

## ***Winnipeg: Becoming a City Where Everyone Belongs***

*Becoming a Vibrant Communities participant is a process that requires a concerted effort by the convening organization to develop its ideas on how it will bring about sustained poverty reduction.*

### ***Charting a route to prosperity***

Poverty in Winnipeg is much the same as in other Canadian cities: Those most at risk of living in poverty include single parents and people with disabilities. Winnipeg's poverty profile is also affected by a large Aboriginal population who are disproportionately poor, high levels of immigration over the last five years and a strong concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods.

Census data from 2006 indicates that 15.7 percent of Winnipeg residents (21 percent of children under 18) live below the low income cut-off (LICO) [Statistics Canada 2006]. Between 2001 and 2006, Winnipeg's population rose from 619,544 to 633,451. Some 100,000 Winnipeg residents currently live in poverty.

The Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council (WPRC) was formed in the summer of 2007 by a group of 22 experienced leaders from business, social service, labour, recreation, education and health. They spent one year learning more about each other's areas of expertise and the nature of poverty in Winnipeg, and reviewing poverty reduction research and best practices. By December 2008, they had established an operating structure and formulated a plan of action. Forging themselves into a group that will work across sectors in what they describe as a "cross-pollinating" approach, Council members hope to generate innovative approaches to poverty reduction. The Council's mission is to "reduce poverty significantly in Winnipeg" and members aspire to make Winnipeg "A City Where Everyone Belongs."

Winnipeg has long had a large, multidimensional movement working at poverty reduction. The majority of activities can be grouped under three headings: advocacy – mainly in the form of protesting lack of government action; services and programs (e.g., food banks, employment, education and public health programming); and the establishment of a wide range of nonprofit organizations to meet specific community needs. As a whole, Winnipeg has had plenty of experience working cross-sectorally on projects, including the 1998 Pan-American Games and the development of initiatives around its Urban Aboriginal Agreement. Winnipegers have been less successful working collaboratively to tackle poverty.

The Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council took some of its inspiration from “The Journey Forward,” a United Way of Winnipeg-initiated community dialogue that operated in 1999-2000. Follow-up discussions with 170 community leaders and a two-day “Willing Community Forum” in late 2000 demonstrated a high level of commitment to working together to address issues of concern. Poverty had ranked as the city’s most pressing issue in both sets of consultations.

The United Way’s community consultations ran parallel to the development of the Vibrant Communities (VC) Network in the early 2000s. Former United Way of Winnipeg Manager Derek Pachal helped nurture a connection between ongoing poverty reduction initiatives in Winnipeg and VC. Other United Ways across the country were also testing new approaches to community-driven, neighbourhood-focused work. The WPRC hopes to capitalize on these and other local poverty initiatives, creating the right mixture of leadership, initiative and energy to significantly reduce poverty in Winnipeg. The United Way of Winnipeg continues to act as a driving force in the Council’s work, providing office space, financial management, and communications and administrative support.

### *Understanding poverty and poverty reduction*

The Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council defines poverty as “the condition of not having sufficient resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, economic, political and social rights.” Its members have adopted this relative definition of poverty which takes into account personal, social, economic, cultural and political factors.

The Council has identified several key drivers which contribute to poverty in their community. These include:

- lack of high school completion
- few opportunities for recreational and cultural activities
- insufficient economic tools for the school-to-work transition
- lack of help for low-income families to build assets
- insufficient supports and quality of life benefits for mental health problems
- lack of employment and economic supports for people with disabilities.

Over the next three years, the Council’s goal is have an impact on 10,000 individuals – 10 percent of those currently living in poverty in Winnipeg – through strategic WPRC-led or influenced projects and initiatives. In addition, WPRC hopes to educate tens of thousands more Winnipeggers about the root causes and societal impacts of poverty.

The WPRC created a Poverty Matrix in 2007 which summarized 2001 Census data according to various parameters – income level, age, household type, and inclusion in marginalized groups. These groups included recent immigrants, Aboriginal Canadians, visible minorities, people with disabilities and women. Some Vibrant Communities convener organizations choose to focus their poverty reduction efforts on particular disadvantaged groups or neighbourhoods. Though its Poverty Matrix organizes Census data in a manner that is consistent with this type of approach, the WPRC is focusing its efforts primarily on identifying the root causes of poverty and devising appropriate strategies by which they can be addressed.

“Our strategies have been developed according to need, based on issues the community has identified as top priorities,” says WPRC Managing Director Harry Finnigan. “While much of our work to date has centered around specific areas of interest, we anticipate that some of our work will focus on high needs neighbourhoods with some strong community leaders, and innovative initiatives which are being developed by various community-based organizations.”

Prior to formulating their long-term plan, Council members felt it was important to demonstrate their capacity for action. In the fall of 2007, they named 23 possible areas of work and, after an evaluation process, narrowed them to four. Accordingly, four Working Groups were established in December 2007 to work on these particular areas of interest – asset building, post-secondary education, early years initiatives, and recreation and culture. A year later when the framework for action plan was presented for approval, these four issues remained high on the Council’s priority list and project efforts continued.

The WPRC’s long-term plan named a total eight areas of activity. They include the four Working Group issues:

- asset building and wealth creation initiatives – facilitate home ownership, support savings for adult learning and a child’s education, and encourage personal savings for retirement income
- early education – provide support for elementary and middle schools in low-income, high-risk neighbourhoods
- post-secondary education – improve post-secondary educational opportunities for low-income youth
- social infrastructure – improve and enrich recreational and cultural opportunities for children and youth living in low-income, high-risk neighbourhoods

and four others:

- early years initiatives – ensure that the youngest children get the best possible start in life
- affordable housing – support new housing initiatives and the maintenance of existing housing
- disability income and quality of life benefits – provide a minimum standard of living and improved quality of life for people with mental and physical disabilities
- public education and engagement – reduce stigma and discrimination associated with living in poverty and engage all citizens in WPRC’s efforts to create *A City Where Everyone Belongs*.

### ***Managing the work***

The WPRC is guided by a six-person Steering Committee whose members provide strategic direction. There is also a five-member Long-Range Planning Committee which gathered research and input from poverty policy experts and community consultations, and developed the WPRC’s original action plan (entitled “Framework for Action”). The four Working Groups are currently designing targets and timelines for WPRC initiatives related to their issues.

Managing Director Harry Finnigan and Program Coordinator Jason Granger are responsible for day-to-day WPRC operations. The decision to hire Harry and Jason part time was rooted in the belief that the Council’s most important work will be its ability to forge connections among partners and with people who have lived experience of poverty. Responsibility for establishing and carrying out specific initiatives will be assumed by the most appropriate agencies.

Together, Council members and staff will map work currently being done in Winnipeg within the eight focus areas and will identify programming and service gaps. This information will be enriched by Council-initiated policy research and polling or focus group research to identify the effects of policies on the lives of people living on low incomes. Subsequent action plans will be developed based on the cross-sectoral perspectives, contacts and expertise of Council members.

New initiatives will be linked with existing programs and each will be evaluated according to outcome indicators developed by the Council. WPRC will formulate an overall evaluation plan for its work and will provide regular updates on its progress to key stakeholders and the larger community.

The WPRC has benefitted from the experiences of other Vibrant Communities (VC). VC conveners in BC’s Capital Region, Saint John and Hamilton have worked hard to include the perspectives and participation of people with lived experience of poverty. Several WPRC members lived in low-income households and are infusing the Council’s work with lessons

learned from their own life experiences. WPRC is now looking for ways to include people with lived experience of poverty in Working Groups and as researchers or consultants on specific initiatives. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, Winnipeg Harvest, United Way of Winnipeg and Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council have brought together as research advisers people with lived experience and perspectives on poverty as research advisors. They are working to complete a Market Basket Measure project (the Acceptable Living Level report), gain feedback regarding the WPRC Framework for Action, and develop a long-range engagement and inclusion strategy.

The Council is receiving financial support from the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, Vibrant Communities and United Way of Winnipeg, and anticipates receiving support from the City of Winnipeg. Local business partners will provide in-kind and project-specific funding as plans move into action.

### *Progress to date*

WPRC's operational structure has already been modified to better manage and structure the Council's activities. Working Group chairs found themselves attending too many meetings – their own, Steering Committee and full council meetings. They no longer attend Steering Committee meetings and WPRC staff members are responsible for providing Working Group updates.

Working Groups have been assigned the responsibility for implementing activities where they see fit, but group members – as volunteers – are not expected to carry out the work. WPRC staff will be increased by one full-time administrative assistant position to allow them to take leadership in the area of project scheduling and implementation. The primary locus for implementation will be through the partner organizations. Members of the Council are able to bring substantial resources to the table, such as research opportunities and funding, which will help support new initiatives. Monies which are donated for specific Working Group tasks are spent accordingly. Any unspecified funds will be assigned according to decisions made by the full Council.

As a further effort to streamline WPRC activity, staff will provide a coordination role. Each Working Group will be responsible for presenting a rationale and objectives for their activities, funding and consultation plans. WPRC staff will assist in completing any necessary detail work for each Working Group and will be on the lookout for overlap or competition between the groups as a whole. Where such duplications exist, staff will document the issue and suggest possible alternatives which can then be weighed by the WPRC.

The Long-Range Planning Committee that was originally tasked with setting the overall plan and direction for the Council has been renamed the Strategic Planning Committee and will continue to monitor how well the group adheres to its original view of the work. Its members will develop recommendations regarding resource allocation for Council approval.

Like the staff, the six-member WPRC Steering Committee plays a coordination role – managing structural and process changes, assigning accountabilities, setting and distributing Council agendas and managing overall operations.

### *Working group activities*

The Council’s original theory of change – that collaboration among members would create opportunities for working together and bring new resources to the table – is already being borne out. Members are enthusiastic about progress to date and feel the WPRC is achieving what it was designed to do.

#### *i. Asset building*

Maintaining and building assets is gaining increasing recognition as a way to help people on their journey out of poverty. The “AssetBuilders Partnership” was established in 1999 by the nonprofit organization Supporting Employment and Economic Development (SEED) Winnipeg and the United Way of Winnipeg. Similar to learn\$ave<sup>1</sup> and other assisted savings projects, it helped participants by providing matched savings and financial literacy training to help them save for large ticket items like house purchases, post-secondary education and business startup costs. Other program variations have allowed participants to save for smaller items like household appliances. SEED asset building organizers were also able to use program elements to strengthen other projects in Winnipeg. For example, they provided financial literacy training and savings assistance to workers employed in a carpentry-focused social enterprise.

In 2008, the province of Manitoba announced \$800,000 in funding for asset building. The WPRC hopes that its connections will help create new opportunities for AssetBuilders programming. Though the Working Group did not play any role in securing the provincial funding, it has created added value by linking the AssetBuilders program with specific families being assisted with bursaries and scholarships and a third program which is providing role models and mentors for Aboriginal youth. By sitting together at the same table, members are effectively wrapping around the same group of people a tapestry of supports.

The Asset Building Working Group is currently engaged in two initiatives: an asset-building bursary program for post-secondary students and an employer-based asset building pilot project. In a multisectoral collaboration, Red River College, the University of Winnipeg, SEED Winnipeg, the Province of Manitoba and the business community are dedicated to ensuring that more low-income individuals in Winnipeg have the financial incentives necessary to access post-secondary education. As students reach academic benchmarks throughout their junior high school and high school years, they receive financial rewards (bursaries and scholarships) which accumulate toward the cost of tuition. SEED’s Asset Building program is made available to the families of these students to allow them to save for other assets.

Currently, there are plans to offer a college credit for students who complete the Money Management course offered through the Asset Builders Partnership. This course provides one credit for students enrolled in programs at Red River College. In addition, funds for post-secondary education may soon be available for low-income residents through a creative pilot asset building bursary project that will combine personal financial investment with resources provided from community accessed dollars, corporate support and government funding.

The Asset Building Working Group would also like to expand on the success of the asset building in Winnipeg by introducing employer-based asset building programs. This model encourages employers to offer asset building and money management programs as an employee benefit within the context of professional development and in-house training. Though there are successful examples of employer-based asset building programs elsewhere – particularly in the US – this pilot project would be a first in Winnipeg. The long-range goal is to develop a pilot initiative, learn through experience and replicate the program with other employers.

### *ii. Early years education*

Supporting youth requires more than funding and programs. The WPRC understands that mentorship and engagement of youth is critical for building self-esteem and encouraging youth to reach their full potential. In 2001, the Business Council of Manitoba initiated a \$2.5 million post-secondary education bursary program for Aboriginal youth that has provided support to more than 500 individuals. Through the WPRC Early Years Working Group, a joint project is being developed by the business community, schools, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Winnipeg, and Big Brothers and Big Sisters for a mentoring project that will match these older, role model youth with younger children in inner-city schools.

The Early Years Working Group met with a group of inner-city principals in the Point Douglas/William Whyte area to discuss what could be done to ensure better outcomes for at-risk youth. Educators had a lot of ideas, including requests for volunteers to fund and operate meal programs, provide sports equipment – either through direct donation or by adopting a school – and developing relationships with students and staff. It is anticipated that these initiatives will be brokered and managed through the WPRC.

### *iii. Post-secondary education*

While it is generally recognized that education can be an important stepping-stone out of a life of poverty, getting onto and over that stepping-stone can be more difficult than it appears. High school completion is the first milestone on this path. But in our increasingly knowledge-based economy, high school graduation alone – without subsequent education or training – is no longer a guarantee of employment.

The Post-secondary Working Group understood that while financial constraints discourage youth from low-income families from pursuing post-secondary education, many other inter-related barriers also exist. These include low grades, lack of information or awareness about how to make appropriate decisions regarding post-secondary education or training, low confidence and self-esteem levels, absence of parental guidance or expectations regarding post-secondary education and lack of career focus.

The Working Group has been developing a pilot project initiative in partnership with the Winnipeg School Division, the provincial government and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. Through this project, the WPRC will work with community groups in the Point Douglas/William Whyte area of the inner city and help enhance innovative initiatives currently in development and already under way.

#### *iv. Recreation and culture*

Though there are a number of free after-school programs for youth in Winnipeg, there is still a huge demand for programming in areas of the city where money and volunteers are in short supply. Unfortunately, gangs offer an attractive alternative for children who can't find recreational and cultural activities. The WPRC Working Group is still assessing program gaps and preparing a plan to tackle barriers to participation. A City task force report advocated for a policy change that would allow different community centres to operate with other funding and operation models.

The Recreation and Culture Working Group is currently focusing on a number of initiatives including changes in policy related to future revisions to Plan Winnipeg, increased municipal recreational subsidies for individuals on low or limited income, collaborations with Sport Manitoba and cross-cultural engagement activities.

#### ***Overall approach***

The experience and reputation of the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council members are the magnets that have begun to attract resources – financial, research and human – to the work of poverty reduction in Winnipeg. The Council will continue to identify service and program gaps, ensure that its efforts are complementary to other poverty reduction work under way in Winnipeg, act as an information exchange for stakeholders, develop appropriate outcome indicators and provide regular evaluation reports to the community.

WPRC intends to help connect the actions of the many independent groups currently working to address poverty in Winnipeg. It is members' hope that by creating opportunities for groups to combine their efforts, new approaches to poverty reduction will be developed and improvements in the city's quality of life will be achieved.

Says Harry Finnigan: “The WPRC will take a fresh and broad look at the issue of poverty in our city in a structured way. By assessing the strengths and challenges of existing approaches, we hope to fill gaps and bring intellectual, financial and leadership resources to bear on issues related to poverty. We also hope to influence a change in attitude toward poverty that ultimately will help us reach our goals and demonstrate measurable results. We want to engage with, and be responsible to, our community by continually reflecting on our progress.”

The WPRC intends to address as many effects of poverty as possible. Given the complexity of the issue, the WPRC recognizes that it is critical to maintain a comprehensive view of related factors, even while choosing to focus on prioritized issues and themes. Their hope is that the entire community will become involved in poverty reduction efforts. Members plan to offer a wide range of programming in accord with their eight areas of activity. By working comprehensively – operating coordinated and interlinked programs, conducting policy and research, and changing public attitudes – they anticipate creating improved connections across programs and building a strong case for better policies.

### *Signs of Progress*

In order to achieve substantial, deep and durable poverty reduction, WPRC will focus on five outcome areas:

1. *impact on individuals and households* – increased number of individuals and households accessing resources and opportunities related to poverty reduction strategies
2. *collective action* – increased number of individuals, businesses, organizations and groups actively involved in and supporting poverty reduction strategies
3. *engagement* – meaningful and sustained participation of low-income residents and the larger public in consultative and decision-making roles
4. *policy and structural change* – education and engagement with policy-makers to promote policy and structural changes that foster poverty reduction and prevention
5. *attitudinal change* – greater public understanding and action towards poverty-related issues and poverty reduction through education and awareness.

Each outcome has been matched with activities, success indicators and measurement tasks. As strategies and results come into clearer focus, the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council anticipates a bright, inclusive future for all residents.

*Anne Makhoul, Harry Finnigan, Jason Granger and Garry Loewen*

## Endnote

1. *learn\$ave* operated in 10 sites across Canada. The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and SEDI (Social and Enterprise Development Innovations) jointly conducted the project between June 2001 and March 2008. Participants had up to three years to complete their savings objectives and one more year to cash their savings and matching contributions. In March 2009, SRDC published “Learning to Save, Saving to Learn: Intermediate Impacts of the *learn\$ave* Individual Development Accounts Project,” one of several reports detailing results and lessons learned from the initiative ([http://www.srdc.org/uploads/learnSave\\_IIR\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.srdc.org/uploads/learnSave_IIR_ENG.pdf)). A final project report will be published in the summer of 2009.

## References

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