

Community Action in Saint John: Making a Difference in the Lives of Young People

Adolescence is a time of change and uncertainty. The excitement of youth and its possibilities are balanced against the pressure of having to make educational and career decisions in an increasingly competitive world. For pregnant girls and teenage mothers without family support, this pressure is compounded by the struggle to find shelter, financial support and healthy relationships.

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 fourth in a series which highlights successful strategies for reducing poverty and building more caring communities.¹ For more information, visit: <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>

A mother's education level, employment prospects and access to decent housing and child care are important determinants of her health and the health of her family [Marmot and Wilkinson 1999]. In Saint John, New Brunswick, pregnant and mothering teenagers have been a source of ongoing concern for the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), the Vibrant Communities convenor agency in that city.

BCAPI was started in 1997 as a local business community reaction to the high level of poverty in Saint John. Made up of senior business and professional leaders, BCAPI acts as a local catalyst, adding new thinking, expertise, financial support and influence to the poverty reduction efforts of government and community organizations.

Before BCAPI came onto the scene, many projects to address teen pregnancy already were under way in Saint John. The lead agency for this work was the Greater Saint John Teen Pregnancy Committee, a coalition of community

organizations formed in the early 1990s. The two groups developed closer ties as a result of a poverty study undertaken by BCIPI in 2000. They focused on breaking the poverty cycle by using ‘best practice’ methods to address poverty’s root causes, including teen pregnancy. The result has been a remarkable array of initiatives to support young single parents.

Says BCIPI Coordinator Monica Chaperlin: “The poverty study made a strong case for moving in the direction of working with children, youth and young single parents to both prevent and reduce poverty for future generations. Besides supporting the work which community members had started on opening a residence for homeless young mothers, BCIPI wanted to assist in the expansion of pregnancy prevention programs and increased opportunities for vulnerable young people in the areas of recreation, continuing education and employment.”

BCIPI began working with existing organizations devoted to finding solutions for youth and young mothers, including the Resource Centre for Youth Steering Committee, St. Joseph’s Community Health Center, the Greater Saint John Teen Pregnancy Committee and the First Steps Housing Project Inc.

BCIPI’s role in all of these partnerships has been to act as an agent for change. Its members bring new ideas, access to resources and a business approach and skill set to the table. BCIPI lends the strength of the business community to discussions with government officials and helps accelerate policy and program changes proposed by community organizations.

Saint John, New Brunswick

Saint John is Canada’s oldest incorporated City. Tourism, light manufacturing and oil processing are now the centre’s main industries, but a more recent push to develop businesses based in the knowledge economy leaves many residents without the education or experience to fill job vacancies. The area is not attracting many new residents; the population fell four percent between the 1996 and 2001 Census periods (from 72,944 to 69,661). A smaller tax base means that the City government is struggling to maintain its programs and services.

A 24.5 percent poverty rate [Statistics Canada 2001] identifies Saint John as one of Canada’s poorest cities. Increasing demand for social services, hampered by reduced government flexibility and funding for community-led services, has put more pressure on nonprofit organizations that work with low-income residents. The BCIPI Poverty Study listed 19,000 poor residents, 6,000 of whom are members of lone parent families [Deloitte & Touche 2000]. The study found that a person living in poverty in Saint John would most likely be a female between the ages of 21 and 39 with two children under the age of 5. The Region of Saint John has a population of 122,678 which is spread out over 3,360 square kilometres [Statistics Canada 2001]. Accessing community services, employment and shopping is a serious problem for residents who do not own a vehicle, with the result that there are high concentrations of low-income residents in inner-city neighbourhoods.

Avoiding teen pregnancy

One of the entry points for community action was to find ways to lower Saint John's high teen pregnancy rate (43 out of 1,000 births in 1999). Exposing teens to the realities of parenting seemed a good place to start.

“Though most teen pregnancies are unplanned, many mothering teens hope that a baby will provide the emotional security their lives are lacking,” says Pat McGill, Chair of the Greater Saint John Teen Pregnancy Committee. Many also do not have the education or confidence they need to envision their future as citizens in the workforce. Being a mother is something they feel they can do. The realities of raising babies and children, however, quickly overturn any romantic notions of parenthood they may harbour.

Organizers in Saint John knew that communicating this ‘wake up’ experience would help reduce pregnancy rates, and they looked around for effective programs operating in other centres. A novel parenting education and prevention program, operating successfully in PEI for middle and high school students, was adopted and managed by the regional health authority's Community Health Centre. The centerpiece of the program is a “Baby Think It Over” infant simulator which mimics the random, day-and-night crying patterns of a newborn child. Each simulator costs \$700 and includes a tracking chip which records how long ‘parents’ take to respond to crying episodes and whether the infant is shaken or dropped. Parents are supplied with a bracelet and key which they use to re-set the simulator after a crying episode is over; this function discourages students from handing responsibility for the

infant over to someone else. After 48 hours, the babies are returned to the health centre.

Besides providing training for school teachers and youth workers interested in using the program, health authority staff ask community sponsors to help purchase the simulators. Donors have the option of naming their babies and they receive an adoption certificate and a yearly update on the program. There are 40 simulators being used in Saint John at this time.

“Most of the 3,000 students who have taken part in this program can't wait to give up the baby,” says Scott Crawford, Teen Program Coordinator at the Community Health Centre. “The realities of looking after an infant even for a brief period lead many students to say that they will be more careful to practice safe sex.” In fact, 92 percent of program participants feel that the experience will deter teens from early pregnancy. In the words of one student: “A cute little baby isn't so cute when it's crying at 2 a.m. A baby is a lot of work.”

A second initiative developed by the Community Health Centre in 2000, called “Roses, Rubbers and Rainbows”, seeks to raise teen awareness of pregnancy and parenting issues. An outside consultant – usually a community health professional – visits a middle or high school to present information on relationships (roses), safe sex (rubbers), and diversity and homosexuality (rainbows). The small group presentation is structured to encourage interaction and provides a safe forum where students can discuss difficult subjects. Says Scott: “Teens seem to really enjoy the presentation, and we believe that it is helping them to be more understanding and accepting of other viewpoints.”

‘The Zone’

The Community Health Centre’s development of in-school programs like Baby Think It Over and Roses, Rubbers and Rainbows has evolved into a more comprehensive menu of services and programs available for teens. Most popular is a daily after-school program, referred to as the Teen Zone.

The ‘Zone’ operates from the basement of St. Joseph’s Community Health Centre in a centrally located, low-income part of the city. Young people from all over Saint John congregate to socialize and develop their talents and skills in a safe, friendly and free environment. Staff members at the Teen Zone are vitally important to the adolescent clientele and are trusted confidantes when a teen needs help with shelter, food or clothing or appears to be suffering physically, mentally or emotionally.

An active Teen Advisory Council enables the participants to have a say in all aspects of the drop-in’s operations, including the choice of programs and services, the rules and consequences, and the types of fundraising and volunteer projects. Says Program Coordinator Scott Crawford: “The Teen Advisory Council brings the mandate of the drop-in centre – ‘for teens, by teens’ – to life. Our youth take great pride in their ownership of the Centre.”

From prevention to support

Once a teen becomes pregnant, there is little available in the way of housing in Saint John. If the woman’s family is unable or unwilling to

provide support, her options are few. The community’s work to open a residence for homeless parenting and pregnant teens, begun in 1999, was rewarded in 2002. That year, with help from the provincial and federal governments, First Steps Housing Project Inc. opened its doors and helped 22 pregnant and parenting youth.

The residence, a former convent located next to the Community Health Centre, has been renovated and now offers young mothers a bright, comfortable living space. Four stories tall, it includes 12 private bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, three living rooms, study areas, child development room and laundry facilities.

A recently completed external evaluation by the New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services concluded that First Steps has been very successful in providing the safe haven, health, education and emotional support critical to the lives of the women and children who come to the centre.

Says Sharon Amirault, Executive Director of First Steps: “Very few of the young women at First Steps were in school or training programs when they arrived, but we work hard to give them the support they need to enroll in a school or education program.” High school completion is an important step in the road to poverty reduction. Statistics gathered in Saint John indicate that women who become mothers during their teens have poor graduation rates, and most also depend on social assistance as their prime source of income. Less than 25 percent of teen mothers who receive social assistance have completed high school by the time they reach age 21.

Says Sharon: “First Steps is not simply a housing program. We make available public health professionals, family doctors, educational service professionals, and abuse outreach and



First Steps opened its door to pregnant and parenting teens in 2002.

addiction counsellors, as requested by our mothers. We are learning together what the issues are for young parents and how we can best support them.”

Before and after First Steps

Statistics gathered by First Steps present this profile of the young women who enter their program:

- the average age is 18 (some have been as young as 13 and as old as 29)
- 75 percent report various forms of abuse and 86 percent describe their families of origin as unhealthy
- most have a history of living in a state of ‘relative homelessness’ – with parents, in a shelter, independently or with a boyfriend – and moved an average of five times in the previous year
- most suffer a combination of drug use, abuse and hunger

- violence and mental health problems characterized their previous living situations
- 75 percent reported suffering abuse while pregnant; 93 percent were abused by their boyfriends.

After exiting the program:

- 100 percent felt safe while in the residence
- 91 percent reported that the program offered a supportive environment
- 80 percent improved their personal hygiene
- 78 percent felt a sense of belonging
- 65 percent improved their understanding of baby care
- 69 percent stayed connected to First Steps after they moved out of the residence
- 73 percent felt the staff and supports were the best aspects of the program
- 50 percent said the rules were the worst part of their stay.

Says Sharon Amirault: “Many of these young women had never known a home that set rules and expectations for them. They were not taught the basics of self care, homemaking, conflict resolution, budgeting or how to care for another human being. Once they leave our facility, many women report that the guidance and rules they received at First Steps were solid lessons that they now rely on to guide their paths.”

First Steps’ future work will focus on finding more continuing education, child care and affordable independent housing solutions. It will also offer more parenting skills workshops, and improve and extend ties with other support agencies.

One thing leads to another

One problem raised by the young mothers at First Steps led to another BCAPI undertaking – the provision of quality, affordable child care to enable parenting teens to continue their education. Despite the efforts of a BCAPI committee to help establish an in-school child care for infants with support from the school district and the YM/YWCA, teen child care subsidies provided by the province were too low to make the program affordable.

BCAPI organizers put their concerns in writing and brought together government and community players to look at the problem. They hoped that raising the subsidy would provide young mothers with enough child care support to continue their education, rather than taking part-time work to meet their expenses. The BCAPI efforts helped influence the province’s decision to increase infant day care subsidies for teens in school from \$18.50 to \$25.00 per day (up from the \$16 per day paid to most low-income mothers).

Says Monica Chaperlin: “One of the benefits of living in a small province like New Brunswick is our relative ease of access to decision-makers. BCAPI was able to bring YM/YWCA staff members together with policy-makers to discuss a specific policy. This type of third-party intervention from a credible community leadership group helped to make the case for a benefits increase. We were fortunate in the timing of our request and in the fact that it was not anticipated to cost the government a great deal of money.”

Even though the increase took effect only eight months after the in-school child care program was launched, revenues were still insufficient to sustain the “infant only” service. The YM/YWCA applied to the school district to expand its child care service to children of teachers and community members, but their application was turned down and the program closed.

“Trying to make success of the in-school day care helped us to fully examine all the problems many parents in Saint John are experiencing in regard to securing high quality, affordable child care,” says Monica. “We discovered that while the \$25 subsidy is a reasonable rate for a normal, mixed age group day care service, a more realistic amount for high quality infant care would be in the \$30 to \$35 range. Even with the increase, the YM/YWCA program could not make a go of the infant program. There remains an insufficient number of spaces for children under 2 years of age in the community. Our teens usually end up looking for unlicensed private services for which the government subsidy rates are much lower and where care quality is unregulated. Putting a child into a less than ideal care environment is an added stress for young mothers who are trying to return to school. We are continuing to work on the child care issue

and we would like to see the province extend licenses for in-home child care sites. The experiences of our First Steps mothers are now helping the community. The child care barriers they have encountered are also a problem for mothers in the rest of the city.”

While the Saint John community is pleased that the provincial government has raised infant child care subsidies for teen parents who attend high school, the lack of infant child care spaces makes it difficult to know if the increase has had any impact on parents’ decisions to stay in school. There is currently no available data to make this determination. The lessons learned through First Steps have helped Saint John community leaders to understand the importance of providing a full range of supports to young mothers as they work to complete their high school education. Without access to alternative education programs, transportation and child care, the journey out of poverty will not likely succeed.

From BCAPI to Vibrant Communities

BCAPI has been recognized nationally for its work. In 2001, it received the Peter F. Drucker Award for Innovation in Canadian Non-Profit Organizations and was the recipient of the Imagine Campaign’s Spirit of Community Partnership Award in 2003.

All of the Vibrant Communities work under way in the 15 centres across Canada are built on the successes of organizations like BCAPI. In Saint John, the wide cross-section of organizations and individuals who have come together to address teen pregnancy and other root causes of poverty have effected a change in the wider community’s attitude. People now believe that they can and must grapple with social problems in order to reduce individual vulnerabilities and

attain what all communities strive for – the dignity, well-being and self-sufficiency of their residents.

All of the hard work is paying off. Says Pat McGill: “In 1995, the rate of teen pregnancies in Saint John County was reported at 52 per 1000 births. In 2000, the rate had fallen to 30 per 1000. We are also seeing fewer births among younger teens. Our provincial Health Region reported that there were 94 births to teens under 18 in 1995-96, but by 2003-04 this number had decreased to 34 births.”

Now that the vision of programs, services and support for teen mothers is a reality, BCAPI and Vibrant Communities member organizations are focusing more heavily on the financial and policy changes which will ensure long-term program sustainability. Says Monica: “Growing more services and supports for children and teens, helping young people to face the reality of safe sex and parenting, and having the supports in place for them if they do become pregnant is a real funding challenge. We continue to look for new ways to develop our community and influence government policy to support our poverty reduction efforts – the will is there, but the funding is weak.”

BCAPI and its government and community partners are becoming increasingly more adept at providing support, informing decision-makers and addressing bureaucratic barriers. A next major initiative will be the relocation and expansion of the Teen Zone. A new, centrally located, Resource Centre for Youth will soon offer a teen health clinic, continuing education, employment resources, recreation and learning activities. “The new centre will be highly visible and accessible to teens,” says Scott Crawford. “Currently, 350 registered teens regularly use our centre – that translates to 10,000 visits each year. We hope to double those numbers once the

new facility is opened and to expand the services we provide.” The Rotary Club of Saint John will raise community funds for the project and the provincial government plans to contribute \$500,000 – an amount the federal government will match through the Infrastructure Canada Program.

Says Monica Chaperlin: “The Vibrant Communities initiative has allowed BCAPI to more formally strengthen partnerships between organizations. Such a cohesive structure lends greater legitimacy to the priorities we set as a community and helps everyone to better understand and support the work that is undertaken to make our community healthier and stronger. It also lends us greater weight at the bargaining table when we want to begin new projects and keep them moving. We can’t assume that any one group can reduce poverty or solve the problems associated with teen pregnancy, but together, our efforts are making a difference.”

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Endnote

1. Other stories in this Vibrant Communities series include:

- *Waterloo Region’s Guaranteed Income Supplement Campaign* (January 2005)
- *Quality of Life CHALLENGE in Victoria Invites Low-income Canadians to Speak for Themselves* (April 2005)
- *Assured Income for the Severely Disabled Public Policy Initiative* (May 2005)
- *The Living Wage Learning Initiative* (May 2005).

References

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