

Reimagining a Just Recovery in York Region

On June 22, 2020 over 80 individuals including a diversity of not-for-profit organizations in York Region came together to discuss the way forward for a Just Recovery from COVID19. This meeting brought about extensive discussions on critical topics that should shape the way we imagine a just recovery.

People across York Region are now asking that government at all levels commit to these 5 goals to build a recovery that works for everyone:

- **Create adequate and accessible income supports**
- **Ensure decent work with fair pay, benefits & protections in safe workplaces**
- **Expand and preserve safe, adequate and affordable housing**
- **Invest in access to public services like child care, transportation, digital access and eldercare**
- **Increase the use of flexible funding and core funding that lets nonprofits adapt to new and unanticipated challenges, and contributes to sustainability and predictability**

Achieving these 5 goals will require specific actions from all levels of government, outlined below.

Background

Following from the first event in June, York Region nonprofits and community leaders met together five additional times to discuss priority areas for public policy: Income Security, Food Security, Housing, Decent Work and the Not-For-Profit Sector. Throughout these sessions, York Region organizations have been imagining new models and policy directions to address the vulnerabilities that have been exposed. Organizations are seeking a more just and resilient recovery that will not only increase quality of life for those most impacted, but also put us in a stronger place to face the next wave, or the next pandemic.

We know from the evidence shared at those meetings that the COVID-19 Pandemic had a disproportionate impact on marginalized and vulnerable populations. In fact, it played a critical role in illuminating just how poorly our support systems work for people who already face marginalization due to poverty, oppression and inequality. It has entrenched long-standing inequities and has shown us that a return to “normal” is exactly the wrong direction to go in. It is time we overhauled our safety net and public policy to guarantee decent living conditions for all communities. COVID-19 has proven that government can act swiftly to change policies and initiate programs. Now is the time to take action.

Each of the policy sections below reflect what we gleaned from our five in-depth discussions, joined by over 100 community leaders. These discussions resulted in policy directions and recommendations for action.

Policy Directions and Recommendations for Action

1.) Food Security

Food banks are a response to a gap in incomes and the consequent loss of access to food. The pandemic revealed that circumstances can change quickly, and food insecurity can grow unexpectedly.

The good news has been that many people and organizations stepped up to address the burgeoning food insecurity. The bad news is that even with increased capacity, the food system is still struggling to compensate for the lack of adequate, stable incomes. The systems are not built for the scale of need that we faced even before the pandemic. Their threadbare capacity can't adequately provide for fresh food, or culturally appropriate food, in their struggle to simply provide enough food.

Goals emerging from the conversation:

Locally:

- Engage the food systems (grocery stores, food producers, restaurants) to provide food that would otherwise go to waste to the food systems that support vulnerable people
- Create more food co-ops, community gardens and field to table programs enabling people to obtain quality fresh food and retain agency and "food sovereignty" in doing so

Provincially and Federally:

- Address income issues by joining together to ensure adequate minimum wages, and income supports
- Take steps to make our food system fair, sustainable and resilient including addressing the precarity and low wages of migrant workers

2.) Income Security

Current income support programs have long been a source of concern. ODSP, OW, EI, CPP, OAS, GIS, the CCB, and HST Credits are a complex web of systems that are poorly constructed, hard to access and provide income far below the poverty line for most recipients. The CERB, for those who qualified, provided income that cleared the poverty line and was easy to access. But many of those living in the deepest poverty were excluded or faced claw backs that actually put them back further below the poverty line.

The CERB illustrated that federal and provincial governments could work together to make a simple, accessible program that provided adequate income when made a priority. They achieved this goal without undermining other services that people rely on. It's time we made real income support a priority for everyone.

Goals emerging from the conversation:

Locally:

- Work collaboratively with the community to call for an income support system that pulls people out of poverty while protecting the services they rely on
- Build systems to support responsive municipal program delivery

Provincially and Federal:

- Collaborate to create an income support system that ensures no one in Canada lives below the poverty line.

3.) Housing

COVID-19 showed how vulnerable precariously housed people are all across the GTA. People who are homeless, underhoused, living in cramped spaces or overcrowded apartments could not physically distance themselves and faced far higher rates of illness.

Those risk factors are the result of an underlying housing crisis. Vacancy rates in York Region are among the lowest in the country. As we build a modest amount of affordable housing, gentrification, renovations and rent hikes on vacant units are eliminating affordable housing units more than twice as fast as new units are built.

Despite this, during the pandemic municipalities managed to house thousands of homeless people in a matter of weeks, showing there is the capacity to make the investments and pass the policies required to make real change quickly.

Goals emerging from the conversation:

Locally:

- Use municipal land to promote the development of affordable, nonprofit and co-op housing that remains permanently affordable
- Waive fees, charges and other costs to maximize affordability for nonprofit developers
- Implement inclusionary zoning to increase affordable housing in developments
- Encourage single units (SROs), secondary suites and auxiliary units as sources of new affordable housing

Provincially:

- Return to real rent controls, including controls on rents in vacant units
- Reverse Bill 184 to prevent large scale evictions
- Invest in affordable housing development and supportive housing

Federally:

- Fund the long term retention of new affordable units created during the pandemic
- Partner with other orders of government to increase investments in the rapid expansion of affordable housing development

4.) Nonprofits

During the pandemic, nonprofits across the GTA played an expanded role in addressing the crisis. They collaborated with local governments and the United Way through Cluster Response Tables. They participated in joint service planning, expanded and adjusted programs and services to respond to pressures caused by COVID-19. Non-profits were a critical part of the pandemic response.

Nonprofits were also a key part of the economic sustainability in Ontario. Already 8% of the economy, the non-profit sector did not shut down during the pandemic, and was among the small number of sectors that continued to contribute to the stability of the economy throughout that period.

But not all nonprofits were equally able to play that role. Those that had flexible funding to reallocate, core funding to sustain them through transitions, and those that had technology to support remote work were better equipped to support their communities during the pandemic. Robust funding is needed, both from charitable sources and from tax funded government sources.

Goals emerging from the conversation:

Locally:

- Continue collaborative planning and implementation within the sector
- Increase the use of flexible funding and core funding that enables non-profits to adapt to new and unanticipated challenges

Provincially and Federally:

- Increase the use of flexible funding and core funding that enables non-profits to adapt to new and unanticipated challenges, and contributes to sustainability and predictability
- Invest in technology to further build capacity of non-profits to increase access to remote service

5.) Decent Work

There has been a steady trend to increasingly precarious work, especially in York Region. Fewer people have stable, full time work that pays a living wage, and many work multiple part-time or casual jobs, with irregular hours, low pay and no paid sick leave or benefits. Precarious jobs lack protection for workers that would enable them to raise issues when work is unsafe, or laws and regulations are not followed.

The pandemic showed just how risky that is. Healthy communities include safe work, where people can stay home when sick, and raise concerns when workplaces are unsafe. Many jobs that are undervalued, like grocery store staff, personal support workers and cleaners, were deemed essential, and were critical enough to justify “danger pay” as an incentive to work during the pandemic. But many others, including migrant workers, got little support despite doing critically important jobs. The people who face the greatest challenge from precarious work are also the people who have tended to be most affected by COVID-19, including racialized people, women, low income households, and immigrants.

Goals emerging from the conversation:

Locally:

- Increase the use of community benefit agreements to support improved employment on major projects in the region

Provincially:

- Address precarious work for all workers by:
 - o Raising minimum wages
 - o Legislating 10 paid sick days for all workers
 - o Ensuring all workers are treated fairly, paid adequately and have access to protections that enable them to address workplace health and safety and other workplace concerns, regardless of where they work.
 - o Eliminating perverse incentives that increase part-time work, such as exemptions from paying benefits

Federally:

- Ensure all workers, including migrant workers and informal workers have status and access to decent employment policies including decent minimum wages, 10 paid sick days and access to protections that enable them to address workplace safety and other workplace issues

Calls to Action:

As you review the reflections and recommendations captured in each of our policy discussions it is clear how interconnected each of the issues are. Precarity, inequity and vulnerability were pervasive themes throughout each of these discussions, which underscore the need for transformative change in public policy if the most marginalized among us are going to experience security, dignity and quality of life in the months and years that lie ahead.

We invite each of you to take individual actions to advance our collective aspirations for a Just Recovery from COVID19:

- Write Letters to your Local/Regional Politicians, your MPP and MP asking them to advocate for these policies in their caucus and with the relevant ministers (*draft letter/email attached for your use*)
- Join in collective efforts to advance the policy recommendations we have arrived at together through collective advocacy. Please email info@conveneto.ca if you want to help with:
 - Townhall events with elected officials
 - Meetings with Individual MPPs, MPs, Members of Cabinet
 - Op-eds and Media Awareness to our Call for a Just Recovery
- Join existing Advocacy Groups focussed on specific policy areas
 - York Region Food Council (morgans@yrfn.ca)
 - Campaign for Decent Work (jj79@rogers.com)
 - Affordable Housing Coalition of York Region (socialplanningcouncilyr@gmail.com)

We look forward to continuing this important work together and moving to the next important steps, which include Advocacy and Action. If you have questions or want to get more involved, please feel free to contact any of us at the emails below.

Thanks again for your participation and support.

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