

Growing Pains and Human Service Provision in Toronto's Suburbs

Two roundtables were organized during the 2007 National Metropolis Conference. Governmental and non-governmental representatives from the Regional Municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel and York were brought together to discuss the challenges facing rapid suburban growth especially with respect to the provision of services to recent immigrants, low income residents, and seniors. The following questions were posed as possible pointers for discussion.

- What problems do recent changes in the suburbs pose?
- Have the problems reached crisis proportion in terms of human service delivery?
- How can the problems be dealt with?
- What are innovative and effective human service strategies?
- Will one set of strategies fit all the vulnerable populations?
- How do we introduce strategies to make sure that the suburban regions are socially sustainable?
- What is the best way to coordinate human service delivery?
- What do we actually mean by coordination?

Challenges of Human Services Delivery in the Suburbs

- Lack of funding from provincial and federal government to support human services
- Growing disparity in human services funding between the City of Toronto and the suburban regions
- The general perception that human services are a drain on the budget as opposed to an investment in the community
- Uncoordinated public transportation prevents people in the suburbs to access services in City of Toronto
- Because of the perception that human services are geared to marginalized/ disadvantaged groups, human services are only dealt with when there is a perceived, urgent problem.
- Municipalities place a strong emphasis on economic development and population growth without considering long-term human service planning. Short term planning is often strung around political time frames
- Lack of visibility of the 905 region with respect to the changing diversity relative to the larger cities, even among those living in the regions
- Newcomers in particular face many barriers – discrimination, language, equity and access to services. They may not fit in well with pre-existing norms and issues of insecurity are prevalent alongside technical issues pertaining to accessing tools to integration.
- There are questions of visibility- how can we make the groups visible and municipalities visible in the GTA.

Overall: Although the suburban regions are experiencing big challenges, most participants conveyed a sense of optimism. The consensus is that they haven't reached a crisis situation, but things need to be done to avoid a crisis. In particular, human services need be planned for the long term in the same way as hard services. Partnership, shared

responsibilities, effective communication, and cross-sector planning are seen as important in human service delivery. However, a caution is that needs are diverse within each region, and despite common themes, it isn't one size fits all.

Human Service Models or Strategies

- **York Region** follows 3 planning criteria -- sustainable environment, economic vitality, and healthy communities; and recognizes the need for crossover. Since 2001, York Region established The Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC) consisting of representatives from 16 human services sectors. Through that forum, the planners work together on environmental challenges, create information through research, and have adopted a number of plans to address the needs of human services in York Region. The Inclusivity Action Plan was created in 2005 to assist newcomer integration by means of a better service delivery model, increased public awareness, and strengthening the capacity of human services agencies to be inclusive. An outcome is the creation of a Welcome Centre which brings together over two dozen settlement service and other service providers to work in collaboration and break down the 'silos'. Five Welcome Centres are anticipated and CIC has committed to the first phase..
- **Peel Region** adopts a model of change management with the acronym ADKAR (Acceptance – accept need for change, Desire – desire to inform change, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement) .The long term plan is to enhance the linkage between human services and population growth. In addition, Peel Region has proposed the implementation of the *Peel Newcomer Strategy* where stakeholders will work with communities to develop a flexible and responsive system, to identify needs and strategies, and to fill the gaps. Corporately, one of the high priority projects is the *Livable Peel Project* which oversees the delivery of services for immigrants in the next 30 to 50 years. There is also a community aspect which will involve the collection of data, the development of discussion papers, and funding for the web service.
- **Durham Region** still sees hard services as the most important services. However, with the increasing population growth, there is a lot of pressure to look at needs. Some steps are being taken to focus on human services such as childcare and youth services. Businesses are keen on knowing how social services work in the community. The willingness to work together for community services appears to be there.
- **Halton Region** has seen some success in sectoral planning like childcare and employment, but not so much on the broader human services side. This is possibly due to positive indicators such as higher income, higher education, and less poverty than other regions. The Region is trying to put a number of agencies under one roof since it is very rare for clients to utilize only one service and funding is scarce.
- The silos have recently broken down. The regional municipalities and the 905 Health Care Alliance have recently started working together in a group called the **Strong Communities Coalition** to discuss and manage growth and funding issues. This is a good beginning as everyone is using the same language and talking about

the same issues. Significant headway is being made. The report, “Ontario Places to Grow”, is a first step that requires follow-up in terms of how to finance growth and incorporate human and social services to sustain strong and healthy communities. Participants agree that the regions are at a juncture where there is not only the opportunity to plan and do local human services provision and planning, but also to influence how government funds will be spent.

Overall: Attempts are made to employ new models and look at new ways of doing things differently. This includes more cross sectoral and cross-regional collaboration. It involves teaming up to strategize and plan for the future on issues. There is a move to plan sustainable cities and to collaborate and coordinate with a large number of partners and stakeholders.

Measuring Impact

- We shouldn't be looking for short term impacts as certain things take time to have an impact.
- There are also certain things we just have to rely on and not be so caught up in having the right scientific measurements.
- Research can support the kind of changes we are looking for in building healthy communities. The notion of evidence based decision making brings a lot of credibility.
- York Region and Peel Region are working with universities and colleges to share data. The Knowledge Mobilization Unit of York University can provide the link.

Accountability and the Coordination of Service Delivery

- Some of the challenges through reduced funding have to do with accountability. The notion of accountability within the last 10-15 years has developed a very strong negative connotation because of funding cuts and the amount of recording around small amounts of money.
- But what has resulted from that is a culture of partnership and information sharing that is relatively new and refreshing. The new emerging social accountability model creates a lot of opportunity to transform human services funding, and the way we look at accountability. Social accountability involves all the players, from community to frontline service deliverers, to administrators to high level decision makers. It would be good to hear from service deliverers and those involved in senior policy roles around funding, and to explore possible areas of disconnect.
- However, accountability also means responsibilities don't reach out of the municipal boundaries. So some view collaboration can be tough.
- Regarding coordination, the focus should be on a strategy to move forward rather than criticizing what each got right now. Now is a good time to look at coordination and build up capacities of organizations, i.e. building together, planning the services, and coordinating resources.
- The Strong Communities Coalition can use its reports as a coordination mechanism. The under-funding issues have been made very public across the GTA.

The report called *Growing Pains* can be a framing mechanism for a coordinated strategy for a broad partnership for municipalities and service providers to work together.

In essence, there is nothing tangible to coordinate at the moment because adequate funding is lacking. The regions should be talking about planning, and advocating for more resources. When the resources come, then each region should go on to the next step and work together out of a sense of goodwill. In developing a service delivery model, we need to bear in mind that in poor times we work together but we should also work together in good times.