



Introduction

Good day, Rotarians. I have volunteered alongside many of you in this room and it has been my pleasure to be a member of this club since January of 2017. For those

who don't know, I am the Executive Director of Hope House Guelph.

Hope House works to increase the well-being of vulnerable adults, youth and children. We serve:

- the unhoused and housed,
- the employed and the unemployed,
- those suffering a new, bewildering setback,
- as well as those dealing with chronic, more complicated issues of poverty.

For over 10 years, thanks to the support of this community, Hope House has been able to offer dignified access to food, clothing, and ongoing support. But more than that, we have been able to offer a caring community that works with people to help them overcome the challenges they face – challenges that result in them being hurt, hungry or homeless.

This is why at Hope House we say **the opposite of poverty is community**.

One major focus of Hope House programming is FOOD. In the last 12 months (from April 1, 2022 to March 21, 2023) Hope House has supported more than 4,000 unique individuals through 17,000 visits to our food markets located onsite and in seven social assistance housing buildings in Guelph. We have distributed almost \$670,000 in groceries, up 28% from the previous year, and for the first time ever, I have seen our food market shelves almost bare at the end of some weeks due to the increase in demand.

When I talk to other poverty relief organizations across Guelph, they indicate they also are seeing a significant increase in demand.



Statistics – April 1, 2022 to March 31, 2023



17,476 FREE meals distributed
to community members
at Hope House.



\$667,644 worth of groceries
were distributed to community
members in need.



We have directly supported
4,080 individuals through our
programs and services.



This year **499** new households
registered to access food, clothing,
and ongoing support services.

Identification of crisis – poverty in Guelph

As Rotarians, I know that you are people of action and that is why I am going to share this information with you, because I know that you are and will continue doing the hard work of moving this local community and the broader global community forward.

We are in the middle of an affordability crisis. Increasingly, a larger share of members of our community are unable to live and meet their basic needs in Guelph.

85% of working Canadians noted inflation and increasing living cost as their top economic concern, according to a report completed by Feed Ontario (formerly known as the Association for Food Banks in Ontario) and published in their [Hunger Report 2022](#). I am sure you have all felt this in your pocketbook. To help you understand why, here are a few reasons.

While overall inflation in 2022 was 6.3%,

- The cost of transportation increased by 10.3%;
- The cost of food increased by 10.8%; and
- The cost of a one-bedroom rental increased by 22.4% making Guelph the 8th most expensive community to live in Canada.

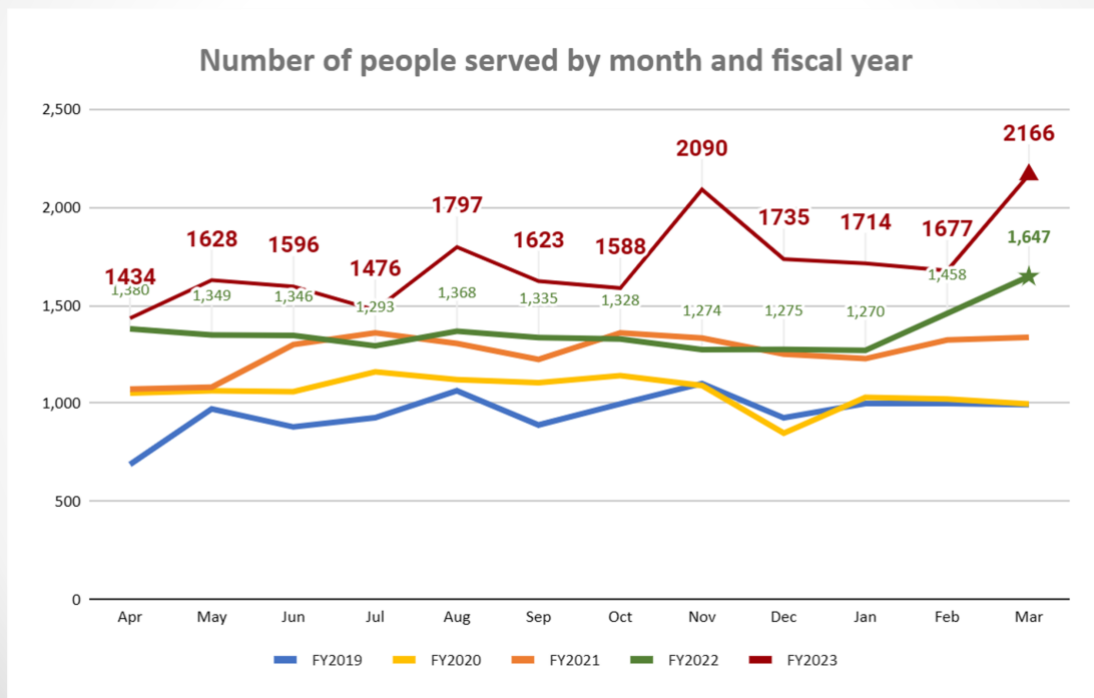


Housing, food and transportation are three fundamental human needs.

This means that poverty relief agencies across the city are seeing massive jumps in demand. Hope House and the Guelph Food Bank both experienced roughly a 50% increase in the number of people seeking support in 2022 from the previous year.

At Hope House in April 2022, we had 1,434 people go through our food markets. One year later at the end of March 2023, we had 2,166 people going through our food markets. This is a 51% increase and the highest figure we have ever seen, which broke a previous record set in November 2022 of 2,090 individuals.

Hope House Food Market



According to the Hunger Report, one in three people accessing a food bank last year were first-time visitors (meaning they have never had to access a food bank before).

Many would say that the best cure to poverty is employment.

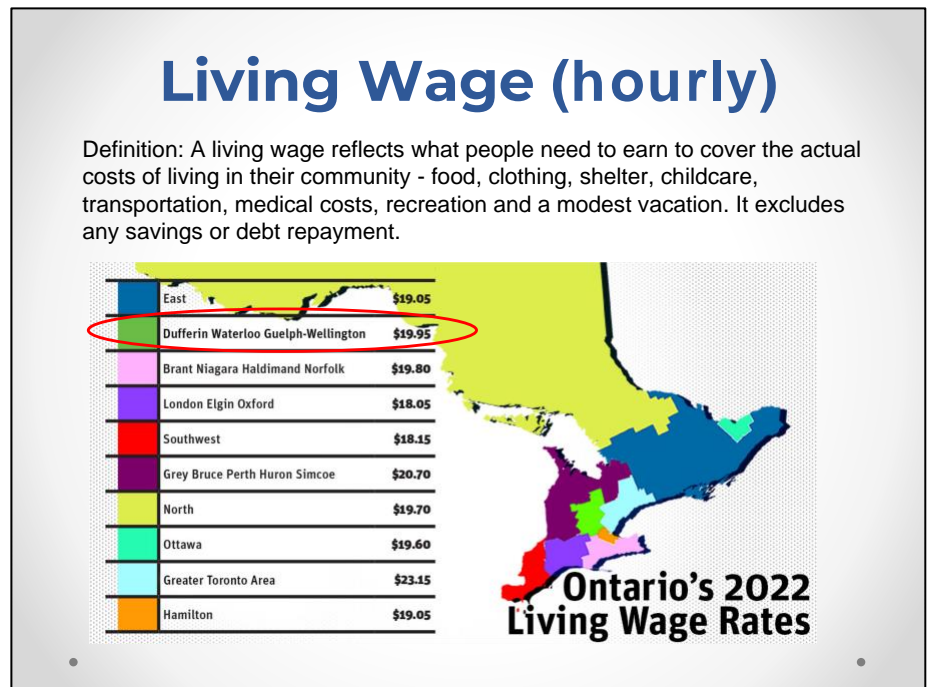
Sadly, this is no longer the case. Ontario's participation rate in the workforce is at a 50-year high. 87.3% of Ontarians aged 35-54 years are working. There are more Ontarians working today than in the last 50 years while at the same time more Ontarians than ever are seeking additional support.

How can these two things be possible?

Unfortunately, we have more people working in low wage jobs than before. In 1998, most minimum wage positions were occupied by high school students that were working part-time to gain work experience or earn extra income. Today, nearly 50% of all minimum wage workers are 25 years or older, with one in three minimum wage earners holding a post-secondary education.

With housing, transportation and food costs all on the rise, minimum wage jobs do not provide people with enough money to live.

The [Ontario Living Wage Network](#) has been strongly advocating for a living wage to be paid by every organization. A living wage reflects what people need to earn to cover the actual costs of living in their community – food, clothing, shelter, childcare, transportation, medical costs, recreation and a modest vacation. It excludes saving for retirement, debt repayment, home ownership, saving for your child's education and any other form of savings.



In Guelph, the living wage is \$19.95/hour or roughly \$42,000/year which is higher than the Ontario minimum wage of \$16.55/hour or roughly \$34,000/year.

The living wage is calculated based on the needs of a family of four with two adults each working full-time. Even the living wage assumes that households require two full-time working adults. So when we say that the living wage is \$19.95/hour or \$42,000/year, what we really are saying is that a household of four requires at least \$83,000/year to live in Guelph. In 2021, the median pre-tax household income for Guelph was \$93,000 which means that 50% of households in Guelph were earning \$93,000 or less per year.

This means that close to 50% of the households in Guelph were earning close to or less than the actual cost of living in Guelph.

What I find even more concerning is that a child born to the poorest Canadians in the 1980s is 22% more likely to remain in poverty as an adult than a child born in the 1960s. This would appear to be a direct result of shift in the economy away from manufacturing to the service industry, as well as shift in our eligibility requirements to access government programs.

We have developed a system of support across Canada that requires those struggling to survive to dedicate the majority of their time to chasing down basic life necessities like food, clothing, shelter, and treatment. The pursuit of these life necessities leaves

- very little to no energy for investing in change; and
- very little opportunity to be forward thinking - thinking about where do I want to be one month from now, let alone a year, and what would I have to do different to get there?

To a large extent, the increased complexity in our systems has been driven by a belief that all these checks and balances are helping society to save money as they discourage fraud.

Having worked in this sector for a number of years and spoken with some incredible people, many who are part of this club, I can honestly say that **what we have created is not effective or efficient.**

Instead of preventing fraud and abuse, the people who need care the most are constantly having to justify that they need it. In addition, an increasing portion of our support funding is allocated to verification and auditing of files, rather than supporting the people who desperately need it.

Before you despair, there is HOPE. Poverty has been overcome before and you have personal knowledge of it.

Every single family has their stories of when their future changed, those pivotal moments that changed their destiny, those stories of when their family exited poverty.

We all have a connection to the hurting, hungry and homeless because it is our story, too.

I want us to take some time to encourage each other by reminding us of these stories of overcoming what at the time seemed like impossible odds. I will start with my story, but I am also going to make time for you to briefly share your stories in pairs at your tables.

My Story

Both of my parents grew up in very low-income families. And both were able to obtain a post-secondary education that allowed them to have middle class careers – my mother as a physiotherapist and osteopath, and my father as an addiction counselor.

They were able to accomplish this as they had a strong community of supportive people in their lives, good physical and mental health, and a real sense of what was the purpose or direction of their life. It was the combination of all these resources – a strong support network, good physical health, and a sense of purpose that allowed them to overcome the obstacle of limited financial resources and reach their goals.

When I gave my Rotary classification talk, I shared with you my dad's story growing up during segregation in the state of Georgia. It is a great story and if you haven't heard it, feel free to ask me sometime.

Today, I am going to share with you my mom's story (that's her in the middle of this photo).

My mom, Kathy, grew up in London, Ontario – on the east side. This part of London was often referred to as the Hamilton Road Area or East End District. Neither name brought up positive images in peoples' minds. Many individuals in her neighbourhood worked in factories or in minimum wage jobs with no health care benefits which resulted in them often having to make really difficult decisions about whether or not to seek health care. When they did seek health care, it was often because the pain had become



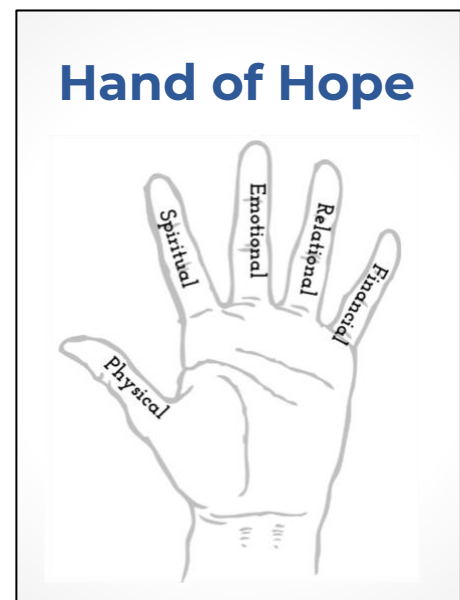
unbearable and so the treatment options were more extreme. Take for instance a cavity in a tooth. By the time they came in for treatment it often required a root canal, which was too expensive and risky as they weren't guaranteed that it would resolve their tooth ache, so rather than risk having to spend money they didn't have twice, they would have the tooth extracted instead.

My mom's family also didn't make a lot of money. They ran a small grocery store. It was operated out of the front of their home. They lived in a couple rooms on the back, with her grandparents living in the unit directly above them. Starting at the age of five she began working in the store. By 12, her grandparents moved to Brighton, Ontario. This meant that her dad and mom, with the help of a hired clerk, were left to look after the store. Within several years it became evident that the store could not survive much longer. As a result, they decided to buy a small cheese wholesale business. One side of the garage was turned into a walk-in refrigerator to store the cheese. A small refrigerator truck was bought and V-Distributors was born. As she got older, my mom worked more and more hours in the family business including going on deliveries with her dad and doing homework from the delivery truck.

At Hope House, we say that the opposite of poverty is community.

Community literally means to strengthen together. And research has shown us that poverty is eliminated when five things are present, as shown by this hand of hope:

- good physical health due to having access to food, clothing and shelter;
- a sense of purpose or meaning in one's life;
- the ability to communicate all your emotions in a positive way;
- a strong group of people rooting or cheering you on; and
- the financial resources to meet your needs.



Despite the lack of money, my mom had good physical health, a really strong sense of what she wanted to do with her life (she was a physiotherapist for 47 years and osteopath for 19 years), her family had taught her how to communicate all her emotions

in a positive way, and she had a huge group of people in her corner wanting to see her succeed.

So thanks to her family's support, and thanks to a summer manufacturing job at Kelloggs, she was able to go to university and was the first person in her family to earn a university degree. Being a physiotherapist and osteopath allowed her to do work that she loved by helping people recover from injuries. And her career afforded me and my siblings so many opportunities that she never had.

Her salary was high enough that she was able to work part-time while my siblings and I were young. This allowed her to be available to teach us some really important life lessons, such as you can't control how other people behave, only yourself, and being a helper is always the best role to have.

My mom wants you to know that she never felt hard done by. She had everything she needed, parents who loved her, a close extended family, food, shelter. In many ways she feels her childhood experiences strengthened her.

So now you have heard how the right ingredients allowed my family to move out of poverty.

Sharing Activity

I am going to pause here for a moment so that you have the opportunity to share with each other a family story of how your family overcame poverty. As Mr. Rogers would say, "We all have had special people who have loved us into being."

Turn to your neighbour and let them know what happened that allowed your family to move forward. Each of you will have 90 seconds to share. I will keep time for you. (3 minutes).

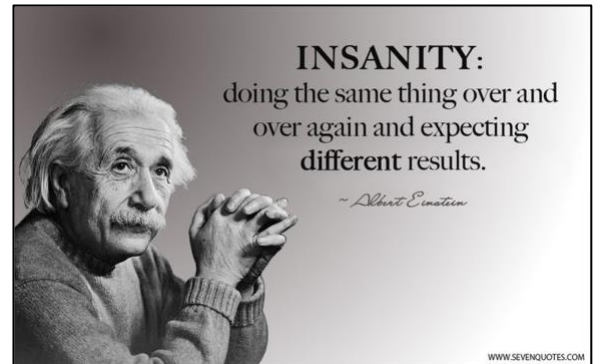
Thank you for sharing.

The Future

Many of us know this famous quote of Einstein's.

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

I believe that we are coming to a point where we are recognizing that we have created a lot of insane systems.



But we have hope.

As this Rotary Club has demonstrated time and time again – problems can be solved when we are willing to do things differently. Many of you here can tell the stories. For example:

- this is what we did when we helped to establish [KidsAbility](#), and
- this is what we did when we helped create [The Grove Hubs](#) for youth mental health across the region

At Hope House, we are also trying to do things differently.

The Better Food Co.

As part of Hope House's commitment to addressing food insecurity in Guelph, Hope House created [The Better Food Company](#), a social enterprise where 100% of proceeds support our community food work.

Here is how it works:

- We partner with local chefs and restaurants to produce high quality takeout meals once per month. These meals use produce from our farm and local food partners.
- We sell these meals to the community with 100% of the proceeds going back into our food programs such as community meals, the food market, seniors' community food markets, and food skills classes.

Our vision is to build a Better Food System where food is healthy, **accessible**, and shared.

We recognize the value of food. Although food is a human right, in Guelph about one in four people struggle to afford and attain nutritious food, according to the United Way. We started The Better Food Company because we believe that removing the financial barriers to food is the most effective way to solve food insecurity.

Last year, Hope House shared close to \$670,000 of groceries with low-income families through our food markets.

Our goal with the Better Food Company is to sell healthy, pre-packed meals to community members like you, so we can grow Hope House's community food work.



We recognize that meals can support your community. We're building a community food system that's focused on relationships. And we want you to be a part of it. (You can learn more and order [HERE.](#))

Buying a prepared meal from us is a small action that has a large impact. Each meal helps to fund our Better Food System, which provides healthy produce and meals to those who need it through Hope House food markets.

This is a community-first food system. The Better Food Company makes you feel good on every level. Not only do you receive tasty and high-quality meals, you're also supporting a local food system that puts community at the centre. From farm to table, you can be certain that we are prioritizing relationships, whether it's our relationship to the community, to cooks, to the land, to our farmers, or to you.

In closing ...

Every day, we have the opportunity to change how we do things. Every day, we have the opportunity to do the hard work of moving towards a different future, one that recognizes the dignity and worth of every person.

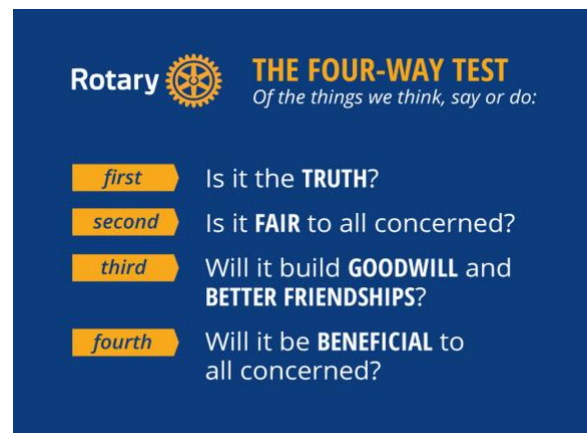
- **This requires us to look at the whole picture.**
- **This requires us to look at how everything is interconnected.**
- **This requires us to work across sectors.**

And that is why I am thankful that there are groups of people that are looking to tackle the root challenges within our community, groups like the Rotary Club of Guelph.

As we take action, let us remember the Rotary Four-Way Test:

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
- Will it be beneficial to ALL concerned?

As always, it has been a pleasure to share with you today. Thank you for the opportunity.



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