



United Way
Bruce Grey



**BRUCE GREY
POVERTY
TASK FORCE**
Our Voice is Power

THE ALL MUNICIPAL CANDIDATES EDUCATION SESSION

Municipal Candidates Education Session

Session Report

September 18, 2026 | Grey & Bruce Counties, Ontario

Our Voice is Power

[YouTube recording of the meeting](#)



The All Municipal Candidates Education Session at a Glance

The All Municipal Candidates Education Session was hosted by United Way of Bruce Grey through the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force, which United Way convenes and supports as a collaborative table addressing poverty-related issues across Grey and Bruce. The session was a non-partisan learning opportunity for municipal candidates, not a campaign debate or endorsement forum.

The session featured three presentations followed by candidate questions submitted through Zoom chat. The recording, slides and resource links were intended for distribution beyond the live session so candidates who could not attend could also use the material.

Why We Held The All Municipal Candidates Education Session

Municipal councils make decisions every day that affect the conditions in which people live: where and what kinds of housing can be built, how communities are connected by transportation, how public spaces are used, what infrastructure is available, and how municipalities work with Counties, community organizations and other levels of government.

At the same time, many of the largest policy levers affecting poverty sit outside lower-tier municipal government. Income-support rates, minimum wage, health and mental-health systems, many housing programs and major sources of social-service funding are determined provincially or federally. One purpose of The All Municipal Candidates Education Session was therefore simple: help candidates understand who does what, what programs and services already exist in Grey Bruce, and where municipal governments have meaningful opportunities to act, partner or advocate.

Why the United Way and the Poverty Task Force?

The All Municipal Candidates Education Session grew from the intersection of direct community work and systems work.

United Way of Bruce Grey works with people navigating utility and heating costs, income and benefit access, food insecurity, housing instability and homelessness, while also supporting community navigation, research, convening and advocacy. That direct experience provides a practical view of where programs work, where people fall through gaps, and where a household problem is actually a systems problem.

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force provides the collaborative table around that experience. The Task Force convenes partners from different sectors to share local evidence, identify gaps, coordinate responses and examine the policies and systems that shape poverty. The All Municipal Candidates Education Session was one way to carry that combined knowledge into a municipal-election learning environment.

The session therefore brought together two kinds of knowledge: the collective expertise of Poverty Task Force partners across sectors, and the practical experience gained through United Way of Bruce Grey's direct community work.

The intention was to give candidates more than statistics about poverty. We wanted to share some of what the community has learned about how systems actually work, what services already exist, where capacity and policy gaps remain, which level of government holds which levers, and where municipalities can make a meaningful contribution through their own decisions, partnerships and advocacy.

OUR HOPE FOR THE SESSION

How are we measuring up against the social determinants of health?

What is trending in the community?

What services already exist?

Where is the gap?

Who has the authority to act?

What can municipalities influence directly, through partnership, or through advocacy?

What would success look like, and how would we know?

The goal was not to tell candidates what positions to take. Our larger hope was that candidates would leave better equipped to ask informed questions, connect with people and organizations doing this work, seek out lived experience, and approach difficult community questions with curiosity before conclusions.

What Candidates Heard

Three presenters approached poverty from different parts of the local system. Together, the presentations connected health, government responsibility and community safety, while providing examples that grounded the discussion in local programs, gaps and systems experience.

1. Social Determinants of Health

Jason Weppler, Program Manager with Grey Bruce Public Health and co-chair of the Grey Bruce Healthy Communities Partnership, described the social determinants of health: the social and economic conditions that shape health, including income, housing, food, employment, education and transportation. Local data presented included the 2025 living wage, housing affordability, subsidized-housing waitlists, homelessness, transportation costs and food insecurity. Candidates were directed to the Grey Bruce Health Equity Tool, developed through partnership between the Poverty Task Force and Grey Bruce Public Health, and to local data resources for further learning.

2. Who Does What?

Kim Wingrove, former CAO of Grey County with municipal and provincial government experience, mapped the roles of federal, provincial, County and local municipal governments. Federal and provincial governments hold major income-security, taxation, benefit and program levers; Grey and Bruce Counties carry system-management responsibilities for housing, homelessness and social services; and local municipalities influence land use, zoning, infrastructure, facilities, Community Improvement Plans, economic development and emergency planning. Her presentation also identified United Way and other community organizations as important local partners and referenced community tax clinics as part of benefit access.

3. Policing, Poverty and Community Safety

Rob Martin, retired Chief of West Grey Police Services, discussed the limits of enforcement when police respond to homelessness, mental-health crises, substance use and poverty. His presentation framed these as social and public-health issues that cannot be resolved by policing alone, and contrasted repeated crisis response with upstream prevention, treatment, housing and community supports. The discussion connected with United Way's local work Mapping Discharge Pathways from correctional institutions and with SOS outreach as examples of examining what happens before and after a crisis response.

Real Experience in the Conversation

The local frontline programs and systems work repeatedly became examples during the discussion, showing how immediate assistance can generate information about larger policy and service gaps.

- Utility and heating assistance, alongside the newly released Energy Poverty Brief, illustrates the difference between helping a household today and asking why the same barrier keeps recurring.
- SOS outreach and homelessness work helped frame program “success” as something that must be defined according to the person, intervention and time horizon, rather than only by whether someone permanently exits services.
- Community Volunteer Income Tax Program work illustrated how filing a tax return is also a gateway to income-tested benefits and credits.
- Good Food Box and community-garden connections grounded discussion about food access while also exposing the limits created by income, transportation, storage and cooking facilities.
- The Saugeen Shores water and wastewater bylaw example showed how a municipal policy detail can have a direct housing stability consequence.
- United Way’s correctional-discharge mapping and Energy Poverty work showed the organization’s broader approach: respond to the immediate need, document what the experience reveals, and carry that evidence into systems advocacy.

What Candidates Asked

The chat and spoken answers moved quickly across issues. The themes below combine the candidates’ written questions with the spoken discussion captured in the meeting notes. Questions are lightly edited for readability and grouped by topic; the emphasis is on the substance of the conversation rather than on individual candidates.

1. Affordability, income and how we measure need

Questions raised

- Is the 30% housing-affordability threshold based on gross or net income, and what counts as a “household”?
- How do increases in employment income affect Ontario Works, ODSP and other income-tested benefits?
- If a living wage still does not make local housing affordable, what does the living-wage measure tell us?
- Should the definition of affordable housing be connected more directly to what people actually earn?

Discussion

The discussion highlighted why definitions matter. Candidates asked not only about the size of the problem, but about the reality behind the statistics. The conversation also explored the gap between wages, benefits and housing costs, including lived experience of navigating ODSP and other supports. The exchange demonstrated the importance of understanding how a measure is constructed before using it to draw conclusions.

2. What does program “success” look like?

Questions raised

- Do we know how many people successfully move through social programs and no longer need them?
- How should “success” be defined: after a month, six months, a year or longer?
- What is the biggest gap between what people need and the services that currently exist?

Discussion

This became one of the session’s clearest examples of curiosity before conclusions. Before answering, the word “success” was unpacked. For outreach, success may mean a person returns and stays connected; for another intervention it may mean stable housing, greater independence or reduced crisis-system use.

The discussion also distinguished between a program that is failing and a program that is working but does not have enough capacity to meet the level of need.

3. Housing, zoning and municipal tools

Questions raised

- What housing programs already operate locally, and what level of support do they provide?
- Could vacant-home taxes or other municipal tools increase housing availability?
- Why are tiny homes, modular housing and other forms of lower-cost construction not used more often?
- Are there local efforts to enable more infill, medium-density housing or additional residential units?
- Can municipalities require a share of new development to be affordable?
- Are community land trusts or other alternative ownership models being explored?
- How can communities build support for mixed-income housing and reduce resistance to infill or affordable development?

Discussion

Housing generated the largest cluster of questions. Discussion covered additional residential units, zoning, Community Improvement Plans, inclusionary-zoning constraints, alternative housing forms, community land trusts and the difference between “affordable” as a program or market definition and what a household can actually pay. Participants also shared examples of work underway in Bruce County, Meaford and Saugeen Shores. The discussion repeatedly returned to the distinction between municipal tools and policy levers held elsewhere.

4. Homelessness, Housing First and shelter

Questions raised

- What responsibilities do municipalities have when addressing encampments?
- Can emergency shelter become a more permanent housing response?
- What do local experts think of Housing First?
- If unsafe housing must be closed because of code violations, what responsibilities exist when residents are displaced?
- What does housing and support cost compared with repeated use of jails and other crisis systems?

Discussion

The discussion distinguished emergency shelter, supportive housing, social housing and Housing First. Presenters described Housing First as providing housing without requiring sobriety or treatment first, allowing people to become safe and stable before addressing other needs. Questions also connected homelessness with policing, incarceration, emergency response and the costs of repeatedly managing crises. Some legal questions raised in the session require careful reference to current law rather than simple generalization from one context to another.

5. Transportation in a rural region

Questions raised

- What should a municipality track before deciding whether to continue the SMART accessible-transit pilot?
- Could municipalities work together on a regional transit system?
- Could school boards, health services or other partners collaborate for transit solutions?
- Could ride sharing or service on selected days help people reach appointments and services?

Discussion

Candidates moved beyond whether rural transit is useful and asked how a municipality should judge whether it is working. Discussion included ridership, quality of life, access to health and social services, social isolation, employment, accessibility, regional cooperation and the practical challenges created by rural distance and low population density. A central evaluation question emerged: define what success means before deciding which numbers to count.

Transit as a public service: One recurring expectation heard in general discussions about rural transit is that “*transit should pay for itself.*” Today’s discussion challenged that premise. Around the world, public transit is generally treated as a **public service supported by public investment**, rather than a service expected to recover its full cost from the people who use it. We do not evaluate police or fire services by asking whether user fees cover their operating costs; we evaluate them by the public outcomes they provide. Transit can be viewed through a similar lens. It connects people to employment, health care, education, food, services and community life. For municipalities considering rural transit, the more useful question may therefore be “**What public benefit are we purchasing, and how will we know whether that investment is working?**”

6. Food security and access to land

Questions raised

- Could access to land and food growing reduce household food insecurity?
- What role could municipalities play in larger-scale local food production?

Discussion

Community gardens, local food initiatives and the Good Food Box were discussed as useful pieces of a larger food system. The conversation also identified practical limits: people may lack transportation, storage, cooking facilities, time or access to land. The discussion returned to household income as a central driver of food insecurity.

7. Addiction, mental health and community safety

Questions raised

- Why is addiction understood as an illness or disease rather than simply a choice?
- What is the most important step for police services right now?
- How should municipalities think about prevention compared with spending on crisis response and incarceration?

Discussion

The panel connected substance use, mental health, homelessness and policing while keeping the roles distinct. The discussion emphasized that police may respond to the immediate situation, but cannot by themselves resolve the health, housing or income conditions behind repeated crises. Candidates also asked directly about prevention and the relative costs of upstream support versus repeated crisis-system involvement.

8. Energy poverty and rural costs

Questions raised

- What support exists for households struggling with utilities and home heating?
- Where do provincial programs end and locally funded assistance begin?

Discussion

The discussion highlighted the rural reality of heating with furnace oil, propane and cordwood, as well as electricity and natural gas. United Way's Energy Poverty Brief and utility-assistance work were shared as examples of both immediate household support and systems advocacy. The conversation also included a recent municipal water and wastewater policy example in which a by-law change helped prevent an eviction.

What Emerged from the Conversation

The questions did not point to one municipal solution to poverty. Instead, they increasingly focused on how to make better public decisions when responsibility, funding and evidence are spread across many systems.

A conversation that became more practical

As the session progressed, many questions shifted from describing the problem toward municipal authority, existing programs, partnership, evidence and outcomes.

For example, a candidate asked, “what should be measured before a transit decision?”, what zoning tools do municipalities actually hold, how to distinguish service gaps from program failure, and what does up-stream prevention cost compared with crisis response.

That shift was closely aligned with the purpose of The All Municipal Candidates Education Session: not to supply a single answer, but to strengthen the questions that come before public decisions.

From individual need to systems learning

A second thread ran through the session: an individual crisis can reveal something larger. A utility bill can expose a gap in provincial assistance. A shelter that is full can show a capacity problem rather than a program failure. A person repeatedly encountering police, hospital or homelessness services can expose a missing connection between systems.

This is central to the way United Way of Bruce Grey and the Poverty Task Force work together: respond to the immediate need, learn from what the experience reveals, bring partners together around the evidence, and carry the issue toward the level where change is possible.

CURIOSITY BEFORE CONCLUSIONS

Asking Better Questions About Complex Community Issues

Poverty, homelessness, substance use and other complex community issues deserve difficult questions. **Good questions separate what we know from what we assume and leave room for the evidence to change our understanding.**

What is happening?

What already exists?

Where is the unmet need?

Who has authority?

What evidence is available?

What outcome are we trying to achieve?

Where the Conversation Goes Next

The All Municipal Candidates Education Session was designed as a starting point rather than a one-time information session.

What we agreed to do:

- Share the full session recording on YouTube.
- Combine presenter slides into one reference PDF.
- Share this integrated meeting report and resource list with candidates.
- Invite participants to complete a short learning-focused evaluation.
- Continue connecting municipal representatives with United Way, the Poverty Task Force, community partners and local evidence after the election.

The longer-term hope is simple: municipal leaders do not need to become poverty experts. What they do need is enough context to recognize which questions belong at the municipal table, which require partners, which need advocacy to another level of government, and what evidence they should ask for before drawing conclusions.

Resources Shared During the Session

- Grey Bruce Health Equity Tool [Grey Bruce Health Equity Tool](#)
- Vital Signs Report, 2026 bgdisc.ca/post/vital-signs-2026
- AMO: Municipalities Under Pressure bgdisc.ca/post/municipalities-under-pressure-the-human-and-financial-cost-of-ontario-s-homelessness-crisis
- bgdisc.ca/post/municipalities-under-pressure-1-year-later-an-update-on-the-human-and-financial-cost-of-ontario-s-h
- An Update on Homelessness in Ontario bgdisc.ca/post/an-update-on-homelessness-programs-in-ontario
- United Way of Bruce Grey Energy Poverty Brief bgdisc.ca/post/energy-poverty-brief
- Saugeen Shores Municipal Housing Allowance Program [Municipal Housing Allowance Program Helps More Residents Achieve Housing Stability in Saugeen Shores | Town of Saugeen Shores](#)
- Community Foundation Grey Bruce [Community Development Corporation](#)
- Housing First Model [Housing First | Homeless Hub](#)
- Institute of Southern Georgian Bay [Affordable Housing Toolkit | The Institute of Southern Georgian Bay](#)
- In Their Own Words: the state of social assistance in Ontario bgdisc.ca/post/in-their-own-words-the-state-of-social-assistance-in-ontario
- Mapping Discharge Pathways from Correctional Institutions [Mapping Discharge Pathways from Correctional Institutions in Bruce Grey - United Way of Bruce Grey](#)

Finding Services & Programs

- 211 Ontario [Search - 211 Ontario](#)
- Grey Bruce Community Volunteer Income Tax Program [Free Income Tax Clinics - United Way of Bruce Grey](#)
- Grey Bruce Good Food Box [Good Food Box - United Way of Bruce Grey](#)
- Grey Bruce Community Garden Network [Community Garden Network | The Sustainability Project](#)
- Bruce County Human Services [Human Services | Bruce County](#)
- Grey County Community Services [Community Services | Grey County](#)

Stay Up To Date on Poverty Related Issues

- Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force [Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force – Our voice is power](#)
- United Way of Bruce Grey [Home - United Way of Bruce Grey](#)
- Grey Bruce Public Health [Grey Bruce Public Health Homepage](#)
- BGDISC - Grey Bruce Data Information Sharing Collaborative [Open Data Portal | Bgdisc](#)
- 211 Ontario Dashboard [211 Business Intelligence Dashboard | 211 Ontario](#)
- Bruce Food Grey Dashboard [All Dashboards | Food Bruce Grey](#)
- Maytree poverty-policy resources [Publications - Maytree](#)

For questions and comments related to this briefing paper, please contact:

Francesca Dobbryn
Executive Director
execdir@unitedwaybg.com

Jill Umbach (she/her)
Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force United Way of Bruce Grey
povertytaskforce@unitedwaybg.com

United Way Bruce Grey
380 9th Street East Owen Sound ON N4K 1P1
519 376 1560 | 800 794 1728

About This Report

This report integrates the Zoom chat with the AI-generated meeting notes and is reviewed by the meeting hosts for accuracy and clarification. The chat was used as the stronger source for the wording and sequence of written candidate questions; the meeting notes are used to capture the spoken presentations and discussion around those questions. Related material is grouped thematically rather than reproduced as a chronological transcript.