

## ***Vibrant Communities Calgary: Community-Driven Policy Change***

*Vibrant Communities (VC) initiatives are dynamic processes, bringing community leaders from business, government and the nonprofit sector to join with low-income residents in developing and delivering strategies to reduce poverty, foster inclusion and improve quality of life. How might representatives of government – federal, provincial, regional, municipal – most appropriately and effectively participate in such initiatives? How might a department’s or institution’s objectives be pursued while also linking immediate objectives with longer-term goals? This series of VC stories explores these questions and the engagement of governments in four VC sites: Saint John, Hamilton, BC’s Capital Region and Calgary.*

Since its early days in 2004, Vibrant Communities Calgary has been driven by a belief that the most effective way to achieve significant and sustained reductions in poverty is through positive changes to public policies and practices. At its inception, an environmental scan was conducted for the initiative to assess where local activities were under way and where there were gaps in efforts to reduce poverty. Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) identified a gap at the policy level. While various poverty reduction efforts were being carried out across Calgary, less effort was directed at policy change. Attention to the underlying and interrelated root causes to poverty was not on the radar.

VCC’s work is founded on the belief that systemic economic, social and political factors are at the root of poverty, leaving individuals without sufficient resources to live with dignity, choice and the ability to participate fully in society. VCC partners believe that a concerted effort is needed at

the community level to address the systems that contribute to poverty.

To build attention to root causes and to achieve positive policy change, the initiative has continued to engage all sectors of the community in efforts to raise awareness and to engage citizens, mobilizing residents themselves in contributing to the development of policies that improve the lives of individuals living on low incomes. In its short lifespan, VCC has already helped effect change in a number of policy and program areas, including income assistance for persons with disabilities, reduced fair transit passes and standard eligibility testing. Over the past few years, VCC has focused upon economic insecurity facing many low-income individuals and families. Its Living Wage initiative has engaged individuals from business, government and the community to identify strategies to ensure that more Calgarians are paid adequate wages – living wages – while enjoying access to benefits and employment supports.

The following story briefly traces several aspects of work being carried out within VCC's Living Wage initiative, drawing particular attention to the Living Wage Action Team's engagement of those responsible for policy development within the City of Calgary. What has been the nature of the relationship between public sector officials and community representatives, and how have the efforts of one sector been beneficial to the other?

### *The Living Wage initiative*

In recent years, one of VCC's key poverty reduction strategies has been its Living Wage initiative. The strategy is to initiate and contribute to an ongoing dialogue

about the benefits (to employers, workers and their families, and the community) of progressive employment practices, including the development of living wage policies (see VCC's 2006 Annual Report, at [www.vibrant-calgary.com](http://www.vibrant-calgary.com) for additional information on the Initiative's evolution). VCC defines a living wage as the amount of income an individual or family needs to meet basic needs, maintain a safe and decent standard of living in the community, and save for future needs and goals. Based on Statistics Canada 2001 before-tax low income cut-offs for individuals without dependents and working full time, and adjusted for Calgary's inflation, the Action Team has identified \$12 an hour as a living wage.

As in all cities, but particularly in Calgary given Alberta's booming economy, earning a living wage is crucial to affording basic goods. Above-average inflation has meant that Alberta's minimum wage, and most income and employment-related assistance programs, are insufficient. As just one illustration, the Calgary Real Estate Board points to the average combined residential sale price across the city as being 27.6 percent higher in March 2007 than one year earlier. Wages are not keeping pace with housing costs. In the second half of 2006, 17 percent of employed Calgarians over the age of 15 earned less than \$12 an hour, representing a total of 94,400 individuals – with more than half of these above the age of 25. An additional 13 percent are faring only slightly better, earning between \$12 and \$15 an hour [VCC 2007].

The Living Wage Action Team has engaged four broad sectors in its work to achieve progressive workplace practices: the public (particularly municipal government), private, nonprofit and quasi-governmental

(health, education and postsecondary institutions) sectors. Membership on the Action Team represents of these four sectors; in the case of the City of Calgary, an Issues Strategist with the Community and Neighbourhood Services Branch has been an active participant. Already, the Team has been successful in moving a number of organizations (e.g., Calgary Health Region) closer to including a living wage as one component of a human resource strategy, while several businesses have also incorporated living wages and benefits packages into their employment policies as a result of research and information from the Action Team (see Makhoul 2005 for information on the Action Team's early successes).

Most recently, the Team contributed towards a City of Calgary Council decision to investigate a strategy whereby the municipality could ensure that contractors pay their employees a living wage – by working within the City's evolving purchasing and procurement policy. The Sustainable Environmental and Ethical Procurement Policy (SEEPP) has been in development for two years by City staff in an administration-led working group. The policy and its related Supplier Code of Conduct have been developed to ensure that goods and services purchased by the City are produced according to recognized ethical and environmental standards. In January 2007, the policy came to the City Council's Standing Policy Committee for recommendation to Council.

One of the purposes of the policy is to “support the purchase of goods and services that will enhance and protect the environment, protect the welfare of workers and represent best value for the corporation.” In its development over the course of the past

two years, numerous stakeholders engaged in community consultations indicated support for including living wage in the policy framework, seeking to ensure that all individuals providing goods or services to the City corporation would earn a living wage. Staff with the City's Community and Neighbourhood Services Branch agreed. However, others pointed to potentially negative financial implications for the City and cited a living wage policy as uneconomic and controversial. Some noted the absence of a living wage policy within the City's internal human resource policies. Not having received Council direction to include living wage, still others deemed inclusion of living wage considerations inappropriate. No one wanted the SEEPP to be delayed; while a living wage was included in the initial Terms of Reference for the policy's development, it was soon dropped.

City staff presented the draft SEEPP to Council's Standing Policy Committee in January 2007. VCC's Living Wage Action Team took the opportunity to make a presentation to the Standing Policy Committee, supporting the Policy and the Supplier Code of Conduct. However, the Team urged Committee members to consider adding living wage to the framework. Basing their presentation on research and consultations conducted over several years of work, the Team was convincing in their arguments, and the Committee agreed. Standing Policy Committee approved the SEEPP and Code of Conduct in principle. But an amended motion was added directing the administration to report back to the Committee in late 2007 about the implications, within the context of a Triple Bottom Line, of including living wage in the SEEPP and Supplier Code of Conduct. The recommendations were forwarded to full Council later in January and were overwhelm-

ingly supported and passed. In effect, City staff have now been directed to include living wage in further research on and development of the Policy and Code of Conduct.

In the coming months, VCC will continue to meet with local councillors to discuss the SEEPP and the possibility of the City further studying an internal living wage policy for municipal employees. Other research will be conducted and disseminated to Council prior to the November 2007 consideration of the amended policy. VCC is also working with a number of private sector groups, including the Vibrant Workplaces Committee, to advance living wage within the business community.

While the SEEPP and living wage policy are not one and the same, there is a sense expressed by some in Calgary that these two initiatives are, at least, now speaking to each other. In looking back on what happened at the January City Standing Policy Committee and Council meetings, one may suggest a significant success in support of a living wage – an achievement that appeared to happen overnight, or in the course of an afternoon. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the ongoing effort of both the VCC Living Wage Action Team – and City of Calgary staff – for creating the conditions for these successes.

Indeed, VCC officials were able to access and then offer valuable and compelling input at a critical window of opportunity. But City staff and politicians with a particular interest in social well-being also knew that, in order to support their own objectives, VCC was a valuable community partner in furthering the agenda for a just Calgary. In this sense, it was long-term effort and relationship building

that helped prepare for this critical juncture in early 2007. The following section offers a few reflections on this longer-term history of engagement between the City and VCC, and seeks to draw attention to a number of ways in which the City of Calgary – and the public sector more generally – has worked with VCC and the Living Wage Action Team.

### ***Reflections on government-community engagement and the living wage in Calgary***

As noted, City staff had been working on developing the SEEPP for two years prior to the January 2007 Council and Committee meetings, but had concluded that the inclusion of a living wage policy would be detrimental for the City and for the success of the SEEPP overall. Community interest in living wage had not waned, however, and the presentations by VCC and other community representatives in January demonstrated the extent to which the community continued to monitor the City's policy development process. Central to VCC's approach has always been the balancing of initiatives already under way with ensuring an ability to capitalize on opportunities as they arise – similar to the opportunities in January.

Mobilization of the community was also aided by a number of politicians and City staff who invited community input at the January meeting. Over the past few years, a number of informal policy networks had developed between City staff in the Community and Neighbourhood Services (CNS) Branch and community organizations, like Vibrant Communities Calgary. These relationships have been mutually beneficial, providing City staff with local input and important

research on community perspectives and other initiatives from across Canada and the US.

Rather than advocate against public policy, VCC has sought continuously to pursue a collaborative approach to policy advocacy and policy development with CNS staff. For example, early in the Living Wage Action Team's work, VCC staff liaised with Katie Black, Manager of the Family and Community Support Services program (City of Calgary) to inform her of the Action Team's work and objectives. Family and Community Support Services is a provincial program of the Ministry of Children's Services, delivered by the City of Calgary, to fund preventive social services within municipalities across Alberta. Calgary receives roughly \$19.8 million each year, currently cost-matching the amount by 25 percent (for a total budget of just under \$26.5 million), funding programs for Aboriginal people, youth, seniors, new Canadians and vulnerable Calgarians. In addition, support for the Community and Neighbourhood Services own research work, in respect of policy and planning, is also made available through the Family and Community Support Services Program.

VCC deemed this contact important. Discussions between VCC, Katie Black and other City officials related to the potential implications of a living wage policy on City contributions to service providers and other nongovernment community organizations. Municipal living wage policies vary in their breadth and depth, with some ensuring that workers employed by the City or contracted using municipal funds will be paid a living wage. Other policies could apply to economic development subsidies or charitable organizations receiving funds from the City.

VCC and the City together explored the implications of a potential living wage policy for the charitable and voluntary sector – in many cases reliant on municipal support. To ensure that a policy would not have unexpected implications, both VCC and FCSS shared information on what nonprofit social service agencies were paying. What was the capacity to pay within the sector? Would the City's commitment to living wage influence its decision to contribute to organizations not paying a living wage? Would contributions have to increase? These were important considerations – also for VCC to ensure its own objectives would not be compromised. While the SEEPP does not relate to social services funded by the City and the Family and Community Support Services, these previous discussions demonstrate the mutual benefits to collaboration across the community and municipality – also creating the conditions for ongoing information exchange.

The impetus for positive relations with the City has come not only from the community. A number of City units have recognized the value of working closely with local representatives on issues within their purview. John te Linde, Manager of the City's Community and Neighbourhood Services Social Policy and Planning Branch, points to an alignment between his branch and VCC. When the City's working group on the SEEPP dropped living wage from its consideration, te Linde appointed one staff member to the City's group and another, Joy Zerke, to the Living Wage Action Team. In making this decision, te Linde recognized both the value of engaging in a multidepartmental City-led policy development exercise – providing research on minimum wages, inflation and the costs of not providing a living wage – but also in contributing to and benefiting from the

Action Team's own research and consultation work, in the interest of the community's social well-being. Branch funding from the Family and Community Support Services helped bolster this decision.

The inclusion of a living wage in City policy is also directly supported by the City's Fair Calgary Policy and its associated Principles of Fairness and Fairness Filter. Jake Kuiken, Manager of Fair Calgary, points to an alignment of intent between the work of his branch and VCC. Kuiken has responsibility for delivering to Council an implementation plan for enacting the Fair Calgary policy framework passed by City Council in November, 2006. The policy identifies the City's commitment to the social well-being of Calgarians and their communities, articulating how the social dimension of the City's Triple Bottom Line Policy (adopted in September 2005) is to be understood and implemented in relation to economic and environmental dimensions. The policy provides guidance to City officials in decision-making, planning and reporting on the City's performance.

Of particular importance is the principle that inequalities are to be addressed by ensuring the greatest benefit goes to those who are most disadvantaged, encouraging respect for the dignity of all. A living wage is consistent with Fair Calgary's policy intent because it would directly enhance the capability of residents to make choices about what City programs, services, facilities or public spaces they need or wish to use. Community groups like VCC could prove helpful in partnering with the City with respect to action plans. Kuiken cites a symbiotic relationship.

Given these interests, and in order to maximize their investments and fulfill their

own objectives in relation to preventive social services, strong neighbourhoods and fair social and economic policy, these staff deem it essential to engage community members on upcoming proposals or recommendations. VCC, like other community groups, are frequently welcome to make presentations or deputations to Council. Other stakeholder and community groups are also supportive in this way, including imagineCalgary, Sustainable Calgary's Citizens Agenda and the Calgary Economic Development's Shared Prosperity focus groups.

Elected officials, of course, are voted into office to pursue particular agendas; they stand apart from public servants with less pressure to remain nonpartisan or neutral. For Calgary City Councillor Joe Ceci, VCC has become a strong community partner in pursuing social justice and progressive policies within the City. Ceci credits VCC in part for his heightened awareness of related initiatives from across the country, suggesting that VCC offers a helpful picture of comprehensive, progressive social policy. He acknowledges VCC's leadership as reputable and effective in marshalling support, and appreciates the ability to call on VCC for community input on given issues from time to time.

Indeed, VCC has earned respect and credibility for its broad and deep community/resident engagement and research, mobilizing and facilitating community awareness on policy issues. The initiative has developed a strong capacity to mobilize the community on short notice and to offer critical, insightful input to longer-term policy development processes. Public information is regularly made available to the community in accessible formats, either through newsletters or concise fact sheets (e.g., a Living Wage Fact Sheet in

March 2007 and a Cost of Living Fact Sheet in April 2007, both on [www.vibrantcalgary.com](http://www.vibrantcalgary.com)). These documents reflect Canadian and international research, linking low wages to other social challenges, such as poor health and crime. As Kuiken attests, in the absence of any Calgary Social Planning Council, VCC plays a vital role in producing informative and crucial research resources.

Finally, in understanding the positive relations between VCC and City staff, it is also important to consider the initiative's efforts to collaborate with other sectors *for* an agenda rather than *against* any particular sector – including governments. VCC is not just targeting governments. It recently launched its Vibrant Workplaces initiative, including the production and dissemination of an *HR Options for Action Guide*. The Guide will profile and encourage other progressive private sector community members pursuing innovative human resource practices that benefit employees, the community and business. Such strategies help attract and retain employees, and open up new ways to address a labour shortage and competition for human resources.

### ***Building on earlier experiences***

Of course, VCC's reputation has also carried over from previous successes in policy development. Fair Fares, an Action Team advocating for the development of a Universal Low-Income Transit Pass (ULITP), has met regularly in recent years, drawing together community members, City staff and Calgary Transit officials to develop a reduced fare transit program. Though perceived differences of power within the Action Team have presented themselves, it remains com-

mitted to working collaboratively across sectors. Together, Team members have pursued research on the cost implications of a reduced fare, potential and actual uptake, and other access issues. They have advocated for provincial government support for subsidization.

The Team's efforts led to the successful implementation of a pilot low-income transit pass in 2006. Now in its second year, Calgary City Council has approved funding for one more year; the future of the reduced fare pass depends in part on provincial-municipal discussions. The Action Team has been encouraged to mobilize communities to receive provincial funding support. Whether the reduced fare pass falls within municipal responsibility (as a transit related investment) or provincial responsibility (as a measure of social assistance) is to be determined. However, the collaborative, government-community process by which the pass has been developed provides another excellent case study in government-community engagement (see Makhoul 2005 a review of early successes under the Fair Fares initiative).

### ***Reflecting on the challenges***

As noted, Vibrant Communities Calgary has pursued a balance between staying focused on existing priorities while remaining open to act on opportunities as they arise. Such just-in-time participation requires flexibility and adaptability – the ability to respond quickly to demands as they arise. This challenge is alleviated, in part, through ongoing collaboration between the community and government sectors. Collaboration has helped VCC staff in forecasting, as best as possible, when policy priorities are likely to

surface, further helping to ensure that the initiative remains relevant within a changing environment. However, while the collaboration of public servants with community initiatives has proven effective for the accomplishment of shared objectives, public servants need to remain mindful of their position as non-partisan officials, open to diverse views and perspectives.

Another challenge facing VCC, and indirectly public servants engaged in VCC, is the degree to which residents and community representatives become embedded within interjurisdictional squabbles, left to advocate to and work with multiple orders of government. The extent to which the Fair Fares Action Team has identified a policy gap between the City and Province is a case in point. It appears that this challenge can be resolved only by political leadership; until such time, public servants (and the community) might be left uncertain themselves of which direction to pursue. Until now, the City has drawn on Calgary Transit's surplus revenue to fund the subsidy. However, this additional financial burden on a City with limited revenue-generating capacity inevitably restricts municipal capacity in other areas; provincial financing becomes necessary. VCC finds itself needing to build rural support for the low-income transit pass, in order for non-urban provincial elected officials to approve the plan. Could rural champions for social development, take on this issue? What are the roles of public servants in mediating this uncertainty?

The challenge of securing provincial engagement in respect of the low-income transit pass is not only unique to that issue. VCC has been successful in engaging partners, attracting 75 participants from 43 organ-

izations by late 2006, representing government, the nonprofit sector, business and people living in poverty. However, engagement of senior orders of government has been more difficult.

Community representatives are frustrated by the lack of additional engagement by federal and provincial public servants, particularly since the early 1990s and an era of provincial and federal retrenchment. Federal engagement is further limited by the full devolution of labour market programs through the Canada-Alberta Labour Market Development Agreement, minimizing the space within which the federal government may directly engage communities in Alberta. However, as Councillor Ceci suggests, stronger collaboration by the federal government, in areas such as immigration and settlement, would be welcome.

Caroline Fairbrother, Regional Director with Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, has not participated as a member of the Living Wage Action Team, but has served as a liaison between VCC and the Alberta Ministry, responding to VCC policy proposals, seeking community input on provincial policy reform and incorporating VCC research into her work. Not unlike public servants representing provincial and federal jurisdictions in other communities across Canada, Fairbrother perceives a conflict of interest in more direct participation. Citing VCC as advocacy focused, and representing the Ministry responsible for minimum wage, she identifies a conflict in more direct participation. An informal liaising role ensures that she remains open to providing support and feedback to community members while also benefiting from community input on her Ministry's work. Indeed, she praises VCC,



and the work of other Vibrant Communities sites across Canada. She points, for example, to BC's Capital Region's Quality of Life CHALLENGE and its development of resources for employers on progressive human resource strategies.

Finally, discussions of poverty in Alberta have only resurfaced in the past two to three years; some of this interest is being spearheaded by the private sector, recognizing that the high cost of living makes it difficult to attract and retain labour. The sector also points to the social and economic costs of homelessness and other social ills. While still a challenge, the sense of a 'boom gone bad' is more common than even a few years ago.

### **Conclusion**

Since its inception, Vibrant Communities Calgary has worked to strengthen relationships with all sectors to pursue collaborative approaches for achieving policy change. The rigour with which it has undertaken this work has enabled a relationship of mutual respect between VCC and the City of Calgary. Whether reflecting on Fair Fares, the Living Wage Initiative or earlier efforts undertaken by VCC, the recognition of shared interests has only improved collective research and environmental scanning efforts, further linking policy development to residents' needs.

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