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Action for Neighbourhood Change Begins

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) is a 14-month strategic research and learning project that will assess how locally-driven revitalization strategies can help citizens build strong, sustainable neighbourhoods. Initiated by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in collaboration with Health Canada and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, the project got under way in February 2005. It will operate until March 2006 in selected neighbourhoods within the cities of Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Halifax.

There are many practical challenges that must be addressed when working collaboratively and horizontally across government departments. This project involves five government sponsors, albeit in three different departments. From HRSDC, there are representatives from the National Secretariat on Homelessness (NSH), the Office of Learning Technologies and the National Literacy Secretariat. Representatives from Canada's Drug Strategy (a Health Canada initiative) and the National Crime Prevention Strategy (which operates under the auspices of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada) complete the roster.

This community story describes the organizational framework which has been built to support and sustain ANC – a community revitalization process which the government hopes to be able to apply in other neighbourhoods grappling with the realities of poverty and homelessness.

The project will carry out two processes simultaneously. Community capacity-building will take place in each city in which neighbourhood residents and representatives from government, non-profit organizations and business will identify, prioritize and address barriers to community vitality. A complementary policy process will build relationships between community and government participants to address policy-related challenges that emerge in the five sites and explore longer-term measures needed to improve government/community collaboration in neighbourhood renewal.

Several criteria were used to select the participating cities, including Statistics Canada low income cutoffs (LICOs), receipt of transfer payments, youth full-time school attendance, the percentage of families headed by lone parents and



the percentage of males over the age of 15 working full time, full year. In addition, communities which had developed positive government-resident relationships during the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (which was run by NSH between 1999 and 2003) were viewed as having some of the necessary relationships and infrastructures in place to best take advantage of the project's short time frame.

Between them, the ANC government partners' mandates cover many of the interrelated factors that can contribute to poverty: homelessness, housing instability, crime and victimization, substance abuse and poor health, safety, low educational attainment and unstable labour market attachment. However, the partners recognize that priorities and actions directed toward poverty reduction must be articulated by local residents and organizations. Balancing government priorities with community wishes requires flexibility and openness. All involved have begun to build the relationships of trust that lie at the heart of positive change.

Who does what?

The work of the ANC project will be carried out by a partnership which includes United Way of Canada – Centraide Canada (UWC-CC), five local United Way agencies, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the National Film Board.

UWC-CC will provide overall project coordination and administrative management and, once the project ends, help others to apply key learning and insights to additional sites. The United Way member agency in each city will be responsible for supporting the operation of ANC in its community, including the selection of the

neighbourhood within which their efforts will be focused. A project coordinator will be hired in each city to organize planning and activities, and to manage communications among the parties involved.

Using their experience and knowledge of comprehensive community initiatives, staff of the Tamarack Institute will act as knowledge disseminators to the five United Way member agencies. In collaboration with the Caledon Institute, Tamarack will prepare an action research framework and a learning and assessment process. These two elements will focus on the dynamics of community-based renewal and local outcomes assessment.

The Caledon Institute will conduct policy research and help build relationships among government and community partners by convening a series of policy dialogues. Through these activities, it will foster collaborative learning on key public policy and governance issues and help identify the specific challenges and insights for the development of future public policy.

The National Film Board will bring to the project its experience as Canada's story-teller. It will train local youth to capture the aspects of community life that are seen as impediments to social well-being and to document the change process that results from the Action for Neighbourhood Change project. In addition to offering a vehicle for engagement and expression, the NFB will be teaching valuable, transferable skills to the young people who become involved with ANC.

Getting everyone working together on such a large project requires organization and teamwork. A steering committee has been formed to coordinate responsibilities and streamline communications. It includes representation from the four national partners, the five neighbourhood

initiatives and the federal government. To date, the committee has agreed on its membership, worked to align each organization's project goals and desired outcomes (within the constraints of a short timeline), and developed communication protocols and materials (visit the project website: <http://www.anccommunity.ca>).

New ways of effecting change

Ultimately, the goal of the Action for Neighbourhood Change project is to strengthen understanding of how a neighbourhood can organize itself for change, the choices it makes and the how these processes differ across communities. It also will assess the impact of existing systems of support on how and why neighbourhoods organize as they do. ANC will continue the efforts begun by government to work collaboratively with a variety of partners to bring about positive change. Projects such as the Urban Aboriginal Strategy and Understanding the Early Years have begun to bridge the gap between the policy and funding structures and the life experience, knowledge and social networks that exist in communities.

For government, one research aim of the ANC project is to uncover how best to realign financial and program supports to have the greatest impact on neighbourhood revitalization. A second goal is to find ways for government departments to work more collaboratively with each other and with communities to identify systems and processes that tackle more effectively the root causes of homelessness and poverty.

To date, Caledon's policy dialogue work has focused on forging a common sense of direction and procedure among the various government representatives and conveying this information to the

partners. This is being achieved through a series of 13 policy dialogues which explore the specifics of horizontal file management among and within different departments while addressing issues which are identified during the ANC field work. Caledon will produce three policy research papers to deepen the learning on topics identified during policy forum work, as well as a reflection paper which will summarize the learnings of the policy component of the ANC.

As in all such endeavours, the struggle between creative approach and corporate management structures requires a certain amount of give and take on all sides. While the players embark on the project and experience the uncertainty that accompanies a new way of working, they also are gaining a sense of purpose, mission and excitement. The partners believe that real innovation is possible and that Action for Neighbourhood Change will result in an effective process for improving the lives of Canadians in selected communities.

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