

Living wage in St. Thomas-Elgin is \$16.47 an hour

By Craig Gilbert

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One conversation, one eye-opening exercise and one new business model for one of the most respected painting companies in Ontario.

The story is that of Henry Dryfhout, one of the dozens who attended the Living Wage release workshop staged by the YWCA's Pathways to Prosperity program on Wednesday afternoon (Jan. 28), filling the Casa Station's main hall for lunch.

The owner of H. D. Painting told the packed house a simple request for a raise from a relatively new 25-year-old employee who had already been bumped from their starting rate of \$14 an hour to \$16 caused him to totally rethink his business model.

Though happy with the company and his coworkers, the father of two with one on the way pulled him over one day to tell him even that wasn't enough to survive.

So they hashed it out and decided he needed \$18 an hour to pay the bills and feed his family.

Dryfhout had concerns about the "ripple effect" that raise would have as he met with each of his "primary workers," the core team in his stable of about 35 employees.

But as it panned out, he realized his business model was even better with his employees at a higher rate of pay.

"We can do more with less people because they're happy and more productive," he said.

The living hourly wage for St. Thomas and Elgin County is \$16.47 according to the months-long research exercise spearheaded by the YWCA.

That amount "reflects what earners in a family need to bring home based on the actual costs of living in a specific community."

It's based on the hourly rate at which a household can meet its basic needs once government transfers have been added and deductions have

been subtracted. It "gets families out of severe financial stress by lifting them out of poverty and providing a basic level of economic security."

Living wage communities boast a higher standard of living and can attract families, according to the YWCA. It would be higher if not for the social services available in Elgin County.

Dryfhout said his living wage-based business model that the presidents of top 100 Canadian companies are watching "very closely" to see if they can adapt it to their own.

That would be music to the ears of Kaylie Tiessen an economist with the Ontario office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a left-wing think tank.

Not surprised to hear Dryfhout's business is thriving with a living wage business model, she said St. Thomas and Elgin County are on the "cutting edge" as one of only nine municipalities in Canada who have undertaken such a study.

"It shows St. Thomas is forward-thinking," she said of the more than 100 people who attended the launch. "Moving forward, they'll be able to look at exactly how pay and public services work together to build a strong and thriving community and a middle class that can actually support the local economy."

She said if more businesses signed on to the living wage movement and promoted it, the economy would be better off and employers would actually save money.

"We would love to see employers acknowledge the fact that they know their business relies as much on workers as it does on customers," she said. "Paying higher wages is actually good for business. When you pay your employees, things like turnover drop, you spend less on hiring (and) training. Your employees are happier, healthier and more productive."