

Building Strong Communities

People who have a common positive goal can accomplish amazing things with the right encouragement and a little bit of funding.

Whether it's taking back a neighbourhood park from drug pushers, creating after-school homework programs for kids, or buying a freezer to keep a school's healthy snack program flourishing, the Hamilton Community Foundation finds grassroots efforts work best when attacking the roots of poverty in Hamilton.

Yes, it can be a bit messy. It's also labour intensive and complicated. But the bottom line is that these efforts make a positive difference in the lives of Hamiltonians who live in poverty.

The Hamilton Community Foundation announced this week it will continue tackling poverty — at the ground level in our community — with \$5 million in funding over the next five years. Five hundred thousand dollars of that money will go toward efforts in the downtown core; the rest will be doled out one project at a time, to collaborative groups that have come up with ways to make a difference, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

■ In the first phase of its Tackling Poverty Together effort, the foundation dedicated \$3.4 million — from 2004 until the end of March 2008 — toward alleviating, reducing and preventing poverty. That effort has had an impact on more than 9,000 people — individuals, families and neighbourhoods — and has resulted in policy changes that have put money in the pockets of some of the people who need it most.

■ The second phase, Building Strong Communities, will focus strategically on neighbourhoods, with support for collaborative neighbourhood hubs driven by residents. As well, the foundation will address poverty reduction on a broader level through public education, policy development, or dealing with issues affecting specific populations.

In much the same way microcredit has transformed local economies around the world, the foundation's sharp focus on targeted projects and programs has had remarkable results.

It's important, too, to recognize this work is being done in the broader context of the community strategy framework developed by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, spearheaded by the foundation and the city more than two years ago. The roundtable includes members from boards, agencies, businesses, media and local government, providing a range of perspectives and input that avoids the one-size-fits-all approach and fosters the intensely local approach.

It's about empowerment, taking responsibility and collaboration. The people who know best how to make a difference in a neighbourhood are those who live there. Giving them the authority to make that difference means they become largely responsible for the future of their own community. They don't need bureaucrats to tell them what to do or how to do it, but they probably do need some help figuring it out. It's called working together and it's all about living in a caring community. As Hamiltonians, we should all be proud.

Lee Prokaska