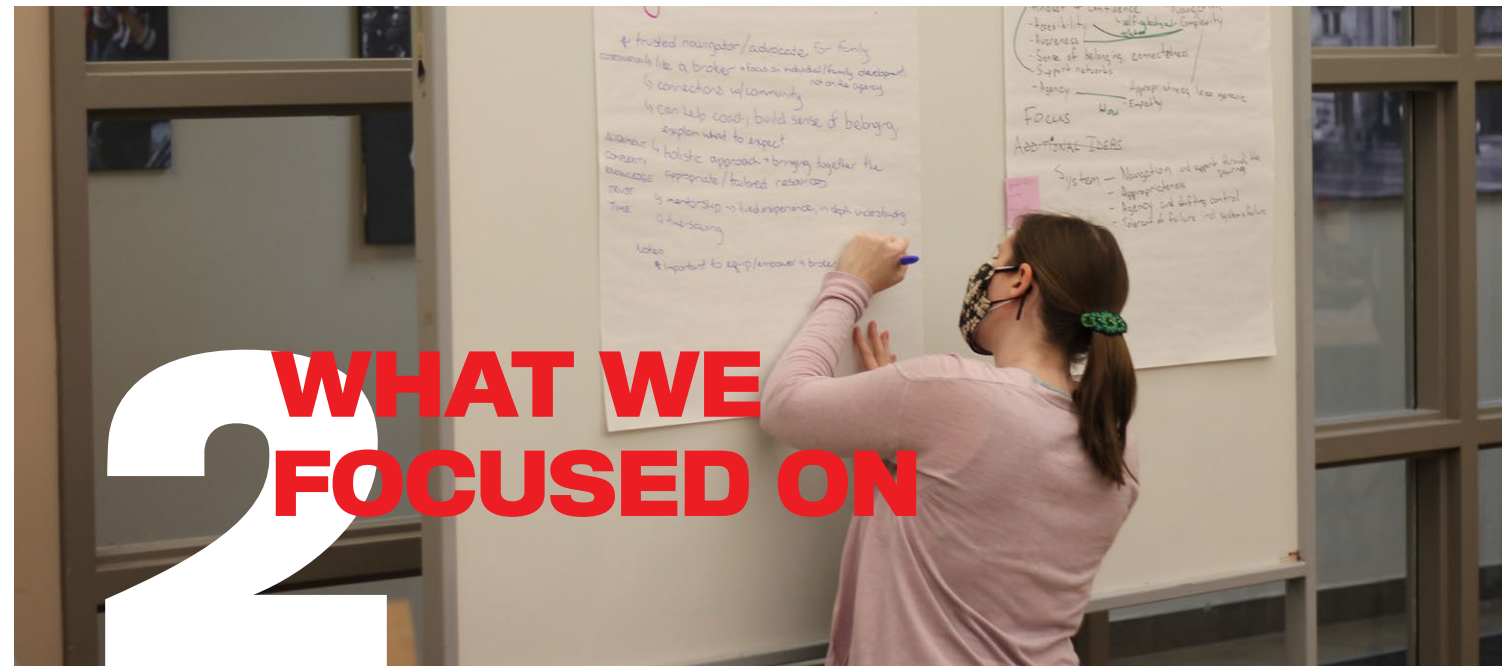


1 WHY THIS PROJECT?

NOBODY WANTS POVERTY TO EXIST IN OUR CITY ESPECIALLY POVERTY THAT IS GENDERED, RACIALIZED AND GROWING.

But despite many efforts to reduce poverty in Toronto, the above-named groups consistently experience disproportionate levels of poverty, in rising numbers. Sadly, we can see it happening yet we still find ourselves facing embedded systemic and cultural factors which undermine progress. Why is that?

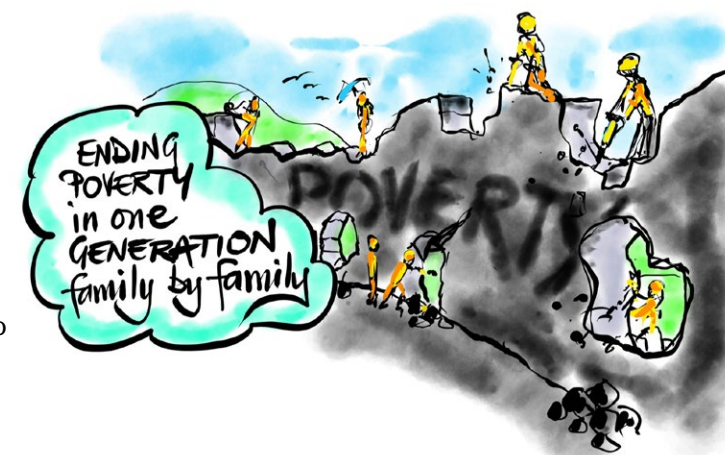
This project asked this burning question and invited people whom we know are already working on the issues to help us consider what we can do now, with the resources we have, to finally make a difference. Those who responded to our invitation joined us in a half-day event to answer the questions keeping us from making the changes we all agree are necessary to build a fair and equitable society for all.



2 WHAT WE FOCUSED ON

A HACK-A-THON TO END CHRONIC POVERTY IN THIS GENERATION

Poverty is a very large and complex societal issue, so our first job in understanding poverty in Toronto was to focus our efforts. We chose to zone in on Single Parent Families - a sizable segment of the population disproportionately affected by poverty in our city. We determined such a focus would not only allow us to impact families today but also lead to a different life trajectory for children within that demographic, with long-term impacts to help end the cycle of poverty in this generation.



We then planned an event aimed to lead us to avenues of action, along with initial general ideas to get real work started, immediately. We determined it's time to finally create a space for creative thinking to overcome an intractable problem that will lead to tangible ideas and the people willing to take them on.



PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADING THE WAY

We asked a small group of people with lived experience to take the lead. We created the Single Parent Family Advisory and Review Panel (SPARP) that informed and approved the project plan which included the creation of a primer package comprised of materials utilized to orient and support the understanding of the day-to-day realities of Single Parent Families.

This primer package was shared with a larger group of cross-sectoral players who hold one or more levers that significantly impact a single parent's economic reality.

The sectors which were represented included:

Residential Developers

Large Scale Employers

Social Policy Experts

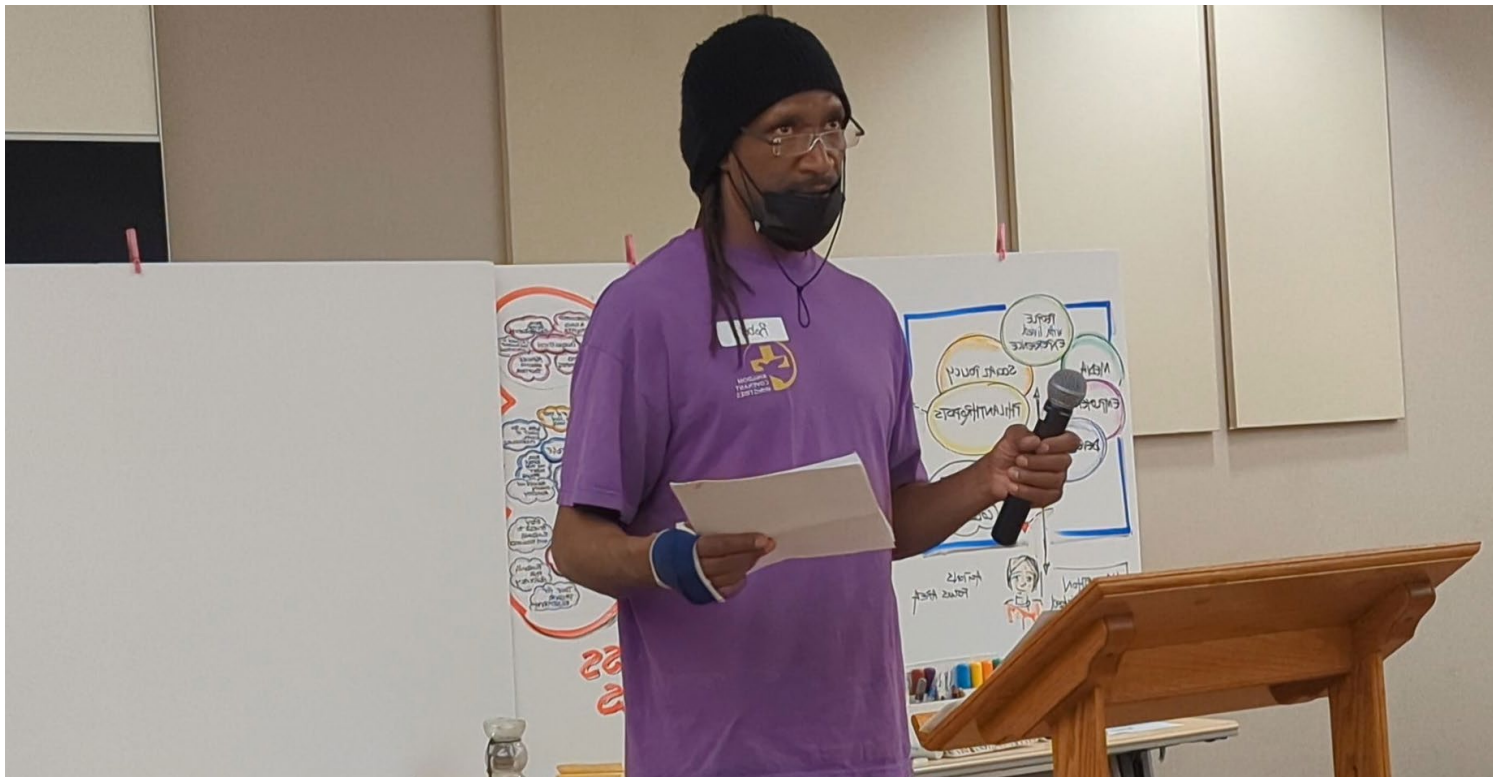
Philanthropists

Media

Their representatives were invited to a carefully-designed half-day session that was built upon the emerging social Hack-a-Thon model. With SPARP taking the lead, the plan was for all participants to work across sectors, learning from one another and co-creating a path of action by which to move forward.

All participants reviewed the primer package prior to completing their pre-event survey and participating in the half-day Hack-a-Thon event.

Going in, the average level of hopefulness that something truly helpful would come out of this day, was 4 out of 10. By the end of the day, the score changed to a buoyant 8 out of 10.





4 WHAT WE DID

PRE-WORK, EVENT DAY, POST EVENT

Thirty-four leaders in total participated, starting with the review of the pre-work primer package which included two composite stories depicting the life and struggles of single-parent families experiencing poverty in our city. Participants were asked: in hearing about the struggles facing single-parent families, what would you hope for their lives? Upon review, we were not surprised that the goals of the SPARP members and the responses from the participants were aligned. An additional question brought to light the many barriers that stand in the way of the successful accomplishment of these goals. This information, gathered in advance, framed the work of the half-day event.



The input gathered in advance was pre-synthesized and structured to kick start the Hack-a-Thon event. Barriers were reframed as Key Success Factors and the group committed to incorporating these into any action plan to be designed that day.

Through both individual and group activities, participants began to articulate focused avenues of action along with initial ideas as to how to begin working towards solutions to accomplishing their goals. SPARP members were there to listen, inspire and motivate the participants. By the end of the event, each person was asked to commit to doing something within their power and purview, which might advance the identified shared goals.

Post-event, reflection and analysis involved interviews with all participants and meetings with the SPARP members. What emerged were three courses of action based on the output of the Hack-a-Thon and prioritized by the SPARP members, to ensure all work will be grounded in their reality.

"I thought that having the parents with lived experience at the Hack-a-Thon was such an important perspective. It resonated with me the most and I am looking forward to staying involved."

Karen Soos,
Director of Social Impact,
Scotiabank



WHAT WE LEARNED

KEY INSIGHTS

1. WE DO IN FACT HAVE SHARED GOALS.

Regardless of life experience, background or area of expertise, we all affirmed our societal goals are the same.

Everyone indicated they want to live in a city where there are healthy and equipped people standing on a stable platform of adequate income and benefits, dignified housing, and access to support in the community. These are the things every person needs to thrive, and all involved shared this fundamental value.

2. WE REALIZE THERE ARE BARRIERS TO SUCCESS.

However, once reframed we could see that these barriers are, in reality, the things we must ensure exist in order to be successful in ending chronic poverty. These are:

- Coordinated Systems
- Sufficient Knowledge
- Motivation to Act
- Trust
- Sufficient Financial Resources / Money
- Shared Goals and Objectives
- Increased awareness of poverty
- Solutions to systemic barriers
- Time to do this work

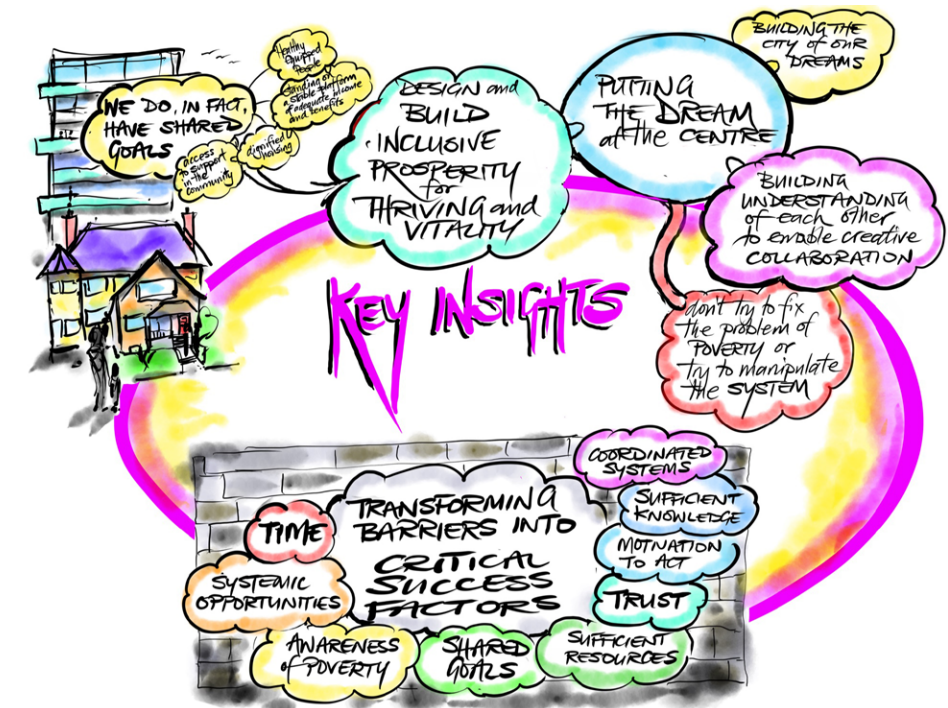
3. WE MUST DESIGN CHANGE BY PUTTING PEOPLE, NOT SYSTEMS, FIRST.

We learned through our activities that poverty must be the focus. Success will not come from putting the existing system in the centre and trying to manipulate it towards the solutions we are seeking.

Rather, Solutions must be grounded in the current reality, wisdom and insights of people whose daily experience is overcoming poverty.

4. WE AFFIRMED WE CAN BUILD AN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN DIFFERENT SOCIETAL GROUPS.

In doing so, we will successfully co-create new and creative ways to use the resources we have for greater impact.





TANGIBLE OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS

The half-day Hack-a-Thon surfaced five Societal Goal Areas with multiple early-stage ideas for each.

SOCIETAL GOAL AREA 1

Healthy People; Chosen focus area: Healthy People Need Healthy Communities

The broader community can (and must!) play a role. The group developed 3 areas of action centred on initiatives which invite the community to support people experiencing poverty:

- 1. Person to person:** Programs which connect single parents to single parents
- 2. Family to family:** Programs connecting families to other families
- 3. Community to community:** Programs which enable people, and entire communities, to help one another

SOCIETAL GOAL AREA 2

Equipped People; Chosen focus area: Person-Centred System Navigation

Our social services system is confusing. While resources do exist, accessing them is challenging. The group explored a nuanced concept to equip people with the resources they need and which encompassed:

- 1. Single Trusted Navigator:** a person with lived experience with the ability to help navigate the complex system of supports
- 2. Person Centric, not System Centric, Approach**

SOCIETAL GOAL AREA 3

Stable Platform, providing adequate income and benefits; Chosen focus area: A System with Better Coordination, Less Confusion

Government and Businesses should work together. The group explored ideas to improve the system of governmental income support, while also working with employers towards the provision of stable living wages.

- 1. Greater understanding:** Mapping a resident’s journey through the system
- 2. Better technology:** Developing a portal (or system) to help understand and access income supports
- 3. Smarter design:** Integrating all levels of government income supports
- 4. Creative collaboration:** Incentivizing employers to keep people employed providing stable and living wage income and benefits

SOCIETAL GOAL AREA 4

Stable Platform - Housing; Chosen Focus Area: Mobilize Capital for Deeply Affordable Housing

Affordable housing isn’t affordable enough. The group developed ideas specifically focussing on the urgent need for Deeply Affordable Housing. These include:

- 1. Mobilize Capital for deeply affordable housing**
- 2. Active Collaboration of all levels of government and stakeholders**
- 3. Improve Delivery and Structure** (Incentives, Roles, and Defined Measures)
- 4. Mobilize Land**
- 5. Approach housing crisis with housing, not shelters**



SOCIETAL GOAL AREA 5

Stable Platform, including community supports, with a chosen focus area of Developing Trusted Integrated Systems

A system is only as good as the trust one places upon it. Our current system is outdated and out of touch with reality. Success will be defined by good ideas and resourcing to support them.

- 1. Develop a map of the ecosystem of community supports, including community members, local businesses, and groups/agencies**
- 2. Develop a person-centred navigation tool or app**
- 3. Have a “concierge” approach - “what help do you need? how can I help you?”**
- 4. Identify the cost of supports**
- 5. Understand the criteria for funding and the length of funding**
- 6. Understand the outcome measures currently being funded, and ensure we focus on what works.**

“The level of cross-functional thinking was the best first step to solving a very complex societal issue. We each brought a different, unique perspective that provided a new lens to the problem and potential solutions. In addition, the quality of the participants was exceptional.”

Zoe Sparrow



THREE COLLABORATIVE WORKING GROUPS

With SPARP members taking the lead, the ideas, outcomes and post-event reflections were reviewed. The group then commented, prioritized and provided guidance for participants to consider their next steps.

What has emerged are three working groups to develop specific action plans toward the chosen goals listed below. These include an open call for others to get involved, in order to assemble the resources required to accomplish the chosen goal and, possibly, lead advocacy efforts for systemic changes.

WE INVITE YOU TO GET INVOLVED

WORKING GROUP #1 COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

To develop Family to Family (F2F) and Parent to Parent (P2P) Mentoring Programs in communities throughout Toronto, and improve access to available community supports with the guidance of a trusted navigator.

With SPARP Guidance: i) F2F and P2P could be expanded to additional neighbourhoods in Toronto; ii) begin by asking community members what they need and then categorize required supports as a first step. Use this list as a priority in identifying those supports and navigating access to them; iii) develop a recruitment and training program for system navigators from within communities with high levels of need.

WORKING GROUP #2 HOUSING

To create a viable financial model to substantially increase the development of deeply affordable housing.

With SPARP Guidance: i) In addition to creating this financial model, work with the local community, city community housing staff and residents to develop a focused plan to evaluate the requirements to make existing Rent Geared to Income (RGI) housing more livable. ii) develop a strategy to address and execute the requirements.

WORKING GROUP #3 INCOME AND BENEFITS

To improve access to government income supports with the guidance of a trusted navigator and expand the number of employment opportunities available at a living wage.

With SPARP Guidance: i) Expanding upon the Hack-a-Thon event primer, develop an “experience” for employers and for governmental employees - those handling social income supports - to help them understand the realities of single-parent families living on the income and supports that they are each providing. ii) Have resulting insights inform the development of solutions that lead to sufficient income to afford rent and live beyond the level of mere survival.

HERE'S HOW WE'RE GOING TO DO IT:



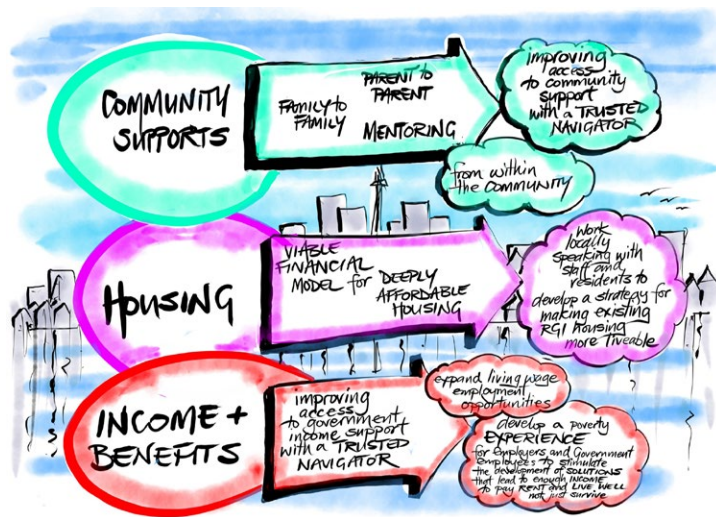
The Poverty Hack-a-Thon participants have indicated the initiative with which they wish to remain involved and sponsors who will cover the cost of each of these working groups. But even the best ideas and most committed participants need a “backbone of support” to succeed.

Yonge Street Mission (YSM) has launched the ReVISION PARTNERSHIP, a team with the tools necessary to enable groups to impactfully work together towards ending chronic poverty in Toronto.

The ReVISION PARTNERSHIP provides professional services including skilled facilitators, community development expertise, established data measurement and evaluation tools, data analytics, community asset mapping, and engagement tool - a “backbone toolkit” residing within the ReVISION PARTNERSHIP team, to support the launch and accountability of associated initiatives. The ReVISION PARTNERSHIP will enable and catalyze collaborative efforts, developed with the sole goal of helping people and organizations create meaningful opportunities for people experiencing poverty.



THE SOLUTION TO POVERTY IS US



"I was really struck by the idea of a system navigator and strongly believe that this is an important gap. I would be happy to devote time to developing solutions."

Ross Anderson, Starbucks

The solution to poverty isn't more programs and services and it isn't found within the current social services system designed to support those experiencing poverty today. The Hack-a-Thon confirmed what we all know to be true: the solution to poverty is us - all of us who make up our local community. If we combine our collective resources and intellect we can create the changes to truly make a difference in the lives of real people who are struggling right now.

This project identified three ways to get involved and the framework for each working group to begin work right away. But to succeed, each group is going to require individuals with a variety of backgrounds, assets, and skills to be a part of the work. This is an open invitation to be a part of changing the game and putting a real dent in poverty as we work together toward ending chronic poverty in our city, once and for all.



CONSIDER YOURSELF INVITED

"We have a keen understanding of what living with poverty is like and how the system works or doesn't work. Trust us, we know it's hard to overcome, and yet we do, day by day, for the sake of our children and because our dreams have not died. Poverty affects all of us and we believe that the power of understanding one another and working together will lead to real and significant change. Only together can we truly create the conditions for success and we hope you will join us in this work."

Poverty Hack-a-Thon SPARP panel

CONTACT

To find out more about how you can be involved please contact:

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Note:

Full research paper and literature review are available for interested parties.

#HACKPOVERTY



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