

Summit put spotlight on poverty in Halton

By Christina Commisso

METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

Sasha Menezes doesn't strike you as someone who lives in poverty.

She's internationally educated, holds a degree from the University of Toronto and comes from an affluent family.

However, the 41-year-old also struggles to keep a job and, at times, to feed her children.

"There's a big stigma against poverty, but there's a bigger stigma against mental illness," the Burlington resident said. Menezes is manic-depressive and she's frustrated.

"Every time I get sick, once again I lose whatever gains I earned," she told the audience at Monday's Leadership Summit on Poverty Reduction. "It's harder for people who have my kind of illness to get engaged and have a voice. I'm not sure what the solution is, but it's nice

you guys want to help."

The event, held at the Halton Regional Administrative Centre in Oakville, brought together people who are living in poverty along with community service agencies and government and business representatives.

"It comes down to an issue of urgency," said keynote speaker Mark Chamberlain, chair of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction.

"If a child isn't fed, they are hungry. If a child isn't fed and goes to school, they typically don't learn. If they don't learn, they usually don't graduate and if they don't graduate or do poorly in school, they use the health care and justice system more. Their health outcomes are poor and, like in Hamilton, they die 21 years earlier than their counterparts," he said. "If a child is hungry, and they go to school, feed them."

"If you hear they'll work on the economy first then focus on poverty, be angry. You cannot have a health plan without a poverty plan. You cannot have an economic plan, if you don't have a poverty plan."

Mark Chamberlain, chair of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction

Chamberlain encouraged members of the audience to speak out against government's lack of action toward poverty reduction.

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In Halton, 8.5 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. In Oakville it's 9.7 per cent and in Burlington the rate is 9.5 per cent.

Part of the day was spent completing a 'Living the Math' exercise, which had participants work out a monthly budget based on a fixed income that a single person receives on Ontario Works (\$561) or someone receiving disability insurance (\$1,080).

"We could not make it work," said Halton Hills Councillor Clark Somerville of the budgeting exercise. "We had a difficult time getting near those numbers. Right off the bat a one bedroom apartment in Halton is around \$750 a

month."

Somerville, along with members of regional staff and community leaders, have taken the Donated Diet Challenge, where for three days he'll only eat donated items donated from food banks.

"This has been an eye opening experience," he said. "I'm not doing this to make us feel sorry for people. It's to help us understand how difficult it can be for some people to buy fresh fruit or that people in our community have to decide between paying their hydro bill or buying food."

Somerville hopes to organize a meeting between the Region and the business sector to develop a strategic plan to address poverty in Halton.

Menezes said she hopes the summit will help the more fortunate in Halton be more appreciative of the simpler things in life.

"I would love to meet at Tim Hortons for a cup of coffee, but there's just no money for it." She said she'd like to play badminton more often, as it helps deal with her bipolar disorder, but she can't afford the \$4 fee to play. "I don't have the \$20 at the end of the month, but that exercise keeps me out of the hospital."

Menezes said providing those living under the poverty line with simple items, such as a Tim Hortons card, could make a world of difference. However, for the time being, the mother-of-two worries about putting food on the table.

"I've already run out of money for the month."

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