



# CASE STUDY | AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT: A LEARNING JOURNEY

*JENNIFER WILCOX & NATASHA PEI, CONTRIBUTIONS BY TRACEY BOYER & MICHELLE JOHNSON*

Even the best laid plans often go awry. Poverty is messy and complex and the process of finding solutions to poverty will be too. A collaborative in Halifax began their journey toward poverty solutions, and along the way, delved into the true meaning of authentic community engagement. This case study highlights a comprehensive local community engagement plan, as well as its pitfalls, and exemplifies how being open to the toughest feedback is amongst the most important aspects of the journey.

## OVERVIEW

While communities vary greatly, and there is no silver bullet for conducting a ‘perfect’ community engagement process, this case study can help other organizations and collaboratives think critically about their engagement plans and processes.

*Authentic* community engagement is about forming real relationships of trust with community members, in which people are inspired to action, and the “extraordinary power of ordinary people” is harnessed to create bold visions for the future. Community engagement is a key pillar of any community change initiative because, as Sylvia Cheuy writes, collaboration amongst residents is one of the largest sources of untapped innovation that is needed to find and implement *sustainable* solutions to our greatest social and environmental challenges – such as poverty (Cheuy, 2018).

### About the Organization

[Poverty Solutions Halifax initiative](#) serves the Halifax Regional Municipality – a rural-urban mixed landscape - and is co-led by United Way Halifax and the Halifax Regional Municipality.

In 2017, with poverty rates ranging from 7% - 34% in various Halifax regions and a Strategic Plan to grow the economy and strengthen the social fabric in the municipality, Regional Council contracted the local United Way to lead the formation of a poverty reduction strategy.

Making the United Way a particularly good fit for the stewardship role is their organizational commitment to poverty reduction, links with community agencies, connections with other United Ways doing similar work, support from the business community and relationships with key provincial ‘social’ sectors.

Authentic community engagement goes beyond one-way consultations that often happen at the beginning stages of a program or project. It keeps members involved at all stages of the initiative and is a two-way relation, where the community receives as much as it gives.

Authentic community engagement is about listening, adapting and following the community's lead, rather than engaging the community in the decision maker's vision.

It is an important element of any community change initiative because large-scale social change is relentlessly incremental. Master regional and community plans set lofty targets - with implications for all residents and organizations - requiring several years and all sectors to achieve the goals. Taking the time to nurture a sense of ownership amongst community members is an investment in sustainable leadership and resourcing of the project.

United Way Halifax's careful documentation of their Poverty Solutions strategy, roadmap, and pitfalls along the way help us to uncover important learnings in authentic community engagement.

**This document is intended to share the lessons we learned, improve our engagement practices, and to enable other organizations to design inclusive engagement processes.**

Jennifer Wilcox, United Way Halifax

## KEY LEARNING

There is no straightforward guide to poverty reduction. Poverty is complex and changing; therefore, plans and processes must be equally as flexible and adaptive to new information.

Relationships are king – do not neglect relationship development in favour of short time frame targets and funding deadlines. In the end, a strategy that is not used, is not useful.

Engage the quietest community members and traditionally underserved communities.

Developmental evaluation is not an activity in and of itself – making the time to track progress and record why activities pivoted along the way is a long-term investment in the adaptation and sustainability of an initiative.

## HALIFAX'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Halifax Regional Municipality's (HRM) community engagement process aimed to foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship of the poverty solutions work by: raising public awareness about poverty, engaging the community around a shared vision, mobilizing the community to identify local needs and prioritize solutions, and building trust to support collective action.

*Community engagement* is the process of working collaboratively to enact positive action. The level of community involvement and influence evolves over time and increases along a 'continuum of community engagement', depicted below.

<b>Level of Engagement</b>	<b>When To Use</b>	<b>Tools &amp; Techniques</b>
<b>Inform</b>	Supports all types of community engagement and keeps people informed to assist in creating an understanding of the issues, options and opportunities.	Publications, newsletters and press releases, advertising, public forums, fact sheets, websites, open houses.
<b>Consult</b>	Consulting is used to gather information and feedback from a variety of stakeholders for use by United Way Halifax, HRM, and the Poverty Solutions Strategic Advisory Cluster. Feedback shows how public input influenced decisions.	Community organizations and groups, surveys or opinion polls, focus groups, planning projects and teams. Open public forums, written and online submissions.
<b>Involve</b>	Active participation from the stakeholders throughout the process to ensure concerns are directly reflected in the alternatives and in developing solutions.	Community member participation on special ad hoc committees, stakeholder research, workshops.
<b>Collaborate</b>	Working together in a joint process with stakeholders throughout the decision-making process, incorporating recommendations into the decision, and assisting in carrying them out.	Consensus building, participatory decision-making, committees, one-on-one consultations.
<b>Empower</b>	Actively supporting stakeholders in developing their own processes and structures necessary to identify issues and to implement solutions. United Way Halifax and the HRM may be in a position to support external groups, but has no greater voice in decision-making than any of the other stakeholders.	Provide skills, training or leadership, resources and tools for projects and initiatives, one-on-one consultations.

Above image adapted from Perth and Smiths Falls District Hospital, 2017, Communications Strategy and Community Engagement Framework (<http://psfdh.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/PSFDH-Comm-Engage-Plan-2017-Approved-Feb-28-17.pdf>)

Community engagement in Halifax included **informing** citizens about Poverty Solutions, **consulting** to gather information and feedback from stakeholders, **collaborating** to generate solutions, and **partnering** with the community from the beginning to create the desired outcomes together.

### Governance Structure for Poverty Solutions

The Poverty Solutions governance structure was designed to engage a broad spectrum of the Halifax community, and was intended to adapt to the changing needs of the initiative over time. Now that recommendations for action have been made, a small working group is developing the next iteration of leadership to move into implementation. Each key stakeholder group is described in detail below.

#### Experts by Experience

Experts by Experience are people who have lived experience of poverty. The plan was to form a stand alone advisory committee comprised of Experts by Experience to oversee the work, provide constant feedback and advice on the implementation of the strategy, and operate with decision-making responsibilities.

As the engagement plan was implemented, the structure shifted to ensure all committees, task teams, and other engagement opportunities were inclusive of Experts by Experience. While a separate group would address power imbalances amongst participants, embedding inclusion throughout the structure was a more direct form of representation. This path was chosen both to build capacity in the community to advocate and because of a lack of organizational capacity to host multiple committees.

In designing an inclusive engagement process, United Way Halifax was guided by the wisdom of community members, the [“Seven Principles for Leadership and Inclusion of People with Lived Experience”](#), and [Peerology](#). Financial support from the Halifax Regional Municipality for developing the strategy was used to provide living wages, child care, transportation and other supports as needed (ex. translation services, ASL interpretation).

The following considerations ensured the full participation of the community in engagements:

- Recognize the expertise of people with lived experience of poverty
- Choose a barrier-free venue located in or near the lived experience community
- Ensure there are multiple avenues for participation and provide appropriate support
- Cover transit costs or provide alternate transportation, as appropriate



- Compensate participants for their time at the [local living wage rate](#) (\$19.17 in Halifax); ensure that compensation does not impede the income source of a person with lived experience of poverty (e.g. income assistance claw-backs)
- Choose a time of day that works best for participants
- Provide food and drinks
- Train allies to understand and support inclusion
- Provide other types of supports including child minding, attendant care, translation or interpretation, and scribes to help participants provide written feedback
- Provide clear and accessible information
- Build capacity by mentoring and facilitating in different aspects of participation (e.g. writing minutes, facilitation, and discussions)
- Consider anonymity

### Community Conscience

The Community Conscience are advocates, agencies and service providers who work with and advocate for people with lived experience. They were asked to provide mentorship, wisdom and guidance to Poverty Solutions. Members of the Community Conscience participated on the Task Teams and Advisory Committee and supported the engagement of people with lived experience of poverty. Their expertise was valuable in identifying what work had already been done, what work could be built upon, where the most need is, and where they might have the most potential for impact. They also provided suggestions for working across sectors.

### Business Alliance

Businesses leaders have skills and resources with direct impact on the outcomes for people experiencing poverty. The private sector can support decent jobs and pay a living wage with an immediate and incredible impact for employees and their families. The client-focus and innovation that occurs daily in business environments is needed to help address difficult social challenges.

Business leaders were asked to participate on Solutions Task Teams and on the Advisory Committee, and a larger group discussed possible roles and responsibilities of the private sector in addressing poverty. A separate Business Alliance group is currently under development.

### Poverty Solutions Advisory Committee

Advisory Committee members hold influence in the systems, institutions, and communities that have significant impact on stewarding the change process where it is needed to end poverty. Members who participated in this committee are leaders that could listen deeply to people with lived experiences of poverty as well as the Community Conscience, to learn how to make change collaboratively. They were asked to steward the work and process of developing solutions across sectors and traditional divides.

### Solutions Task Teams

Solutions Task Teams identified priority solutions around specific thematic areas (ex. housing, food security). They were multi-sectoral and comprised of key individuals and organizations identified by community partners.

### Community Engagement Phases (2017)

- **April – Aug:** Background research, strategy development and partnership recruitment
- **Sept – Nov:** Task Teams organize around themes and identify poverty solutions
- **Nov – March:** Receive feedback from the public on the draft Poverty Solutions Strategy

The engagement process was designed to consult a diverse cross-section of HRM's population, and consisted of the following components:

- Open houses and public meetings to prioritize solutions;
- Conversations with lived experience, the Community Conscience and other stakeholders;
- Public community workshops;
- Independent written, video, and other mediums (e.g. visual art, audio) submissions;
- Online surveys through [Shape Your City](#);
- The Community Report was shared throughout the process and incorporated feedback.

### **Reducing Over-Engagement: Leveraging Existing Consultations**

Poverty Solutions also sought to incorporate the collective wisdom of groups and individuals who have worked to eliminate poverty in HRM for decades, honouring the significant consultation and engagement that has already occurred in the community around poverty elimination.

The Poverty Solutions team referred to [United Way's joint submission](#) consultations on Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy, "600 Voices in '16" neighbourhood consultations in Dartmouth North by [Between the Bridges](#), the work of the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre to develop the [Urban Aboriginal Homelessness Community Action Plan](#), Nova Scotia's 2009 Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the "[What's Your Recipe for a Better Food System?](#)" Food Secure Canada discussion hosted by the Dartmouth North Community Food Centre. Results from these consultations informed Poverty Solutions' engagements and were incorporated into the 129 Ideas for Action.

## **IMPLEMENTATION: PITFALLS**

As comprehensive as the Poverty Solutions engagement plan was, they heard from the community in December 2017 that the initiative was not representative of the entire community. Funding constraints and an ambitious project timeframe led the team to collaborate with the more 'usual suspects', and though they included people with lived experience, the engagement process missed a significant portion of traditionally under-served communities that did not yet have well-established communication channels to provide input.

Halifax's Poverty Solutions primary challenges included:

**Weak relationships:** With sections of the Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities.

**Lack of diverse representation:** The United Way is not a service provider and the network lacks a diversity of connection to lived experience members. Numerous community conversations were held throughout rural HRM, but there was no rural representation on the governance structure and all of the feedback events were held in the urban core.

**Short timeframes:** Trying to engage un-engaged communities in a period of three months was not

conducive to building trust and relationships.

## FAILING FORWARDS: FROM LISTENING TO ACTION

Responding to feedback with action is one of the most important elements in authentic community engagement, as the ability to turn plans and recommendations into action is essential for establishing trust. Below are several ways that United Way Halifax is responding to community input.

**Adapting the Plan:** Rather than writing a prescriptive strategy, Halifax Regional Municipality's [Community Report](#) is a document that outlines what the community identified as the main challenges and opportunities for change.

**Strengthening Partnerships:** United Way Halifax is recognizing its responsibilities in truth and reconciliation, and the role that the organization has in the colonization and marginalization of the Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities. An engagement period of three months perpetuated the power relationships that silenced these communities for decades.

The Poverty Solutions' work will be a journey over many years to reconcile and build trust. United Way Centraide Canada is already a proud signatory to the [Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action](#) – a commitment to sharing the United Way network and resources to include and benefit Indigenous peoples. United Way Halifax will also incorporate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [Calls to Action](#) in their organizational structure, values, and community impact strategies, and identify specific Calls to Action to focus on. They are also working in collaboration with the [Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre](#) to build a partnership agreement, and as part of their personal learning journeys, United Way staff and volunteers have participated in blanket exercises hosted by the Friendship Centre.

Nova Scotia also has a history of systemic racism towards African Nova Scotians. Learnings from the Poverty Solutions engagement highlight the need for an integrated equity approach with a thorough examination of the power dynamics and privilege held by individuals and organizations involved in change initiatives. As such, United Way Halifax is seeking to build capacity to increase equity by having staff and volunteers participate in cultural humility training, as well as establishing a local community of practice to go on a learning journey with other organizations, in collaboration with the Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities.

Volunteer funding panels that lead the strategic investment of resources were intentionally recruited for diversity this year. Staff who have been building community relationships reached out and invited African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities to participate on the funding panels. Honorariums at a living wage rate, child care, and transportation supports are being provided to ensure the full participation of community members with lived experience of poverty. This has resulted in a much more diverse group to review funding applications for 2019.

**Building Regional Diversity:** United Way Halifax struggled to address the diverse needs of the rural, urban, and suburban communities in the HRM. Going forward, United Way has been working with Prosperity for All, a new coalition of organizations and community members building more inclusive communities and reducing poverty along the Eastern Shore. United Way will also play an important role in amplifying the voices of these communities by establishing Community Pulse, a group to inform UW's community impact strategies.



**Engaging Experts by Experience:** In many cases, people with the most profound expertise also face significant barriers to participating in formal consultation processes. While 38% of people who participated in the Poverty Solutions engagement had lived experience of poverty, a more intentional equity approach and stronger relationships would have resulted in much greater representation and diversity. In addition to the original considerations for planning an inclusive engagement event, community change practitioners should consider these learnings:

- Incorporate the event into existing community programming;
- Decision-making should be based on acceptance (e.g. everyone can live with the decision);
- Explore community ownership of data, particularly with Indigenous communities;
- If possible, the group should be chaired and facilitated by people with lived experience. If not possible at the time, build the capacity for it;
- Use plain language in documents and resources;
- *All* meetings should be reciprocal in nature and include a capacity building element. (Ex. conflict resolution, leadership skills, communications, equity, and diversity.)
- Get a commitment from partner organizations to work in equity

**“ In many cases, people with the most profound expertise, also face significant barriers to participating in formal consultation processes. ”**  
 Jennifer Wilcox, United Way Halifax

**Lessons for Preparing Hosts to Share Power and Decision-Making with Participants**

When bringing together diverse stakeholders it is important to create a safe space to consider the power imbalance in the room. Participants from organizations and groups that have privilege should consider how this power impacts and marginalizes other participants in the group and share power and decision-making.

- Meet communities on their own terms and in their own spaces;
- Commit time for building relationships with marginalized communities;
- Build capacity to facilitate safe space and in conflict resolution;
- Be transparent about the decision-making process and how input will be utilized;
- Build diversity into the structure – either in existing groups or by establishing separate but equal groups. Both have positives and drawbacks, as discussed below;

Existing Group	Separate but Equal
More direct representation	Addresses power imbalance of the Existing Group model
Builds capacity/advocacy in community	Challenges around influence – be clear about decision-making power
Equity and legitimization challenges – especially if anyone represents an organization. Experts by	Challenges around communication between working groups



experience do not have this.	
Ensures balance and critical mass	Self-advocacy groups perform a similar role in the community
Multiple perspectives will be heard	

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Authentic community engagement is the intentional process of co-creating solutions, and requires input from diverse community members. It is important to engage a multi-sector approach and includes people of diverse backgrounds in the conversation(s) and decision-making processes.

Poverty Solutions strove to engage HRM residents in decision-making to identify solutions to poverty. Engagement is an interactive and creative process, and the community should be engaged in a constant and authentic dialogue with the roundtable leaders. There should be a true shared understanding of each other’s needs, and collective work toward solutions. Authentic engagement requires partners to internalize the lessons from the process and shift the culture of how we work.

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