



CASE STUDY | TORONTO'S LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY GROUP: ADVISING ON A MUNICIPAL STRATEGY

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The Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) advises the implementation and evaluation of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy, *TO Prosperity*. The LEAG successfully balances the voices of lived/living experience with staff accountability, while providing an avenue for individuals with lived/living experience to participate in city processes. The group's success stems from a strong commitment to an equitable and inclusive process by all parties.

OVERVIEW

The City of Toronto envisions themselves to be a city with opportunities for all and a leader in the collective pursuit of justice, fairness and equity. Toronto's poverty reduction strategy, *TO Prosperity*, was launched in 2016, and serves as a concrete, 20-year plan that was shaped by engagements with almost 2,000 Torontonians. Residents with lived experience of poverty very actively participated in the development of the strategy, particularly through the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG), whose members continue to play a leading role in its implementation and evaluation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The LEAG's membership is inclusive of residents from various equity-seeking groups and represents a vast range of Toronto's perspectives and identities.
- The LEAG represents the culmination of years of input from community members who demanded better access routes for people with lived/living experience to participate in city processes.
- The LEAG's success stems from a strong commitment across all parties to do things systematically differently, and to an equitable and inclusive process.

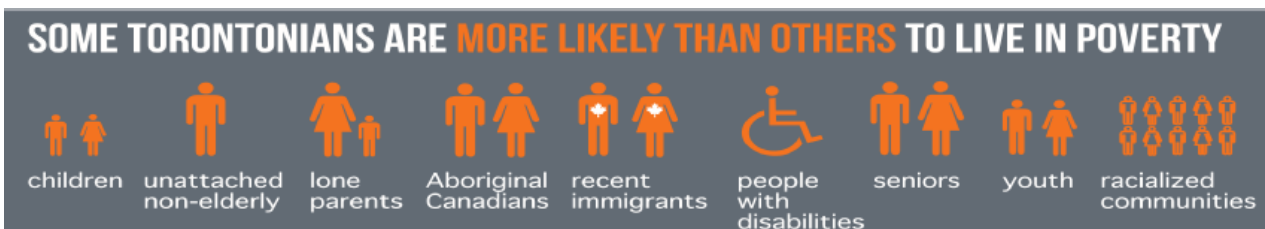
TORONTO LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY GROUP (LEAG)

Launched in 2017, the LEAG is one of The City of Toronto's poverty reduction strategy reinforcing accountability structures. The group's mandate focuses on advocacy, education, awareness, monitoring, and evaluation. Members apply personal lived/living experience with poverty to inform the development, implementation, and monitoring of *TO Prosperity*.

toronto.ca/povertyreduction

POVERTY IN TORONTO AND THE CITY'S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY

The City of Toronto recognizes that life in Toronto is getting more expensive every day. Housing, transit, and healthy food are increasingly out of reach for people living on low wages and income supports. Good jobs are increasingly hard to find, with almost half of Greater Toronto Area workers in temporary, contract and part-time jobs with variable hours, little stability, and no benefits. While education remains a smart long-term investment, it offers no immediate guarantees: almost one in four college graduates are working low-wage jobs. Housing is unaffordable, Employment Insurance is less accessible than it used to be, Ontario Works rates have lost more than half of their value in the last 20 years, and childcare demand outweighs supply.



The City of Toronto has been tackling poverty and poverty-related issues for many years. They are continually building on what works and are regularly creating new strategies to ensure that the benefits of growth and prosperity are widely shared across the City, so that everyone can live in dignity. Toronto's poverty reduction strategy includes six areas of focus: Housing Stability; Service Access; Transit Equity; Food Access; Quality Jobs and Livable Wages; and Systemic Change. It is implemented in partnership with a range of stakeholders, including the LEAG.

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF LEAG MEMBERS

Toronto's LEAG was informed by hundreds of Toronto residents who provided input on what a lived experience advisory group should look like, including composition and terms of membership, frequency and location of meetings, communications, audience and tactics, and supports required. The City applied an equity-based application and selection process to the group, with consideration given to ensure representation from equity-seeking groups.

LEAG members were nominated through an open call for applications that clearly laid out the type and duration of commitment requested, including training, orientation, monthly meetings, and community engagements. The application identified benefits that participants would receive, including recognition, food, bus tickets, and child- and/or attendant care. It also specified that honorariums would be provided at a rate of \$50 per meeting or \$100 per full day activity.





To balance the voices and perspectives of lived/living experience with staff accountability in the selection of advisory group members, the City established a Nominations Committee, which was comprised of four residents and two City staff. This committee reviewed and assessed the more than 350 applications received based on selection criteria that included intersectional diversity, experience with poverty, volunteering background, and experience as community advocates. In January 2017, 40 applicants were interviewed and 20 were selected.

LEAG members include people with diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual, and gender identities. Members include racialized people, new immigrants, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and people with experiences of the justice system. These individuals represent the vast diversity of perspectives and identities that make up the City of Toronto. Members hold intricate knowledge and diverse personal lived experience with the realities, conditions and impacts of living with poverty.

The LEAG's coming together represents the culmination of years of input from community members who demanded better access routes for people with lived/living experience to participate in City processes.



LEAG GROUP AGREEMENT

Successful LEAG applicants participated in orientation and training sessions to review the group's priorities, supports and guidelines. These sessions supported members to build a shared understanding of the many pathways in and out of poverty, to build capacity in communications and conflict resolution, and to gain training in key concepts such as equity, diversity, advocacy, and allyship.

LEAG members designed an approach to the group's work that aligned with a number of principles from *TO Prosperity*. These principles have strong connections to community development, and ensure that engagement processes are inclusive and meaningful. LEAG applies these principles, listed below, to push public participation in city processes to a more collaborative and empowering place.

LEAG Principles for Planning and Decision Making

- Put people who have lived or are currently living in poverty at the core
- Recognize that gender, race, sexual orientation, status, age and abilities influence how people experience poverty
- Respond to the diverse needs of individuals and groups at the table
- Provide residents the power-building supports necessary to engage effectively
- Require sensitive behaviour from those who carry institutional power at the table
- Be directly connected to community through multiple channels and activities
- Promote continuous and clear communication that is easy to access and understand
- Be self-renewing, allowing new voices and new leadership to emerge

The LEAG also developed a group agreement with communication guidelines, agreed on steps for dealing with conflict, brainstormed strategies for engaging with the City, and identified ways for members to build capacity, become allies, and apply reflective practice and continuous learning to their work.

THE LEAG IN ACTION

Launched in 2017, the LEAG serves as one of *TO Prosperity's* reinforcing accountability structures. LEAG members are engaged as part of a four-year term (2017-2020) to inform the effective development, implementation, and monitoring of the strategy. The group's mandate focuses on advocacy, education and awareness, and monitoring and evaluation.

LEAG members participate in a wide variety of City policy, program, and service-development processes. They act as a conduit between City staff and communities, and organize and participate in presentations and conversations with City divisions, the private sector, community agencies, and residents. Members contribute insights into a range of programs and issues, including Ontario Works, unemployment, systemic discrimination and the impacts of violence.

The LEAG meets monthly as a group to deeply learn about *TO Prosperity* initiatives, build individual and group capacity to lead and support these initiatives, and participate in consultation and facilitation opportunities with Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy Office (PRSO) and other City divisions. The group also engages in monthly meetings with the PRSO that offer opportunities for members to build capacity (for example in facilitation), gain understanding of municipal policy and budget processes, and dive into specific issues.

Functions of the LEAG

Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide insight and feedback on City policies, programs and services • Improve access to social services across the City of Toronto
Education and Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate and inform City staff about the realities of poverty in Toronto and the diversity of experiences of those struggling with it • Share information about the Strategy and the LEAG with City divisions, the private sector, community agencies and residents • Act as a conduit between communities and the City
Monitoring and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in the monitoring of Strategy actions

LEAG members also participate in policy and program development processes with City divisions in charge of implementing the Strategy, sometimes through one-off consultations, and other times through or longer term, co-led work. For example, members supported the roll out of a new service model for Ontario Works by facilitating workshops and explaining to frontline staff the positive impact the new model could have on the lives of social assistance clients.

LEAG members connect with advocates in other City advisories, building bridges that can help to strengthen their voices. They work with residents in the Neighbourhood Improvement Areas Planning Tables, the Seniors Strategy Accountability Table, and the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

LEAG represents TO Prosperity in events and committees. For example, three members attended Tamarack's *Cities Reducing Poverty: When Business is Engaged* summit in Hamilton in 2017, and one was selected to join the Government of Canada's Ministerial Advisory Committee on Poverty. Members connect back with their communities to share their new learning and information, listen to community concerns, and bring those concerns to City processes.



LEAG YEAR 1 SELF-EVALUATION

After its first year, the LEAG formed an Evaluation Workgroup to develop and administer a self-evaluation. This evaluation was designed to foster professional development, promote self-sufficiency, and improve programs. It asked members to reflect on an individual and a group perspective, how successful they had been in areas that included: creating a respectful, supportive, and empathetic environment; hosting open and honest interactions; understanding each other's perspectives without judgement; making space for people to ask questions; and achieving collaboration over competition.

All evaluation activities were co-led by LEAG members. Members built understanding of the importance of evaluation, identified priorities, and designed a survey that applied an Empowerment Evaluation Model, in order to help people to help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. The workgroup implemented the evaluation, reported back on results, and developed responses to findings by identifying SMART goals and concrete follow up actions.



Empowerment presumes that people themselves should be integrally involved in the change process – from defining their situation to determining goals, selecting their course of action and evaluating the results.

– DuBois and Miley, 1996



CONCLUSION

Toronto's Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) was formed based on an equity-based application and selection process that ensured that membership represented a vast range of perspectives and identities. The group's approach is rooted in a number of community development principles that are inclusive and meaningful, and that support the group to push public participation in city processes to a more collaborative and empowering place. The LEAG's coming together represents the culmination of years of input from community members who demanded better access routes for people with lived/living experience to participate in city processes. Its success stems from a strong commitment across all parties to do things systematically differently, and to an equitable and inclusive process.



READ MORE

- [TO Prosperity: Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy](#)
- [Accountability Table Community Conversation Guide](#)
- [Lived Experience Advisory Group Application Form](#)
- [10: Engaging People with Lived/Living Experience](#)

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