

Vibrant Communities Saint John: Dismantling the Poverty Traps

How do comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives contribute to poverty reduction? The six Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities are experimenting with a variety of approaches. This series documents their experiences. For each Trail Builder, an initial story will present the key ideas guiding its work: how local partners understand poverty, the role they can play in reducing poverty, their goals and the core strategies to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and adjustments. Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative in which representatives from 15 urban centres have come together to explore local solutions to poverty. Trail Builder initiatives will provide insights that fuel the learning within Vibrant Communities and with others interested in the role that collaborations can play in tackling poverty.

Introduction

Residents of Saint John, New Brunswick, are proud of their community's long-standing tradition of providing assistance and support to their disadvantaged members. In 1997, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) emerged and joined a host of nonprofit and government agencies already working to reduce poverty in Saint John. This new community player has brought an important voice, new energy and focus to the work. In 2004, BCAPI agreed to act as the convenor organization for Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ).

Though much work was already being done to address poverty issues in Saint John, resources were limited. VCSJ organizers placed an early emphasis on research to help understand the factors that contribute to poverty, determine the most effective poverty reduction strategies and focus the investment of energy and resources. In the 12 months since its launch, VCSJ has articulated a

clear understanding of its role: to identify the traps that keep people living in poverty, build public understanding of the issues and facilitate multi-sectoral collaboration on solutions. Its long-term goal is to bring the poverty level in Saint John in line with the national average over the next ten years. Its interim goal is to assist 2,000 individuals (800 households) in their journeys out of poverty by 2008.

Vibrant Communities Saint John represents a growing and committed team of leaders from all sectors: individuals living in poverty, churches, community agencies, three orders of government, business and trade organizations. More than 80 people are members of the initiative's Leadership Roundtable, committees and working groups. Many other individuals and organizations contribute interest and support, and are actively engaged in complementary poverty reduction efforts in the community.

Already the increasing number of community leaders concerned with poverty is having a ripple effect. Such involvement heightens the profile of poverty, bringing greater attention to the issue. This attention leverages additional resources, such as the recent announcement of \$25,000 from the provincial government to support work in the high-poverty neighbourhood of Crescent Valley. In turn, public interest, dialogue and support are fostered.

Poverty in Saint John

Saint John is New Brunswick's largest city and, in many ways, the economic engine of the province. Despite the presence of a solid economy and low unemployment, the City of Saint John (like most large urban centres in Canada) is faced with a significant population living in poverty.

According to the 2001 Census, the poverty rate for the City of Saint John hovered around 24.5 percent, 8.3 points higher than the national average of 16.2 percent [Statistics Canada 2001]. This unacceptably high level of poverty has hurt all parts of the community. Local businesses suffer because of relatively lower participation in the Saint John labour market, and an already under-resourced nonprofit sector staggers under the demand for service provision. Government service providers are also stretched to meet immediate social needs and, as a result, have limited capability to make long-term social investments.

Of course, it is people living on low incomes who suffer most of all. Through a series of consultations with the broader community, Vibrant Communities Saint John has defined poverty as: *the social and economic vulnerability caused to individuals and households by a lack of resources needed for dignity, self-sufficiency and well-being* [Vibrant Communities Saint John 2005]. Ultimately, poverty means reduced opportunity to participate fully in the life of one's community.

A closer look

In order to deepen its understanding of poverty in Saint John and refine its poverty reduction strategy, VCSJ joined with the Human Development Council (a local social planning council) and the University of New Brunswick Saint John's Community University Research Alliance to produce a baseline statistical report on poverty in the city. The report was entitled *Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John*.

The statistical information contained in the report was supplemented with qualitative research from focus groups, interviews and community

meetings with people who experience first-hand the realities of living on a low income. Community, government and business representatives were consulted as well in order to develop a comprehensive view of poverty in Saint John.

Many of the social and economic trends being experienced in Saint John also can be found across the rest of the country: wealthy suburbs, a growing income gap between rich and poor, and the stubborn persistence of urban poverty.

Two local factors, however, distinguish the challenge of poverty in the Saint John Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). First, the region houses a large portion of its poorest residents in very high-poverty neighbourhoods in which the housing stock is generally old and in poor condition, access to government services is difficult and overall economic opportunity is limited. While the majority of citizens in Greater Saint John reside in a mixed-income neighbourhood, a full 25 percent live in a “vulnerable” neighbourhood. Second, the Saint John CMA has the highest incidence of lone-parent poverty in Canada, suggesting that the face of poverty locally is overwhelmingly young and female. More than 60 percent of Saint John’s lone-parent families live in poverty, higher than any other major Canadian city. Furthermore, this ratio has been effectively static over the past 20 years.

While research is an ongoing component in the work of VCSJ, several key understandings on the nature of poverty have emerged from the work to date.

Poverty is overwhelming and multifaceted: Poor quality housing, housing that costs too much, inadequate diet, limited transportation and education levels that make well-paid jobs inaccessible all contribute to a sense of entrapment and the belief that opportunities for improvement

are non-existent. The ongoing stress of trying to meet basic needs with too few resources requires unusual courage and resourcefulness.

Single parents and their children have special needs: Twenty percent of families in Saint John are headed by single mothers; the vast majority of them live in poverty and often in neighbourhoods that are homogeneously poor. Single parents are particularly challenged as they try to navigate the system to improve their lot. They must make decisions alone, handle jobs or training, and stay present to the needs and problems of their children while sometimes dealing with abusive partners. The cost, flexibility and accessibility of quality child care and especially infant care opportunities, along with confusion over the criteria for child care subsidy entitlement and transportation are urgent concerns. Transportation to and from child care centres is another issue. Supportive communication and cooperation between caregivers and overburdened, low-income parents is difficult to achieve.

High poverty neighbourhoods are vulnerable neighbourhoods: Roughly 30 percent of Saint Johners living in poverty are housed in neighbourhoods of very high poverty – Census areas where more than 40 percent of the local population falls below the poverty line. These neighbourhoods have few services, limited educational or recreational opportunities, and a fragmented sense of community. The stigma attached to such neighbourhoods adds to the sense of hopelessness that residents experience.

Community-wide supports create belonging, but these are under threat: Saint John has a rich array of services and supports. There is strong commitment from community agencies, churches and government departments to assist low-income residents in a variety of ways. However, many services are challenged by high

demand and funding constraints or cutbacks, and very often potential users do not understand how services fit together or how to find an appropriate point of entry.

The assets of individuals are too often overlooked: The community's continual focus on the challenges associated with poverty often keep people from seeing the tremendous resources of courage and survival skills practised every day by low income individuals, families and neighbourhoods. Their efforts to navigate the systems, determination to move forward with education or employment despite huge barriers, and willingness to share their stories are rarely celebrated or acknowledged.

The approach to the work

Given this understanding of poverty, VCSJ has chosen to root its poverty reduction strategy in addressing the challenges faced by low-income neighbourhoods. In this way, VCSJ can tackle the interlocking set of issues that face lone-parent families and other low-income residents, and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Says VCSJ Manager Monica Chaperlin: "Our research and the *Poverty and Plenty* report both identified the poverty 'hot spots' that exist in Saint John. When we looked at where Vibrant Communities' efforts could make the greatest difference in helping people to improve their quality of life, a neighbourhood-based approach was clearly the direction to take."

Critical to VCSJ's success is strong collaboration among government, business, the faith community, community-based organizations and people living on low incomes. VCSJ members are committed to learning more about how to communicate across these sectors, perspectives

and interest groups in order to develop ever more meaningful partnerships.

Another key focus for VCSJ is to help the larger community understand the attitudes, policies and practices that keep people trapped in poverty. Improved public understanding of the issues is seen as a foundation for supporting effective action to reduce poverty. It will also help to counter the extreme sense of isolation and stigma attached to poverty – especially in vulnerable neighbourhoods.

VCSJ has summarized its poverty reduction strategy according to six key elements:

1. ***Engage the community leadership*** in a network committed to achieve its poverty reduction goal.
2. ***Help people move forward in their journey out of poverty*** through advocacy and different forms of mentoring.
3. ***Strengthen the collective capacity of the community*** to invest in children and youth, ensure access to education leading to sustainable employment, and develop safe and affordable housing and neighbourhoods.
4. ***Research and evaluate its impact*** by assessing what works and documenting the key learnings.
5. ***Communicate the community's learnings and progress*** both internally to its own network and externally to the community.
6. ***Champion continuous engagement, learning and improvement*** in poverty reduction efforts in the community.

To date, VCSJ has focused its work on four substantive areas: Investing in Children and Youth, Education to Employment, Safe and Affordable Housing, and Neighbourhood Change. Embedded in these themes are initiatives in Advocacy and Mentoring, Research and Evaluation, and Communications and Learning.

Work in Progress

Investing in Children and Youth

VCSJ worked with the Saint John Early Childhood Development Coalition (SJECD) to increase Saint John's capacity to provide quality and affordable early childhood development opportunities. Staff contributed to six featured articles in the local newspaper that described the needs and benefits of early childhood learning and care for low-income families, wrote a proposal to Social Development Canada's *Understanding the Early Years Program* for funds to establish a baseline measure of kindergarten readiness, and involved the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) in developing a model for a parent and early childhood learning and care centre. Social Development Canada has approved a \$382,000 *Understanding the Early Years* program grant for research and resulting community mobilization work. VCSJ, working with members of BAPI and SJECD, is now promoting the establishment of an early learning and family centre in an inner-city neighbourhood, potentially offering services and support to 400 families.

In order to strengthen their ties to service providers and recruit more leadership, members of the Investing in Children and Youth Working Group have developed an inventory of existing programs and services for children and youth (and corresponding gaps) and have established a high profile Children's Health Task Force mandated to identify one to three key actions that will improve the state of wellness of children from ages 5 to 12 who live in poverty in Saint John. The inventory has provided the Task Force with connections to local service providers and best practices. It has also served to clarify common challenges and barriers for children in poverty as well as the services that seek to engage them.

Education to Employment

This working group's initial goal has been to develop a thorough understanding of the continuing education and employment needs, barriers and opportunities for individuals with low levels of education. Learners in basic education programs, government staff, employment counsellors, instructors, and selected trades and business organization representatives were interviewed and best practices identified from across the country. Policy and program changes have been recommended and efforts are under way to develop consensus for an action plan to champion improved access to education and employment. As a result of their efforts, the community as a whole will have a greater understanding of education and employment opportunities. Funding options are being explored by one of the provincial government partners to establish a two-year, community-based education and job placement pilot program for 150 participants.

Safe and Affordable Housing

In early 2005, the Housing Working Group members convinced the (then) federal Housing Minister Joe Fontana of the importance of devoting one Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation staff person's time to helping build momentum for new affordable housing in the city. A CMHC resource person in Saint John helped to raise the profile of social housing needs and government programs and to strengthen connections among private, public and community stakeholders. The results? Within one year, Saint John developers had secured government commitment to 100 new affordable housing units.

The addition of the CMHC staff person also helped to bring attention and new resources to vulnerable neighbourhoods. In the Old North End

(ONE), for example, the CMHC representative secured funds to operate a five-day planning exercise to help residents and other interested groups envision a better future for ONE and a plan for getting there. Known as a charrette, the process involved residents young and old, church groups, nonprofit organizations, landlords, business people and elected political leaders from all three orders of government. The charrette was facilitated by urban planners from Dalhousie University and guided by representatives from CMHC's national office. A summary report, which provided short- and long-term goals, is serving as a roadmap for neighbourhood change. Though housing was the initial focus of CMHC's involvement in this area, the all-encompassing nature of poverty and strategic solutions formed the basis of the charrette discussions and recommendations.

Energy poverty – a situation that arises when customers have their heat and electricity turned off by local utilities when bills go unpaid – is common among renters in Saint John. The issue came to the attention of VCSJ through informal discussions with low-income residents and staff at Romero House, a local soup kitchen and community support organization. To champion solutions to energy poverty, VCSJ applied for – and was granted – formal intervention status at the Public Utilities Board (PUB), the regulatory body that approves rate increases in New Brunswick. As a result of its intervention, VCSJ has stimulated much public discussion in the area of energy poverty. Both the provincial government and electricity providers have begun to understand the unique challenges that high heating bills place on low-income households. The provincial government has announced the formation of an Office of Energy Efficiency and VCSJ has expressed its interest in helping the new office tailor programs to help combat energy poverty throughout the province.

In order to protect themselves against energy poverty, members of ONE Change have made a commitment to a neighbourhood weatherization initiative, under the theme *Winds Of Change*. The VCSJ housing group is actively seeking ways in which the local utility can support this initiative. Members are interested in encouraging a broader 'warm apartments' campaign in 2006, and will lobby the local utility to actively promote energy efficiency in low-income neighbourhoods across the city.

Neighbourhood Change

Research results described in the *Poverty and Plenty* report and other findings of VCSJ working groups caused the VCSJ Leadership Roundtable to put greater emphasis on neighbourhood approaches and to rethink its original three key areas of focus (Investing in Children and Youth, Education and Employment, Safe and Affordable Housing). Neighbourhood Change was adopted as a fourth area of concentration and members began to examine how they could add a neighbourhood lens to VCSJ work.

In 2005, VCSJ engaged a diverse team of government, business and community players in establishing a Neighbourhood Development Committee for Crescent Valley, an older public housing project serving 400 families. The committee researched public housing transformation practices and prepared a report that summarized the physical and social challenges of the Crescent Valley neighbourhood and how these challenges could be addressed. Currently, the committee is working with the residents to complete a survey of their concerns and ideas for how to improve their own lives and the community's overall functioning. Local MLA Trevor Holder (now the provincial Minister of the Envi-

ronment) acquired \$25,000 from the province to help conduct the survey. Service Canada agreed to undertake the analysis of the survey data. Ultimately, it is hoped that the residents of Crescent Valley will follow in the footsteps of the ONE Change neighbourhood group and direct their own process of neighbourhood improvement, thus allowing VCSJ to initiate a citizens' engagement process in another low-income area.

Advocacy and Mentoring

An innovative pilot program combining best practices in neighbourhood-based advocacy and mentoring has been developed by the VCSJ Advocacy and Mentoring Committee. Members secured \$3,500 from KAIROS – a national ecumenical partnership – to begin the process of consultation and implementation in Saint John's South End. Residents will be encouraged to identify technical assistance gaps needed to organize neighbourhood councils and advisory groups, which the Committee will attempt to match by networking with volunteer organizations and individuals. One such opportunity now under way will train residents to run a meeting. Other skills to be taught could include consensus decision-making, identifying neighbourhood priorities for change and survey design. The aim is to provide safe and effective ways for neighbourhood groups to work with VCSJ and other organizations to create horizontal change.

Research and Evaluation

In 2006, building on the *Poverty and Plenty* report, VCSJ's Research and Evaluation Committee will continue to explore the situation of vulnerable neighbourhoods, reviewing data which relates to health, education and crime.

Further understanding of these issues will be used to influence public policy.

Research strategies will continue to reflect a balance of quantitative/statistical data and analysis with a range of qualitative research tools that are tailored to capture the lived experience of those in poverty.

Says Tom Gribbons, Chair of the VCSJ Leadership Roundtable: "We focused our research energies in 2005 on making sure we were grounded with good information so that we could determine the right path for VCSJ. We wanted to be sure that our efforts were addressing the really critical issues and whether better strategies existed in other North American cities that we could emulate. We feel we've been successful in raising public understanding of poverty issues and in making the case for policy changes at the federal and provincial levels. In 2006, we will continue to be guided by our ongoing research as we begin to work on the design and development of evaluation indicators." VCSJ members are now working to build analysis and evaluation components into all aspects of their work.

Learning and Communications

Learning, and communication of the learning, are VCSJ priorities. The VCSJ motto, developed by Erminie Cohen, former Senator and VCSJ's patron, is: *Connections Create Vibrant Communities*. Says Senator Cohen: "Connecting individuals and diverse sectors through face-to-face meetings, learning forums, e-networks and media stories, and most importantly, through daily experiences of the work at hand, increases understanding of poverty, builds trust and enriches the problem-solving for better solutions."

VCSJ organizers believe that building a knowledge base and further engaging collaborations will improve understanding and lead to increased support and participation and more resources for reducing poverty in Saint John. In 2006, they will be targeting information and awareness campaigns to leaders in government, business, community nonprofit organizations and people living in poverty.

Conclusion

In a short time, Vibrant Communities Saint John has become a compelling advocate for social inclusion and poverty reduction. Now that the initial stage of gathering information about poverty is well under way, VCSJ partners have a clearer understanding of the interlocking factors that contribute to poverty. Addressing these factors requires the contribution of many players working together in strong, multisectoral partnerships. The poverty traps are becoming ever more visible – now comes the work of dismantling them.

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