



# **The Road to Empowerment Project: Developing Self Advocacy and Cause Advocacy Skills Across Niagara**

***Final Summary Report, January 2015***

The Road to Empowerment is a community development project coordinated by three Niagara region Community Health Centres (CHCs): Bridges Community Health Centre (Fort Erie and Port Colborne), Niagara Falls Community Health Centre and Quest Community Health Centre (St Catharines). The project received two years of funding through the Niagara Prosperity Initiative in late 2012 to develop and deliver workshops and community initiatives focused on empowering people with the lived experience of poverty with skills to better self advocate and to advocate for action on the structural causes of poverty. Through skills training and resource sharing participants are becoming leaders who will be guided and supported to take collective action and advocacy on poverty-related issues through a variety of strategies and opportunities.

This summary captures the work completed during the two year funding cycle of the project. However, the work of Road to Empowerment will continue beyond the project funding cycle through support from the original CHC project partners an on-going partnership development.

**This project was made possible through the generous support of:**



## **Project Partners**



## **Project Beginnings**

Most cuts to health/social services have the highest impact on those who are most disengaged or unaware of possible impacts. Community Health Centres (CHCs) see the impacts of poverty, disengagement and disempowerment every day and frequently advocate on behalf of our clients on issues such as housing, social assistance, medication access, dental care, and much more. Health promotion and community development staff from three Niagara area Community Health Centres: Bridges Community Health Centre (Fort Erie/Port Colborne), Niagara Falls Community Health Centre, and Quest Community Health Centre (St Catharines), met to discuss ways to work together to develop training in leadership, communication, and engagement with the intent to help our clients become better advocates for themselves and, over time, advocates for creating change on a public policy/service delivery level. This was the impetus for the project proposal, entitled Road to Empowerment, with the intent of it being embedded firmly in our on-going Community Health Centre work and activities.

## **Project Development**

After submitting a successful proposal to the Niagara Prosperity Initiative in 2012, the three Community Health Centre partners worked with consultant Laura Cattari, an advocate and member of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, to develop a six-week curriculum for a self advocacy workshop series training. Various resources were gleaned to create content we felt was appropriate and suitable for us and the needs of our participants. Topics included understanding the importance of self advocacy, communication (I statements, assertiveness, reflective listening), prioritizing, decision making, problem solving, planning, community supports, research, staying organized, negotiation, self esteem, story telling, and using social media. An introduction to social justice, structural causes of poverty, and cause advocacy concludes the workshop series and provides an opportunity for participants to continue in this area as a community action group, if interested.

Participant eligibility requirements included age 18 and over, current or past experience living on a limited income (i.e. social assistance, CPP, EI, minimum wage), and a desire for personal growth. We used several strategies for recruitment including:

- Creation of promotional flyer to share with local agencies and internal staff to encourage referrals
- Newspaper interview, which ran in the three Niagara daily newspapers, to provide an overview of the project and how to get involved
- Word of mouth promotion with clients known at our Community Health Centres

## Project Launch and Delivery

Between March and September 2013, a total of ten sets of six-week self advocacy workshop series were held between the four delivery sites – Fort Erie (two), Niagara Falls (three), Port Colborne (three), and St. Catharines (two). A total of 83 participants have been active in the self advocacy workshops between the four sites, surpassing our goal of 48. Each site used one-two staff (health promoters, community health workers, social workers) to facilitate the workshops and, while the curriculum has standard structure and topics, each site had the flexibility to adapt the materials to meet their own needs and comfort level. For example, Niagara Falls staff incorporated the use of an advocacy-themed movie, alongside the curriculum content, to engage participants.

To ensure inclusion for all participants, a meal was provided at each workshop and bus tokens available, as needed.

Year Two of the project kicked off in November 2013 with a regional Road to Empowerment forum that brought together over 40 of our Road to Empowerment participants and partner allies from across Niagara. Mike Balkwill and coordinators of the provincial Put Food in the Budget campaign facilitated our day at the Niagara Falls Library. Participants gained a better understanding about the ways poverty presents itself, supporting factors, and root or systemic causes of poverty. We also began a discussion on empowerment and the importance of social justice and collective advocacy to address poverty.



Throughout the first half of 2014, each community began to meet monthly to develop a community action group – Fort Erie's group was named South Coast Residents Against Poverty (SCRAP), Port Colborne dubbed its group Bridging Differences Port Colborne, while St Catharines chose to stay with the original project name Road to Empowerment. Niagara Falls continued to deliver self advocacy workshops but was unable to build enough interest and capacity for a community group during this time.

CHC staff worked with Mike Balkwill from Put Food in the Budget to overcome some initial challenges with group development and to develop some common directions for the groups. The issue of poverty, stigma, and disrespect was often repeated in all communities and became the focus on a Poverty and Stigma survey that was piloted. The survey asked questions such as:

- Have you or people you know ever been treated unfairly, felt disrespected, felt judged, or felt discriminated against because you are poor? If yes, please provide some examples and details, such as where, what was said.
- How did you feel when you were treated unfairly, disrespectfully, or were judged for being poor?
- How has this type of treatment impacted your life and others who are poor?

The responses were wide-ranging – retail stores, social service and health agencies, landlords, banks, libraries, and family were some examples of where people felt stigma and disrespect. Anger, frustration, helplessness and more were common examples of how people felt. The impact on people's lives is tremendous – exacerbating depression, hopelessness, isolation, sense of despair and giving up. Sharing these examples as a group led to some tears but also a sense of developing empowerment – we are alone in fighting back against disrespect, stigma and discrimination and we are going to take action.

A second regional training day was held in October 2014 in Port Colborne. Our mentor, Mike Balkwill provided further guidance and leadership as our group members sort through the messiness of group formation, bonding, and setting a direction. We learned about developing empowerment guidelines, building allies, identifying and prioritizing issues, and getting ready to take action. A final follow up training day concluded with three action areas being identified and the formation of working groups. The issues identified as highest priority, based on level of urgency and difficulty were: (1) food vouchers with recipient names attached (2) lack of public space accessibility for people who are homeless/under-housed and (3) hospital discharge and transportation issues. Three point people were identified and committee have been formed with key information such as minimum/maximum demand, who to contact, and timelines identified. There is still much work to be done, but it is great to have a sense of direction and cohesiveness.

### **Next Steps Post-Funding**

Each community group will continue to meet monthly to look at local issues and actions. For example, groups are looking at ways they can work with municipal government on local poverty issues, tying in with provincial and federal poverty-focused advocacy initiatives, growing group membership through allies and people who live in poverty, and on-going mutual support for all group members.

We are aiming to hold regional in-person meetings quarterly (or more often), pending time and financial resources. Our biggest challenges right now are funding transportation costs for regional meetings, as well as on-going training needs to develop our cause advocacy knowledge and skills.

We will periodically update our Road to Empowerment website with news and stories -

<http://roadtoempowerment.weebly.com/>

## **Project Successes**

We have had a bounty of success stories throughout the project - many participants have reported increased confidence and assertiveness in advocating for themselves and for beginning to speak out on broader issues. Some participant highlights include:

- Interviewed for a local newspaper during Community Health and Well Being Week
- Media interviews for the Faces of Poverty series, as well as participation in live-streamed events
- Started using social media (i.e. Twitter) for advocacy activities
- Used new skills to speak more confidently/appropriately at Family Court & with a school principal
- Actively pursuing volunteer opportunities to help other women who have been abused
- Set up meetings with their local MPP and MP to advocate for assistance with income issues
- Felt increased confidence and applied for and secured employment
- Felt increased confidence to speak up at medical appointments, achieved more satisfactory results
- Invited to speak at the Niagara North Community Legal Services AGM, YWCA No Fixed Address event
- Had housing issues resolved, stuck up to a landlord
- Joined a disability committee, taken a leadership role
- Put together a business plan to start own business
- Joined the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network

Collectively, we've also had successes for cause advocacy and engagement:

- 20 Road to Empowerment participants attended the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation held on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in St. Catharines. For most this was their first time participating in such a venue and several spoke publicly before an audience of 80, including St Catharines MPP Jim Bradley and many local service providers, to share their personal stories, experiences, and solutions to address poverty;
- Welland MPP Cindy Forster attended a joint Port Colborne/Fort Erie group meeting to discuss housing and poverty issues in November 2013;
- Several Road to Empowerment members participated in Chew on This events held across Niagara on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, as part of the national Dignity for All campaign. Participants handed out materials raising awareness of poverty issues in Canada calling for the creation of a federal plan to eliminate poverty in Canada;
- Two members participated in the Dental Health Forum hosted by Bridges Community Health Centre in October 2014
- 10 group members attended the provincial Put Food in the Budget annual meeting in December 2014 in Toronto and delivered workshops on the work being done in Niagara with Road to Empowerment

Several powerful testimonials have been provided by Road to Empowerment participants, including:

#### *Year Two*

- I started with the Road to Empowerment self advocacy workshops last year and have continued with the monthly groups, also joined the Quest CHC advisory committee. This keeps me involved and feeling a part of something - to be honest, it has saved my life and the friendships I have gained are wonderful and supportive.*
- I first got involved in some community advocacy by attending the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network meetings. Lori from Bridges CHC referred me to the Road to Empowerment group in St Catharines - I have taken the self advocacy training and am now contributing to the cause advocacy meetings. The best thing that has happened as a result of taking part in Road to empowerment is that I now have hope and I have a way to make positive change. It's empowering and we are a community - I am inspired and encouraged! Being involved is helping me to cope with being poor - I have a voice and I love the authenticity of the group.*
- I attended the self advocacy classes and continue to attend monthly SCRAP meetings and trainings for cause advocacy. I have become more confident and feel like I am not alone anymore. I feel this is significant because I am doing something not only for myself, but for others.*
- I participated in the self advocacy program last year and took a refresher of it this past fall to help boost my skills. I've gone on to become involved in the monthly group meetings and have been inspired by all of the networking and skill building. I now want to help "make a difference". Knowing that I am not alone in my struggles is in itself empowering and re-affirming - there is help and support available by caring people, both allies and peers. It really helps to stay connected when life is difficult; I now have hope and a future. I'm meeting new people, making new friendships, and helping others where I can. I have found a voice and being involved has helped me to not be afraid to use it in a positive way.*
- I first took the Road to Empowerment self advocacy workshop last year, then helped lead the workshop with Lori at the local soup kitchen to help teach others how to self advocate. I have also participated in the process of developing the cause advocacy group Bridging Difference Port Colborne. The best part of participating has been having a community of people who understand and can work toward improving their lives and the lives of others. It is very difficult to persevere when you feel alone and like your issues and life don't matter. Having a supportive community can give you the strength you need to fight for what you need.*

#### *Year One*

- My social worker at Bridges CHC thought Road to Empowerment would be good for me to take. It has given me the confidence to stand up for my cause, taught me how to use the tools for research, and who and what is available to assist me in reaching my goals. If I don't take a stand for myself nobody will.*

- *I heard about Road to Empowerment through my health care team at Bridges CHC. I have spent a great deal of time in hospital and I wanted to learn how to speak up for myself and this program has helped me to do that. I am now able to speak up for myself and I will not be intimidated by any government agency if I do what I am supposed to do as a self advocate. For most of my life I have been scared to death by government agencies. I needed to learn a more effective and positive way to approach them. Road to Empowerment program has worked for me and I intend to build upon the positive experiences and successes that I have had so far.*
- *I got involved through my counselor at Quest CHC. I have found my involvement to be really helpful, I've been learning about city politics and public speaking. At the beginning of the year my personal life was going through hell. Attending Road to Empowerment meetings has helped me come back to life, learn, educate myself, and meet a great group of people.*
- *I was introduced to Road to Empowerment by staff at Niagara Falls Community Health Centre. I have found it to be very informative and enjoyable. I have become more assertive about myself and my rights and I have applied this to my current situation. Before getting involved in this program I let everyone walk all over me. Now I realize I have the right to disagree and to know exactly what is being done and if it is best for me personally.*
- *I got involved with Road to Empowerment last spring. I feel it has given me more tools and strategies to cope with trauma and assertiveness in regaining my voice to speak about how I really feel. I have learned ways to communicate more effectively within my personal life and with agencies. I feel my confidence has improved as a result and I have a sense of purpose and freedom to be able to speak my truths and ask for my needs to be met. In the past I was unable to do these things which I now see as part of my PTSD and trauma. Now I have learned how to prioritize my needs, create a plan with attainable steps to follow through, and confidently ask for what I need, as well as to successfully advocate for others who may not be able to advocate for themselves. This has improved the overall quality of my life and has helped me to move forward. I have highly recommended others take the self advocacy workshops and get involved. The facilitators are kind and compassionate, understanding and knowledgeable, and extremely supportive. I would not be where I am today without their assistance and support!*
- *Mary Anne suggested the Road to Empowerment project to me while I was at the Crystal Beach Community Church and I felt it would be very helpful for me. I feel understood, supported, and part of a group rather than all on me. I really have issues I've been just letting slide and I believe is contributing to my depression. I need to stand up and being a part of this new community group is fantastic!*
- *I first became involved with this project when I saw it in the Bridges CHC newsletter. The best thing that has happened to me so far is that I finally completed a CPP form I was afraid of and needed to get sent in. Being a part of the workshops has made a difference to me because I realized that I have a voice. I have faced some of my fears. It has been great to get out and meet new people.*

**“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice” ~ Nelson Mandela**