

Solution: Humanizing Affordable Housing

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Introduction

Leadership Waterloo takes the initiative to identify issues that are local to the Region of Waterloo and works with cohorts of leaders to generate innovative ideas to solve the issues at hand. This year, the 2021 Leadership Waterloo cohort has closely examined the issue of affordable housing in Waterloo Region. While assessing the issue of affordable housing, our group noticed a lack of awareness amongst the general public about the issue of affordable housing which was creating a lack of buy-in, or, adoption of the issue. In response to that, our group is creating a campaign intending to humanize the issue of Affordable Housing within Waterloo Region in collaboration with the Housing Innovation Fund project. Our main objective is to clearly communicate to the broader community that the issue of Affordable Housing is about more than just housing, and to simplify the issue of Affordable Housing as a whole to make it simpler for community members to provide their resources (time, efforts, and money), which is where our project aligns with the Housing Innovation Fund project. The following report will provide insight into the efforts made by our group to understand the challenges related to our topic and outlines our proposed solutions.

Who We Spoke To

To help inform the development of our campaign, we reached out to House of Friendship's marketing team to understand the tools and concepts they use in engaging the community to further their organization's goals and objectives.

Other Resources

Along with speaking to different experts and knowledge holders in the community to help inform our scope on the issue of affordable housing.

What We Learned

The issue of affordable housing is extensive and complex and requires more immediate attention focused on creative solutions that strike a balance between servicing the vast majority of people experiencing this issue while also having solutions that are tailored to the unique and diverse needs of the groups experiencing the issue.

The issue of affordable housing falls on a large spectrum and affects people and groups of various socioeconomic statuses, ages, abilities, genders, cultural representations, and physical locations in the region.

Challenges

According to the Kitchener Housing Needs Assessment, the current housing needs are not being met and the current 'silo approach' between sectors is not an effective approach to addressing the issue of affordable housing (City of Kitchener Housing Needs Assessment, 2020). Along these challenges, our group identified an additional challenge as it relates to affordable housing is Waterloo Region which is the current perception of the issue being inaccurate and not providing a fulsome representation of those experiencing affordable housing issues.

Current Housing Needs Not Being Met

Certain sectors, such as the Waterloo Region Food Bank and the Community Housing Access Centre, are seeing increased demands in their services which demonstrates that the need for more affordable housing options is growing. According to the City of Kitchener Housing Needs Assessment, there is a need for over 3000 additional subsidized housing units in order to meet the demand of the current waitlist of those waiting for access to affordable housing (City of Kitchener Housing Needs Assessment, 2020).

Ineffective Silo Approach

While the issue is being addressed in small facets around the region (such as shelters and food banks), it appears that the current “solutions” are too narrow, and often when people come together to address the issue at large, it quickly feels overwhelming. This contributes to the issue feeling more complex and daunting, leaving it almost impossible to gain momentum.

Perception of the Issue of Affordable Housing

Another issue is the perception and misconception that affordable housing affects a very specific demographic through the perpetuation of incorrect stereotypes. The issue of affordable housing does not discriminate. When thinking about campaigns to address affordable housing, typically we see a stereotypical archetype of someone who is homeless, and perhaps also struggling with addiction. This may be true of some people who are affected by this crisis, however the issue of affordable housing falls onto a much larger spectrum that also impacts those of varying socioeconomic statuses and lifestyles.

What is Missing?

While developing a campaign to raise awareness is an ambitious effort, we recognize that raising awareness doesn't necessarily have a direct impact on solving the issue of affordable housing. The question remains, once awareness is raised and the community is informed, what is the next step? To combat this identified gap in our project we have partnered with the group presenting the Housing Innovation Fund whose focus is implementing an Affordable Housing levy in the Region that will be used to collect capital that will be allocated towards the building of Affordable Housing in the Region; similar to how Vancouver is utilizing revenue generated from their vacancy/speculation tax that was implemented 4 years ago to address Affordable Housing issues in their city.

To help support the Housing Innovation Fund, we will not only be delivering a campaign to help raise awareness, but we will also create a deliverable in the form of a report for Councillor Erb. This report will include the stories and statistics that we collect for our campaign and will expose gaps in the system as it currently exists.

Proposed Solution

Scope

Bearing in mind the three challenges mentioned above, our group determined that developing a campaign would help to raise awareness to the current housing needs specific to Waterloo Region and shift the current and inaccurate perception of the problem.

Who: there are many players involved in our proposed solution that we did not have an opportunity to reach out to, including, but not limited to: various sectors that make up the ‘silo approach’ (i.e. social services, hospitals, and police services). These players have statistics and testimonies that

speaking to the issue of affordable housing in our community and will inform our campaign by putting a face to affordable housing, which will “humanize” or mobilize our issue.

What: we need the stories of those who have been personally affected or impacted by Affordable Housing, to help us mobilize the issue and help us make it hit home with people who have the means to help mobilize the issue. We can do this by telling the stories of people who have experienced issues as it relates to affordable housing with hopes of simplifying the issue and making people realize that it could happen to anyone. We want to pull on their heart strings of people so they want to contribute to the cause, and we will do this by working with the Housing Innovation Fund, a fund that people can contribute their money to.

When: recent stories that would resonate with people so they realize that it could be them.

Where: we need to tell the stories of those in Waterloo region who have been affected by the Affordable Housing crisis to help us drive our point home – that it could be your neighbour that you’d be helping by contributing your money to the cause.

How: by donating your money to the Housing Innovation Fund.

Intended Outcomes

Our aim is not to just simplify, but to clarify the issue for the community, and what their role in addressing it may look like. Widespread information sharing creates an increased understanding of what the issue of affordable housing looks like in our community, who is impacted, and the negative effects it has on the community as a whole. By clearly communicating the issue at hand, how it impacts our community, and why it is worth investing in, we will have a strong pitch as to why our initiative is worth adopting.

Financial Implications

What needs to be taken into consideration, is the proposed Affordable Housing tax levy that our group is supporting through our campaign. Since introducing additional taxes isn’t typically received well by the general public, our goal is to communicate the current crisis, how it currently affects them as home-owners, and how a small tax levy could have a drastic positive impact on the community as a whole, including them as stakeholders.

Suggested Partners

As mentioned, we have partnered with another group within the Leadership Waterloo 2021 cohort, The Housing Innovation Fund. By partnering with this group, we are bridging our solutions to not only raise awareness but also to create buy-in when they propose their Affordable Housing Tax Levy to the council.