The Road to Empowerment is a community development project coordinated by three Niagara region Community Health Centres (CHCs): Bridges Community Health Centre (Fort Erie and Port Colborne), Niagara Falls Community Health Centre and Quest Community Health Centre (St Catharines). The project received two years of funding through the Niagara Prosperity Initiative in late 2012 to develop and deliver workshops and community initiatives focused on empowering people with the lived experience of poverty with skills to better self advocate and to advocate for action on the structural causes of poverty. Through skills training and resource sharing participants are becoming leaders who will be guided and supported to take collective action and advocacy on poverty-related issues through a variety of strategies and opportunities.

As we near the end of the first tear of the project, we’d like to reflect on our successes to date, as well as where we hope to head in year two.

This project was made possible through the generous support of:

NIAGARA Prosperity Initiative

Niagara // Region

Project Partners

Bridges
Community Health Centre

Quest
Community Health Centre

NFCHC
NIAAGA FALLS COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE
**Project Beginnings**

Most cuts to health/social services have the highest impact on those who are most disengaged or unaware of possible impacts. Community Health Centres (CHCs) see the impacts of poverty, disengagement and disempowerment every day and frequently advocate on behalf of our clients on issues such as housing, social assistance, medication access, dental care, and much more. Health promotion and community development staff from three Niagara area Community Health Centres: Bridges Community Health Centre (Fort Erie/Port Colborne), Niagara Falls Community Health Centre, and Quest Community Health Centre (St Catharines), met to discuss ways to work together to develop training in leadership, communication, and engagement with the intent to help our clients become better advocates for themselves and, over time, advocates for creating change on a public policy/service delivery level. This was the impetus for the project proposal, entitled Road to Empowerment, with the intent of it being embedded firmly in our on-going Community Health Centre work and activities.

**Project Development**

After submitting a successful proposal to the Niagara Prosperity Initiative in 2012, the three Community Health Centre partners worked with consultant Laura Cattari, an advocate and member of the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, to develop a six-week curriculum for a self advocacy workshop series training. Various resources were gleaned to create content we felt was appropriate and suitable for us and the needs of our participants. Topics included understanding the importance of self advocacy, communication (I statements, assertiveness, reflective listening), prioritizing, decision making, problem solving, planning, community supports, research, staying organized, negotiation, self esteem, story telling, and using social media. An introduction to social justice, structural causes of poverty, and cause advocacy concludes the workshop series and provides an opportunity for participants to continue in this area as a community action group, if interested.

Participant eligibility requirements included age 18 and over, current or past experience living on a limited income (i.e. social assistance, CPP, EI, minimum wage), and a desire for personal growth. We used several strategies for recruitment including:

- Creation of promotional flyer to share with local agencies and internal staff to encourage referrals
- Newspaper interview, which ran in the three Niagara daily newspapers, to provide an overview of the project and how to get involved
- Word of mouth promotion with clients known at our Community Health Centres
**Project Launch and Delivery**

Between March and September 2013, a total of ten sets of six-week self advocacy workshop series were held between the four delivery sites – Fort Erie (two), Niagara Falls (three), Port Colborne (three), and St. Catharines (two). A total of 83 participants have been active in the self advocacy workshops between the four sites, surpassing our goal of 48. Each site used one-two staff (health promoters, community health workers, social workers) to facilitate the workshops and, while the curriculum has standard structure and topics, each site had the flexibility to adapt the materials to meet their own needs and comfort level. For example, Niagara Falls staff incorporated the use of an advocacy-themed movie, alongside the curriculum content, to engage participants.

To ensure inclusion for all participants, a meal was provided at each workshop and bus tokens available, as needed.

Participants were asked to complete a pre and post survey of their understanding of self advocacy and their personal skill development throughout the workshops, as well as a satisfaction survey. In addition, several participants provided a testimonial for the funder, highlights of these will be shared under *Program Successes to Date*.

**Project Successes to Date**

We have had a bounty of individual success stories during the first year of the project - many participants have self reported increased confidence and assertiveness in advocating for themselves. Some individual participant highlights include:

- Interviewed for a local newspaper during Community Health and Well Being Week
- Started writing blog posts for Road to Empowerment website
- Started using social media (i.e. Twitter) for advocacy activities
- Used new skills to speak more confidently/appropriately at Family Court & with a school principal
- Actively pursuing volunteer opportunities to help other women who have been abused
- Set up meetings with the local MPP and MP to advocate for assistance with income issues
- Felt increased confidence and applied for and secured employment
- Felt increased confidence to speak up at medical appointments, achieved more satisfactory results
- Invited to speak at the Niagara North Community Legal Services AGM
- Had housing issues resolved
- Stuck up to a landlord
- Joined a disability committee and has taken a leadership role
- Put together a business plan to start own business
- Actively seeking employment
- Joined the Niagara Prosperity Initiative grant proposal review panel
Collectively, we’ve also shared some successes, with some unexpected early opportunities for cause advocacy and engagement:

- 20 Road to Empowerment participants attended the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation held on September 30th in St. Catharines. For most this was their first time participating in such a venue and several spoke publicly before an audience of 80, including St Catharines MPP Jim Bradley and many local service providers, to share their personal stories, experiences, and solutions to address poverty.
- Welland MPP Cindy Forster has approached our Port Colborne group to attend a meeting to discuss housing and poverty issues; this will take place on November 8th.
- We have created a website for the four sites to stay better connected, post stories in a blog format, etc - http://roadtoempowerment.weebly.com/. We anticipate this will be a valuable resource to assist with sustainability and profile of our work.

Several powerful testimonials have been provided by Road to Empowerment participants, including:

- *My social worker at Bridges CHC thought Road to Empowerment would be good for me to take. It has given me the confidence to stand up for my cause, taught me how to use the tools for research, and who and what is available to assist me in reaching my goals. If I don’t take a stand for myself nobody will.*
- *Lori told me about Road to Empowerment and it sounded interesting. It was a good refresher for other programs I have taken. Through the project I have become aware of things I had no clue about i.e. what our government is and isn’t doing and I am hoping I can help make a change and a difference.*
- *I heard about Road to Empowerment through my health care team at Bridges CHC. I have spent a great deal of time in hospital and I wanted to learn how to speak up for myself and this program has helped me to do that. I am now able to speak up for myself and I will not be intimidated by any government agency if I do what I am supposed to do as a self advocate. For most of my life I have been scared to death by government agencies. I needed to learn a more effective and positive way to approach them. Road to Empowerment program has worked for me and I intend to build upon the positive experiences and successes that I have had so far.*
- *I heard about Road to Empowerment through Julia from Quest CHC while talking to her at Start Me Up Niagara in regards to getting involved in public speaking. I have learned a lot about different topics and situations in dealing with public speaking. This has been very valuable to me.*
- *I got involved through my counselor at Quest CHC. I have found my involvement to be really helpful, I’ve been learning about city politics and public speaking. At the beginning of the year my personal life was going through hell. Attending Road to Empowerment meetings has helped me come back to life, learn, educate myself, and meet a great group of people.*
• I was introduced to Road to Empowerment by staff at Niagara Falls Community Health Centre. I have found it to be very informative and enjoyable. I have become more assertive about myself and my rights and I have applied this to my current situation. Before getting involved in this program I let everyone walk all over me. Now I realize I have the right to disagree and to know exactly what is being done and if it is best for me personally.

• I got involved with Road to Empowerment last spring. I feel it has given me more tools and strategies to cope with trauma and assertiveness in regaining my voice to speak about how I really feel. I have learned ways to communicate more effectively within my personal life and with agencies. I feel my confidence has improved as a result and I have a sense of purpose and freedom to be able to speak my truths and ask for my needs to be met. In the past I was unable to do these things which I now see as part of my PTSD and trauma. Now I have learned how to prioritize my needs, create a plan with attainable steps to follow through, and confidently ask for what I need, as well as to successfully advocate for others who may not be able to advocate for themselves. This has improved the overall quality of my life and has helped me to move forward. I have highly recommended others take the self advocacy workshops and get involved. The facilitators are kind and compassionate, understanding and knowledgeable, and extremely supportive. I would not be where I am today without their assistance and support!

• Mary Anne suggested the Road to Empowerment project to me while I was at the Crystal Beach Community Church and I felt it would be very helpful for me. I feel understood, supported, and part of a group rather than all on me. I really have issues I’ve been just letting slide and I believe is contributing to my depression. I need to stand up and being a part of this new community group is fantastic!

• I first became involved with this project when I saw it in the Bridges CHC newsletter. The best thing that has happened to me so far is that I finally completed a CPP form I was afraid of and needed to get sent in. Being a part of the workshops has made a difference to me because I realized that I have a voice. I have faced some of my fears. It has been great to get out and meet new people.

• I heard about Road to Empowerment through our local community dinners at Crystal Ridge Church. I am making connections and am getting stronger character-wise. This is significant because I needed more skills to ask and obtain information about my needs.

Next Steps

All four sites have several participants who are keen to continue to meet and work together to learn more about cause advocacy and to develop skills and strategies to do so. On November 22nd, a regional forum will be held in Niagara Falls for all interested Road to Empowerment participants. The forum will be facilitated by community leaders from Put Food in the Budget and will engage participants in further story telling, social justice, and priority setting. This will help to launch the next phase of our work and to develop new leadership development opportunities.
The Community Health Centre staff will continue to support the development and growth of each group. Our roles will include the cultivation of leadership development amongst participants and continuing to offer further advocacy learning opportunities, as identified by each group. There are regional, provincial, and national cause advocacy opportunities we can connect with and we look forward to sharing and discussing these together.

All sites plan to continue to offer the six week self advocacy workshops and will engage some past participants to co-facilitate with CHC staff.

We are appreciative to have further funding to support and enhance our efforts during the second year of the project and excited to see what directions our community participants chose to go on their road to empowerment. We hope you are also inspired by the work we have been doing!

“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice” ~ Nelson Mandela