



community stories

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Spryfield Chooses Halifax ANC

The Action for Neighbourhood Change project (ANC) may be complex but its purpose is clear. The initiative is about real people helping one another to make their neighbourhoods better places to live. Since the project began in February 2005, it has generated optimism and hope among community members. The partners are excited that the program is having the desired results: Citizens are becoming involved in changing their neighbourhoods and government is hearing the feedback it needs to support them effectively. This series of stories presents each of the five ANC neighbourhoods as they existed at the start of the initiative. A second series will be published at the end of the ANC's 14-month run to document the changes and learnings that have resulted from the effort. For more information about ANC, visit: www.anccommunity.ca

Organizational change

With a population of 359,111, the amalgamated Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) makes up about 40 percent of Nova Scotia's population and 15 percent of the population of the Atlantic provinces [Statistics Canada 2001]. Unfortunately, with amalgamation came decreased autonomy at the neighbourhood level for the financing and operation of local initiatives. This shift is not in accord with recent developments at the United Way of Halifax Region (UWHR).

Since 1998, UWHR has undergone a significant change in direction, moving from addressing community needs to building community strengths. Its ecological approach emphasizes the roles and importance of the individual, the family, the neighbourhood and the larger community – institutions, associations and agencies. Where these four entities overlap is where UWHR believes community building can occur – and is the new locus of United Way support. In its role



of change facilitator and information clearing-house, UWHR is guided by six principles: flexibility, collaboration, stewardship, keeping an asset focus, building the capacity of residents and assessing community impact.

United Way of Halifax Region has made the necessary alterations in its organizational structure to support its new change process. New terms of reference now guide the community resources committee which leads UWHR's strategic investment. New approaches have been articulated for achieving effective community partnerships and soliciting community input in the formation of strategic directions. Says Peter Mortimer, UWHR Director of Community Resources: "To avoid having projects work in isolation, they now are included as part of an integrated organization. Another benefit to our restructuring has been the realization that asset-based, community capacity building corresponds well with the process of measuring outcomes."

Peter continues: "Once we adopted an ecological model as the guide for our work, focusing on neighbourhood development became the logical next step. We feel that the Action for Neighbourhood Change project contains the two key elements needed to improve neighbourhoods – a citizen engagement focus that gives power and control to individuals, and institutional support for how people work. The United Way's ability to broker relationships among citizens, neighbourhood organizations and external agencies bodes well for the success of the project. ANC has moved up our timetable for initiating neighbourhood-focused work by providing us with resources and new relationships. We will be able to learn from others' mistakes and successes – as well as our own."

Neighbourhood selection – Halifax style

United Way of Greater Halifax short-listed seven neighbourhoods for possible participation in ANC. Selection criteria included poverty rates, school completion rates, racial and cultural diversity statistics and eviction notices. In terms of assessing potential receptivity, staff reviewed United Way's past involvement in each community and assessed both the degree of voluntary activity present and the level of institutional support. This last was achieved through discussions with partners about whether there was interest in sustaining the project over the long term.

Says Peter Mortimer: "Because we were uncertain of exactly how this project would unfold, we took the approach of offering an opportunity to neighbourhood leaders and waiting to see who would respond. We told them that we could bring certain things to the table – funding, an opportunity to work together and time to let them work at their own pace and steer the ship as they saw fit. We were very honest about not having all the answers and instead offered to work out the process together. Rather than putting off potential participants, this approach had the effect of reassuring people that community members themselves would be in charge of the process and the outcomes."

Neighbourhood history

The road into the neighbourhood of Spryfield snakes through the often heavily-congested Armdale Rotary (traffic circle) at the head of Halifax's northwest arm, then travels up a steep hill onto the mainland. Residents have

a sense of being separate from the rest of Halifax – the rotary acts as a traffic barrier and the hilly climb leaves the rest of the city ‘down below.’ Spryfield’s boundaries are difficult to define, partly because its main thoroughfare (Herring Cove Road) winds through areas that are commercial, suburban, wilderness and agricultural by turns. Despite the maritime place names, rolling hills and manmade structures obscure the view of the harbour and remove any sense that this is a seaside community. Inland lakes, farmland and a provincial park are year-round sources of beauty and recreation, however, and form an important backdrop to the community.

Captain William Spry, Chief Surveyor for Nova Scotia, was issued a land grant in 1766 and began clearing his property for farm fields. A farming community soon grew up around Spry’s property and until the 1950s, area families lived mainly on the crops, animals and dairy goods they produced and on locally-harvested fish. Annexed by the City of Halifax in 1969, Spry’s Field (now Spryfield) was provided with improved road, sidewalk, water and sewer services.

During the early 1970s, the City’s new, multi-service approach to human services resulted in the appointment of a Multi-Service Coordinator. Shortly after, the Mainland South Community Services Offices Association was created. With involvement from the province, City and the Spryfield Lions Club, this organization brokered a partnership which led to the opening of the Captain William Spry Community Centre in 1985. A Board of Directors was established and, with it, a Multi-Service System which allowed regular discussion of community issues.

Now the community hub, the Spry Centre contains the largest indoor wave pool east of Montreal, a library, offices and public meeting room facilities. Its board’s original mandate was

to coordinate services in health, culture, recreation, education and social services. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the centre was supported through provincial legislation that enabled the Multi-Service System to operate across government departmental mandates and boundaries. Many local associations and programs were launched to help move forward community-expressed needs and interests.

For eight years following the regional government’s amalgamation, the Multi-Service System continued to operate much as it always had, but with a community-elected rather than an appointed board of directors, and with direct HRM funding rather than rental income from the community centre. In 2004, a reduction in municipal funding was instituted to reflect removal of support to the Board for activities falling outside of HRM’s mandate. This effectively eliminated the multi-service coordinator position and her accountability to the community Board. Instead, an HRM Community Developer position – accountable to senior staff in HRM’s Recreation, Tourism and Culture staff – was appointed.

In 2005, HRM and the Board negotiated a general service agreement that provided a stipend and furnished office and communications support to the Board. This allowed the Board to hire a part-time research and administrative coordinator, keeping a presence in the community, and sharing space with ANC. The multi-service roundtable continues to meet, but with the only paid staff support coming from the United Way’s ANC Community Facilitator position.

Neighbourhood description

Spryfield’s appearance gives the sense of a community where decay and prosperity struggle for supremacy. Boarded-up businesses and

abandoned homes dot the streets, but some of these have been taken over by newer tenants. The former Canadian Tire outlet, for example, is now used by the provincial justice ministry for its Corrections Services Office, and by city police for their western region office. Its presence has helped to increase residents' sense of security and improve relationships between police and the public.

The Greystone Housing Complex, a public housing project which sits on top of Spryfield's highest hill, is the most visible sign of the area's need for social investment. Built in the 1970s, Greystone was the first of several low-rent accommodations to be built in Spryfield and it represented a shift to a greater disparity in income among residents than had previously existed. The land beneath the 220 Greystone townhouses was trucked in from a construction site and offers no healthy soil for plants or trees. No gardens and little greenery make for a drab, industrial-looking neighbourhood for about 600 people. The physical isolation of the project up steep roads has created an "up the hill, down the hill" mentality. Residents must leave their area for food and services, but visitors rarely come into the neighbourhood. The regional municipality's shift to centralized services poses an access challenge to low-income residents who have to rely on low-frequency transit service.

Appearances tell only part of the story, however. Just as the hills obscure the view of the sea, Spryfield's physical and social challenges must be set amid a history of resourcefulness and creativity. Programs which were spawned by the city's multi-service approach in the 1970s have continued to evolve and are undergoing revitalization as the next generation of residents and community organizations focus on the neighbourhood's potential for positive change.

The people of Spryfield

Just under half of Spryfield's 4,500 residents are non-migrants. Some 45.6 percent are descendents of the original settlers – more than in the general Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) population (29.5 percent). Spryfield renters tend to be highly mobile as a result of lower than average monthly rental costs (\$497 versus \$657). One-quarter of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent (26 percent versus 13 percent for HRM). Household income averages of \$30,936 are lower than the rest of the municipality (\$56,366). Educational levels are also lower; 46.4 percent of people over 20 years of age have not completed high school, compared with 22.3 percent in the rest of HRM.

Spryfield's population is younger than average (33.5 years) and has more lone parent families (37.6 percent – more than double the HRM figure of 16.6 percent). There are proportionally more children (29.2 percent versus 26.7 percent). Spryfield has no day care facilities.

Despite the fact that transit service to Spryfield is inadequate, many more use public transportation than in other parts of the regional municipality (25.4 percent versus 9.9 percent).

Community assets

The Captain William Spry Community Centre, Spryfield's community hub, continues to house the Board of Directors and provide meeting space for a variety of community groups and organizations, including the monthly multi-service roundtable meeting. Since the 1980s, these organizations have worked to coordinate efforts and funding aimed at enriching and enlivening the community of Spryfield. These

include the CRABapple Mapping Project, the Spryfield Residents' Association, the McIntosh Run Watershed Association, the Mainland South Heritage Society, Spryfield Community Garden, the new Urban Farm Museum Society and an environmental activist group fighting to protect a local lake.

Halifax ANC Project Manager, Paul Shakotko, hired Marjorie Willison as a Community Developer for the project. Marjorie and her husband moved into the area in 1979 to raise their family. She joined the Mainland South Community Services Offices Association soon after its formation. A garden consultant, Marjorie is a well-known garden show call-in host on the local CBC radio station, author of two gardening books and an ardent supporter of urban agriculture. A member of numerous community organizations, she also works part-time for the Spry Centre Board. Marjorie will be assisted by Tanya LeClair, an administrator and communications specialist, and Christine Carter, a coordinator who lives in the Greystone housing complex and who is well-connected with the members of her community.

Says Paul: "UWHR is committed to helping ANC become as self-sufficient as possible once the project ends, so staff members were chosen on the basis of their experience with, and connection to, the community. We are extremely fortunate to have such well-qualified people working with us."

Spryfield is also home to several service organizations whose staff members use resources wisely and continue the Nova Scotian tradition inherent in the "all for one, one for all" Antigonish Movement.

In late 2003, the Salvation Army established the Cornerstone Family Centre in the

Greystone Housing Complex. Because of Halifax Regional Municipality's new focus on recreation at the Spry Centre, Cornerstone will provide important program and meeting space in its twin townhouse location. The facility now houses a Capital Health stop smoking program, legal service workshops and a joint library/ HRSDC plan to operate computer programs. Cornerstone is acting as a pilot project for the Salvation Army's new social outreach efforts and is being viewed with interest by other area Army churches.

Besides the Salvation Army activities, Greystone residents can meet over a community dinner every second week. A group of local churches take turns providing the food; residents help with setting and cleaning up. Since the late 1990s, a local agency called Family SOS uses United Way funding to run a Healthy Kidz program for Greystone families.

Down the hill, the Chebucto Boys and Girls Club operates after school programs and summer camps for 35 to 40 children and youth. Programs offer excellent leadership training experience for young people who have come through the club, but fees and public transportation issues present participation barriers for some Greystone residents.

Care and concern are the hallmarks of the St. Vincent de Paul Society's "Hand in Hand" advocacy centre, located on the busy Herring Cove Road. It provides used clothing, assistance in obtaining furniture, education and referrals for counseling primarily to single mothers, the working poor and people on social assistance.

The Saint Paul's Family Resources Institute operates out of the basement of Saint Paul's Church and is co-funded by the United Way of Halifax Region and the United Church. The

Spryfield Residents' Association recently purchased sound equipment which may be used in after school music production programming at the Institute, with a view to creating a performance group which could put on music, drumming and dance events throughout the city.

Program Coordinator Kelly McGuire currently operates the food bank at St. Paul's, but her plan for the fall is to set up a café-style drop-in where food bank users can begin discussing their ideas on matters like food security, good food boxes and communal cooking classes. Says Kelly: "We'd like to continue to move to a 'members, not users' mentality and eventually evolve into a food collective." The church also operates the Spryfield Community Garden which food bank users can access.

Spryfield residents do not lack for creative brilliance. Local artist Paul Saulnier has reconstructed Spryfield's original architecture in miniature. His 70 buildings and the 50 more he has planned are a historical legacy and a tangible link to the past. They are on display at the Spry Centre library and are part of the annual Christmas decorations at the local mall. In addition to Peter, many other creative craftspeople call Spryfield home, including members of the CRABapple (Creating Roots And Branches) Mapping Project. Its members made a community quilt which 'maps' the groups and organizations that make Spryfield special. They have produced a series of walking tour brochures which describe the natural history and cultural heritage of the community.

The Urban Farm Museum is located on three acres of land within walking distance from the Spry Centre. It has a ten-year licence with the farm family who owns the land. Opened in 2001, the museum offers a way to reconnect residents with their agricultural past. Rather than

focus on exhibits, it offers old-time social events, workshops and demonstrations and the chance to participate in agricultural activities – clearing, planting, tending and harvesting.

The Provincial Ecology Action Centre operates the Halifax Local Exchange Trading System (LETS), using a barter system that operates all over the world. In Halifax, the unit of exchange is a Salty, equivalent to \$10 an hour in labour or goods which can be traded among members. Organizers hope to make LETS very active in Spryfield.

The organizations described above represent only some of Spryfield's assets. The Spry Centre's annual community directory lists 140 services, many of which are available within a five-kilometre area.

Says ANC Project Coordinator Paul Shakotko: "Spryfield has an extensive network of public and non-profit agencies that work well together. Besides nonprofit and community organizations, the Spryfield and District Business Commission – which was recently established after several years as an association and is now promoted by the *Chebucto News* – is working to make business and social sectors more aware and appreciative of one another."

Challenges for ANC

The Halifax Regional Municipality's decision in 2004 to reduce funding for the Spry Centre's Board of Directors outreach objectives had led the board members to question whether community members themselves saw any need for a continuation of this function. Participants at an April 2005 community forum concluded that "... with so much change and development on the horizon, the need for citizen engagement and

community coordination on a wide range of issues is greater than ever” [Willison 2005].

The challenge for ANC will be to hear the community residents’ voices more clearly – particularly those people who are not actively participating in the activities which already exist.

Says Paul Shakotko, “There is such a sense of energy and enthusiasm active in this community that coming to work is a real pleasure. Our first hurdle was to forge a working relationship with the Spry Centre’s board members which honoured their accomplishments and desires for the community while allowing for new ideas and perspectives to be explored. It was a delicate dance between governance and accountability, and liability and responsibility.”

The United Way of Halifax Region made it clear to ANC participants from the outset that it will not have the financial means to support the project after March 2006. For that reason, program staff decided that one of their projects would be to create a Spryfield Community Profile. This will be a legacy document that will allow residents to gain a wider understanding of the issues and strengths in Spryfield and to influence other funding bodies to support their work in the future. Says Paul: “We want organizations to understand the impact their work has on the region as a whole in order to help attract support in the years ahead. The Community Profile includes statistical and historical information that will act as a community memory and guide.”

Paul continues: “Action for Neighbourhood Change has already attracted a lot of participation from people who are motivated by circumstances, possess the right qualifications and aren’t afraid of risk. With these people in place, excellent outcomes are a sure thing.”

Says Marjorie Willison: “We who live in Spryfield recognize our community for the treasure it is. We also have the courage to deal with our problems, and we see ANC as a wonderful opportunity to help us move forward. It also fits with the direction set by the Captain William Spry Community Centre Board and the expressed desire of citizens to be more involved in decisions that affect their lives.”

Anne Makhoul

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

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