

***Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Victoria  
Invites Low-income Canadians to Speak for Themselves***

In July 2003, BC Capital Region's Vibrant Communities initiative, known as the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, invited people on low income who had been involved with the project to come to a meeting. Initially seen as a one-time gathering, organizers wanted to discuss how to better include people on low incomes in the CHALLENGE's decision-making process.

*Established in 2002, Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative that explores promising local solutions to reduce poverty. Fifteen communities from across Canada have formed a learning partnership through which they share ideas, resources and strategies related to poverty reduction. Each of the participating communities already had done considerable work to alleviate poverty and saw Vibrant Communities as a way to extend and enrich their efforts. This story is the second in a series which highlights successful strategies for reducing poverty and building more caring communities. For more information, visit: <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>*

The choice of facilitator – a woman named Karasima who herself lives on low income – sent a clear message that CHALLENGE organizers were interested in the opinions of people who had experienced poverty first-hand. The meeting included a meal and a small honorarium for participants, and transportation and child care costs were reimbursed. Each of these details – the invitation, selection of facilitator, meal and financial assistance – demonstrated a genuine concern for life circumstances and a desire to remove barriers to participation in the community.

The meeting focused on four questions: how the group wished to be identified, the barriers and solutions to reducing poverty, whether their opinions would have an impact on the CHALLENGE and the likely benefits of continuing their involvement with the project.

The discussion of whether to form a special (separate) committee helped participants articulate the view that individuals' worth should be tied to their contributions and actions rather than their income. They agreed that they were each free to self-identify as living on low income,

or to choose whichever identification felt most comfortable. A theme repeated throughout the meeting was the importance of speaking up about the experience of poverty in order to bring about widespread community understanding and respect for those in need. By the end of the meeting, participants realized that continued involvement with the CHALLENGE would increase their sense of personal empowerment, give them networking and sharing opportunities, and help them continue the process of escaping the isolation that is a defining characteristic of poverty. They left the session with a clear sense that they needed to get more involved with the numerous Quality of Life CHALLENGE working groups.

While achieving success in bringing low-income participants to the discussion table, CHALLENGE organizers realized that they also must encourage those individuals to share their experiences with a wider audience. Karasima was invited to the annual Vibrant Communities meeting in Guelph, Ontario, in September 2003 where she faced for the first time the intricate dance of attending a conference – knowing when to speak, with whom to speak and gauging responses. Karasima was inspired by much of what she heard in Guelph, particularly the notion that people living in poverty must be actively involved in the process of changing their circumstances. It gave her the impetus to develop a model for assisting people who recognize themselves in a position of need – for food, clothing or connection.

“People working in the field of poverty reduction – both those living in poverty and those trying to help – suffer from burnout,” says Karasima. “Community economic, social and emotional needs are increasing and funds are decreasing. I wanted to help people identify their top-of-mind concern and then find some way of addressing it so that they wouldn’t feel so overwhelmed.”

### ***Need a SNACC to get you through?***

Karasima developed a method for breaking down large, multifaceted problems into small, easily managed pieces, or snacks. The SNACC acronym stands for:

- Sharing successes – identify a triumph, large or small
- Needs – what service or item is required? (e.g., better dental care, clothing, food, child care, skills)
- Action – what could be done to get the need met?
- Commitment – what commitment is the person willing to make to in order to get their needs met?
- Community – who are the people who can support your commitment?

Says Karasima: “When we begin meetings or workshops by sharing something good that’s happened – something as simple as the fact that we got to the meeting – we focus our minds and spirits on the positive and can move into the work of the CHALLENGE. I’ve recently recognized that a gap sometimes exists between a person’s individual needs and the work of the group. We need to talk about that gap – to recognize that it exists and understand its importance. Sometimes our members have to see their individual needs are paramount and they must remove themselves from the group to attend to their situation. We keep the door open and encourage them to rejoin us when they are ready.”

The experience of attending the conference in Guelph, combined with the personal successes that had come with involvement in the CHALLENGE, strengthened the resolve of the group to continue to learn better ways of becoming engaged, and to encourage the other 14 Vibrant Communities to do likewise. In October 2003, they adopted the name

“Community Action Team” (CAT) to help those outside the group understand what they were trying to achieve. During the last 12 months, their members have worked on most of the CHALLENGE working groups and many of their ideas have been incorporated into ongoing projects.

“My sense is that CAT members have had to face down fears of what others might think about us and what we thought about ourselves,” says Karasima. “I believe the CHALLENGE initiative creates such an atmosphere of respect that many of us have learned to place more value on our contributions.”

Robert Putnam describes the importance of bonding and bridging relationships in community building [Putnam 2000]. Karasima’s experience of developing relationships among other low-income participants (bonding) and between the CHALLENGE’s many working groups (bridging) is an important facet of the work under way in Victoria. Bridging relationships are vitally important to a healthy community because they can support and direct positive action on difficult issues.

One of the Community Action Team’s ongoing objectives is to forge alliances with community agencies whose mandates may or may not include action on poverty reduction. For example, in the coming year, CAT is considering a coffee talk project. Community Action Team members will invite people who are at various levels of involvement in the CHALLENGE to discuss CAT’s work in relation to community issues.

During the CHALLENGE’s November 2004 Celebration and Dialogue event, a wide cross-section of Victoria residents came together to celebrate the project’s work to improve quality of life and discuss strategies for addressing ongoing challenges. Many participants

expressed how important it was for them to hear the stories of people living on low income. The CHALLENGE plays a pivotal role in encouraging connections between people, including between people living at high- and low-income levels. In the words of one participant: “People are blind to the need and differences in their community and often, until we need each other, we don’t connect. People don’t want to know; they stay in their comfortable reality.” Another said: “People are suffering in silence and we may not know their stories. We don’t ask often enough how people are doing.”

### *Moving forward*

The Community Action Team began working on an experiential learning tool in late 2003. Designed for social work students, social service sector employees, board members and government employees, it gives examples of life situations which can be placed on a spiral, demonstrating the upward or downward impact that events can have on a person who is trying to move out of poverty. In addition, CAT members presented the Quality of Life CHALLENGE with a suggestion to establish a work clothing program for men. Securing the proper attire for job interviews is a serious problem for many people living on low incomes.

In the spring of 2004, the CHALLENGE conducted a participatory evaluation process for its working groups. Inclusion of people on low incomes was a recurrent theme and Karasima initiated a review of the CHALLENGE’s inclusion practices, which led to the development of an Inclusion Policy by the Community Action Team. This policy was then adopted by the Quality of Life CHALLENGE’s Steering Working Group.

Though previous practices made provision for reimbursing transportation and food

expenses for people living on low incomes, these were not being offered consistently or explicitly. Karasima was concerned that some individuals were unable to ask for the funds they needed. Says Karasima: “Because we’ve agreed that low-income participants can choose whether to self-identify, healthy snacks or meal vouchers were not made available unless people specifically asked for them. People had to choose between going hungry and identifying themselves. Through the process of fully discussing the inclusion policy with members of the CHALLENGE organization, working group chairs have become more committed to making sure they are aware of the needs of low-income participants and to make sure that transportation and food costs are met.”

In July 2004, the Community Action Team initiated a balcony garden project that provided participants with two containers for growing fresh vegetables and the instructions necessary to make the project successful. CAT currently is preparing a “Grocery Store Specials”

project that encourages grocery store managers to put key food and household items on sale at times of the month when people on social assistance have money to take advantage of lower prices. These and other initiatives have allowed committee members to acknowledge their strengths and limitations, and have helped to change attitudes among the CHALLENGE staff who were sometimes unwilling to let CAT members fail.

Says Karasima: “We weren’t prepared for a number of wrinkles with the garden container projects, but having others rush in to fix our problems underlined the fact that inclusion also means letting people learn from their own mistakes,” says Karasima. “Besides helping us to better define inclusiveness, the container experience has helped to encourage discussion and make a decision about the kinds of work we will undertake.” It was recognized, for instance, that generally the Quality of Life CHALLENGE is not structured to provide direct services to the community.



*People listening to each other at Celebration and Dialogue 2004.*

The balcony garden project offered CAT members another opportunity to build relationships with local farmers and environmental organizations not usually associated with poverty reduction as well as with more traditional partners, such as community centres and food security groups.

Community Action Team members are also working to establish a cross-country dialogue with other Vibrant Communities low-income participants. A common concern is the ongoing work of attracting and retaining low-income committee members. People living on low income often face additional difficulties in attending regular meetings as they deal with day-to-day health and life challenges. CAT meetings are often attended by only Karasima and four others; sometimes quorum is not met. Karasima hopes to increase CAT membership to 15. If at least ten people are able to attend monthly meetings on a regular basis, they can be encouraged to participate in other areas of the CHALLENGE.

### *Relationships of substance*

For Karasima, the respect and integrity of the Quality of Life CHALLENGE staff members, and her relationship with researcher, Jane Worton, have provided the support and guidance she needed to find her own strengths and grow into her role as the lead member of the Community Action Team. Says Karasima: “The staff at the CHALLENGE are not afraid to share their power. People who have experienced need tend to try to keep things for themselves out of fear that it may be taken away from them. That applies to material goods, but it can also apply to their work. Jane and others have taught me that there is always more work to be done. I have been gently guided in my work and now see that someday I will pass my current tasks

onto someone else. I have been mentored and will mentor another person myself, and the community as whole will benefit from those relationships.”

CHALLENGE organizers seek to integrate strong relationships into all facets of their operations. They work to encourage bonds, particularly among CAT members, so that new recruits can feel comfortable asking questions while they are learning the ropes. A buddy system for new CAT members is under consideration. Says Jane: “It takes a lot of courage to try new things, meet new people and, in particular, go and speak about personal experiences in large groups. When CAT participants learn to trust one another, it makes it easier for them to do the bridging work with other organizations because they know they have someone supporting them and backing them up. Strong bonds are integral to our work.”

During the Quality of Life CHALLENGE’s participatory evaluation event in the spring of 2004, CAT representatives were asked to reflect on their work and its impacts on their lives.<sup>1</sup> It was clear that by taking the first step of joining the CHALLENGE, they were rewarded in ways they could not have imagined. The change from isolation to connection was a powerful motivator for many. A summary quote about leadership neatly summarizes the *raison d’être* of the Vibrant Communities initiative and the importance of valuing others for their unique gifts:

In community, there is no one leader – we all work together as leaders to share the power within each of us. Believing we are leaders in our community, we don’t lift just one person up, but we encourage, support and inspire. Then we have an empowered community – sharing our strengths, vulnerabilities, needs and experiences.

*Anne Makhoul*

*Anne Makhoul coordinates the community stories series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.*

*The Quality of Life CHALLENGE's website is: [www.qolchallenge.ca](http://www.qolchallenge.ca)*

*Karasima, Community Action Team Facilitator, can be reached at: [jane@communitycouncil.ca](mailto:jane@communitycouncil.ca)*

*Jane Worton, Researcher, the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria can be reached at: [jane@communitycouncil.ca](mailto:jane@communitycouncil.ca) or by phone at (250) 383-6166.*

**Endnote**

1. Until 2006, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE has three priority areas: Community Connections, Homes and Sustainable Incomes. As part of the Community Connections priority area, the project collects and shares stories of how people are working together to improve their quality

of life. The goal is to collect 1,000 stories by 2006. During the annual Community Celebration, Quality of Life Awards are given out for exemplary stories in six categories: youth, education, business, community organizations, neighbourhoods and community arts.

**Reference**

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Shuster.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340

Fax: (613) 729-3896

E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org)

Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)