

City can't 'afford' poverty

Much work to do in poverty fight

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One of Hamilton's best known business leaders says poverty can be eradicated by refusing to accept arguments that helping poor people doesn't make economic sense.

Mark Chamberlain, chair of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and former CEO of Wescam, says it's the same dilemma that would-be entrepreneurs face in funding their innovations.



There is never enough money to properly start a new business venture, he said. The successful startup happens because the business owner refuses to take no for answer from investors. He or she is essentially "unreasonable."

Chamberlain argued that anti-poverty advocates should invoke the same stubborn determination with government.

"Entrepreneurs by nature are unreasonable people. If they were reasonable, they would be failures as entrepreneurs."

He said the societal view that a living wage is economically impossible needs to be challenged in the same way that business owners challenge assumptions that their innovations are not commercially viable.

"We allow so much of our economics to drive our values as opposed to allowing our values to drive our economics."

He said a living minimum wage is the latest in a long list of societal problems that at one time were accepted as economically unfeasible to fix.

"When we say we can't afford a living wage, it is equivalent to saying we cannot afford not to have kids under 14 working as they did ... in the industrial revolution. Or we can't afford not to have slavery. Or we can't afford a public education system or universal health care.

"Our challenge has to be to ... show government what the possible can be. A child's brain development does not wait for funding.

"It costs billions a year to try to afford to keep people in poverty. We have to challenge our business to be part of the solution."

Chamberlain said progress is being made in reducing poverty in the community, with the city's poverty rate falling to 18.1 per cent in 2006 compared with 20 per cent in 2001. But there is still much work to do.

More than 47,000 people in Hamilton have seen an "improved way of life" from investments made by government, community partners and other organizations.

The roundtable hosted a conference at LIUNA Station yesterday to discuss progress in diminishing local poverty.

The roundtable is dedicated to making Hamilton the best place to raise a child and emphasizes the root causes of poverty.

The organization advocates creating a city where every child experiences quality early learning and parenting, and gains skills through education and recreation.

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By the numbers

19,602: People using city food banks in March 2009

15,511: People using city food banks in March 2008

8,313: Children using food banks in March 2009

One third to one half: Less food received from bulk purchases, like pasta, because of rising food prices since spring 2008

468,115: Number of individual meals served at food banks and hot meals provided

\$11.42: Cost per person for a food bank meal