

Facilitators: Councillors Pauline Raven and Emma VanRooyen, Municipality of the County of Kings

We enjoyed meeting each and everyone of you and were grateful to hear about your municipality's responses to poverty. We learned that there are many practical and immediate ways municipal councils can help lessen the impact of poverty. Below is an overview of what we heard. A list of attendees is also included to help you access more information from particular towns, counties or districts.

It's clear that participants understood the wide range of persons touched by poverty and a need for community support. Rural residents, whether infants, single parents, single males, or retirees can all be impacted and a municipality can offer a wide range of programs and grants to assist.

However, this is not an exhaustive list of all programs offered by all municipalities, rather it's a sample of the programs brought to mind by those who attended. A phone call, email or visit to a sister municipality's website will undoubtedly provide more details.

Perhaps in the months ahead there will be an idea or two here from another part of the province that you can recommend for use by your municipality in its endeavours to help residents living in low-income circumstances. We hope this list and your time together in November will encourage you to reconnect around programs of interest.

A huge thanks to everyone who participated in this session (48 attendees registered with their business cards). Together we accumulated a greater base of knowledge on this important topic.

Sincerely, Pauline Raven & Emma VanRooyen

Property Tax Relief

Grants to offset the costs of property taxes were reported by the representatives of 22 different municipal units.

- Counties of Annapolis, Colchester, Cumberland, Digby and East Hants (6 units).
- Districts of Argyle, Chester, Guysborough, Lunenburg, Shelburne and St. Mary's (6 units).
- Towns of Bridgewater, Kentville, Mahone Bay, Middleton, New Glasgow, Parrsborough, Pictou, Shelburne, Stewiacke and Wolfville (10 units).

In one county the qualifying level was an annual income lower than \$17,500. The highest income level where a household could qualify was \$33,000. The highest grant noted was \$350, and the lowest was

\$150. Some representatives reported based on their own estimates. It would be interesting to research these grants and to track changes over time. Some interesting points of discussion were:

- Low rates of application, despite levels of perceived poverty.
- Requirement of proof of income with all applications in most municipalities.
- No required documentation of annual income in at least one municipality while noting that applicants are told on the application form that proof of income may be requested by finance staff.
- Some municipalities had initiated these grants several years ago while others started in 2014-15.
- At least one municipality had indexed the qualifying annual income and grant to the Canada Price Index.

Energy Efficiency

Paying for fuel and electricity is a major challenge for residents who do not have affordable housing.

Only one municipality reported a Home Energy Loan Program (HELP) that was up and running. However, three councillors reported interest in this program and discussions or recommendations had been initiated.

- County of Inverness has a Property Assessed Clean Energy Program (PACE) as described in the rural poverty cracker barrel session.
- A Kings County Councillor is lobbying for a PACE program modeled on Inverness' partnership with Efficiency Nova Scotia.
- A Digby County Councillor has also started work on PACE and other efficiency initiatives.
- A Town of Wolfville Councillor is lobbying for "Solar Wolfville" which will also include opportunities for a wide range of efficiency options for households.

Low income and non-affordable housing situations lead to emergencies for households. At these times municipalities can be called upon for assistance. A number of strategies were reported by attendees.

Five municipalities reported help aimed at assisting households with heating costs.

- The County of Pictou as well as the Towns of New Glasgow and Stellarton have "fuel funds" to address emergencies households experience during winter months.
- A Digby Councillor reported having personal access to wood. By setting up his "wood bank" he was able to supply fuel to wood-burning residents in need.

- The Town of Mahone Bay owns and operates their own power utility and sets lower electrical rates than Nova Scotia Power. As an independent utility, the town can also apply personalized payment plans for residents in need.

The County of Pictou and Town of Wolfville noted that they fund food banks. The Wolfville councillor noted that the food bank also provides furniture and helps with a wide variety of needs (e.g., locating funds to help with the provision of dentures).

The County of Cumberland highlighted their involvement with “Coats for Cumberland”. This program runs across municipalities in that region and can save families with children the cost of winter coats, leaving more income for housing costs.

Two municipalities reported financial support for actions aimed at providing shelter for homeless rural adults or youth.

- Region of Halifax has opened an “Out of the Cold” shelter in Musquodoboit Harbour.
- Town of New Glasgow operates a “Roots for Youth” homelessness shelter.

Two municipalities/partnerships reported proactive approaches aimed at establishing affordable housing options.

- The County of Inverness has established a housing cooperative to explore affordable home ownership with a focus on youth and seniors.
- The Districts of Lunenburg and Queens is helping to establish a working partnership “South Shore Housing Action” to explore affordable housing options.

Rural Public Transit

“Door to door” service was the type of transportation most reported by municipalities attending the session. Commonly, these were described as services for seniors and disabled persons and occasionally for those accessing educational programs. These types of programs were reported by:

- Counties of Cumberland, East Hants, Kings and Pictou
- Districts of Chester and Clare
- Towns of Bridgewater, Pictou and Shelburne

Comments indicated that often these were shared services with surrounding counties, districts or towns and that these services are offered through independent organizations that are partially funded by municipalities.

The following municipalities are currently working to establish public transportation services for their units. All reported that they are exploring a door-to-door model.

- County of Antigonish
- Districts of Argyle, Lunenburg and St. Mary's
- Town of Mahone Bay (hiring a coordinator to implement)

Scheduled services were clearly a challenge for rural municipalities. Kings Transit and Strait Area Transit representatives did report services that regularly services routes. While Kings uses buses and the Strait Area uses minivans, both services are unrestricted. Anyone can ride and this provides the public at large with access to work, school, medical appointments, shopping, banking, etc.

The County of Digby noted that they provide free bus rides for the community at large for large events (e.g., Wharf Rat Rally) and for the week before Christmas.

Some other transportation supports were noted:

- Town of Canso is served by a private operator of a small bus company
- The Towns of New Glasgow and Wolfville placed value on good taxi services. The Town of New Glasgow noted that their municipality subsidizes taxi use for those in need
- Several rural municipalities noted transportation for medical appointments in Halifax were provided through the private sector and/or non-profit transit organizations

It was clear that attendees placed a high value on public transit. The challenges of addressing the public transportation need of a widely dispersed, declining and aging rural population left several rural municipal representatives feeling that there was no affordable option for their communities.

A 2013 report on rural transit can be accessed at the following link (Transit in Rural Nova Scotia: Moving towards available, affordable and accessible transportation):

http://atlantic.transport-action.ca/Transit_Report_Final.pdf

Recreation Programs

Fourteen municipalities with attendees reported they offered or supported recreation programs that incorporated strategies to make programs more accessible to low-income households.

A partnership with the private sector is providing access to recreation and sports activities across the Districts of Chester, Lunenburg and Queens. This “Pro-Kid” program funds program registration and

equipment costs. The Town of Berwick's recreation department actively seeks private business sponsorship for children entering summer camp programs.

Five municipalities reported that their summer camp or after school programs could be accessed at no charge by children from low-income families.

- The Counties of Colchester, Digby and Kings, as well as the District of Shelburne and the Town of Middleton all highlighted free access to after school programs.
- Digby reported free after school skating and pond hockey in the winter months.

The County of Kings presented a free “Moms and Tots” exercise and support program offered to families at no charge and with transportation supports.

Four municipalities highlighted free programs for seniors:

- County of Kings' Recreation Department offers free bus trips to performances or special events.
- The District of Lunenburg holds seniors' picnics and recreation days.
- The District of Shelburne reported many free programs for seniors.
- The Town of Stewiacke highlighted their senior yoga program.

Two municipalities (Counties of Digby and Shelburne) reported that the senior safety program they support is linked to service provision in a broad sense but does support many lower-income seniors.

Two municipalities reported access to free bikes:

- The Town of Bridgewater's “Bikes for kids” refurbished 70 bikes that were provided free of charge for kids.
- The Town of Wolfville's “Dirt Divas” supplied bikes to girls in need of a free bike in conjunction with a program that promotes safe use of bike trails.

Two municipalities (County of Kings and the District of Guysborough) provide financial support to sports teams for travel costs.

Lastly, a few programs with a broad-range of potential impacts were reported. While not targeted to persons living in low-income circumstances, these programs could prove helpful to those experiencing poverty:

- The County of Colchester dedicates an evening to hear presentations from organizations. Each councillor is given a pre-determined amount to allocate as he or she sees fit.

- The County of Guyborough also invites applications from organizations with a \$10,000 per councillor fund that can be allotted once per year based on the priorities seen as most important to each councillor.
- The County of Cumberland provides funds to an organization that is skilled in providing direct support to families living in low-income circumstances.
- The County of Inverness supports a Community Leadership Centre.
- A County of Digby Councillor sees the need for a mental health worker to help residents navigate services and is lobbying for the municipality to fund a program.