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BC Capital Region's Quality of Life CHALLENGE: Leadership

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.

Introduction

There is no single pathway – or resolution – to poverty. Similarly, factors affecting the quality of life are intertwined. Reducing poverty or improving quality of life requires comprehensive responses characterized by organizational and cross-sector collaboration. Organizing comprehensive and collaborative processes on the ground, however, involves a long-term process of community learning and practice to determine how best these might be structured.

In order for diverse organizations to commit to comprehensive and collaborative processes, potential partners need to see the interconnected nature of the issues – in ways that include each partner's mandate and objectives. Perhaps only then would each recognize the importance of potential contributions and express a willingness to pursue joint activities. Across BC's Capital Region, many government and nongovernmental

organizations recognize the multifaceted nature of poverty and quality of life, and have demonstrated a desire to work collaboratively. Along the way, individuals and organizations are learning about great potential and significant challenges: How do comprehensive frameworks translate into collaborative efforts on the ground?

This story traces various efforts within BC's Capital Region to enhance quality of life. The Quality of Life CHALLENGE, described below, provides a helpful entry point to understanding the various activities under way throughout the region, demonstrating both the opportunities and challenges of joining government and the community in comprehensive initiatives.

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE

For those involved in the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, the Vibrant Communities convener in BC's Capital Region, collaboration needs to be community-driven. It must respond to the priorities identified by residents. Since a multisectoral community gathering in September 2001, the CHALLENGE has engaged and mobilized sectors from across the region to respond to priority concerns threatening the quality of life. The CHALLENGE's primary goal is to strengthen the community's capacity to self-organize around issues by building a culture of engagement, inclusion and collaboration. Many factors affect quality of life and the CHALLENGE seeks to create a space for all sectors to work together and see the big picture.

First convened by the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria

(Community Council), a Steering Working Group with representatives from government, business and the nonprofit sector, has the responsibility for the CHALLENGE's overarching vision and direction. Several Working Groups and Task Forces have evolved to address priorities first identified at the September 2001 gathering, including housing, sustainable incomes and community connections. These Working Groups each articulate and implement specific strategies and collectively build upon pooled assets to enhance the quality of life across the region.

The CHALLENGE also works to strengthen relationships and connections in order to build the capacity of the community to respond to local concerns. CHALLENGE efforts are based on a commitment to shared leadership, information, resources and power. These commitments are demonstrated, in part, through a formalized Inclusion Policy and Procedures. Central to the CHALLENGE's practice of inclusion is ensuring that the voices and experiences of persons living on low income are heard by decision-makers in all sectors. Once equipped with knowledge, leaders are encouraged to work for change within their own spheres of influence.

Demonstrating the interconnectedness of factors that comprise quality of life

The use of research and data is one of the ways in which the Community Council and Quality of Life CHALLENGE have been effective in demonstrating the complexity of poverty and quality of life. For example, a 1999 report on quality of life in the Region led to the September 2001 gathering of nongovernment and government officials discussed above. Information in the report

was updated in a 2005 publication, *Quality of Life in BC's Capital Region*, a one-stop document with detailed data summarizing trends related to the Region's demographics, housing, labour market and employment conditions, health and community safety, participation and community affordability.

In another example, a 2003 Community Council report entitled *Making Room* raised public awareness and recognition of housing affordability challenges. The report helped create a climate in which municipalities came together to jointly establish the Regional Housing Trust Fund – a region-wide mechanism within which funds for the development of affordable housing are pooled. As a local planner in Central Saanich, Hope Burns points to the value of housing affordability data in building greater awareness of the challenges in her own municipality – an awareness that contributed to a policy change allowing secondary suites and to the development of seniors housing.

Most recently, in May 2006, the CHALLENGE released research and data on a living wage, demonstrating the cost of living in BC's Capital Region. Based on a reference family of four, and defined as an hourly rate of pay that allows a family to enjoy a basic, modest quality of life, the data found that both parents must earn \$14.88/hour. This research has supported dialogue by governments and the community on the real costs of living in the region. Local planning, economic development and housing officials point to the importance of data in making evident the links among various issues. A shortage of housing that is affordable, for instance, combined with wages that may be insufficient for accessing available housing, limit the ability of the hospitality industry to attract and retain workers.

Local economic development officials point to the value of a comprehensive approach for data gathering and dissemination. Data and research have been successful in bringing together groups spanning economic, environmental and social interests to help establish common objectives.

Linking housing affordability to a comprehensive framework

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE seeks to convene within a single forum key representatives from different Working Groups, Task Forces and other major initiatives across the Region. In so doing, the CHALLENGE recognizes the need for situating various efforts within a framework that considers the links among the diverse issues affecting the quality of life.

A short review of housing-related initiatives in the region demonstrates the breadth of work under way in one important area. Several elements of this work are also explicitly linked to activities in other sectors – illustrating the added value of a comprehensive approach while also pointing to the difficulties of collaborative implementation.

Before the CHALLENGE was launched in 2001, the Housing Affordability Partnership (HAP) had emerged as a non-partisan, regional table involving representatives of the public, private and nonprofit sectors interested in increasing awareness and support for innovative solutions. Several government representatives on HAP have also participated in the development of the Capital Regional District's Regional Housing Affordability Strategy, focused on housing affordability and homelessness across the Region's

13 municipalities, and approved in March 2007. As separate entities, participants have determined that both HAP and the Regional Strategy are driven by specific purposes and are complementary. Both contribute to a common goal and pursue activities towards this goal in different spheres of influence.

The Housing Affordability Partnership is one of the first manifestations of community partnerships on issues of housing affordability and grew out of early collaborative work in Victoria's downtown area. As the Regional Housing Affordability Strategy's March 2007 approval already shows, HAP is only one forum where government officials come together around housing affordability. The working relationships established through HAP and other forums have a broad value and exist outside of these formal mechanisms and across government orders. Compelled by market pressures and on-the-ground realities, Lee King from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Roger Butcher of BC Housing and Henry Kamphof of the Capital Regional Housing Authority work closely together on an almost daily basis. They point as well to an ever-increasing number of partnerships characterizing new developments.

It is also essential to establish links with those addressing housing stability, Lee King brings housing issues to a Federal (public servant) Managers Forum, exploring connections to employment and sustainable incomes. Roger Butcher points to the importance of working with the Vancouver Island Health Authority to ensure housing supports, while also recognizing the links among health status, poverty and social conditions such as homelessness. Interest in

the latter was demonstrated by the Capital Regional District's May 2006 co-hosting, with the Vancouver Island Health Authority and the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, a Forum on the Social Determinants of Health.

Some of the relationships between these various entities are more formal than others. The Housing Affordability Partnership, for example, is linked to the CHALLENGE through the overlap of individual representation; the Quality of Life CHALLENGE's Director, Mabel-Jean Rawlins-Brannan provides Secretariat services to HAP. Other ties are more informal and arise from a personal sense of the importance of working with colleagues from other organizations and sectors. The extent to which collaboration within the area has become the norm is an impressive development. The articulation of the need to work with other sectors (e.g., health; employment) to pursue sustained housing solutions is also notable. Participants will continue to assess the best means of ensuring that an *awareness* of the linkages among issues leads to appropriate collaborative *action*. Are the mechanisms in place to enable individuals and organizations to pursue collaborative work?

The many ties to quality of life

Housing officials are not the only ones to recognize the value of linking their work to other sectors. Officials in health, regional planning, employment and community safety are also framing their work within broad lenses. A brief review of some of these efforts raises important questions about how best to both articulate a comprehensive framework *and* practise a collaborative approach.

Health and quality of life

As noted, the Vancouver Island Health Authority, the Community Council and the Quality of Life CHALLENGE, and the Capital Regional District co-hosted a day-long conference in May 2006 on the social determinants of health, motivated by the recognition that “we’re all working towards the same goal” of reducing inequities in health and well-being. Participants were drawn equally from the health, voluntary and local government sectors. Conference outcomes are only now becoming clear, as the relationships developed at that event continue to bear fruit. The benefits of a comprehensive approach have been stated explicitly within the recently approved Health Authority’s Strategic Plan in Population Health. One of three components within the Plan focuses on the engagement of community partners, such as those working in the areas of housing and poverty, in order for the Health Authority to achieve its goals.

The new Strategic Plan on Population Health, representation of the Health Authority on the Housing Affordability Partnership, and the working relationship between Health Authority staff and the CHALLENGE together present numerous opportunities for better understanding the linkages between health and housing. The next step will be for both the CHALLENGE and Health Authority to explore how shared interests can be reflected in mutually supportive activity.

Regional planning and quality of life

On another front, the Capital Regional District (CRD) is preparing to implement its new Strategic Plan, *Focus, Performance and*

Accountability, approved in January 2007. This Plan seeks to bring coherence and credibility to planning and program delivery on a number of concerns across the CRD, including several facets of social planning. The small size of most of the 13 municipalities within the CRD precludes each from hiring social planners. In response, and without assuming responsibility for service delivery, the CRD plays a social planning and policy function by enabling collaboration among municipal and community partners, encouraging each to consider community concerns within both a regional and conceptually comprehensive framework.

The CRD’s Strategic Plan outlines several broad priorities. It identifies the need for strategies to be developed and implemented at the regional scale around issues such as housing affordability, transportation and economic development. In each of these areas, officials have also identified the potential for community organizations to play specific concrete roles, minimizing duplication of efforts. Through the Strategic Plan, the CRD has articulated its interest in facilitating a collaborative planning mechanism.

The extent to which the CRD’s planning process is complementary to the work of the CHALLENGE, and moves from comprehensive framework to collaborative activity, will become clear in the coming months. The community sector has been very involved, for example, in leading to the approval of the Regional Housing Affordability Strategy and will continue to press for ongoing engagement. Ultimately, support for the Strategic Plan will depend on the degree to which residents see that the Plan’s objectives respond to community needs and assets. While officials with the CRD can advance the Plan, community

buy-in, might be enhanced by mechanisms like the Quality of Life CHALLENGE and its Inclusion Policy and Procedures.

Sustainable incomes and quality of life

Another Working Group supported by the Quality of Life CHALLENGE is the Sustainable Incomes Working Group, addressing one of the CHALLENGE's three priority areas. Joe Artibise, a local Service Canada representative, has been participating on this Working Group as community liaison for Service Canada. Service Canada was attracted to the CHALLENGE several years ago, recognizing that interventions intended to meet the needs of its own client groups (e.g., at-risk youth, disabled and older workers, lone parents and unemployed persons) will always be more successful if the range of individuals' needs and assets are considered.

Director of the Greater Victoria/Cowichan Service Area Service Canada Centre, Shannon Baggott notes that Service Canada's work is guided by the Labour Market Development Agreement – a community plan of sorts. This document draws attention to the importance of working with other federal departments, the province and municipalities to articulate effective and holistic interventions. Still, implementing such an approach is challenging. Resource constraints make it difficult to maintain or strengthen significant relationships while continuing to adhere to Service Canada's mandated activities with particular client groups.

Community safety and quality of life

One final illustration of another early-stage comprehensive effort is emerging from

the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC). The NCPC has identified Victoria as a high crime area, making the community eligible for multi-year funding to deliver a comprehensive community crime prevention plan. No doubt arising from the working relationships established to date, the City of Victoria has engaged the Community Council in the development of a possible strategy to tackle these concerns.

A Forum held in January 2007 brought together a diverse array of representatives from the criminal justice system and social service sector to consider a potential integrated wrap-around approach linking these areas (where client groups overlap). Should this initiative proceed, a multi-partner Steering Committee will likely be created. Given shared interests in a comprehensive framework that links various sectors, it will be important to consider how best to position this initiative within an environment that is quickly, and positively, becoming filled with a desire for comprehensive approaches. How might this growing interest in collaborative work best be pursued?

From comprehensive frameworks to collaborative action?

These initiatives illustrate the extent to which individuals and organizations in BC's Capital Region recognize the interconnected nature of factors affecting quality of life. Outside of government, the United Way and Victoria Foundation are also emphasizing holistic approaches – exploring how a community is affected or looking at its “vital signs” – rather than paying attention only to a single issue.

In response, however, to these various comprehensive approaches, both community and government officials speak of the challenges of being in too many places at one time. Community representatives, like those working on the CHALLENGE, struggle to know where within government to signal their interests and contributions, while government officials point to a seemingly fragmented community sector. How can both sectors better penetrate these various tables without having to spread too thinly their valuable human and financial resources?

BC's Capital Region faces a challenge for which other communities may be envious. Though there may be no simple answer, the question remains: How best can public sector organizations harness the energy and enthusiasm for holistic and comprehensive frameworks, translating this energy effectively and practicably into an inclusive version of 'sideways leadership'? Might this be done without each sector or organization exercising its own leadership of an exclusive comprehensive approach? Can 'horizontal silos' be avoided?

Improving coherence

Collaboration builds greater awareness as well as shared understanding and results. While organizing comprehensive collaborative efforts is not a clear-cut process, many government officials in BC's Capital Region – like elsewhere – are exploring ways to minimize the duplication of comprehensive effort. Several considerations arise from the experiences of BC's Capital Region that are helpful when thinking about potential approaches.

First, some public sector officials point to limited support from the public sector towards the work of convening and practising community collaborations. Despite a common requirement for communities to pursue partnership-driven approaches, few resources are actually made available to enable collaborative implementation. Perhaps more significantly, some officials point to the absence within their own organizations of an awareness of other government initiatives with potentially similar objectives.

In some cases, this lack of awareness results in the requirement for similar, sometimes duplicate, community effort. Comprehensive frameworks may be encouraged – but are often still restrained by organizational structures and practices that encourage a continuation of silo-based approaches. As one example, how might the shared interest already expressed by the Health Authority and government offices responsible for housing and homelessness translate into a program design that enables community organizations to address health and housing needs without cumbersome, duplicate reporting relationships?

Second, officials have drawn attention to the challenges of acting as both financial sponsor and community partner at the same time. The local Service Canada office, in particular, identified the need to separate its role in program delivery (i.e., funder) from that of community partner. Entering into contractual relationships precludes certain partnerships. To deal with this problem, the local office named Director Joe Artibise as a *consultant*, and separated his position from program delivery and oversight. Artibise became community liaison, enabling him to

participate in the CHALLENGE Steering Committee, and to further explore how the CHALLENGE and Service Canada could pursue mutually supportive activities.

Third, government officials point to basic time limitations, noting difficulties in finding time for interdepartmental and multi-governmental initiatives, and for community outreach and networking. When multiple community efforts or government comprehensive frameworks appear to pursue similar objectives, officials may face difficult decisions in allocating their support (be it human resources, technical assistance and financial support) accordingly. The effect, of course, weakens each structure, as various gaps in membership become more common across tables, contributing to governance and communication challenges.

Representatives of community-led initiatives and organizations are also considering ways to minimize duplication of effort. As the Quality of Life CHALLENGE transitions from its first phase (2001 to 2006) to its second phase, a Transition Coordinator has been actively engaging multiple sectors of the community to identify how best the CHALLENGE can pursue a value-added and niche role. Efforts in the area of sustainable incomes, noted by various government officials as a unique contribution by the CHALLENGE, will certainly continue. Such grounding is key; without this base, comprehensive frameworks may struggle in moving from issue identification to action.

Staying focused on a comprehensive vision

A question remains: Within a context like BC's Capital Region, can we consider a

broad and multisectoral mechanism or coordinating body by which various streams of community-based activity could be situated, and through which the community itself might be engaged? Clearly, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE continues to play a considerable role. By speaking of the Region's community-wide vision, culture, attitudes and mindset, the CHALLENGE adds a perspective broader and bigger than any single issue. Yet effectiveness in implementation – along with the mapping of a comprehensive approach – requires the ongoing support of change agents within the community and within its enabling institutions – i.e., government and the private sector.

Until recently, representatives of the Government of Canada, Province of British Columbia and City of Victoria were developing an urban development agreement. Comprehensive community engagement of recent years pointed to a number of community priorities for which government coordination would be beneficial, including housing and public health and safety. Notwithstanding the best intentions and energy invested by all participants, in late 2006 the process to finalize an urban development agreement for Victoria stalled, due largely to mandate shifts within the new federal government. By early 2007, the federal commitment to signing any new urban development agreements had waned.

Nonetheless, and in the absence of a signed agreement, the commitment to working collaboratively across orders of government and the community to address key priorities in Victoria has continued, building on two years of progress. The experience of these projects demonstrates that fostering key relationships and exploring shared interests can help achieve better results for cities

even in the absence of a formal signed agreement. When governments commit energy and effort to creating the space for community dialogue, urban renewal and revitalization are possible.

While the potential value of an inter-governmental and/or interagency partnership table still appears significant for aligning intervention tools and delivering collaborative approaches, a range of common activities – from information-sharing to joint delivery and collaborative action – remain possible. Can we envision a mechanism, governance arrangement or coordinating body that could enhance horizontal collaboration? Would such a body enable governments to more easily identify their role within broader and more comprehensive strategies? Should organizational structures be further adapted to facilitate participation in collaborative processes? Or might more informal processes, driven by common data and research, be more effective in advancing comprehensive efforts?

Conclusion

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE is committed to addressing the interconnected root causes of poverty and to improve quality of life through a multistakeholder and comprehensive approach. The vision remains strong and its implementation remains possible.

Various initiatives under way in BC's Capital Region recognize poverty and quality of life as complex issues. Proponents of many of these initiatives also acknowledge that collaborative action on complex issues builds awareness, shared understanding and mutually supportive activity. There is significant community capital with which to work. Ensuring

that comprehensive visions translate into collaborative processes requires movement in uncharted waters. How might the CHALLENGE's principles – including the sharing of power, information, resources and leadership – best be incorporated into its practice?

Building on a strong foundation, BC Capital Region's Quality of Life CHALLENGE will continue to invite partners, including the public sector, to reflect upon, learn and practise new ways of organizing for this important work.

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