

CODE RED

Join us for a Code Red Open Forum, Thursday, April 22 at 7:30 p.m. in the Spectator auditorium. This session is free, but you must register in advance. Call our Open Forum line at 905-526-3535 to register.

We need courage to confront our mistakes

BY TERRY COOKE



Terry Cooke is president and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation and former regional chairman of Hamilton-Wentworth.

We are separate and unequal. Over the past 40 years, Hamilton has become an economically segregated community, divided by income and geography.

Concentrated poverty is the moral challenge of our generation.

Steve Buist and researcher Neil Johnston's groundbreaking Code Red clearly shows that Hamilton is losing ground economically, and compounding its problems by limiting where our poorest citizens can live, go to school and work.

But beyond a sense of human compassion and concern about the health costs of inner-city poverty, why should you even care? If your family is fortunate enough to live in one of our better neighbourhoods and you generally avoid spending time in the inner city, does it even affect you?

North American urban experience and years of research confirms that poverty anywhere is bad, but concentrated poverty spreads, undermining economic growth, property values, health and educational outcomes across entire regions.

How did we get here? The decline of Hamilton industry started the downward economic spiral for much of our North and east ends. Our uncompetitive tax rates discouraged new private-sector job creation. Working families who glued together older neighbourhoods left to escape pollution and find careers elsewhere.

One-way streets created virtual highways in older areas, moving large volumes of traffic quickly from downtown to the suburbs, with little appreciation for their negative impact on local neighbourhoods and businesses.

Regional government in the 1970s further fuelled middle-class flight, providing the financing and infrastructure for low-density suburban housing. Develop-

ers targeted "exclusive" middle and upper-class buyers, and local planning policies largely prevented smaller, affordable or residential-care facilities for people with lower incomes or disabilities.

But instead of trying to stabilize home ownership and focus on brownfield remediation to create new jobs in older neighbourhoods, we mostly abandoned the North End to illegal apartments, absentee landlords and public housing. We used tax dollars to subsidize residential sprawl and build suburban business parks unreachable by public transit.

This restricted housing options for people with low incomes and high needs in neighbourhoods that were already struggling. Suburban growth pressure was not unique to Hamilton, but it had more devastating results here than in more progressive cities that avoided segregating the poor.

Syracuse University professor Gerald Grant recently published an important book called *Hope and Despair in the American City* (Harvard University Press, \$29.95). It contrasts the abysmal performance of neighbourhoods and schools in Grant's native Syracuse, N.Y., with the more positive experience of Raleigh, N.C. While Raleigh integrated every school by family income levels, and gave their teachers the tools to innovate, Syracuse

continued to concentrate poor kids together in the inner city.

In 1998, Raleigh set a goal to have 95 per cent of grades 3 to 8 students proficient in math at a time when a majority of inner-city kids were failing. Today, a mere 12 years later, they are at 91 per cent.

Meanwhile, Portland, Ore., with a rusting manufacturing base similar to Hamilton's, dramatically restricted sprawl and focused its redevelopment around Light Rail Transit, renewing mixed-income older neighbourhoods and creating new jobs in small knowledge-based businesses. Today, Portland is a stunning example of economic rebirth and diversification.

There are lessons for Hamilton in the very different experiences of Syracuse, Portland and Raleigh. Syracuse was unwilling to talk about the uncomfortable facts of neighbourhood and school segregation. Portland and Raleigh relished the clash of ideas and civic engagement, and accepted the need to make fundamental changes to achieve income diversity in schools and neighbourhoods.

To end the cycle of poverty in Hamilton, we must be willing to have a blunt conversation about our neighbourhoods and our neighbours, about our schools, about the health of our citizens and the magnets we need to glue investment into place.

Looking at the sobering evidence presented in the past few days, you may ask if I am filled with hope or despair. The answer is hope, tempered by the hard reality of the work ahead. And here, the Hamilton Community Foundation and citizens of Hamilton have some stories to tell.

Six years ago, the foundation had the foresight to make poverty its priority, working with partners to establish the Poverty Roundtable and Jobs Prosperity Collaborative to attack poverty at its roots. HCF also directly funded many ini-

tiatives that give us cause for optimism. Let me tell you about just one.

Planning teams that include service providers and many local residents are working to improve the quality of life in eight challenged Hamilton neighbourhoods. These "hubs" are becoming "one-stop" service centres to address poverty effectively by offering critical supports while building neighbourhood capacity.

Perhaps most importantly, civic engagement in the neighbourhoods is expanding. Local citizens are taking ownership of where they live and making positive changes.

But to change the overall trajectory of our city, we must do more than just support and build capacity in neighbourhoods and schools that remain economically segregated "poverty traps."

We need to find the courage to confront our past planning mistakes and take a different path, committing to a future where all of our schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces integrate people of all income levels to begin reversing the devastating consequences of concentrated poverty.

Hamilton needs to become more competitively attractive to private-sector jobs that pay living wages. We must continue pressuring senior levels of government to provide a guaranteed annual income for those who require social assistance.

A west harbour Pan Am Stadium, Light Rail Transit and full-day GO service create a remarkable opportunity to leverage massive capital investments to begin transforming Hamilton's inner-city neighbourhoods into healthy, sustainable and more economically integrated places.

Working together and facing up to some hard truths, I believe that we can overcome the challenge of concentrated poverty and make Hamilton the best place in Canada to raise a child.

Making connections builds a healthy city

BY MURRAY MARTIN



Murray Martin is the president and CEO of Hamilton Health Sciences.

Hamilton is a city of contrasts. Geographically sliced into upper and lower city, divided into rural and urban, rich and poor, it is a community obliged to build bridges to connect those contrasts.

I look at Hamilton's North End and downtown, an area plagued with high poverty and low levels of education. Here is an opportunity to examine what bridges can do, and the necessity to build them.

Hamilton General Hospital, one of Hamilton Health Sciences' family of health care facilities, is an integral part of this community, and a clear example of how contrasts must work to bridge poverty with possibility.

Renowned for innovation in cardiac and stroke care, a regional centre for trauma cases, and a global leader in health research, how does such a hospital also focus care on the population within walking distance of its doors?

It's a strong-hearted community with proud new and established immigrants, but it is also an area dotted with homeless shelters, a regional jail, people suffering addictions and those with severe mental health issues.

These are the unfortunate connections of poverty and health. How do people think about staying healthy when they are worried about shelter? Where does nutrition fit into a meal that is based, by

necessity, solely on cost? How do you pay for medication with no health plan and only sporadic work? Where do you get a persistent cough checked without a family doctor?

These problems exist in the inner city because it offers cheaper shelter (although often still expensive for those living in poverty), and we see the health fallout at the General.

We see it in patients who have multiple complications because a problem has been left to deteriorate. We know that poor living conditions help to create those complications — for instance, a stroke is made worse by poor diet and lack of medications.

We see it in the emergency department as "frequent flyers." These are the people who walk through our emergency doors multiple times through the year.

It's not a huge number, maybe a few dozen, but they keep coming back — some

averaging two to three times per month and, occasionally, it's two to three times per week. We do our best to keep these people healthy, but we're doing it in an environment intended as the last resort, not as it should be in primary and preventative care.

Ankle pains, addictions, poison, toothaches, rashes. These are some of their complaints. But sometimes it's not that at all. Sometimes a nurse will spot a face seen many times before; she'll offer juice, a sandwich and a smile. The visitor leaves feeling better, without a medical exam. He was just seeking connection.

Sometimes, at the General, the connection is a nurse finding a blanket to cover the person using a hospital chair as a bed on a cold night; sometimes it's giving away a pair of shoes from the free "Clothes City" hospital closet, created when staff realized this population needed clothing.

Is this what hospitals are for? Not on paper. Not by government regulation. But by community responsibility, yes.

It's why our hospital staff has built bridges with the community — connecting with Claremont House, a centre helping homeless people with alcoholism, because we know sometimes addictions can't be fixed, aren't a matter of hospital care, but are a part of long-term and palliative care. It's why we've connected with local shelters, so that we can under-

stand that not everyone has a proper home to go to when they leave a hospital and still need attention.

These connections are invaluable in our community, but they are only a part of the solution. I've seen much of this before, in my years in Vancouver as CEO of Vancouver Hospital and Health Sciences Centre, and I know it's not enough. Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside is awash in issues of poverty, homelessness, and addiction and mental-health problems.

Through the years, millions of government dollars have been dropped into the area in revitalization and rehabilitation programs, in the many efforts to try to fix the situation.

But quick, reactive programs are not an answer. Nor is it about a huge hit of money.

We need commitment from all levels of government to recognize and identify areas such as Hamilton's downtown and North End as worthy of long-term, systematic programs to help improve the lives of those suffering from having too little.

Hamilton is exceptionally good at building connections, at developing a strong voice for those too weak to be heard. We need to use that voice to continue to tell this story, and to help build long-term solutions.

We are doing our part, but we need governments to take a lead role to ensure sustainability.

The fix? Partnerships, leadership, urgency

BY CHRIS MURRAY



Chris Murray is city manager for the City of Hamilton.

There is a significant body of research that supports the relationship between health and wealth. Access to proper housing, good food, jobs that pay a living wage or more, education and literacy, environment and recreational opportunities are just some of the social determinants of health that have an impact on the success of people and neighbourhoods. Municipalities that respect these variables and work collaboratively to reach positive gains in all areas will be more successful than those that do not.

Closer to home, it's clear that family incomes vary considerably among neighbourhoods in the lower city of Hamilton and those in other parts of this community. Add to this the fact that our population is aging, and baby boomers will be mostly retired in 10 years, and it makes you worry about how lower household income and higher health care demands will affect quality of life.

If that's not enough, residential growth in the last 30 years has dramatically surpassed commercial and industrial development to the point where approximately 82 cents of every property tax dollar collected today comes from the residential taxpayer. As troubling as this is, having a grasp of the problem is the first step in finding a lasting solution.

So when asked by many how do we find ourselves with such extremes in the health of our community, and how can we

solve it, I think about what I have learned in the past 16 years as a planner, manager, director and now city manager. As the former director of housing, I saw first-hand the challenges people face when having to "live" on Ontario Works.

The east-end McQueen neighbourhood, for example, sticks with me to this day. I attended a neighbourhood planning group meeting in 2007 to gain a better understanding of resident concerns. The high level of frustrations they expressed left some uncomfortable, and afterward yielded expressions of pity for the rough but fair treatment I received.

Make no mistake, they felt ignored and were adamant that the city needed to do more than listen to them. It needed to act. More importantly they told me that we needed to become a partner — one that didn't impose our answers on them, but rather developed solutions with them.

This resulted in a series of 90-day work plans that we committed to — some of these involved simple things such as bet-

ter lighting and signage in the neighbourhood, for example. As a result of that meeting, residents began to feel empowered, and in turn took it upon themselves to organize a community garden, weekly shuttle service to the grocery store and even fundraise for playground equipment (which was installed last year).

I'll never forget meeting one woman who had immigrated from Iran. She had attended a neighbourhood forum, and was listening quietly to her neighbours and city staff talk about new program ideas for helping people get to know each other and work together. When I asked her what she thought about this, she smiled and said "my husband and I just want a job."

An old friend of mine once said "to a hammer, all problems look like nails." Hammers and nails have their place — as do programs — but for many having a well-paying job that allows a person to provide their family with good food, a safe home and education is vital.

Those conversations shape my thinking today. It led me to begin to focus our organization, to strengthen partnerships with other stakeholders, to break down walls that occur in every organization and to challenge staff. When I took this position as city manager, I committed to council and senior management that we would align our efforts and develop priorities.

This past year, we developed a Corporate Priority Plan that will provide us with an integrated approach to achieve our goals. Approved by council last Decem-

ber, the plan documents the challenges we face in the lower city and the need for co-ordinated action. It also identified two major themes we must focus on: community prosperity (more living-wage jobs and growth in the nonresidential assessment base) and sustainable service delivery (services citizens need, value and can afford). As a city we know confronting our challenges will require a command of relevant issues, planning, active involvement of the public and private stakeholders and, where warranted, the involvement of experts in areas of particular interest. That is why we need to continue to work together — as a community, we are blessed to have gifts such as McMaster University, Mohawk College, Redeemer University College and world-class medical facilities.

The leadership of these institutions together with our school boards, nonprofit organizations, police and the private-sector partners must share more of a common purpose. Let the Pan Am Games serve as a clock by which we time our actions to see if our neighbourhoods that need attention can be improved.

Only together can we come up with the solutions that will change our community. I don't want to leave the impression that we are waiting for that change. Change has already begun and will continue, but it requires constant effort, re-evaluation and the input of new ideas.

We must work with a sense of urgency. Ten years will go by in a flash.