

'It Feels Like We've Sparked a Movement'

Image



People are thirsting to be involved in Calgary's new poverty reduction initiative, and creatively finding their own ways to do so

Earlier this month a priest, rabbi and imam joined together to share a message on addressing poverty in Calgary — but not through a charity model.

Instead, they spoke on creating a city that is “good for all of us,” effectively tearing down the “poor versus non-poor” mentality. Across the city on that same day, faith services of various religions had a similar focus.

This is just one example of what's being sparked as Calgary's new poverty reduction initiative, now about three years in the making, unfolds.

Dubbed [Enough for All](#), the effort has a notably strong focus on shifting the conversation in terms of what it means to reduce poverty. “Let’s talk about us as a community,” is the rallying cry. “We’re all in this together, and we have to figure out how we build the community that works for all of us.”

Undergirding this cry is a recognition that everyone is vulnerable to poverty and all are affected by it in some respects. But if a vibrant, inclusive city can be built, it will be a better city for everyone — and poverty will be solved too — almost by accident, if you will.

It’s this conversation that leads to the root cause of poverty, as well as to very different approaches around what to do about it, proponents say. It’s this thinking that sparked the interfaith service dedicated to addressing poverty, for example.

Derek Cook, who has played a central role in developing the Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative, is strongly energized to see the excitement and engagement the effort is rousing.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

Derek Cook

With a whole working life dedicated to poverty issues, he’s experienced how often people need to be encouraged to care. Not in this case. “I’ve had the opposite challenge, of trying to manage all of the interest and support,” Derek says.

“People are just thirsting to be involved, and creatively finding their own ways of doing that, and they’re doing that using this new language about poverty that we’ve started to spread.

“It feels like, instead of running a project, we’ve sparked a movement,” he adds.

He links the uncommonly high level of interest to the commitment of those who set up this initiative. From the beginning, there has been a dedication to ensuring this is

a meaningful exercise, something that actually yields change on the ground, rather than another report that gathers dust in a back city hall room.

Calgary is [not the only jurisdiction](#) seeing energy around a multi-sector approach to a major community issue.

Around the world people from diverse sectors are laying aside their differences, admitting they don't have answers and committing to co-create solutions to economic and social problems.

"People are becoming much more deliberate, intentional, conscious and strategic about approaching problems in a whole-systems way," says Al Etmanski, co-founder of an effort called Thinking Like a Movement.

"They're understanding that addiction or drug abuse is related to mental illness, is related to poverty, is related to mental health, is related to homelessness.

"Each one of those is a tough problem on its own, but they're actually interlocking. More people are approaching (social and economic challenges) from that broader perspective. Their analysis makes allowances for all of that, and the resources are becoming much more focused on that."

"It's a very hopeful sign, and I think we're at the beginning of it."

Both Al and Derek — and others — agree that in a multi-sector effort, it's relationships that will ultimately determine success. Al has had confirmed what complexity theory teaches: that in such complex problems as society is grappling with, it's not so much the solution as it is the connections and the relationships among people that's of greatest importance.

"Fundamental to our work has been the primacy of relationships and community," Derek says.

"We've said that poverty isn't a problem to be fixed; it's a wound to be healed. So it's not a technocratic exercise. It really is about restoring relationships and rebuilding community."

In neighbourhoods, having this focus could look like the creation of community hubs — spaces where people gather, receive services and also meet and build up the area's social capital.

Recreating the idea of community in the economy is also important. In that realm, this could look like supporting the development of more co-operatives and B-corps as well as other business models with an embedded commitment to a community's well-being.

In the social service networks, the intent is not to create more programs and services, but connect people appropriately to the right programs and services. This could look like someone only having to share their story once and the door being opened to all the support they require, no matter which agency it comes from.

"If this idea of restoring relationships and building community stays central, the Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative will be successful," Derek says.

"If that gets lost, then you're left with a bunch of programs. Programs haven't solved poverty in the past, and I don't think they will in the future."

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