

Fight poverty with positive outlook

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When you're struggling to make ends meet, it's easy to dwell on what you don't have.

Enough money to pay the rent. Enough food to put on the table.

And it's easy to forget the things you've got. Things that can help you get ahead.

Tangible things like a car, or a roof over your head. Intangibles like confidence, self-esteem, and relationships with family, friends and neighbours.

"Sometimes we don't realize what assets we have in our lives already," said Mary MacKeigan, executive director of Opportunities Waterloo Region. "Coming from that point of view helps change people's lives."

This concept of identifying your strengths while recognizing your weaknesses was one of the messages delivered at a free forum hosted at the Transylvania Club by Opportunities Waterloo Region.

The non-profit group brought together a variety of agencies yesterday with the goal of educating low-income workers about some of the resources available in the community.

At the City of Kitchener's community services display, for example, people could find out about accessing affordable recreational programs.

"A lot of the things you learn through recreation you don't often learn in other environments, like social skills," said co-ordinator Angie Fritz.

Speakers talked about such things as building your own container garden and eating well on limited means. Tax officials helped prepare tax returns. And visitors shared their own tips in a series of discussion groups.

"I think it's a really good opportunity," said Shayne Scott. "It's a good way of seeing where you're at in life."

Participating organizations included the Project READ Literacy Network, Anishnabeg Outreach, the St. Louis Learning Centre and the Community Garden Council.

"We all have people in our agencies who have skill gaps," said Carol Risidore of

The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region. "We work with them to help them get a better job, and keep a job."

The idea of focusing on a person's strengths and improving on weaknesses -- whether personal, social or financial -- isn't a new one.

The framework, known as the Asset Pentagon, was developed in the United Kingdom and has been used worldwide, but it's a relatively new approach in this area, MacKeigan said.

Building on a 2003 pilot project, Opportunities Waterloo Region has just produced a booklet outlining the concept and pointing people toward the appropriate resources.

"I don't think people recognize that they need to build on these assets," said forum organizer Kelly Fraser. "If you're just going to work and coming home and doing nothing, it's pretty depressing. But if you gain confidence, you feel better about going out there to get the things you need to come out of poverty."

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