

# Ending poverty will take greater focus on people living with it, researcher finds

October 17 2019, by Bev Betkowski

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U of A graduate student Emma Wallace interviewed people living in poverty as well as employees of academic, government and non-profit groups. "There's not one person I talked to who said they had it figured out. Engagement is not one-size-fits-all," she said. Credit: University of Alberta

Poverty-focused groups including government agencies trying to help people living in poverty need to make a systemic cultural change to connect more meaningfully with them and develop better policies, according to a University of Alberta master's student.

Emma Wallace studied the issue with EndPovertyEdmonton, a community partnership created to eliminate poverty in the city within a generation. The Faculty of Extension graduate student's research included interviews with people living in poverty and employees in related academic, government and non-profit groups.

She found that meaningful engagement wasn't as easy as simply inviting people living in poverty to a formal meeting, taking notes on what they say and turning that information into helpful policy.

"People can feel intimidated by the experience," she said. "Well-intentioned efforts can turn out to feel tokenistic."

The experiences of those living with day-to-day poverty need to be reflected in strategies that are taking root at all levels of government such as Canada's Opportunity for All, but there's not a lot of existing information or research about how to do it well, noted Wallace.

"Frankly, we don't know what meaningful engagement means or what it looks like."

Without understanding how to make sure people experiencing poverty really feel heard, policies intended to help them may fail.

"They'll lose trust in their relationships with organizations that need their input for better programming," said Wallace.

She found that various groups have guidelines, but what works for one

won't necessarily work for another.

"There's not one person I talked to who said they had it figured out. Engagement is not one-size-fits-all; it's going to look different for everyone."

Though it may seem straightforward to ask people about their experiences, how it's done doesn't always recognize their everyday struggles, she noted.

"An organization might invite people to give their input, but if it happens during the day and that person is working, or they can't afford child care or transport, how can they attend? We hold a meeting that works for us, but we don't always think of how it would work for other people."

Her work also showed that if input from those in poverty isn't put into action, the whole process feels worthless to them.

One worker Wallace interviewed spent months working with clients on a set of agreements for shared space. They took time to design and write out the charter as a poster to display on the wall, but then were told they couldn't hang it, according to building rules.

"They talked about a different method like a plaque, but didn't have money for it," Wallace said. "So the unfortunate consequence is that people experiencing poverty feel like their opinions and efforts don't matter. It's important to be committed to following through."

A new blueprint should also knock down "systemic barriers" like funding issues, she added.

"For example, one participant I interviewed had money for diabetes prevention, teaching about diet and exercise. But clients instead had a

priority of cleaning up the community, getting rid of garbage and needles. And this person had to say, 'We don't fund that. Can we just talk about diabetes, please?' So the needs and wants of the clients aren't taken into account."

"It's starting from scratch and asking people about what they want to address, instead of assuming what the main issues are."

While widespread systemic change could take 10 to 15 years to implement, groups can take smaller measures now, like providing honoraria to cover the costs of attending meetings.

"This shows that the efforts of people experiencing poverty are valued," explained Wallace.

Being realistic with participants about timelines for change is also important, along with focusing on "small wins," Wallace suggested.

"One group won't solve poverty tomorrow, but maybe it can get funding for a housing initiative, or host an event to raise awareness about poverty in the community."

Rejigging standard ideas about meetings is also a good idea, she noted.

"Sitting with someone on a less formal basis and having them share spots on a community map where they've either struggled or thrived helps them speak more freely. They're telling their story in a more comfortable way."

Wallace presented her findings to EndPovertyEdmonton to shape its own work, and hopes other groups will use it too.

"It's a [fundamental human right](#) that people be involved in decisions that

will impact their lives, and people experiencing [poverty](#) are no different. I want this research to spur momentum towards more easily inviting them into meaningful conversations that support change," she said.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Ending poverty will take greater focus on people living with it, researcher finds (2019, October 17) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-poverty-greater-focus-people.html>

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