

This Report is dedicated to those who have struggled most with the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic. While COVID 19 has affected all of us, it has had a greater impact on racialized, low income communities which face greater inequities. These are the same communities which face barriers to affordable housing, access to employment and income supports and educational opportunities.

These are the same communities many LEAG members call home.

Acknowledgements

This impact report is a gift from one LEAG cohort to the next. It is a legacy of work and learnings from members drawn from their participation in the City's first Lived Experience Advisory Committee.

The City of Toronto would like to acknowledge the many hands and many hearts who contributed to the creation of this impact report.

Thank you to the Impact Report Working Group for establishing the framework and supporting the decision making process to determine the medium in which is best hand off their legacy to the LEAG's legacy from one cohort to the next:

- Colin Desjarlais
- Veronica Snooks
- Carla Navida

Continuing their work, after COVID forced a hiatus, the following LEAG Members guided the process to develop an Impact Report:

- Ann Marie Moulton
- Bee Lee Soh
- Colin Desjarlais
- Gerry Banks
- Karen Bible
- Kelly Lawless

The LEAG is a vital part of the work of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. Formally, the LEAG provides continuous accountability as a resident advisory body. But more broadly, the LEAG ensures that the work of our office and the City remains grounded in striving to achieve impact for residents living in poverty in a way that emphasize equity, inclusivity, and long term systems change.

We consider LEAG members to be valuable members of the team and they make our work better.

 Wayne Chu Manager, Poverty Reduction Strategy Office, Social Development, Finance and Administration

We would like to thank the Yonge Street Mission and 12thirteen Design Inc. for their guidance and support the LEAG through this process and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Office for their ongoing support.

And finally, thank you to all the residents, advocates and allies who continue to work tirelessly to bring about equity and dignity to our City.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'Legacy' as "something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past"

For the past four years, the first LEAG cohort broke ground as the City's first Lived Experience Advisory Group. They have shared their personal lived experience against the realities, conditions and impacts of living with poverty to inform the effective development, implementation, and monitoring of the City's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The LEAG includes residents who reflect the diversity of the city. In selecting members for the LEAG, consideration was given to ensure good representation from equity-seeking groups from all four corners of the City. LEAG members include people with diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual, and gender identities, and their insights contributed to a range of programs and issues, including Ontario Works, homelessness, unemployment and systemic discrimination and the impacts of violence, to inform the activities of the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The Journey to Inclusion and Consent to the development of this report, reflects the journey of inclusion and consensus exercised through the work of the LEAG itself. The process to creating this report is a glimpse into the push and pull, passion and commitment to having voices heard from the margins.

Discovery: generating ideas to reflect the LEAG's legacy

- Plethora of ideas and scouring examples
- Identifying the target audience and key message
- Weighing the pros/cons based on constraints [time & money]

COVID IMPACT: a year of silence which disrupted the LEAG's ability to finish this report in 2020. However, COVID could not stop the LEAG's committment to passing on this Legacy. As with many things even though the timing was disrupting, the spirit was not extinguished and the resiliency of the LEAG resurrected this work a year later.

Focus: choosing the path to tell the story Process of shortlisting the

- Process of shortlisting the best ideas, based on the constraints present
- Debating the pros/cons of each idea
- Reaching consensus

Report: contributing to the creation of the report

- Submissions
- Interviews
- Survey

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Introduction

TO PROSPERITY: Toronto poverty reduction strategy

Six Areas of Focus

Housing Stability Service Access Transit Equity Food Access Quality Jobs and Livable Wages

Systemic Change

Poverty in Toronto and the City's Poverty Reduction Strategy

The City of Toronto recognizes that life in Toronto is getting more expensive every day. Housing, transit, and healthy food are increasingly out of reach for people living on low wages and income supports. Good jobs are increasingly hard to find, with almost half of Greater Toronto Area workers working temporary, contract, part-time jobs with variable hours, little stability, and no benefits. While education remains a smart long-term investment, it offers no immediate guarantees: almost one in four college graduates are working low-wage jobs. Employment Insurance is less accessible than it used to be. Ontario Works rates have lost more than half of their value in the last 20 years, and childcare is unaffordable.

The City of Toronto has been tackling poverty and poverty-related issues for many years. Building on what works and regularly creating new strategies to ensure that the benefits of growth and prosperity are widely shared across Toronto, the Clty has created a 20 year strategy to address poverty. Toronto's poverty reduction strategy includes six areas of focus: Housing Stability; Service Access; Transit Equity; Food Access; Quality Jobs and Livable Wages; and Systemic Change. It is implemented in partnership with a range of stakeholders, including the **Lived Experience Advisory Group.**

> While it seems almost impossible to measure the full impact of poverty on our society in monetary terms, we can suggest that the cost in terms of

stress, emotional turmoil and corresponding physical illness

places an expensive burden on our social services and healthcare supports.

– Dennis, LEAG Member









350+ Applications Received

40 Applicants Interviewed

> 20 Members Selected

About Our LEAG

Toronto's LEAG was informed by hundreds of Toronto residents who provided input on what a lived experience advisory group should look like, including composition and terms of membership, frequency and location of meetings, communications, audience and tactics, and supports required. The City applied an equity-based application and selection process to the group, with consideration given to ensure representation from equity-seeking groups.

LEAG members were nominated through an open call for applications that clearly laid out the type and duration of commitment requested, including training, orientation, monthly meetings, and community engagements. The application identified benefits that participants would receive, including recognition, food, bus tickets, and child- and/ or attendant care.

To balance the voices and perspectives of lived/living experience with staff accountability in the selection of advisory group members, the City established a Nominations Committee, which was composed of four residents and two City staff. This committee reviewed and assessed the more than 350 applications received based on selection criteria that included intersectional diversity, experience with poverty, volunteering background, and experience as community advocates. In January 2017, 40 applicants were interviewed and 20 were selected.

The LEAG's coming together represents the culmination of years of input from community members who demanded better access routes for people with lived/living experience to participate in City processes.

The collaboration between the Service Delivery Model (SDM) Renewal project at Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) and the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) was a unique opportunity to build trust between City staff and residents. It was an opportunity to do things differently by shifting from the typical client-staff relationship of receiver-giver to creating a space for dialogue and mutual understanding. For two months, caseworkers and volunteers from the LEAG listened, learned and challenged one another on ways to embed empathy, dignity and respect in the process of applying for social assistance in Toronto. **When faced with systems that often exacerbate the structural inequalities in our society and that are slow to change, this exchange brought a sense of hope.** It was an opportunity to reflect on what is within the power of institutions to change in day-to-day processes and procedures, mechanisms that could yield better outcomes through culture change, with the guidance of the people who navigate these systems as best they can to survive.

- Clara Ganemtore, Policy Development Officer, Toronto Employment and Social Services

Our Group in Action

Launched in 2017, the LEAG serves as one of TO Prosperity's reinforcing accountability structures. LEAG members are engaged as part of a fouryear term (2017-2020) to inform the effective development, implementation, and monitoring of the strategy. The group's mandate focuses on advocacy, education and awareness, and monitoring and evaluation.

LEAG members include people with diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, sexual, and gender identities. Members include racialized people, new immigrants, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and people with experiences of the justice system. These individuals represent the vast diversity of perspectives and identities that make up the City of Toronto. Members hold intricate knowledge and diverse personal lived experience with the realities, conditions and impacts of living with poverty. LEAG members participate in a wide variety of City policy, program, and service-development processes. They act as a conduit between City staff and communities, and organize and participate in presentations and conversations with City divisions, the private sector, community agencies, and residents. Members contribute insights into a range of programs and issues, including Ontario Works, unemployment, systemic discrimination and the impacts of violence.

I am passionate about social justice and it is my belief that people are our greatest investment.

What affects one affects all.

I endeavour to use my life in service for the betterment of our community, our society and the world at large.

- Ann-Marie, LEAG Member



Our Members

Andrew Barnes

Andrew is a Dorset Park resident who is active in the community, volunteering with Operation Springboard as a member of the Youth Justice Committee. Andrew is passionate about issues related to Ontario Works and employment services, and feels that services such as food banks are strained to meet the needs of those who are living on low incomes.

Ann-Marie Moulton

Ann-Marie is a resident of Scarborough East who volunteers with the United Way of Greater Toronto. The two issues in Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy she is most passionate about are unemployment and housing. Ann-Marie is also a strong believer in serving humanity through volunteerism, and as a mother, takes these passions and lessons and shares them with her daughter. A humanitarian driven with a passion for helping others, Ann Marie is an extraordinary speaker, author, and a caring community advocate who speaks on the behalf of the marginalized and disadvantaged in our society.

Bee Lee Soh

Bee Lee is a community activist working tirelessly to reduce poverty both in the city as a member of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Lived Experience Advisory Group and nationally as a member of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy Ministerial Advisory Committee. Bee Lee is an active community volunteer in the Steeles-L'Amoreaux neighborhood where she lives. She passionately volunteers and participates in city-wide community organizing on transit, housing and employment. She is a member of several community organizations including: Toronto Newcomer Council, Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy Resident Advisory Group, Toronto Food Policy Council, Commitment to Community, Scarborough Civic Action Network and Scarborough Poverty Animator Network. Bee Lee is also actively involved in TTCRiders, Fair Fare Coalition, and Scarborough Transit Action.

Carla Navida

Carla lives in the Jane and Wilson Area and is involved as a volunteer with a number of organizations including North York Community Home and International Organization for Migration. Carla is passionate about youth mental health, and as a young person, sees the importance of having strong educational opportunities. Carla notes two significant personal achievements as overcoming the trials of being part of an immigrant family, and recently being awarded the Governor General's Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers. Carla recently graduated and is now a scholar at University of Toronto Scarborough.

Cassandra Chambers

Cassandra lives in East York and believes that quality jobs and systemic change are the key matters when addressing issues related to poverty. Cassandra notes a significant personal achievement as developing a reverse employment strategy for a youth program, Youth Outside the Block. Cassandra is a member of the accountability body to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Lived Experience Advisory Group, and she runs BossDiva, a women's small business network that supports marginalized women who aspire to start a business from home.

> I joined the LEAG because poverty goes beyond a lack of food or housing.

Poverty is isolation, loneliness and can be a thief of self-worth.

A person should experience belonging, community and selfempowerment in this life, with these we may all reap riches.

– Kelly, LEAG Member

Colin Desjarlais

Colin is an Indigenous resident of the Garden District and has been involved in community and social justice organizing for several decades. Colin is passionate about homelessness and income security and believes no one should have to sleep outside, and everyone should have a minimum income. Colin volunteers with the Clan Mother's Turtle Lodge and the Thunder Woman Healing Lodge, and notes a significant personal achievement as coordinating and organizing BC's first province-wide HIV/AIDS conference in 1997.

Gerry Banks

Gerry lives in Toronto Centre and volunteers at the Dan Harrison Community Complex Residents Association and the Regent Park Community Health Centre. His additional community involvement includes St. Michael's Hospital Co-Design Team, Margaret's Drop-in Centre where he runs seniors bingo, VE'AHAVTA's public speaking forum, Wired World of Senior's Trouble Shooting Programme, where he is a Peer Trainer, and at Church in Regent Park where he provides Audio Visual assistance. Gerry is an advocate for food bank accessibility and supports for lowincome and vulnerable seniors.

Kaarina Wilson

In 2004, Kaarina developed a trio of autoimmune diseases that prevent her from working regularly: systemic scleroderma, primary biliary cholangitis, and Sjögren's syndrome. As a result, she is passionate about poverty and health. She's been volunteering for Choose Health since 2014, the LEAG since 2016, and the Toronto Disability Pride March since 2017. She's a speaker, advocate, and organizer.

Kaé Egalite

Kaé is a black, queer, non-binary artist living loudly in the margins. Their advocacy work centres in making art accessible, as well as building compassionate community. Kaé is excited to be a part of the LEAG as a proponent of safe, affordable housing as well as food security. I joined the LEAG because I wanted to give a voice to the chronically ill living in poverty on ODSP.

- Kaarina, LEAG Member

Karen Bible

Karen is a Scarborough resident who has worked in the women's anti-violence movement for over 25 years. Currently, Karen volunteers with the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape. The issues that Karen would most like to see championed throughout the Poverty Reduction Strategy are housing, livable incomes and quality jobs.

Kelly Lawless

Kelly is the former Chair of the Empowerment Council, a not-for-profit funded by CAMH, and a former Mental Health Representative of CAMH's Liaison Committee, working to improve client experience. Kelly is a regular lecturer and presenter on addiction, trauma and recovery at York University and CAMH. She is a graduate on the Dean's Honour List at George Brown College's Transitions to Post-Secondary Education and she is currently a student at Ryerson University working towards a degree in Social Work. Kelly is a member of the Steering Committee at CAMH and a member of the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) for the City of Toronto.

Kevin Jackson

Kevin is a resident of Mimico who is committed to issues related to disability and improving accessibility in the city. Kevin has channelled this passion into organizing the annual Toronto Disability Pride March and chairing the Psychiatric Survivor Archives of Toronto.

Our Members (continued)

Libertad Vega

Libertad lives in Etobicoke and volunteers at the Working Women Community Centre and Dr. Roz's Healing Place. Libertad believes housing, education, employment and nutritious food should be made top priorities in the Poverty Reduction Strategy. Libertad would like to use the spaces created by the LEAG to champion the needs of women and children.

Lindsay Jennings

Lindsay's combination of lived experience and academic education allows for her dynamic approach to the provision of her support to prisoners and former prisoners who are striving towards their community integration goals. Her areas of interest include educating individuals about harm reduction/overdose prevention and facilitating life- skills workshops with these populations. Lindsay is also a committed advocate who is passionate about bringing positive changes to those who are involved with the correctional and criminal justice systems by ensuring that housing, substance use, mental health and program needs are addressed as immediately as possible once they have been admitted to custody as well as throughout their incarceration.

Stephanie Cormier

Stephanie is a Bloordale resident who works at a non-profit environmental organization, as an advocate for children, and as a professional artist. As a creative individual in the city, Stephanie believes housing instability, the high cost of living, and the trend toward precarious contract and part-time work are pressing issues for Toronto.

Tarek Kadan

Tarek is an individual Syrian refugee who came to Canada by himself in 2015. He studied Social Work and Community Development. Tarek works at North York Community House as a Settlement counsellor. He has been very involved in the community since he arrived. He has been a volunteer community advisory, a peer researcher, and a youth outreach worker and a youth worker for Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. Tarek is also the founder of Syrian Youth Catering Services, a social enterprise that support international students who came from countries of conflict. He has volunteered with over 30 different organizations, supporting and fundraising for people in need both in and outside of Canada. All of these experiences allowed him to grow and participate in activism, calling for fairness and equity among humans, regardless of age, sex, culture, background, gender, religion, colour.

Veronica Snooks

Veronica is a Toronto Community Housing tenant in the Flemingdon Park community. Veronica has been a member of The Dream Team for five years, and presently, she is involved with the Housing Unit Takeovers (HUTs) and is a member of The Empowerment Council. She has been involved with the Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy as an animator for community dialogues and has participated in many public consultations alongside Working for Change and Campaign 2000. Veronica is a graduate of Women Speak Out, has received peer training through Peer Recovery Education for Employment (PREFER), and is an esteemed guest speaker at conferences and events. Veronica's passion lies in working with groups and teams dedicated to social justice and public education. Recently, Veronica completed her first year at First Nations Technical Institute College, where she is specializing in Indigenous mental health and addictions.

In Remembrance:

Two beloved members of the LEAG unfortunately passed away during their time with the LEAG. They are missed

The level of passion and commitment to social justice issues is often undervalued. As a member of the LEAG for the last 4 years two of our members passed away fighting for the cause.

Kevin Jackson

was a tireless disability rights advocate and community organizer who fought hard for the community so that people with disabilities could live with dignity.

Kaarina Wilson

also fought hard on social issues negatively impacting the disability community in Toronto and the GTA.

Both Kevin and Karina became my friends, each taught me to fight for our rights with diplomacy and tenacity. I miss and love them dearly and I was truly honoured to know them as friends.

- Colin Desjarlais, LEAG Member



Remembering Pam McConnell

Pam McConnell was a City Councillor representing neighbourhoods in the Downtown East from 1994 until her passing in July 2017. In 2014, Pam was appointed to the position of Deputy Mayor with the responsibility to champion the creation of Toronto's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Through her career, Pam's work was always centered on both her passion for social justice and her extraordinary ability to bring diverse people together to embrace a vision that opportunity for all is everyone's business.

Many community members involved in the creation of the Strategy, as well as the visioning and co-creation of the Lived Experience Advisory Group may recall her oft- repeated "Five Fingers" speech, which is how she tried to simplify the Strategy for decision-makers. She would hold up her hand and say something along the lines of:

"each finger represents one of the five themes of the strategy, which are all connected to the palm, and that represents systemic change. Then when we close our fist, that represents the real strength of the Strategy which is the power of community voices coming together to push for and achieve real change."

That closed fist is the LEAG.

While Pam was not able to work directly with the first cohort of the LEAG, she would be very proud of each of the members and your collective successes. This model is exactly how she preferred to do business at City Hall, because it is the only way to make decisions that put people first.

-Sean McIntyre (former Executive Assistant to Councillor Pam McConnell)



Drenched with light

I walk within the darkness My heart sings with peace inside My spirit soars with joy each day My eyes see My hands held out I do the Lords work I give to others Норе I light the way Until eyes see **Drenched with light...** They walk within the darkness Their hearts sing with peace inside Their spirit soars with joy each day Their hands held out They do the Lords work They give to others Hope They light the way Until eyes see Amen.

> Veronica Snooks LEAG Member

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Our Work



2014

- In April, City Council voted to create a PRS, with a Community Advisory Committee and Senior City Staff Steering Committee guiding the process.
- Phase 1 Community Engagement involved community conversations, online questionnaires, multi-sector dialogue, and city division drill downs.
- City Council commits \$24.5M to poverty reduction in the 2015 budget.

2015

- Phase 2 Community Engagement
- Close to 2,000 Toronto residents provided concrete ideas for how to address complex poverty issues, many of which are included in TO Prosperity as proposed actions to improve housing stability, service access, transit equity, food access and the quality of jobs.
- Participants also stressed the need to continually involve residents with lived experience in planning and decision-making processes. As a response, TO Prosperity laid out an Implementation and Accountability Structure, that includes a Lived Experience Advisory Committee.
- In November, the Final PRS was sent to council addressing implementation, outcomes and the financial strategy. It is unanimously approved on November 4th.

Residents discuss the development of LEAG through a Design Day held on September 24, 2016. It's so important to ensure that any City strategy or policy in fact serves the residents it intends to. The Lived Experience Advisory Group is a really good example of how this can happen. When we include and collaborate with individuals for whom the work matters the most, the work itself is enhanced. Even in developing the structure of the LEAG, it was important to take a codesign approach with the Design Day, where we had hundreds of residents attend. We learned so much that day! And, once the LEAG was in place, they became important and ready resources for Divisions to partner with when centering and honouring the residents we serve.

– Safiah Chowdhury, Policy Project Leader, Community & Social Services

2016

- During the spring of 2016, City staff in partnership with community organizations engaged hundreds of community members on how the LEAG should work.
- On September 24th, information from the community conversations was consolidated, shared, and shaped into a Design Day where residents were invited to decide on the model of the LEAG, including the composition and terms of membership; frequency and location of meetings; communication frequency, audience and tactics; supports required, and more.



2017

In January 2017, 20 residents with firsthand experience with poverty were selected to join LEAG.

2018

 LEAG members participate in monthly meetings

Members participated in a consultation with Municipal Licensing and Standards on the review of Multi-Tenant Houses (rooming houses) in Toronto.

A few LEAG members participated in the Cities Reducing Poverty conference in Hamilton, where the focus was to examine the role of business and multisectoral approaches to poverty reduction in cities across Canada.

2019

In November, recruitment for the second cohort of the LEAG commenced.

2020

In March, work on launching the second cohort of the LEAG was put on hold due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

2021

- LEAG Alumni began to convene to work on several LEAG Legacy initiatives including the LEAG Impact Report.
- In March, efforts to relaunch the second cohort of the LEAG began.



One member participated in an advisory to the Neighbourhood Micro Grants program, which makes small grants of \$1000 available to resident-led groups to help them inspire their neighbourhoods with events held between August and December. As part of the Neighbourhood Micro Grants Review Panel I advocated for mindfulness and wellness yoga events that address trauma and crisis in communities, youth forums that would provide youth with a platform to discuss issues of poverty in their communities, and the unveiling of murals that reflect the culture of each community. My concern is that there are many other neighbourhoods that have been excluded from the micro grant program. **In future, I would like to see the grants extended to more neighbourhoods in need.**

– Lindsay, LEAG Member

Our Outcomes

Since the inception of the Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Lived Experience Advisory Group has required the City of Toronto and the Social Development, Finance and Administration Division to grow in our practices of partnering with resident leaders. As a result, we have had deeper collaborations that have led to divisional learning in multiple parts of the City of Toronto, more responsive and effective policy and services (ie. Fair Pass) and a deeper commitment to resident engagement especially of those most vulnerable. In short,

the LEAG has helped us improve our system.

Denise Andrea-Campbell Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

Being Seen, Feeling Heard, To Be Known

Ann Marie said 'poverty makes people invisible'. What the LEAG accomplished was to bring a face to those who are struggle with poverty and a voice to those struggles. Poverty does not have one face, nor one voice. Many do not look like the stereotype. Many are well educated – holding PhDs and professional designations – and others once held good jobs. However, circumstances became challenging with many falling through the cracks and struggling to make ends meet.

The LEAG made space to advocate for those most affected by poverty.

The LEAG became a platform – a megaphone – for those with lived experience with poverty to have voice, to speak on issues they are intimately familiar with, and suggestions rooted in the real, everyday world of those who struggle to house and feed themselves and their families.

Many working in City Hall do not have lived experience. Policies are based on theory and data, and not so much on what works on the ground. The LEAG wanted to make sure whatever policies or programs were up for implementation were realistic and workable; it could not just be all talk, but had substance to bring about real change in people's lives, based on their circumstance.

Here are some outcomes from their participation in the LEAG:

Great Coaches Change Lives

Many LEAG members spoke passionately about inspiring others to stand up and speak out. Bee spoke about two young women who approached her after a transit deputation. As they approached her, she assumed they were intending to speak with one of the City staff. However, they rushed straight to her and began to ask questions about her deputation, her experience working with the City, and how they too could go about making change for their communities. It dawned on her that her voice carried authority and could inspire others, especially young people.

The LEAG is a conduit to coach and mentor others, as people who are able to train and inspire others. Through the LEAG, members have gained extensive understanding on how the City works, and relationships with politicians and bureaucrats who make decisions. The LEAG are now eager to share all they have learned with others.

Opening Doors and Linking Opportunities

A common outcome of the LEAG's work, was the expansion of networks at all levels. Connecting with other jurisdictions and government officials enabled LEAG members to exercise their ability to impact knowledge and influence change. The LEAG also extended their community networks with grassroots organizations, community-based agency and other advocacy leaders across the City. The LEAG has become a gateway to increased advocacy, based on lived experience and therefore, backed by authenticity and authority.

These encounters led to opportunities which were unimaginable. LEAG members have worked alongside the City with Sidewalk Toronto to redesign the waterfront, partnered with OW and ODSP to address anti-oppressive practices, and sat on the Mayor's Task Force on Housing.

The work has not stopped now that this LEAG's term has finished.

In fact, it is just the beginning.

It was difficult finding time to interview the LEAG members - despite the lockdown and stay-athome measures during COVID – because they were so busy in their work in mobilizing their communities, despite COVID. The pandemic opened doors and created opportunities for their work to continue.



Why Housing?

Early on, the LEAG identified housing as an area of focus. Many members of the LEAG bring an intimate knowledge of what it means to be homeless or precariously housed.

Housing is really the centre point in people's lives and provides stability and security.

- Colin Desjarlais, LEAG Member

Years of under investment and gentrification have led to a housing crisis in Toronto. According to the Canadian Real Estate Association, house prices in Toronto have increased 15% during the pandemic. In February 2021, the average house price in Toronto topped \$969K, and prices continue to push upwards.

In contract, over the course of 2020 7,617 new individuals entered the shelter system, according to the City's new Shelter System Flow data dashboard.

The key driver of homelessness includes the economy and the housing market. The lack of affordable housing and gentrification in communities across the City, have exasperated this issue.

The LEAG chose to be a megaphone to bring attention to issues around affordable housing, supports to keep housing, and safety in housing for those struggling to secure a permanent address. Housing is essential.

There is a real need for a strong housing strategy.

A real housing strategy which will reduce homelessness and increase affordable housing is critical and an important focus for the first LEAG cohort. Veronica and Kelly have worked to support the development of a strong housing strategy.

Veronica Snooks is passionate about good, safe and dignified housing for all Torontonians. Building upon her experience with the City's Community Safety Unit's DREAM team, and her involvement in the home unit takeover project, she has used the LEAG platform to advocate for safety in housing and supportive services to keep one's housing and avoid homelessness. The program is now expanding province wide.

Kelly knows first hand how housing can open up opportunities. The stability from her first apartment with Woodgreen Community Services, enabled her to enroll in George Brown's Transition to Post-Secondary Education program. That opportunity built her confidence which began her road to the LEAG. As the LEAG representative Mayor's Taskforce on Housing, she was sitting shoulder to shoulder with politicians and developers, and brought the lived experience voice to the table.

The LEAG put a spotlight on three key themes:

2 Stigma for those facing homelessness

Homeless cuts every demographic and every situation.

The face of homelessness has changed, especially with the fallout with COVID. Although society has this perception or stereotype of someone who is homeless, there are many well educated phDs who have fallen through the cracks and refugees and new comers who have no social safety net to lean upon. Jobs are scarce and affordable housing is even more scarce. Systematic transformations are needed to help people get jobs, access mental health and addictions supports and secure good housing.

Home may be where the heart is, but there is no heart in being homeless.

The Lived Experience Advisory Group was integral to ensuring that the voice of residents of Toronto were heard in the HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan consultations. We were fortunate to have a LEAG member join the External Advisory Committee who reminded us of who the plan was for and the real struggles and realities faced by many. **The plan is richer thanks to the input from LEAG.**

 Sherri Hanley, Policy Development Officer, Housing Secretariat

3 Shelters are not the solution. Housing is.

"I used to work shelter and it's hard." - Karen Bible

At the moment, people are reluctant to go to a shelter. Because of COVID, people are scared of closed spaces, but have no other choice but use the shelters, especially during the cold winter months. Shelters were never meant for the mass of people who need a place to sleep each night.

The LEAG were disheartened and dismayed by the urgency and severity of the housing crisis. When there is no time to build housing alternative approaches need to be considered. There was real sense by many that housing is such a big issue, that they had limited impact in creating real solutions to address the crisis. And some expressed a regret for not having as big an impact as they had hoped.

However, there is hope on the horizon. Many members of the LEAG mentioned COVID helped to bring a bright spotlight on the housing crisis and genuine dialog has begun among decision makers and elected officials.

Good thing about COVID is that it's opened up people's eyes. If we can do this in a time of crisis and lift people out of poverty and inject money, we can do it any time and increase housing.

- Colin Desjarlais, LEAG Member

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As well, this cohort is tossing the mantel to the next cohort, to carry on this work and build upon it.

Our Reflections

Let them see the spark in you and hear your voice to bring about CHANGE The LEAG wanted to share words of encouragement and advice in their own words. The following is a glimpse into the heart and hope of the first LEAG cohort to the next.

Excerpts from an open letter to the new cohort:

I wanted to congratulate you first of all. it is definitely a selection process, and you have been asked to come along and participate in lending your voice to change in this city. This is an awesome opportunity to experience how change is created within the city and what limits that spark we bring from igniting into flame and creating much needed action.

In beginning, it seemed like there was ample time at first, in the end, there really isn't that much time at hand. Change, at least in the context of the city, happens at a pace of the lumbering dinosaurs in some instances, yet in others, it happens with relative speed...I suppose I mean to say, jump in when you can, you are likely much more knowledgeable and capable than you think, and there is still much work left to be done.

I am of two minds: I am here to celebrate with you for it is a cause to celebrate, and passing the torch. Let me say, you will find your voice and work supported fully by many city staff who will move heaven and earth to see your success and ensure that you have access to movers and shakers at the city. There is much reason to be excited.

Let me not paint too rosy a picture though; there are others who will not see the value, honesty or courage of your convictions. In addition to this, I find the direct opposition to our work and frank disregard to our wisdom by the upper echelons of power, disheartening, and I admit to being ready to quit on more than one occasion.

We as folks with lived experience know that poverty in Toronto is a political choice. Keep their feet to the fire. Let them see the spark in you and hear your voice to bring about change.

- Karen Bible, LEAG Member

The full letter has been presented to the current cohort

Passing on wisdom...

Work backwards. Think about what you want to succeed in doing and where do you want to be in 2 years. Then figure out how to get there and make a plan to get there. Know exactly where you want to be and make a plan and check all the boxes along the way. And be honest.

Be honest especially in evaluation otherwise we will never progress.

- Cassandra Chambers, LEAG Member

The LEAG has been a platform for those with lived experience to have our voices heard and be involved in making change. Even without the LEAG I can still take action – I can depute or meet my councilor – but I would not be as effective as I have been through the LEAG. I am only one person, and I need to bring others in for multiplication. Make that commitment. **Raise at least one person to be a leader for themselves and the community during your time in the LEAG.**

- Bee Lee Soh, LEAG Member

Listen to others and their experience, be prepared to change your mind about things but keep a focus as a group together.

Nothing will get done without the rest of the group.

Stephanie Cormier
LEAG Member

Continue to tap into what has already been done. Partner with someone/group of us from the first cohort.

Be passionate about the work and

- Ann Marie Moulton, LEAG Member

be committed to the cause.

Ask questions and work together. The City has had their eyes opened. They can see the potential of the LEAG and how much of a difference people can make with Council.

- Gerry Banks, LEAG Member

Involvement in the LEAG can turn into new opportunities.

As my confidence grew, I become much more involved in the community: going to marches, pubic speaking and attending symposiums. It has led to a seat on the Mayor's task force on housing, sitting at the table with developers to make change.

– Kelly Lawless, LEAG Member

Don't be afraid to share your ideas. None of us are perfect and there is no such thing as a stupid question.

Be yourself and have respect for the job and the other LEAG members.

It's hard, but you have a chance to bring about change.

– Colin Desjarlais, LEAG Member

Keep focused on the big picture – whatever you choose. I was hoping we would have done more for housing in Toronto, and propel the work more than we did. Advocacy is challenging but focus on that big picture. Do your best.

Be proud of the work you will be doing and do not get overwhelmed or stressed.

Work together as a team.

- Veronica Snooks, LEAG Member

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LAST WORDS to encourage the city and the impact the LEAG has had.

People that have lived in poverty face dire conditions: go to food banks and struggle with health and mental health matters. LEAG allowed a space where stigma does not exist - rather lived experience is honoured and listened to. We were strong, anti-oppressive and respectful. We were the pioneers of the LEAG. We started out this way, and I have no doubt that LEAG will continue to that voice. The one that states the marginalized, the racialized, and the judged deserve better.

We can do better. LEAG taught me that.

- Kelly Lawless , LEAG Member

The learning and the experience I have received will remain with me as I continue to seek new ways of serving, while continuing to bring awareness to the systemic issues that plague our society. It is my hope that this work will continue and that the goal to reduce poverty will be realized and its impact be felt throughout our communities and our society at large.

- Ann-Marie Moulton, LEAG Member

This is their

Soul Friends (Peers)

When love sings in your heart nothing can cause it to depart... Songs are sung in sufferings and celebrations... **Melodies hummed** in the darkness **Bursting forth into in the light** Words unspoken written on a page Your heart provides the heat As the story unfolds The drum beats **Truths of life and love Descriptions of you Come forth to share** With ears eager to know How does love sing in your heart **Through sufferings and darkness** How do melodies burst into light Where to find the drum beat

Every time the drum beats I hear a song A melody sung strong Loud and clear **My friends** calling me along to a sing song no matter where I am my friends love lives within my Spirit beating drums singing sweet melodies they play for me in my darkest moments calling me along to have courage and be strong I am never alone When I sing my songs Joyful love sings along **Through my friends**

unspoken words

Veronica Snooks LEAG Member





