

Group searching for 'common good'

The Caske+
July 6th, 2011

by Corey LeBlanc

coreyleblanc@thecasket.ca

Feedback has been plentiful as the Antigonish Poverty Reduction Coalition (APRC) continues gathering information to help create an action plan to deal with poverty issues in the community.

Group members gathered June 30 at the People's Place to receive an update on the progress of its project.

Project co-ordinator Paula Cameron said five focus group sessions have been completed, which have provided tremendous feedback regarding poverty issues.

By the end of September, the goal is to complete 20 focus groups in various Antigonish communities.



Antigonish Poverty Reduction Coalition members Lise de Villiers (left), ACALA (Antigonish County Adult Learning Association) and Sister Marion Sheridan, Sisters of St. Martha social justice committee, were among those gathered June 30 for an update on the group's ongoing work. (Corey LeBlanc photo)

"It is going to be revealing and an important piece of work."

Lucille Harper
AWRC executive director

"We have heard many stories and suggestions for change," Cameron, who conducts the focus group sessions with Marion MacNeil, said.

Each focus group takes 60 to 90 minutes, involving various stakeholders. Cameron noted there is also an opportunity for people to provide feedback in a one-on-one setting.

"People have been brave and so open with us so far," Cameron said, noting stories have touched on everything

from access to transportation and food to the efforts of the broader community to support neighbours who may be struggling.

"We heard about the difficulty in getting groceries when a road trip from the Ohio Valley costs \$60," Cameron recalled.

"There is also the social isolation involved with lack of transportation," she added.

Cameron said one community had a group of people working on creating a community taxi service. They outlined the barriers associated with getting such a project off the ground.

The need for more affordable housing has been another common theme. Cameron said they heard stories of families living in houses with holes in roofs and walls falling down.

Cameron said participants

have talked about "disappearing shared spaces," areas in communities such as corner stores and gas stations where people gather and learn about the needs of their neighbours.

"People want to grow their own food, but that even presents barriers in terms of cost and other issues."

Cameron said a common theme has been people burdened by the stigma that success is equated to what people have.

"It is a struggle for many people."

"People have been brave and so open with us so far."

Paula Cameron
APRC project co-ordinator

The focus group discussions are meant to focus on challenges to thriving communities and possible future directions in dealing with poverty.

That feedback will be part of the creation of a five-year action plan to address community needs, which will be presented to the community in a report and public presentations.

Eventually, the goal is to form action groups to implement recommendations.

"One of the biggest barriers is finding out what's going on," Cameron said about poverty issues, noting these sessions are helping with that challenge.

The APRC is a group of individuals and organizations concerned with "improving the quality of life for all citizens" in Antigonish town and county.

Lucille Harper is executive director of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), which is one of the coalition's founding members.

"People do not realize the amount of work [involved] for people living in poverty," she said during the June 30 meeting as coalition members discussed the focus group findings Cameron outlined.

Harper said there has to be so much prioritization for people in areas such as food and transportation.

"And for new people in the area, they don't have that network to help them," she noted.

Returning to that idea of the stigma involved with living in poverty, group members talked about the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality."

"There is widely-held perceptions that people abuse the food bank," Jerome Grant, county councillor and St. Josephs Social Action Committee member, said.

"The ones that are damning it are certainly not contributing to it. They use [talk of abuse] as a cop out," he added.

Sister Marion Sheridan of the Sisters of Saint Martha Social Justice Committee, and an APRC member, touched on what she thought is a pervading attitude that people who do not "contribute" to society should be punished or do not deserve things.

"They are often targeted for those reasons," she said, reiterating the idea that money and what someone has reflects their worth.

Sister Sheridan said there must be a focus on the belief there is "common good for everybody."

During the discussion, members stressed the need not only to complete the paper, but also work on putting its findings into action. Also, the importance of delivering the presentation to groups, such as municipal councils, Chamber of Commerce, was noted.

Harper said the APRC's final report will be not only be a reflection of the "need" in our communities, but also "what poverty really looks like."

"It is going to be revealing and an important piece of work," she added.

The final report is scheduled for completion in March, 2012.

For information about the APRC project, contact Paula Cameron at 863-6221, ext. 225, or aprc.awrc@bellalliant.com