

# Cities *Reducing* Poverty



*How Vibrant Communities Are  
Creating Comprehensive  
Solutions to the  
Most Complex Problem  
of Our Times*



Mark Cabaj, Editor

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The Tamarack Institute  
Waterloo Ontario

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*To the growing number of local organizations  
and residents across Canada who have made up  
their mind to end poverty in their community  
and are serious about tackling it comprehensively*



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the contributions of a great number of people.

The first and obvious thank-you goes to the writing and editorial team members who put this book together. Eric Leviten-Reid, Garry Loewen, Mike Toye, Liz Weaver, and Mark Cabaj have all played a variety of roles; each researched and wrote drafts of the community stories, while Mark prepared the Introduction and chapter on conclusions drawn from the case studies covered. More about these writers may be found at the end of this book. As well, Anne Makhoul of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy has been the faithful and productive scribe for Vibrant Communities since 2005 and once again displayed her editorial and writing skills.

In the end, however, these authors were but scribes who documented the experiences of people living and working in their communities. The list of these contributors is long, and includes:

- Job Bus in Niagara: Peter Papp (former Executive Director of Opportunities Niagara), Nancy Sutton (Job Bus Coordinator), Lori Watson (Manager, Community Services, Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities, Niagara Region),



Sarah Pennisi (Director, Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities, Niagara Region), Tony Chiecca (Human Resources Manager, Niagara 21st Group), and Tony Silversti (Evaluation Consultant)

- Fair Fares in Calgary: Colleen Huston (Executive Director, Disability Action Hall), Bonnie Pacaud (Disability Action Hall), Ramona Johnston (former Executive Director of Vibrant Communities Calgary), Dan Meades (current Executive Director of Vibrant Communities Calgary), Joan Farkas (City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services), and Michelle Kristinson (MS Society of Calgary)
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- Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction: Mark Chamberlain (Trivaris), Tom Cooper (Director, Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction), Joe-Anne Priel (Community Services, City of Hamilton), Paul Johnson (City of Hamilton), Sheree Meredith (Hamilton Community Foundation), Howard Elliot (*Hamilton Spectator*), Bill Medeiros (citizen), and Carolyn Milne (Hamilton Community Foundation)
- Vibrant Communities Saint John: Wendy MacDermott (Coordinator, Vibrant Communities Saint John), Cathy Wright (Social Planner), and Monica Chaperlin (Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative)



In order to make sense of these diverse efforts, we have leaned heavily on a number of great thinkers and organizations in the fields of social policy and community development. Prolific policy research by Sherri Torjman, Ken Battle, and Michael Mendelson of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy has yielded a wealth of insight into the nature of poverty in Canada as well as promising policy responses. Systematic research and rigorous analysis, on comprehensive community initiatives, by Anne Kubisch and Pat Auspos at the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change have been equally influential. Other organizations whose ideas you will find referenced throughout the document include: the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore, Social Innovation Generation@Waterloo, the Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto, and the Centre for Community Renewal in British Columbia.

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the national supports in the initiative's later years, allowing research and the production of materials such as this book. More importantly, Tim Brodhead, Dana Vocisano, Johanne Moerhing, and the late and much missed Katharine Pearson were full partners in stewarding Vibrant Communities and were deeply committed to the learning process that continues to permeate the project.

Finally, the biggest thank-you goes to the people and organizations that were involved in the 16 local collaborations that made up the Vibrant Communities network over the past 10 years. From west to east, they were: B.C.'s Capital Region, Surrey, Abbotsford, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, the Saint-Michel district of Montréal, Trois-Rivières, Saint John, Halifax (briefly), Sydney (briefly), and St. John's. These collaborations did the heavy lifting by experimenting with new and ambitious approaches to reducing poverty. They also shared their experiences and insights generously and honestly with their peers across the country, exhibiting the best spirit of the learning community.

PAUL BORN, PRESIDENT  
TAMARACK

# INTRODUCTION

This book explores the efforts of collaborative groups in six different Canadian cities as they work to reduce poverty. These groups are: a project that seeks to get long-term unemployed job seekers trained and transported to jobs across the sprawling region of Niagara; a coalition pressing Calgary City Council to pass (and maintain) a subsidized bus pass for people with low incomes; a grassroots network of citizens' partnership clubs in Montréal working to turn around a forgotten neighbourhood; an unusual collection of local organizations in Surrey working to get homeless day labourers back into the mainstream; a high-level roundtable of civic leaders in Hamilton mobilizing the community to make it the best place to raise a child; and a business-led group in Saint John that aims to reduce that City's poverty rate by one half.



The common thread among these groups is that they are guided, to varying degrees, by a desire to employ a comprehensive approach in their work – one that tries to tackle the interconnected cause-and-effect variables of poverty.

Support for a concentrated effort to reduce poverty has grown in recent years. The general public's interest in poverty reduction has remained consistently high over the past two decades, fuelled, perhaps, by the recognition



that economic restructuring, increasing levels of debt, and recessions have increased the number of people who are just a few paycheques from economic uncertainty. In poll after poll, Canadians have reported that they feel reducing poverty is important, that it is possible, and that they want governments – and other sectors of society – to do more to make it happen. Formal institutions, such as police services, health organizations, and teachers' associations, have joined the chorus. They understand that the effects of poverty and exclusion put an extra demand on their already stretched services and budgets. Business organizations have pointed out that poverty is a drag on productivity, while organized labour and faith-based organizations argue that poverty in a land of plenty is unethical.

More and more governments and communities are responding to the challenge. A Senate subcommittee's call for an all-encompassing federal poverty reduction strategy resurrected an earlier pan-Canadian commitment to addressing poverty, and seven out of ten provincial governments in Canada are now implementing a poverty reduction plan or strategy that stresses a comprehensive approach. Our three territorial governments are well down the path of establishing plans. There are also approximately 40 cross-sector roundtables in urban centres across the country that have created (or are creating) local comprehensive strategies or plans to reduce poverty.

At the core of most of these efforts is an explicit shift away from the piecemeal approach that focused on one dimension of poverty at a time and a movement toward a more comprehensive process that gets at the multiple factors underlying poverty. Why? Because poverty is complex.



## ***The Complex Nature of Poverty***

The case for a comprehensive approach to poverty is strong because the constellation of “cause-and-effects” underlying poverty are numerous and complex. While governments and research agencies typically define (and measure) poverty as a lack of income, it is actually a broad reality composed of a variety of interrelated problems:

Listening to people talk about their experience of poverty, it is clear that poverty is complex and multidimensional. Poverty is more than simply a lack of income. It is the stress caused by the inability to make ends meet, social isolation, and the fatalism and lack of time that prevent political engagement. It is the associated material deprivation, poor housing and neighbourhood decline. Poverty is a product of multiple causes and can have multifarious, interconnected short- and long-term negative consequences that make life difficult to cope with. Such complexity is easily overlooked and frustrates the best intentions of policymakers who are often tempted to tackle single causes and specific outcomes. (Tomlinson and Walker, 2009: 1)

This web of interconnected cause-and-effects can create a poverty trap in which problems interlock, increasing one another’s negative effects. The deeper a family’s poverty, the stronger the trap and the more difficult for them to break free. David Shipler, the author of *Working Poor: Invisible in America*, illustrates this dynamic by describing the plight of a single mother holding down several low-paying jobs:

For practically every family, then, the ingredients of poverty are part financial and part psychological, part personal and part societal, part past and part present. Every problem magnifies the impact of the others, and all are so tightly interlocked that one reversal can



produce a chain reaction with results far distant from the original causes. A rundown apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing. (Shipler, 2003: 11)

The key to reducing poverty, therefore, is to unlock or disrupt these interlocking cause-and-effect relationships. This requires a comprehensive approach that is sensitive to, and eventually addresses the totality of, the interconnected problems:

... If problems are interlocking then so too solutions must be ... a job alone is not enough. Medical insurance alone is not enough. Good housing alone is not enough. Reliable transportation, careful family budgeting, effective parenting, effective schooling are not enough when each is achieved in isolation from the rest. (Shipler, 2003: 11)

In the face of this bewildering array of factors, eliminating poverty for even one person or family is an intimidating prospect. Reducing poverty on a larger scale is even more daunting because the manifestations of poverty vary from person to person and from place to place. (See Table 1.) The poverty of a homeless teenager escaping an abusive family in Victoria is dramatically dissimilar to that of an accomplished older immigrant holding down several low-paying jobs because his/her engineering degree is not recognized in Canada. The challenge of barely getting by with poverty-level wages in the booming oil town of Fort McMurray is



different from coping on the same amount of money in a rural community in Québec. Finally, the temporary poverty of a university student is starkly different from that of a young child in a family that has been receiving social assistance for three generations. As with all complex issues, there are no cookie-cutter solutions to poverty (Cabaj, 2004).

<b>Table 1: The Poverty Matrix</b>						
A general framework to examine poverty statistics among the five demographic groups experiencing the highest incidence of poverty.						
		<b>Demographic Groups*</b>				
		<b>Work-limiting disabilities</b>	<b>Recent immigrants</b>	<b>Unattached individuals aged 45 to 59</b>	<b>Lone parents</b>	<b>Aboriginal people</b>
<b>Level of Poverty</b>	<b>At-Risk</b>					
	<b>Working (Waged) Poor</b>					
	<b>Temporarily Unemployed</b>					
	<b>Dependent Poor</b>					
	<b>Homeless</b>					
* Peter Hicks indicates that 54% of all persistently poor families in 1997 were found in these five categories. See "Preparing for Tomorrow's Social Policy Agenda" (SRDC Working Paper Series 02-04. November 2002).						

Ironically, many poverty traps exist in part because of well-meaning, albeit clumsy, efforts of governments and communities. For example, most families receiving social assistance across Canada experience the Catch-22 of typical welfare systems: They are forced to give up their financial assets before they go on social assistance and then are limited in how much they may earn once they find work if they're going to stay on assistance. Faced with the combination of low asset limits, low earning exemptions, and



low welfare rates, they are left in a perpetual state of low income, tangled up in a frayed social safety net when what they need is a trampoline. Similarly, people who are homeless may struggle to obtain all of the possible support services available to them because they lack a fixed address, have to resort to predatory loan sharks or cheque-cashing businesses because they do not have a bank account, and are forced to pay much higher-than-average costs for low-quality food thanks to the desertion of their neighbourhood by mainstream grocers (and the incursion of convenience stores that carry low-nutrition foodstuffs at higher-than-normal costs).

Poverty is perhaps the most extreme example of what policy analysts and social change advocates call “wicked issues” or “social messes”: problems where the cause-and-effect relationships are really a constellation of tightly coupled problems, are unique from one case to the next, can be approached from many different angles, and are bereft of simple solutions.

Canada has made significant progress in reducing poverty over the past hundred years. Governments and local agencies have developed a vast and elaborate array of programs and services to address the factors related to poverty (e.g., affordable housing, income support, public education) for a variety of different demographic groups (e.g., seniors, unemployed) and communities (e.g., rural, urban).

While the number of Canadians who are poor has decreased, the poverty reduction needle remains stubbornly stuck. The gap between rich and poor is widening. While poverty levels tend to go up and down with the fortunes of the economy, they have not gone down appreciably for several decades. Why?



## **Enter Vibrant Communities Canada**

Vibrant Communities Canada was founded by Paul Born, President of Tamarack – an Institute for Community Engagement, as that institute's first major initiative. It was formally launched in the spring of 2002 in partnership with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and small leadership groups from cities across Canada. The goal of the network was simple: to experiment with a new local approach to addressing poverty that was guided by five key principles:

1. *Poverty is better addressed when reduction, not alleviation, is the goal*
2. *Poverty is more effectively addressed by multisector leadership and collaboration, involving business, government, and non-profit leaders as well as people with firsthand experience in living with poverty*
3. *Poverty reduction is more effective when comprehensively focused on the interrelated cause-and-effects of poverty as opposed to isolated and unrelated efforts to address symptoms*
4. *Poverty reduction is more effective when built on local assets as opposed to looking for solutions from outside the community*
5. *Poverty reduction efforts are more productive when they are part of an ongoing process of learning, evaluation, and change rather than the pursuit of a silver bullet*

Collaborative roundtables from 16 cities participated in the initiative's Learning Community: B.C.'s Capital Region, Surrey, Abbotsford, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon (briefly), Winnipeg, Waterloo Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, the Saint-Michel district of Montréal, Trois-Rivières, Halifax,



Saint John, Sydney (Nova Scotia), and St. John's. With extra financial and technical support from national organizations, 13 of them (called Trail Builders) experimented with their own unique application of these principles through poverty reduction campaigns that lasted five to ten years.



The progress of Trail Builders in reducing poverty since then has been impressive (see Table 2). Thousands of organizations have developed hundreds of innovative initiatives that have helped nearly 200,000 households to move forward in their efforts to escape their poverty trap. The accumulated lessons about the challenges and opportunities of a more comprehensive, multisector local approach to poverty – an approach that was developed through a process of trial and error in local communities – are also substantial. The Vibrant Communities website contains hundreds of stories, reports, articles, tools, and teleconferences exploring a variety of topics. These range from substantive challenges (e.g., how to develop a living wage campaign) to process issues (e.g., how to work with governments to change public policy). (See <[www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)>.)



<b>Table 2: Vibrant Communities Collective Results (June 2011)</b>
<p><b>Individual and Household Impacts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 197,575 individuals and households have received 407,578 benefits from Vibrant Communities efforts, including increases in income, access to food and shelter, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 3,000 businesses, government departments, voluntary sector organizations, voices of experience, and citizens are engaged</li> <li>• 3,700 media stories, reports, and learning events about poverty have been reported/taken place in 13 communities across Canada</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community Innovations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 238 poverty reducing strategies and projects have been completed or are in progress</li> </ul>
<p><b>Policy Change</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 45 strategies have expanded community involvement in the policy-making process</li> <li>• 40 strategies have produced substantive policy changes in areas such as transportation and housing</li> </ul>

### ***This Study***

The aim of this study is straightforward: to help readers – specifically those involved in a local poverty reduction coalition in an urban community – understand more clearly how they can reduce poverty by developing deeply integrated responses to the multiple cause-and-effects of poverty. To accomplish this goal, we are driven by a three simple questions:

- What are the different ways a local group might tackle the interrelated cause-and-effect factors underlying poverty?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches?
- What are the keys to making each approach most successful?



As you read through the stories in this book, you will see that there are many other dimensions of poverty reduction that we could explore; however, we have chosen to focus solely on the discrete challenge of how to develop what Tony Blair, former Primer Minister of Great Britain, referred to as “joined-up solutions to joined-up problems” (Oyen, 2002). This work complements an already growing volume of research on comprehensive strategies. The members of the Aspen Institute have summarized 20 years of the Institute’s research on comprehensive community initiatives (Kubisch et al., 2002; 2009), and Eric Leviten-Reid has provided a broader exploration of the challenges of comprehensive strategies (Leviten-Reid, 2009).

Having followed closely the on-the-ground work of more than one dozen Trail Builder communities, we found it difficult to choose which case studies to investigate in more depth. Every local group has something to teach us about the challenges of this work. Eventually, we applied two basic criteria to help us narrow the field to the six examples in this book.

The first criterion was that a group’s efforts yielded some type of measurable effects, particularly on local poverty. In the field of research, this is called “purposeful sampling.” These efforts were not required to have been completely successful. As the local actors in each of these change stories will freely admit, there have been setbacks in each local change effort and few people are altogether clear on the ultimate impact of their work in reducing poverty. Yet, in each of the highlighted case studies, people have witnessed and tracked some type of productive disruption to the poverty trap described above.

The second criterion was variety. We wanted to see how communities of very different descriptions dealt with the



challenge of poverty. We believe we have succeeded in this area. The examples play out in a city of more than a million (Calgary) and a district of 50,000 residents (Saint-Michel in Montréal). They involve the collective efforts of organizations spread out over a sprawling region of a dozen communities (Niagara) and a network of networks in a single city (Hamilton). Some of the stories are about discrete projects (Surrey), while others focus on entire poverty reduction strategies (Saint John). Together the examples demonstrate that comprehensive efforts can focus on different demographic groups, are possible in different contexts, can operate on different scales, and can vary in breadth.

In the end, our investigation was fruitful. We uncovered four different strategies for tackling the interrelated cause-and-effects of poverty and a number of emerging leadership characteristics required for them to be effective. We also unexpectedly rediscovered the importance of other essential elements of the Vibrant Communities approach, for example, the role of high aspirations in community change efforts, the importance of multisector community engagement, and the practical challenges involved in evaluating poverty reduction work. These findings are described more fully in the final chapter.

The entire purpose of the ten-year Vibrant Communities venture was to systematically explore the potential and practical implications of adopting a new local approach to reducing poverty and to broadly disseminate whatever we might learn from our collective efforts. We believe the results of this study, only one of many studies to emerge from this initiative, make another small contribution to the poverty reduction movement in Canada. We hope the stories and lessons in this book will inspire and inform the efforts of many, whether activists, service agencies, local



poverty reduction networks of volunteers and organizations, foundations, or civil servants and politicians at all three levels of government.

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*Note:* For more information on the work of Vibrant Communities Canada, see <[www.vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca)>.

## CHAPTER 1

# CONNECTING THE DOTS, UNTYING THE KNOTS IN NIAGARA REGION

Readers who have spent time looking for their “ideal” job know what an emotionally draining experience it can be. In Ontario’s Niagara Region, the sinking feeling that maybe “you just can’t get there from here” has an even more literal meaning. In this sprawling region of 1,899 square kilometers and 12 municipalities, a lack of intermunicipal transit can make getting *to* a job insurmountable. That was the case, at least, until a determined set of partners came together in 2005 to create the Job Bus.



### **Context**

Not only is Niagara a sprawling region, but it also is a region in transition. Since the 1960s, its governance has become increasingly integrated as a result of a Province-wide trend toward municipal restructuring. In 1970, two counties and 26 municipal units were combined to form one regional government and 12 municipalities. Soon after that, police services and waste disposal services were regionalized.



More recently, specialized health services have been located throughout the area. Reflecting these changes, Niagara's labour market has also become increasingly regional in nature.

Over the same period, Niagara also began making the painful shift from the "old" economy to the "new." In 1996 alone, nearly 8,000 jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector as large companies such as General Motors and Domtar either downsized or closed their doors altogether.

"In the past," says Patrick Gedge, Chief Executive Officer of the Niagara Economic Development Corporation, "it seemed natural that you went and worked for the big guys," whose continued growth seemed guaranteed. But that is no longer the case as intense international competition has funnelled jobs away from the automotive sector, smoke-stack factories, and big foundries. The emerging reality in Niagara Region is a more diverse economy in which small businesses play a much bigger role and in which other sectors – notably services, tourism, and agribusiness (including a flourishing wine industry) – are critical players alongside a leaner, increasingly high-tech manufacturing sector.

These regionalization and economic trends are the backdrop to the Job Bus initiative. In the transition to the new economy, many residents have lost jobs and many others have experienced a significant drop in income as they moved from relatively high-paying jobs in manufacturing to lower-paying ones in the service economy. In the 1990s, the unemployment rate in Niagara had been among the highest in Ontario; the poverty rate of 17% in 2001 saw 35,000 residents living in "strained circumstances." Regionalization has meant that more people have had to travel outside their home community to obtain jobs and access services.

Here's how *A Legacy of Poverty* (Arai and Burke, 2007), a



recent report on poverty commissioned by Niagara Region, summarizes the area's transportation difficulties:

We have moved to thinking about economic development and community supports on a region-wide basis and the result of this is that a man living in St. Catharines must be able to access three transportation systems to access a workplace in Niagara Falls. Similarly, a woman living in St. Catharines is not able to access the Women's Resource Centre in Beamsville unless she has a car.

### **Opportunities Niagara**

It is little wonder that intermunicipal transit was identified as a top priority for a regional initiative focused on poverty reduction. Despite its growing regional reality, few mechanisms existed to tackle complex social and economic issues on a regional basis. As a result, many opportunities for constructive action were going unfulfilled. An organization called Opportunities Niagara was developed to fill that void.



Formally established in 2002, Opportunities Niagara operated with a small core staff and a leadership table that brought together government, business, non-profit organi-



zations, and low income residents from across the region. Together they would address the multiple and interrelated root causes of poverty. Opportunities Niagara's primary purpose? Facilitating and brokering collaborative efforts to reduce poverty, or, in a phrase coined by Niagara leadership members to capture the essence of their work, "connecting the dots; untying the knots."

In the case of intermunicipal transportation, Opportunities Niagara would soon discover that connecting the dots related to transportation and employment was relatively easy; untying the knots of intermunicipal transit, however, was a struggle.

### **Connecting the Dots**

Concern about intermunicipal transportation in Niagara is longstanding. In fact, provincial government studies on the subject predated the formation, 40 years ago, of Regional Niagara. A scan of local newspapers reveals that the call for action has been growing louder and increasingly frustrated as solutions have failed to emerge:

*Critical Decision on Region-Wide Transit Is Looming*

*Niagara Region Spins Its Wheels on Transit: Lack of Public Transit in Niagara Is Leading to Loss of Talent*

*Niagara's Drive for Region-Wide Transit Is Stalled for One More Study*

The facts of the matter were clear and compelling. By the 1990s, many people in the region were travelling between municipalities for work.

For example, 45% of Welland's workforce lived in a municipality outside that city. More than 90% of Niagara residents use some form of personal transportation (car, truck, van) to get to work. For people who either choose



to use public transit or cannot afford a vehicle, access to employment is much more difficult. Transit hubs at two local colleges help students, but not the general public. The three large transit systems have begun to extend limited service to adjacent municipalities, but frequency and routes are just that: limited. Private bus services and taxis are prohibitively expensive. Private buses typically cost \$20 per round trip for intermunicipal routes, and taxis can run to \$40 or more.

In short, job seekers without personal transportation face major obstacles getting to and from work. Buses operate infrequently and at awkward times. Routes may not run close to where people live or work. Connections are poor or non-existent. Travel times can be unbearably long. A resident of Port Colborne working in Niagara might have to choose between paying \$5 for a four-hour, round-trip transit ride or \$40 for two 15-minute cab rides.

The resulting dilemma has been documented by employment support agencies:

- 87% of participants in St. Catharines and Welland YMCA employment assistance programs lack transportation to Niagara Falls for employment
- 70% of participants in the YMCA Women's Resource Centre do not have transportation and therefore find it difficult to access employment opportunities outside St. Catharines
- 80% of participants at Niagara College's Summer Job Service Program indicate it would be difficult for them to access transportation to Niagara Falls for summer employment

A survey of Niagara participants in Ontario Works, the provincial welfare-to-work program, identified the lack



of transportation as the factor mentioned most often by respondents when asked about barriers to employment. Fully 80% said that they faced some form of transportation barrier to finding work (Regional Municipality of Niagara, 2004: 6).

Getting to work has traditionally been seen as the employee's responsibility. Gaping service holes and convoluted transit pathways in Niagara have made getting to work impractical – and, in some cases, impossible.

### ***Untying the Knots***

While Opportunities Niagara became an important partner in the Job Bus initiative, the initial impetus came from people in the business sector.

#### *Getting started*

In the early part of this decade, Niagara's tourism industry was in the midst of rapid growth and struggled to meet its labour needs. Ironically, many employers had begun looking offshore for workers even while local unemployment rates were soaring.

To support local tourism, Niagara College created the Niagara Tourism Human Resource Council with an initial grant from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. As Council coordinator, Nancy Sutton was well aware of the apparent employment/transportation contradiction and was determined to resolve it. Her many contacts within the tourism sector, government, and community employment agencies helped her arrive at a possible solution.

One of Nancy's contacts was Jennifer Guarasci, Human Resources Director for the Niagara 21st Group, a consortium of Niagara Falls food, accommodation, and entertainment providers. Jennifer knew firsthand how much time,



energy, and paperwork it took to hire offshore workers and how costly it was to arrange their health-care coverage and accommodations. Hiring offshore workers also went against the grain of an organization that prided itself on contributing to its community. Says Jennifer: “Our clear preference is to hire locally.”

In fact, all but one of the elements of a local hiring solution were already in place. For years, a robust network of government, community, and business partners had collaborated to help social assistance recipients and other job seekers find work. They had established a comprehensive pathway to employment: assessment, readiness, recruitment, training, and on-the-job support. The one missing stepping-stone was appropriate transportation.

Nancy Sutton and Jennifer Guarasci developed a practical solution for the Niagara 21st Group’s offshore/onshore dilemma: a Job Bus that would take people from parts of the region experiencing high unemployment to Niagara Falls. Transportation costs would be shared by workers and the employer, Marriott Fallsview Hotel.

### *Putting the pieces in place*

When Peter Papp, Executive Director of Opportunities Niagara, heard what Nancy and Jennifer were considering, he offered to help. Gregarious, engaging, and well-connected, Peter was ideally suited to advancing the Job Bus project. He was a City councillor of the Town of Pelham. Before joining Opportunities Niagara, he worked in the Region’s Social Services Department. He was highly regarded for his ability to bring people together to make things happen.

Peter was also familiar with the regional transportation issue and had long been committed to finding a solution. He knew that the Job Bus would demonstrate the benefits



of collaboration and would give new energy to the all-but-stalled efforts to advance intermunicipal transit in Niagara.

Peter and Opportunities Niagara members helped make some of the practical arrangements to bring the Job Bus initiative into reality. Peter secured the support of the Mayor of Welland, who agreed that the Welland Transit Authority should provide the required bus service. When the project nearly came to grief over the question of who would take financial responsibility for signing a contract with the Transit Authority, Peter secured Opportunities Niagara's agreement to bear the risk.

### ***The Pilot Project***

The Job Bus Pilot Project was officially launched in June 2005, just in time for the prime tourist season. Port Colborne and Welland were chosen as the first locations to be linked to Niagara Falls.

Both communities had been particularly hard hit by layoffs in the manufacturing sector, and their unemployment rates were above the regional average. Moreover, both were communities in which the lack of intermunicipal transit was known to be a major factor in preventing job seekers from securing work. Port Cares, a community organization that agreed to partner with the Job Bus, had earlier implemented its own makeshift transportation solution. Staff had bought an old van and used it drive their clients to work. Symbolically, perhaps, the van expired in early 2005. Port Cares was looking for another way to help its clients meet their transportation needs.

The Job Bus quickly became a model of comprehensive-ness and collaboration. Project partners met with employers and researched labour market opportunities. They developed a well-integrated set of supports and opportunities



that linked job seekers to available jobs. Niagara 21st Group supplied employment opportunities and onsite training. Positions included housekeeping and kitchen services; hourly wages ranged from \$8 to \$12 (the provincial minimum wage rate at the time was \$8 per hour). Community partners helped with promotion, worker recruitment, assessment, and training. Transit contracts, financing, and cost-sharing arrangements were established. Job Bus participants and the Niagara 21st Group shared the costs of providing the bus services. The Job Bus initiative unfolded in a series of steps:

1. Familiarization Tours: Employment counsellors were given hotel tours to become more familiar with the work environment, hiring requirements, and job expectations
2. Information Sessions: Two sessions were held to give prospective employees a clear understanding of job opportunities, job tasks, wages, hours of work, and working conditions. These sessions were also used to gauge both the demand for a transportation service and the willingness of prospective employees to share the costs of a transportation service with the employer
3. Pre-screening Interviews: Employment counsellors conducted individual interviews to assess each individual's readiness for employment and potential to sustain employment. Specific interview themes included eagerness and willingness to secure and sustain employment; physical ability and workload capacity; availability; and self-perceived work ethic. Job seekers could discuss employment support needs, such as clothing, child care, and any disability-associated resource requirements. They were also offered additional interview and job preparation workshops



4. Employer Interviews: Staff from the Niagara 21st Group's Human Resources Department interviewed applicants from among the pre-screened prospects
5. Onsite Training: Employees received training, guidance, and ongoing support through the learning phase and their progress was continually monitored throughout the training contract

Results from the six-month pilot project were promising. Ninety percent of the information session participants expressed an interest in attending a pre-screening interview. Of those, 40 participants were referred to the employer and 34 were granted employment interviews. In the end, 17 job seekers secured employment and 80% of them retained their employment for the full tourist season (June to November), a significant improvement on the typical 65% retention rate.

Most importantly, the project proved that by working collaboratively, regional partners could meet the challenge of operating an efficient and affordable intermunicipal transportation strategy. The Job Bus proved that a solution could be found to what had seemed to be an unsolvable problem.

### ***Scaling Up***

Building on the pilot's success, the Region's Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities Division agreed to seek funding to further explore the potential of the Job Bus.

Fuelled by \$150,000 in funding obtained from Ontario Works' Employment Innovation Fund, a second round of Job Bus activity proceeded. When government funding for the Niagara Tourism Human Resource Council wound down, Opportunities Niagara agreed to be the project lead; Nancy Sutton joined its staff as the Job Bus coordinator.



The goals of the project's second round were to involve more employers and evaluate the initiative more systematically. Funding was structured to mitigate the risks faced by employers. Over the first three months, the project would cover the full costs of the bus. In the next three months, costs would be shared by the project and employers. By month seven, employers would assume the full expense, less a fare paid by employees. An important aspect of the initiative was to determine whether the Job Bus could remain viable without ongoing government funding.

In 2006 and 2007, the Job Bus succeeded in expanding its operations. The Niagara 21st Group remained an important partner, continuing to hire workers through the Job Bus initiative. The project added new routes to link workers in Fort Erie and St. Catharines with jobs at the Hilton Hotel in Niagara Falls, the Convergys Call Centre, and a horticulture operation in Virgil.

In 2008, a partnership was struck with the Niagara Parks Commission. The organization initiated a summer-time Youth Job Bus to help parks maintenance workers travel from one location to the next.

In all, more than 200 unemployed residents secured employment through the Job Bus effort.

Even though the overall expansion of the program was seen as confirmation of the Job Bus concept, an evaluation conducted on behalf of the Region's Community Services Department also identified some limits. First, coordinating and promoting the program were seen as difficult logistical and management tasks. It was challenging for a small operation like Opportunities Niagara to keep pace with the work that was required. Second, it was clear that the overall initiative was more successful with some employers than



others. Lackluster employee retention rates in the call centre and horticulture facility show transportation to be just one of a number of factors that affect longer-term employment outcomes. Finally, while some employers were prepared to assume the financial costs of operating the Job Bus, others were not. Several reported that they would need transportation subsidies to maintain their involvement.

Notwithstanding these deeper challenges, the Job Bus evaluation showed encouraging results (MacDuff, 2005). Commissioned by the Region's Department of Community Services, the evaluation focused on the experience of participants receiving social assistance through Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program. It found that:

- 40 individuals secured employment through the Jobs Bus initiative; 43% of this group moved off social assistance altogether
- 60% of all workers retained employment for at least three months
- 90% were assessed by their employer to have improved their employment skills
- 42% received a pay raise during their term of employment

The strategy of developing a program to address multiple barriers to employment, specifically in cooperation with organizations with a strong interest in the project's success, was effective. According to Sarah Pennisi, Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities Director, the 43% rate of Job Bus participants who left social assistance was more than double the rate of conventional programs. Furthermore, the fact that so many participants secured immediate raises in their already above-poverty-line wages may help them buck the typical pattern of social assistance recipi-



ents: Canadian studies show that approximately 20-50% of people who leave social assistance eventually return because of the poor quality of their jobs, for example, earnings, benefits, and training (Pennisi, 2011).

As a program, therefore, the Job Bus initiative showed real promise. From the outset, however, many of its proponents recognized that the larger question was whether they could build on these initial successes to help a larger number of people achieve and sustain an even deeper reduction in poverty. On the “supply side” of the equation, the program assisted approximately 2.5% of the region’s social assistance recipients; many more might have benefitted from a similarly targeted employment program. On the “demand side,” the program went only a small way toward filling the large number of vacancies in the Region’s growing tourism and service sector during the same time period. Simply put, how do you “scale up” something that seems to work for so many organizations and people?

### ***Untying Bigger Knots***

Part of the solution to achieving a greater scale of impact was to get at the structural challenges related to employment barriers. And the first stop was the regional transportation system.

Work on the Job Bus proceeded on two fronts: the day-to-day effort to operate and expand the project, and a longer-term effort to raise awareness about the issue and promote action on the part of municipal and regional policy makers. In general, it saw the Job Bus pilot as a catalyst for systems change.

The challenge, of course, was that intermunicipal transportation had proven itself to be an intractable problem. Like other such problems, regional transit in Niagara is



both socially and technically complex. Socially, it involves a wide range of stakeholders with diverse and sometimes divergent perspectives: people with personal transportation and people without; municipalities with established public transit systems and those with none; private bus and taxi operators; employers who are willing and able to defray the costs of transportation for their workers and others who are not; workers, students, senior citizens, people with disabilities with somewhat different transportation needs; individuals who simply prefer public transit or see it as vital for environmental reasons. All of these interests and others add to the tangle of technical issues: system design, ridership levels, governance, and costs.

In short, the need for intermunicipal transit is great but not for everyone; the costs of proceeding are large but so are the costs of doing nothing; and the repercussions of not acting are relatively clear but the implications of moving forward are in many ways unknown. All in all, a recipe for inaction.

In this context, the Job Bus helped to shine a light on the dilemma experienced by many job seekers and employers in the Region: People were looking for work and work was looking for people, but, because of a lack of transportation, never the twain could meet. The Job Bus seemed to infuse fresh energy into the debate. In government circles and in the media, the bus was heralded for demonstrating the desirable outcomes that are achievable when the missing link of intermunicipal transit was provided.

In due course, after a couple of false starts, this fresh energy contributed to modest but significant advances.

In the spring of 2007, Peter Papp and Opportunities Niagara members continued their efforts to build awareness



and interest in an intermunicipal transportation strategy. The Mayor of Welland submitted a resolution that the three existing transit authorities (St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, and Welland) jointly submit a letter of interest to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Green Municipal Fund.

In June of that year, the Region's Transportation Steering Committee passed this resolution, sent a letter of intent to FCM, and was invited to submit a project proposal. Committee members agreed that Opportunities Niagara should shepherd the application process. Says Peter Papp: "Relationships among regional municipalities and the regional government itself can be difficult, so it seemed logical to appoint an organizing body that was seen as neither a lower- nor an upper-tier player. Once plans were put into effect, however, we anticipated that either the Region, a municipality, or a third party coalition would operate the new intermunicipal transportation system."

For a year, the \$3.2 million funding request to buy five buses and begin building an intermunicipal transit system hung in the balance. In the end, a deal failed to materialize.

Regional Chair Peter Partington continued to affirm that intermunicipal transit was the Niagara Region's top priority. In the spring of 2009, the Region put substance to these words by announcing a three-phase study of the issue.

Finally, on June 23, 2010, a modest breakthrough: Regional councillors voted to invest \$3.7 million in buses for the three existing transit authorities in Welland, St. Catharines, and Niagara Falls, and to transfer about \$2.7 million annually in operating costs to these transit authorities. This support for the local municipalities was intended to improve bus services between these three cities and to smaller communities such as Fort Erie and Pelham. While it was a relatively small move toward a full-fledged regional



transit system, some who watched the vote that night called the decision historic.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the Job Bus initiative demonstrated the viability of intermunicipal transportation and its importance in helping people get to work, and, in the process, gave fresh impetus to the drive for regional transit. At the same time, by filling the gap in the chain of supports for the unemployed and by showing the value of working simultaneously at the programmatic and systemic levels, the Job Bus also illustrated the potential of taking a comprehensive approach to complex issues.

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## CHAPTER 2

# FAIR FARES IN CALGARY



Calgary's efforts to establish affordable transportation options for people with disabilities and low incomes demonstrate that some of poverty's causes and effects may be judged more important than others. If addressed as individual issues, they can create a chain reaction of positive change in other areas.

Income or getting a job is the central problem of poverty, which, if resolved, makes it easier to address other related issues (e.g., housing, food, health). In Calgary, organizers determined that by improving access to public transit, they could enhance a person's potential to find and secure a job, access services, and play a part in the daily life of a community. By offering opportunities for connection and belonging, they could help improve people's economic circumstances and relieve the isolation and loneliness that can accompany urban living.

A Calgary advertisement that challenged people to consider the merits of affordable transportation features a photo of a mother and two young daughters waiting inside a transit shelter as a commuter train rushes past them. The



designer (Anardako Canada Corporation, a VCC partner) used shades of blue only, offering the viewer a wintry, wind-swept reminder that, with apologies to Tom Wolfe, some people just can't get on the bus. If you're on the bus, you're going somewhere. If you're not on the bus, you're staying put.

A lack of efficient, affordable transportation is a serious contributor to the wintry feeling of social exclusion. In 1998, two determined people in Calgary began a campaign to convince City Council to set up a low income transit pass for low-wage earners living with disabilities. Little did they know the chain of events they were setting in motion by telling personal stories.

### ***Vibrant Communities Calgary***

In 2002, the United Way of Calgary and Area created the Sustained Poverty Reduction (SPR) Working Group to address the root causes of poverty. A group of regional leaders was cultivated as a support for the fledgling group. The intention was to allow the leaders and SPR Working Group to inform and inspire each other. As its activities evolved, however, the Working Group gradually established a life of its own. Now known as the Steering Committee, its members led several Action Teams.

By late 2004, it was agreed that the Steering Committee should establish itself as a distinct initiative; it subsequently was named Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC). This decision led to the development of a defining organizational characteristic: VCC adherents recognized that they would need to continually monitor the poverty reduction landscape to determine which groups were active and in which areas they could be most effective. They would adjust their focus and energies according to their read of potential



gaps, assessing them for their potential to generate long-term impacts in multiple areas.

Early aspirations were bold and focused on eliminating poverty completely. The group was greatly influenced by the “social determinants of health” framework. This comprehensive lens on health and poverty emphasizes (a) the interdependency of multiple factors underlying poverty and (b) the “systems” underlying poverty, such as public policy and attitudes (<[www.health.qld.gov.au](http://www.health.qld.gov.au)>).

While still housed at the United Way, staff experimented with this approach on a policy-change pilot. The Province had announced a review of its Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program, aimed at influencing the provincial government’s planned changes to income support programs for persons with severe disabilities (Makhoul, 2006). In creating a roundtable with broad membership from among the disabilities community, the AISH initiative served as an effective learning laboratory. The roundtable’s final recommendations to the Province were received and helped confirm the direction of the Province’s planned amendments to the program. It also helped establish VCC’s reputation as a capable and collaborative convening organization (Makhoul, 2006).

Now operating independently of – though often in coordination with – the United Way of Calgary and Area, VCC continued its focus on grassroots organization and attention to politically sensitive issues such as promoting the adoption of a living wage. Such issues might more readily be taken up a social planning council, but the lack of such a body in Calgary allowed VCC the space to define a twin focus for its systems change work: It would build public awareness about poverty and advocate for the policy changes necessary to reduce or eliminate it.



VCC quickly evolved into an entrepreneurial policy change group. The group worked to become the “go to” organization for anything to with poverty. Soon it was actively involved in a wide range of municipal and provincial policy discussions, including transportation, living wages, workforce development issues, secondary suites, and eligibility criteria for City services. Its ability to connect rapidly with and mobilize diverse players – particularly individuals and networks of persons living with low incomes – provided an extra level of “street credibility” not enjoyed by other more established but less connected groups such as the City or United Way.

The group’s organizing ability, plus its relentless attention to using media (most recently emphasizing social media) to inform and rally the Calgary public on the issue of poverty, prompted one observer to refer to them as a “21st-century social planning council.”

### ***The Challenge of Affordable Transportation***

Though empirical evidence is scarce, there is general agreement that a lack of safe, convenient, affordable transportation alternatives leads to an interlocking set of circumstances that impact the quality of a citizen’s life (Gaffron, Hine, and Mitchell, 2001). People who are “transportation disadvantaged” have more difficulty accessing education, employment, and affordable goods, which reduces their ability to improve their socioeconomic circumstances. A lack of transportation options makes it difficult for them to access medical appointments, places of worship, recreational activities, family, and social networks. This leads to a sense of social exclusion, which saps their spirit and discourages them from accessing the opportunities that *are* available to them.



Studies show that while owning a personal vehicle may be the best way to secure and maintain employment, the cost of ownership is too great a burden for many people living on low incomes. Economically disadvantaged people benefit from urban planning options that support walking or cycling and from transportation alternatives that include public transportation, taxis, para-transit, ride sharing, and vehicle sharing.

Thanks to Calgary's booming economy, the median income of a household in the City in the early 2000s was more than \$10,000 higher than in any other city in Canada. Unfortunately, not all residents were sharing in Calgary's success. Statistics showed that the wealthiest 10% of households had an average annual income of \$248,600 in 2001, compared with \$13,000 for the poorest 10% of households. The City of Calgary's records show that in 2003, 17.2% of residents (161,000 people) lived below Statistics Canada's before-tax low income cut-off.

Bonnie Pacaud's experience of poverty in childhood, and her efforts to integrate an older sister with Down's syndrome into the community of Lethbridge after 25 years in a provincial institution, shaped her personal and career paths. She became concerned about the links between disability, low income, and transportation after her move to Calgary in the late 1990s. She had served on a provincial committee that studied issues affecting people with developmental disabilities. Colleen Huston had worked with the City of Calgary's Social Services Department, providing transportation services to people with disabilities. The two women helped form the Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes in 1998.

Says Bonnie: "A transit pass was part of the larger issue of allowing people the means to make a positive contribution



to their society. When people who live with low incomes or who have a disability cannot get to work or volunteer opportunities, we rob both them and ourselves of the gifts and talents they have to share.” The committee established the goal of achieving affordable bus passes for all low income people living with disabilities in Calgary.

In the course of putting together a discounted transit pass proposal, the committee worked closely with agency representatives and people living on low income. These groups became supporters of the committee’s work and their members provided many personal stories of the barriers people faced as a result of poor transportation access. Next, the committee built a wider community of support among aldermen, City employees, and community organizations. In 2002, it helped shape an Alberta Urban Municipalities Association resolution asking the Province to establish a subsidized monthly transit pass program for low income Albertans.

Albertans with severe disabilities may qualify for a monthly income from the provincial government. The Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) program has come under fire from the disabilities community numerous times. Though considered innovative when it was established in 1978, it has been criticized for low levels of support, restrictive earning rules, and a lack of integration with other income security programs. (Today it distributes \$1,188 per month to recipients.)



### WHAT'S RIDING ON TRANSPORTATION

The Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes worked with municipal officials in Red Deer, Edmonton, and Calgary. The City of Edmonton subsequently approved a pilot project for a low income bus pass and passed a resolution to work with the Province on subsidized fares for AISH recipients. Today, Edmonton fully funds a discounted transit pass for AISH recipients; that decision is reviewed annually at budget time. Monthly passes are \$32 (compared with the regular fare of \$80) and may be used only for regular bus service. The government of Alberta's only involvement to date has been to verify whether a resident is an AISH recipient.

In 2003, committee members began meeting with MLAs to build more support for subsidized transportation. They organized public rallies and demonstrations and prepared video testimonials from people living in poverty. As part of a local publicity campaign, Calgary residents were asked to write letters to City aldermen and MLAs about the benefits of a low income bus pass.

Meanwhile, the City's Community Services department adopted a triple-bottom-line filter – economic, environmental, and social – for its operations in 2004. Fair Calgary provided a lens through which municipal services could be judged to be equitable and fair. For the first time, the City's transit plan described the social issues associated with transportation. The affordable transportation planets were aligning at last. "There was some serendipity to getting the results we got. Fair Calgary really helped," says Colleen Huston, committee co-originator and now Fair Fares Action Team co-chair.

Through its many efforts, the committee won the sympathy and support of several aldermen and was widely praised



by provincial government representatives for its ability to communicate the concerns of a diverse community. But the years were passing and Bonnie Pacaud was concerned that the affordable transportation issue might never be resolved.

### ***Restating the Problem, Driving for Success***

VCC's research showed that of 161,000 Calgarians living on low income in 2003, 55% used transit regularly (more than three times per week). With the exception of seniors who already had a discounted fares program, many low income people found the cost of public transportation prohibitive. At this time, AISH recipients were receiving \$855 per month for living expenses and could not afford to purchase a \$70 monthly bus pass.

VCC agreed with the committee's earlier assertion that lack of affordable access to the public transit system was a major contributor to poverty and social exclusion in Calgary. They wanted to make it easier for people to get everywhere they needed (and wanted) to go.

Capitalizing on its new name, refreshed leadership, and the exciting policy-alignment possibilities suggested by the City's adoption of the Fair Calgary lens, Fair Fares got busy on a new publicity campaign. Building on the original committee's first letter-writing campaign, the Action Team asked its members to distribute 2,000 mother-and-daughters postcards and ask residents to write to their individual aldermen. Says team co-chair Colleen Huston: "The postcards were a tangible demonstration that funders, donors, socially conscious politicians, social service organizations, and people living in poverty favoured the creation of reduced fare passes for low income residents." At Council meetings in the spring of 2005, aldermen reported receiving hundreds of postcards and many letters in support of Fair Fares.



The Action Team realized partial success when the City implemented a Low Income Transit Pass (LITP) program for 2,000 Calgarians in receipt of the AISH benefit. Beginning in August 2005, qualified applicants could purchase a monthly transit pass for \$35, half the full fare. In January 2006, the program was expanded to all adult Calgarians with incomes lower than 75% of the low income cut-off.

While these developments were important, they did not include either a provincial role or a long-term sustainability plan. The estimated \$2 million amount that it would cost to provide the passes until the end of 2006 was to be drawn from the City's Fiscal Stability Reserve Fund.

Two aldermen joined the Fair Fares Action Team in January 2006 as a way to advance the work being done to secure provincial funding for Calgary's LITP. Another letter-writing campaign, meetings with the Calgary MLA caucus, and a presentation to the provincial Standing Policy Committee on Education and Employment were all aimed at encouraging a provincial role in affordable transportation. No one in Edmonton appeared to be listening.

Meanwhile, Fair Fares kept the pressure on Calgary to make the pilot LITP program into a line item in its regular budget, which it did in November 2008, three and a half years after the discounted passes were first introduced. By mid-2009, Vibrant Communities Calgary felt that it had accomplished its original goal and moved on to other poverty reduction initiatives.

Bonnie Pacaud and other members of the original committee continue to work at increasing public awareness of the LITPs and changing what they feel are restrictive purchasing conditions.



## Results

A monthly bus pass in Calgary costs \$75; the Low Income Transit Pass is half this amount, or \$37.50 per month. That amount, though small, can mean the difference between eating and going hungry; it can mean making and keeping a medical appointment and being able to afford a prescription. It translated into an annual savings of \$450, or 3% of the annual income for a single person living at the low income threshold of \$15,253. In 2008, Calgary Transit reported that of the 35,000 eligible to apply for the pass, approximately 10,000 had applied and approximately 5,000 of them purchased a pass each month (a total savings of \$2.1 million per year).

Vibrant Communities Calgary joined the Fair Fares initiative partly because its members recognized the social and economic benefits that affordable transportation could make possible. For individuals, getting access to health care, education, employment, and social opportunities is vital to citizenship and the enjoyment of urban life. For employers, adequate transportation helps bring more people to work and reduces employee turnover. More people in stable employment means more tax revenue and lower social assistance payments for governments.

An August 2007 survey of 400 LITP users found that before the passes were instituted, 63% of them used transit fewer than eight times a week. After the passes became available, 81% used transit eight or more times a week. The following table provides a breakdown of transit use among LITP holders.

**Table 3: Type of Trip for Which Calgary Transit Was Used**

Type of trip	% of Respondents		
	Before Pass (n=137)	After Pass (n=289)	Difference
To go to social/recreational/ cultural activities*	45	63	18
To go to volunteer activities*	24	41	17
To go to the doctor/dentist, etc.*	64	75	11
To travel to work*	57	67	10
To shop for groceries*	50	60	10
To shop for other items	61	69	8
To attend religious meetings or services	27	34	7
To attend school/training, etc.	50	56	6
To visit friends or family	61	64	3
To look for employment/go to interviews	52	52	0

The survey also found that the pass had helped most users save money or buy things they needed. Many reported being able to get out more to socialize and access school and work. Getting and keeping a job was easier for half the group; 48% said they were able to volunteer more often. In all, 97% reported that their lives were better as a result of the discounted passes.

**Table 4: Perceived Benefits of the Low Income Transit Pass – Aided**

Statements	% of Respondents		
	Agree	Disagree	Total
You have more money to buy things or save when you have the Low Income Transit Pass (n=396)	90	10	100
You visit family and friends more often when you have the Low Income Transit Pass (n=396)	62	38	100
You go to medical appointments in Calgary more often when you have the Low Income Transit Pass (n=387)	60	40	100
You were able to keep a job because you had the Low Income Transit Pass (n=391)	59	41	100
You take more training/educational classes when you have the Low Income Transit Pass (n=388)	55	45	100
You found employment (or better employment) when you had the Low Income Transit Pass (n=382)	49	51	100
You volunteer more often when you have the Low Income Transit Pass (n=389)	48	52	100

### ***From Personal Stories to Wider Conversations***

Besides the economic and social benefits of the initiative, Fair Fares created a space for low income people to tell their stories and raised the profile of poverty issues among City administrators. Michelle Kristinson, Government and Community Relations Manager with the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada (Calgary chapter), worked on both the AISH and Fair Fares initiatives. “Fair Fares really increased



the profile of low income people and it brought together many organizations that don't usually work together. The MS Society works mostly on health-related issues, and Fair Fares helped us to better appreciate the links between income and well-being.”

In May 2006, Fair Fares was awarded the Community Spirit Award of Distinction from the Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary. The award recognizes organizations that have come together to create approaches to community development and inclusion that none of them could have accomplished alone.

### **Lessons Learned**

Vibrant Communities Calgary organizers can point to at least ten success ingredients for groups considering systemic change initiatives to consider.

1. Lodge the initiative within an organization that has the administrative capacity and persistence to support the initiative and see it through to a satisfactory conclusion
2. Recruit multiple sectors as partners in the work
3. Nurture relationships with people of influence – both supporters and naysayers
4. Take the conversation to other municipalities, municipal organizations, and provincial government representatives, as appropriate
5. Blend the passion of advocacy with economic and social arguments in order to keep as many people engaged in the conversation as possible
6. Regularly acknowledge, thank, and inform partners and allies of the work's progress



7. Involve the people most closely impacted: low income earners and the organizations that work with them. This includes tailoring messages to specific groups according to language and ability levels
8. Use personal stories to heighten media and public awareness of the realities of poverty
9. Brand the initiative in a way that succinctly communicates the initiative's message to other audiences
10. Evaluate the impact of early successes and share the results of the evaluation among partners and people of influence

The success of its AISH and Fair Fares work lent weight and heft to VCC's reputation as an organization capable of building successful collaborations. Its ability to help keep poverty on the public agenda has been proven over time. It continues to enliven the poverty reduction conversation, most recently by instituting an energetic social media communications plan.

VCC took advantage of this new-found clout to begin addressing other issues related to poverty. Parallel to its Fair Fares Action Team, it established a Living Wage Action Team in 2003 to help create awareness of full-time adult workers in Calgary who were living in poverty. VCC went on to join the No Sweat Coalition in 2005. This grassroots advocacy group had worked with the City of Calgary for several years to build support for fair wage municipal purchasing and contracting agreements. The coalition continued to advocate for the adoption of a Sustainable Ethical and Environmental Purchasing Policy (SEEPP), which Calgary passed in 2007. VCC's Living Wage Action Team continued its work, and, in 2009, the City came within one vote of



adopting a living wage proposal for its own and its contracted employees.

In early 2010, VCC opted to take over the management of a collaborative civic engagement project, Poverty Talks!, launched jointly by the Calgary and District Labour Congress and the Alberta College of Social Workers. Its original intent was to give people who live in poverty the leadership skills and information they need to become involved in the electoral process, while raising the public's awareness of poverty issues. Says current VCC Director Dan Meades: "Our capacity and credibility in the areas of government relations and poverty reduction were greatly enhanced by Fair Fares. Poverty Talks! is a good example of how one initiative builds to the next."

But was it enough to reduce the city's poverty level to zero, the aspiration of the early VCC founders? Members of Vibrant Communities Calgary began more frequently to hear two messages that made them rethink their strategy of focusing on single "strategic opportunities."

First, many in the general public felt that the successful implementation of the City's well-publicized (and much-needed) ten-year plan to reduce homelessness would result in substantial reductions in the City's poverty. In fact, the 4,000-strong Calgary homeless represent a small fraction of the 150,000 people who live below the low income cut-off. Ending homelessness was important but by itself would not reduce poverty, nor affect the "pipeline" of vulnerable people who often end up homeless.

Second, though VCC's work on issues such as AISH, Fair Fares, and Living Wage was viewed as important, VCC leaders heard repeatedly, from the supportive and sceptical alike, that these single-issue initiatives would not be able to



significantly reduce city poverty rates by themselves. It was becoming apparent the community needed a more ambitious and comprehensive plan that focused exclusively on the bigger challenge of poverty.

The opportunity to take poverty reduction work in Calgary to the next level arrived in mid-2010 with the onset of municipal elections. VCC members met with the majority of 115 candidates for alderman and mayor over the spring, summer, and autumn, and made the case to each of them that a municipal poverty plan for Calgary should be a priority. A September 2010 meeting facilitated by VCC allowed the 12 mayoral candidates to present their platforms to a packed hall of 300 voters and gave voters the opportunity to ask each one publicly whether they would support a poverty reduction strategy. All of the front-runners – including the soon-to-be-elected Naheed Nenshi – agreed that they would do so.

In June 2011, Mayor Nenshi confirmed his commitment to moving forward on Good Idea #10 of his official platform: a municipal poverty reduction strategy. As of the publication of this book, Calgary City Council has approved a grant to create a secretariat that will help develop and implement a municipal poverty reduction strategy. Calgary will be the first major city in western Canada to take such a bold step and one of few to do so in all of Canada.

## **Conclusion**

Fair Fares has one focus: to achieve a discounted bus pass for people in Calgary who are living on low incomes. It has demonstrated that even a single-focus initiative can generate positive outcomes in many parts of people's lives. It also affirms the value of persistence. Says Bonnie Pacaud: "Because this wasn't a funded program, we were able to



keep working on it for ten years. We didn't get pulled away by things like program funding changes." Colleen Huston points out that the LITP issue benefitted because it was clearly identifiable and tangible. "Nobody was working to provide a discounted bus pass until the Committee and Fair Fares came along. This initiative filled a key gap in a range of other community initiatives already taking place."

Fair Fares took place at a time when the City of Calgary had begun to look at its own operations from a poverty reduction perspective. Its Fair Calgary lens helped shift attitudes about what causes people to live in poverty and what keeps them there; transportation came to be seen to be an important component of social and economic inclusion.

A key outstanding question is whether improved access to transportation and its attendant ripple effects will be able to achieve broad, deep, and durable reductions in poverty. The transit pass will certainly benefit a large number of Calgarians. Colleen and Bonnie's work to ease restrictive purchasing conditions may eventually help all 35,000 eligible Calgarians to purchase LITPs. Durability has been achieved through the City's bold decision to embed the benefits in Calgary's permanent budget.

Whether the impact of Fair Fares is "deep" depends on your perspective. The reduction of monthly passes to \$37.50 may appear to be only a small drop in a family's economic bucket, but two \$20 bills are a big deal when many low income residents live on approximately \$1,000 a month. The benefits of improved access to services, training, and jobs, as well as improved mental well-being from knowing you can get around, are difficult to measure.

The bigger success of Fair Fares initiative, however, is its contribution to the emergence of a broader poverty reduc-



tion strategy in the City that seems to have gained a type of self-refuelling momentum year after year. As a result, the recipients of Fair Fares may soon have a lot more help breaking the poverty trap that governs much of their lives.

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## CHAPTER 3

# BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE IN MONTRÉAL

### ***Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé***

If you have been fortunate enough to spend some time in Montréal, you may be familiar with the French expression *joie de vivre*. Between comedy and jazz festivals, the cafés on Saint-Denis, late-night poutine, and fond (though the distant) memories of Stanley Cup parades, Montréalers know how to have fun. But as with any urban metropolis in the 21st century, all is not rosy. Globalization has hit former industrial and manufacturing districts and hit them hard. In little more than a generation, immigration has radically changed the demographics of many neighbourhoods. And the gap between rich and poor has grown over the past two decades, leaving half a million people living in poverty in Greater Montréal (Centraide, 2010).

The former City of Saint-Michel has faced a harder time than most Montréal neighbourhoods. Though faced with social and economic decline, local agencies and residents in this district of Montréal have taken action over the past





20 years to build what is now a highly structured, strongly collaborative approach to neighbourhood revitalization. Focused on poverty reduction, they are motivated by a shared dream of a neighbourhood not just of *joie de vivre*, but also a neighbourhood *où il fait bon vivre*, where it is good to live. This is their story.

## **Background**

Until the end of the 19th century, Saint-Michel was a vast countryside of a scattered agricultural lands. The inauguration of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the introduction of the electric tramway, and the opening of several quarries led to gradual population growth in the area. It wasn't until after the Second World War that the region flourished, with the construction of the Metropolitan Highway attracting new industries and its two major quarries employing many new workers. With thriving manufacturing and textile sectors, the population grew from 6,000 to 68,000 residents in under 20 years (Ville de Montréal, 2011).

But economic changes and the impacts of deindustrialization took a toll on the area. The closure of the quarries and political problems with municipal administration led to political and economic decline. Following a referendum, Saint-Michel was merged with the City of Montréal in 1968. Social and economic conditions in the new neighbourhood failed to improve, so in 1991 community agencies organized a forum to look for ways to turn things around. More than 200 citizens and community organization representatives came together to imagine together what kind of neighbourhood they wanted to create to put Saint-Michel “back on the map.”

The result was *Vivre Saint-Michel en Santé* (VSMS), a multisector network that worked to improve the neigh-



bourhood's quality of life. Originally established as part of the Canada-wide Healthy Communities movement, VSMS began operating under a tripartite agreement in 1997 with the City of Montréal, Centraide of Greater Montréal, and Montréal's Office of Public Health. Through the 1990s, VSMS connected the neighbourhood's organizations and community workers and gradually became the reference point for community action. Joint efforts led to the creation of numerous new community groups to meet residents' needs. VSMS's greatest contribution was its ability to coordinate and align community, public-sector, and private-sector initiatives.

By the early 2000s, however, the community was losing its appetite for revitalization work. Despite many successes, poverty persisted. VSMS participants realized that their efforts had achieved new processes and structures that had improved the neighbourhood's quality of life, but that had not affected the conditions that contribute to poverty. Between 2000 and 2003, VSMS members began looking for new ideas to orient their work and directly improve living conditions in Saint-Michel. "It was like we were in a boat together," recalls community organizer Pierre Durocher. "The motor was running, but no one knew where the boat was going."

In 2003, VSMS's board commissioned a private-sector firm to develop a neighbourhood strategic plan. Not long after that, Centraide of Greater Montréal approached VSMS to explore the idea of joining Vibrant Communities, which effectively opened a door to new ideas and resources just when they were needed.



## **The Challenges**

As part of the process of joining Vibrant Communities, VSMS established a clear portrait of the issues facing Saint-Michel. Four research exercises were undertaken: a detailed socioeconomic profile of the neighbourhood, a telephone survey of 300 residents, a series of focus groups, and workshop discussions that were held during the first Grand Rendez-vous de quartier (Big Neighbourhood Meeting). The survey turned out to be an important contribution to the research process. For example, it gave residents the chance to prioritize the issues of security and cultural infrastructure, issues that had not been identified as significant by local agencies.

Eight major neighbourhood challenges were identified through this work, most notably the low incomes of individuals and families and the low quality of housing in the northern and eastern parts of Saint-Michel (Chantier, 2008: 9). The absence of interaction between local cultural communities and wider Québec society was also seen as a weakness and likely added to the insecurity felt by citizens in the evenings and through the night (half of survey respondents indicated that they were nervous about going out after dark).

Divided by a major highway, and separated by the former quarries, the neighbourhood was not improved by poor land-use planning in the post-war years. Industries had been established in residential areas, creating problems of noise, safety, and transportation. Worse, between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, the old Miron Quarry was used as a landfill, with heavy trucks visiting 1,500 times per day. This decision created problems with litter and odour, leading people to stigmatize Saint-Michel as a dumpsite.



The neighbourhoods' recreation and cultural facilities were identified as inadequate. Activities for adults, and especially for children and youth, were absent or lacking. In addition, residents and local business leaders were largely uninvolved in neighbourhood development issues. All of these weaknesses contributed to an overall sense – on the part of residents and other Montréalers alike, that Saint-Michel was poor and unattractive.

The neighbourhood's eight identified challenges were compounded by the district's highly mobile population: 40% of Saint-Michel's population changes every five years. By contrast, a neighbourhood that experiences low rates of turnover can build on its existing social capital. Planners and organizers realized that residents were voting with their feet: As their economic fortunes improved, they were moving up and out. If they could indeed make Saint-Michel a good place to live, lower mobility rates might be an effective measure of their success.

### ***The Response***

Underlying Saint-Michel's specific quality-of-life issues was the need of local and city-wide organizations to establish a shared understanding of the neighbourhood. The intensive and participatory research and planning exercise that began in 2003 was continued throughout 2004 and culminated in the release of a community strategic plan. This document proved to be a powerful motivating and direction-setting tool in the years that followed.

The plan's focus on poverty reduction gained immediate, widespread acceptance. "There wasn't even a debate," recalls Pierre Durocher. The plan proposed an Urban and Social Revitalization Task Force (Chantier de révilatisation urbaine et sociale), a consultative body that went far beyond



VSMS's original mandate. It also called for a more robust operational structure and a greater number and diversity of stakeholders. After some consideration, it was agreed that VSMS would be modified to fill the new attendant responsibilities. With that, a new era of work began.

The VSMS 2005-2008 Action Plan envisioned Saint-Michel as a pleasant area to live, conducive to family life and multicultural exchange – as an active community rooted in solidarity that would be responsible for its own development and for contributing to a thriving Montréal.

Four main areas of intervention were identified:

1. Training and employment to ensure an adequate income
2. Adequate, affordable housing
3. Diversified, quality, and accessible services, especially in the cultural, sports, leisure, and commercial sectors
4. Improved urban security

The key to success was to adopt a bold approach to community change. Rather than trying to obtain a few small successes or “early wins,” a strategy often used elsewhere, Le Chantier determined that limited action and small successes would not impress the community – that they would not signal a substantial change or provide enough hope. Local people had experienced ad hoc targeted initiatives and marginal progress over the years. These were judged insufficient to change the community's circumstances; they did not generate sufficient optimism.

VSMS decided, therefore, to “start with a bang” by rapidly involving more citizens and moving ahead on a score of initiatives. Organizers believed that citizen attention and subsequent involvement could be obtained only through a



broadly based, multi-project, multisector approach. Involvement would result in greater attachment to the neighbourhood and greater optimism, both of which were judged essential to community revitalization and a reduction in poverty.

VSMS and its partners quickly got down to business. They decided to work on 42 specific actions, and they established two cross-cutting themes for the work. VSMS would:

1. Rely on citizen participation and a strong collaborative process
2. Strengthen Saint-Michel as a cultural and tourist destination

The people in the boat had agreed on which way to go together. Now they had to organize themselves to get there.

### ***A Constellation of Clubs***

The new focus required new governance and operational structures. On the governance side, VSMS had about 30 active partners with a nine-seat board of directors in 2003. As part of its new action plan, the board was expanded to 21 seats, and in 2010 VSMS had more than 60 organizational members. Both numbers were seen as indicative of an expanded level of participation.

In operational terms, VSMS had previously used five operational “tables” that brought members together on specific themes. Although these did not correspond well with the priorities of the new plan, VSMS decided not to abolish them but rather to set up additional “clubs” based on the priorities in the plan.



<b>Tables (prior to 2003):</b>	<b>Clubs (after 2003):</b>
• Mental health	• Housing
• Children and families	• Income
• Food security	• Culture
• Seniors	• Security
• Youth action	• Sports and leisure
	• Commercial services
	• Citizen participation

Each of the tables and clubs is made up of between ten and 40 organizations and citizens from Saint-Michel, working on their priority issues as part of the overall Action Plan. Following a further restructuring of VSMS in 2006, the tables and clubs each select a representative who sits on the board of directors and is responsible for communications among the groups.

Key to actually carrying out a plan of 42 specific actions is recruiting individual organizations to each take the lead on one. VSMS members and partners are invited to take on specific projects in order to achieve the objectives identified in the Action Plan and pursued by the clubs. For example, the Centre éducatif communautaire René-Goupil created the Bureau info logement (housing information office), responding to a priority identified in VSMS's Action Plan. As part of the income intervention area, the community organization Objectif Jeunesse + offered a work experience program to 27 youth with learning difficulties in partnership with a local school. In 2010, each of the clubs had between four and nine project leads carrying out initiatives that contributed to VSMS's overall action plan.



While the first action plan was being undertaken, Saint-Michel was named an “integrated urban revitalization zone” by the City of Montréal. The neighbourhood was provided an additional \$100,000 in annual funding, which allowed VSMS to intensify its activities.

By 2005, VSMS’s leadership was able to begin articulating a theory of change and based it on two primary strategies: increasing the collective capacity for action, and acting simultaneously, in an integrated and comprehensive manner, on all of the neighbourhood’s significant weaknesses.

Collective capacity for action would be achieved by strengthening citizen participation and supporting the growth of local leadership, while ensuring strong and inclusive collaboration and mobilization among all internal and external neighbourhood partners. Together, these activities would attack the causes of poverty and increase synergy among distinct sectors (social, economic, sports, cultural, and business). Simultaneous action was seen as ambitious, but it kept partners and residents interested and engaged. Without a critical mass of engagement on the interconnected issues that Saint-Michel was facing, breaking the cycle of poverty seemed unlikely.

The 2005-2008 Action Plan was followed by a subsequent three-year plan for 2009-2012. The four key intervention areas were maintained, with additional efforts to help young people finish school (income intervention area); improve food and transportation services (services intervention area); and renew an emphasis on the cross-cutting strategic theme that focused on citizen participation. The number of actions was increased to 120 identified projects.

Among the numerous projects identified in each intervention area, the clubs and tables pursue those that are



their top priority, or those for which the resources or other opportunities to move forward can be found. Some projects can be completed rapidly, while others will continue over the life of the three-year plan. In early 2011, between 40 and 50 projects of the 120 in the plan were under way, which was considered the maximum that VSMS could effectively support and coordinate at any given time.

As the scale of its activity increased, VSMS was able to attract new resources to support its work. The annual budget grew from just under \$200,000 in 2003-2004 to \$1.2 million in 2010-2011: a six-fold increase in seven years. Dozens of projects were launched or completed. The range and scale of activities turned Saint-Michel into a virtual community-building work camp.

### ***Real Progress, Uncertain Impact***

The groups involved in VSMS had high hopes for the community plan. Since 2005, an astonishing number of residents working in various partnership clubs were actively involved in bettering their community. Between 2004 and 2008, 4,200 adults and 900 youth participated in various grassroots projects, while 100 people were involved in neighbourhood committees and in youth social action projects.

The programmatic results of their efforts are impressive. By 2010, some 30,000 households had benefitted from VSMS-related activities through improvements in employment, housing, recreation, and educational opportunities. (See Table 2.) This represents well over one-half of the district's population.

**Table 6: A Snapshot of Key VSMS Programmatic Results**

Area	Programmatic Results
Income	Two local employers committed to hiring 900 neighbourhood residents. Thirty-five young people of high school age who were facing difficulties were supported in job searches.
Housing	Partnerships with developers led to the creation of 170 units of affordable housing. Thirteen low income families were supported in the process of acquiring a residence, of which three have made purchases to date, thanks to the Property Access program.
Culture	More than 700 children were introduced to arts and culture through the Cirque du Soleil and the Montréal School Board's Arts Nomades program. Cultural activities were provided to 2,000 people, and 50 neighbourhood artists were promoted, highlighting the neighbourhood's cultural wealth.
Safety	A multisector urban security action plan was developed in collaboration with community organizations, the police, and municipal officials. The plan identifies 30 actions, such as organizing activities in public spaces and parks to reappropriate these spaces for community use.
Sports & Leisure	The Montréal School Board and the municipal district agreed to invest in the Louis-Joseph-Papineau sports, community, and cultural centre. A large business is committed to investing \$1 million in the creation of a multi-purpose centre in the eastern part of the neighbourhood. The Oser Jarry Development Corporation was created to revitalize Jarry Street and make it a new civic and commercial hub for Saint-Michel.

In several cases, the efforts have helped “move the needle” on some of the fundamental challenges of poverty in the community. The increase of 170 units represents is relatively modest in comparison with approximately 21,500 housing units in the community but is a significant increase in the critical stock of affordable housing. Similarly, the commitment of local employers to hire 900 local residents



will make an appreciable difference in a community boasting 22,425 employees, and the thousands more who dream of jobs close by.

Despite an impressive mobilization and scale of activities, VSMS is not altogether clear about the extent to which it has helped families and individuals to break their poverty traps. VSMS uses neither a casework approach, which focuses on supporting specific families over time, allowing them to track improvements or reversals in their lives, nor a cumulative impact assessment approach. Although anecdotal examples can be found of families benefitting from multiple services, staff are unsure whether these are exceptions or represent a broader pattern.

VSMS is currently working on a more in-depth evaluation methodology to better connect the work of the various tables and clubs. An analysis will help determine whether their actions benefitted households and advanced the overall strategic plan. In the meantime, the jury is still out on the number of people that have made significant progress in unravelling their poverty traps

The same uncertainty exists about whether VSMS-related actions have helped to create a tipping point in how residents view their community, and their confidence in its future. Informal feedback from residents indicates that they perceive that things are changing for the better. Majorie Villefrance, Director of Programs for Maison D'Haiti, sums up the feeling of many when she says: "One of our successes is the participation of the population in neighbourhood life. We are not only residents of Saint-Michel, we are citizens of Saint-Michel."



## **Lessons Learned**

In addition to making concrete changes in the well-being of a community, one of the bottom lines in community change efforts is how much local activists learn in the process. Here, the investment in VSMS has paid off in spades.

When VSMS jointed Vibrant Communities in 2005, members were in a position to significantly expand their on-the-ground work. Although the scale of mobilization in the neighbourhood has been remarkable, project leaders point to a number of key factors that influenced VSMS's development, and to lessons that have emerged from the experience.

### *Right place, right time*

The existing network structure of VSMS, in which trust and relationships had already been established, was an ideal framework to apply the Vibrant Communities model, scale up the collaborative approach, and focus on poverty reduction. Furthermore, because many of the local organizations were created by VSMS, which itself was born of a collaborative approach, this way of dealing with issues became more and more natural to the community-sector stakeholders in the neighbourhood.

Many social action groups in Québec have a different perspective on the role of government and the strategies that should be taken to improve conditions. Collaborating with government is a less familiar strategy than mobilizing, opposing government decisions, and confronting government for positive change. Collaboration has resulted in continuous negotiation among community-sector representatives, who vary their engagement styles according to the political context, the issues at hand, and the community-sector leadership involved.



### *Setting the table*

Taking the time to build agreement on a shared understanding of the issues and the priorities for action is fundamental to bringing a wide range of stakeholders together and engaging them in a common plan of action. VSMS partners and staff were unanimous that the in-depth research and neighbourhood strategic planning process laid an essential foundation for the joint action that followed.

### *Supported “learning in action” works best*

Developing a theory of change in collaboration with Vibrant Communities in 2004 was seen by VSMS members as putting the cart before the horse. VSMS had not yet delved into action and initiatives; it has preferred to allow the work to unfold, learning what worked and what didn't through a process of experimentation and comparison. Once VSMS had begun implementing their Action Plan in 2005, they were able to understand the meaning and usefulness of a theory of change and benefitted greatly from the process of creating one for VSMS. It has become a touchstone that guides their work and planning.

### *Doing it all at once is challenging*

Supporting a 21-member board while coordinating 12 clubs and tables that involve more than 100 organizations that are working simultaneously on dozens of projects is an enormous management and administrative challenge. The starting point for coordinating these activities is the shared Action Plan, in which each of the tables and clubs plays a role. In addition to a weekly newsletter, VSMS has put many processes in place to strengthen communication and coordination. But the evolution of initiatives, communication among partners, and even the financial management of multiple projects and funding sources is demanding, both



for VSMS and for all of the organizations involved in the plan.

According to Yves Lévesque, Executive Director of VSMS, “The trick is to not get focused on the management of everything.” Bureaucratizing VSMS’s activities would make the process too heavy and discourage partners. To succeed, VSMS has to be able to track what progress they can, while (a) sustaining the mobilization and energy that keeps partners at the table and (b) gradually building the accountability mechanisms and evaluation culture that will strengthen the collaborative approach.

#### *A multisector approach facilitates opportunism*

VSMS’s multisector work plan means there is a wider horizon of opportunities to leverage. For example, when the Québec government recently announced funding programs to support immigrant settlement and integration, VSMS had already identified priorities related to this issue in its Action Plan, making it easier for them to develop a proposal. More recent government attention on the issue of retaining youth in school offers VSMS a similar opportunity to apply for funding.

The more than 100 projects proposed in the 2009-2012 action plan provide a buffet of possibilities – more than can be addressed by VSMS and its partners. But the ambitious scope of the plan provides flexibility, allowing VSMS to concentrate on what is doable and seize on opportunities as they arise.

#### *Engaging the private sector is hard to do*

Project leaders concede that private-sector engagement is still one of the weaknesses of the Saint-Michel process. There have been strategic alliances in some sectors (e.g., with con-



tractors for housing projects and good connections with Cirque du Soleil). Even though the Vibrant Communities approach raised awareness of the importance of business involvement, no significant breakthrough with the private sector has been made. Larger businesses in Saint-Michel see their interests as more regional, provincial, or international, and smaller SMEs have limited resources.

Thanks to Centraide initiatives, there has been some success in generating interest among some of Montréal's biggest business leaders, but this has not yet translated into local business support. If current efforts to strengthen citizen participation are successful, they in turn may encourage the involvement of local businesses owners.

#### *Current challenges: evaluation and citizen participation*

VSMS's current priorities include improving evaluation processes and continuing to strengthen citizen participation. The assumption is that a continuous evaluation system will foster a culture of evaluation among all tables, clubs, and partners, making them the evaluators of their own effectiveness and helping them to look for the changes in social conditions that will fulfil VSMS's overall goal. Ongoing evaluation will focus not only on the results achieved by all partners, but also on the quality of collaborative processes. It is hoped that the information captured by the recent implementation, in the spring of 2011, of new evaluative tools will provide a better basis for selecting and orienting actions in the next strategic planning process expected in 2013.

Cultivating greater citizen participation has been a consistent strategic priority since the renewal of VSMS in 2004. Seven years ago, many of the organizations in the neighbourhood had gotten away from grassroots participation.



Training sessions, continuous outreach, and the development of local citizen leadership have resulted in higher rates of participation. In 2010, VSMS changed its bylaws to create a citizens' electoral college, which creates a category of membership for individual citizens, as distinct from members who represent organizations. Citizen members elect representatives to dedicated seats on the board. This way the number of citizen members can grow without threatening the governance of VSMS as a body that primarily coordinates local organizations.

### ***Where to from Here?***

VSMS is approaching the next major renewal of its community portrait and diagnosis. Eight years of working together on the same collective priorities means it is time for review, renewal, and refreshment. The timing for a new phase of VSMS's work is good, building on the celebrations that will be organized for the 100th anniversary of the founding of Saint-Michel, in 2012.

Though pleased with their accomplishments, VSMS members and partners have no illusions about the limits of what can be done by strategic neighbourhood action alone. Supportive policies and programs at regional and provincial levels are also needed, because the significant decisions that affect the broader social and economic environment are often taken there. VSMS leadership is increasingly working with other neighbourhood revitalization initiatives to push for change at these levels.

VSMS's approach, grounding ambitious action in a comprehensive plan for neighbourhood revitalization, was the natural next step in 2003. Addressing such a wide range of issues while seeking to build community capacity for action meant that the reach of VSMS activities may have



been long, but the significant impacts of the work done to date remain to be seen. Project proponents contend that the first ten years of the neighbourhood revitalization initiative is but a first stage, with much more significant changes to become visible in another five or six years. If residents begin staying in the neighbourhood because *où il fait bon vivre* – it is a good place to live – we will indeed see a new Saint-Michel, contributing to a more vibrant Montréal.

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## CHAPTER 4

# PROJECT COMEBACK IN SURREY

You never know just when a conversation may start that leads to an important community initiative. Project Comeback essentially began when a presenter at a 2004 forum sponsored by the Surrey Homelessness and Housing Task Force shared that he was working as a day labourer and that he was also homeless. For many at the forum, his story contradicted the notion that work and shelter went hand-in-hand.



For Susan Keeping and her colleague Saira Khan, the comment triggered concerns, which they brought back to their workplace, the Newton Advocacy Group Society. NAGS members soon expanded the circle of conversation by proposing to Vibrant Surrey that this was precisely the kind of issue that the recently formed roundtable could help to address.

### **Context**

Surrey, British Columbia, is one of the fastest-growing cities in Canada. Over the past decade, its population has



increased by nearly 25% – from 379,000 in 2001 to 472,000 in 2010. Similar growth is forecast for the next 20 years. Surrey is currently on track to overtake Vancouver as the Province’s largest city.

These population increases come at a price. Surrey’s social infrastructure is struggling to keep pace with high levels of unemployment and poverty among recent immigrants, youth, women, and Aboriginals. Though Surrey has a population only one-fifth smaller than Vancouver’s, it has one-eighth the number of social services, government agencies, and other mechanisms for social action.

Surrey has a highly complex physical and social landscape. It consists of six distinct communities and a city centre, and its population is socioeconomically and culturally diverse. Fostering cohesion and collaboration in this environment is no easy task.

### ***Vibrant Surrey: A Solutions Incubator***

Enter Vibrant Surrey. When its initial participants began talking in 2003, they recognized these underlying challenges. In short, Surrey had no social planning council or other community-based structure to bring partners together to tackle complex problems. If anything, a tight supply of funding tended to foster competition among many of the organizations that might participate in collaborative efforts. Needed was a mechanism specifically designed to hear what Surrey residents were saying, clarify how issues of concern could be addressed, and bring people together to make them happen.

Gradually, partners were engaged, the state of local poverty was researched, and a common vision was created. By 2004, Vibrant Surrey was poised to play the role of “solutions incubator.”



As Executive Director of the Newton Advocacy Group Society (NAGS), Susan Keeping had become one of Vibrant Surrey's early and stalwart members. Having helped to create NAGS in the early 1990s to advocate for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, Susan also understood that solving problems ultimately required collaboration among people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This was all the more the case when the issues of concern were multifaceted and intertwined, such as those faced by the homeless.

Susan brought the situation of homeless day labourers to the Vibrant Surrey table precisely because she believed that a collaborative community effort was needed to address the tangle of employment, housing, and other hurdles that confront these community members.

Partners in Vibrant Surrey agreed, making the situation of homeless day labourers a roundtable priority and initiating further consideration of what should be done.

### **Getting Started**

Further conversations were held with Vibrant Surrey partners, including two credit unions, the United Way of the Lower Mainland, government representatives, City employees, and members of the Surrey Chamber of Commerce (now the Surrey Board of Trade). Says Susan: "We made it very clear that we didn't have any answers to the problem, just that we were interested in hearing people's input and sharing information. The group got engaged with the ideas and we were encouraged by the response."

Coast Capital Savings sponsored the first of what became a series of lunchtime meetings to facilitate multisector engagement on the issue of homeless day labourers. Held in mid-February 2005, 40 people were expected at the event



but 60 actually attended. Participants were asked three questions: how they identified the issue, what they could do at that moment to make a difference, and whether they wanted to be part of a working group. By meeting's end, attendees committed to forming a working group that would focus on services for homeless day labourers. Because the membership wanted to include all sectors in their discussions, John Stark, the Coordinator of Surrey's Homelessness and Housing Task Force, agreed to invite eight construction company owners to a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Surrey Chamber of Commerce. Two of these owners subsequently joined the working group.

In May 2005, Susan and Saira returned to the task force and described a path forward. John Stark agreed to work as a coordinator of the as-yet-unnamed project. Funding provided by Vancity Credit Union and United Way of the Lower Mainland enabled the project to hire John for the next year. He facilitated the working group and oversaw the development of both a vision document and a year-end evaluation of the initiative.

### ***Homeless Day Labourers: Challenge and Opportunity***

Since the 1990s, homelessness in Canada had been on the rise and increasingly of concern. Economic recession, an increase in "precarious employment," cuts to social programs and, not least, the near end to investment in social housing have all contributed to housing insecurity and growing homelessness. Despite federal government support for a National Homelessness Initiative beginning in 1999, the number of homeless people continued to rise in cities across the country.

Surrey was no exception. Between January 11, 2002, and March 15, 2005, the homeless population in Surrey –



those who qualify for shelter beds and those who do not – went from 215 to 375, a 74% increase. The proportion of street homeless, or unsheltered people, went from 109 to 256, a 135% increase (Project Comeback, 2005). Thousands of other residents were considered to be at risk of homelessness.

As elsewhere, initial efforts to address homelessness in Surrey focused on trying to meet immediate needs through the development of emergency shelters and expanded access to emergency food assistance. However, it was becoming clear to many that real progress required a greater emphasis on assisting the homeless to acquire and maintain full-time employment and independent housing. While not a viable option for all homeless people, at least not in the near term, Vibrant Surrey partners saw it as a real possibility for the 18% of Surrey's homeless population who worked as day labourers.

While homeless day labourers led a precarious existence in many respects, they also possessed important strengths on which to build.

Typically, they are paid minimum wage, receive no benefits, and have no guarantee of work from one day to the next. They often perform heavy labour or menial tasks – mainly in the construction industry – and are expected to provide the steel-toed work boots, hard hats, and other items required by the job. In addition, because they prefer not to apply for assistance, for years they were ineligible for shelter beds. Before that policy was changed in 2006, most were forced to sleep outdoors, in vehicles, or in wet/cold weather shelters or a drop-in centre that allowed them to sleep only sitting upright.

Nevertheless, the majority of homeless day labourers worked between three and four days a week. Many had pre-



viously held full-time positions in the mainstream labour market and knew what was required of them to maintain full-time employment. Some possessed specific skills that made them attractive to potential employers. Others had previously received counselling or training to improve their employability. Many were highly motivated to break out of a cycle of homelessness.

For all of these reasons, the founding partners in Project Comeback believed that many homeless day labourers were well positioned to secure full-time employment and independent housing, and leave homelessness behind.

But then again, the many hurdles facing homeless day labourers were not to be underestimated. Day labourers generally have low levels of academic achievement. Many do not possess a high school diploma, and some struggle with literacy and numeracy problems. All of this inhibits their ability to apply for and sustain employment, which in turn severely limits their career options. Most homeless day labourers, whether for hereditary reasons or as a result of their current living situations, suffer from low self-esteem and depression. Many self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. Some have been involved with the criminal justice system, and many have poor support networks and unresolved issues stemming from childhood abuse or neglect. Like other homeless people, some also face basic practical issues such as a lack of the formal identification needed to obtain banking or other services (NAGS, 2006).

A well-designed and carefully delivered program would be needed to address such a range of challenges.

### ***Project Comeback: The Pilot Project***

Even as working group participants began to formulate a plan to assist day labourers, Saira Khan met with shelter



users and people waiting in line at daily work assignment gathering places to hear what they felt would improve their circumstances. The answer was clear: They needed to continue working. Says Saira: “Several people told us that work was the only thing that made them feel normal and valued, and without the ability to work, they felt they might die. The majority also expressed an aversion to group housing arrangements and shelters. They wanted their own dwelling, preferably living on their own or with one other housemate.”

These goals became the key reference points for the working group. The group’s program design outlined a process and suite of supports required to move people into full-time employment and independent housing. It involved four key elements, as follows.

### *1. Screening*

A careful screening process was undertaken to determine suitability for the program. This was intended to reduce the incidence of failure for participants in order to avoid eroding their already fragile self-esteem. It also was intended to increase the chances of success for employers and other partners investing resources in the program. Individuals not admitted to the program would be referred to services that could assist them with their current needs.

### *2. Personalized enhancement plan*

For those who did enter the program, an enhancement plan would be developed based on both their strengths and any challenges that needed to be addressed before they could begin an employment placement. The enhancement plan could cover any of a wide range of factors, including anger management, conflict resolution, empowerment, financial planning, goal setting, life and social skills, literacy



development, relationship mending, self-esteem building, substance misuse counselling, and time management. This portion of the program would be delivered in the evening and on weekends so participants could continue in any employment activities during the day.

### *3. Employment placement*

All participants would be matched with employers according to their abilities, experience levels, and skill sets. Initially, opportunities were identified in the construction sector, but it was hoped that over time a wide variety of jobs would be available. Organizers would help participants in their work placements by providing them with necessary clothing and equipment, as well as with bus passes and a meal allowance until they received their first paycheck.

### *4. Ongoing support*

During the transition to full-time, sustainable employment, participants would receive ongoing coaching, mentoring, and support from program staff. Regular communication would be maintained with the participant and the employer to resolve any conflicts or misunderstandings. Support would not be limited to life skills and work-related issues but would include access to computer, Internet, and telephone services; financial management; furnishings; and other household items.

### *5. Housing*

Finally, all participants would be helped to locate appropriate market housing and financial support to cover the required damage deposit and first month's rent. It was recognized from the outset that meeting participants' housing needs would be a challenge. All had inconsistent employment, few had references, and some lacked appro-



priate identification. Possible strategies were developed to address housing goals, such as providing rent guarantees and performance bonds to private landlords and arranging temporary accommodation for participants until they could locate appropriate market rental housing.

Critical to the design of the project was the partnership model it embodied. Twenty organizations, including businesses and business associations, community groups, faith-based organizations, social service agencies, and government, were involved in its development. Each had a distinct role to play that was vital to the success of the project:

- Businesses would provide employment to project participants
- Faith-based organizations would help cover non-employment-related costs for participants, such as damage deposits and half of the first month's rent, and would provide furniture and other household items
- Social service agencies and community groups would refer participants and assist in the screening process
- Interested community members would make charitable contributions and sit on the working group, providing overall direction to project staff
- Service Canada would fund project staff and cover all employment-related costs
- Vancity Credit Union had already covered the cost of preparing the initiative's vision document, and the United Way of the Lower Mainland had agreed to fund the pilot project evaluation

The overall plan for the proposed two-year pilot project received an important boost when two construction company owners joined the working group. They were



dissatisfied with the \$16 per hour they were paying day-labourer companies for workers – \$8 for the worker and \$8 for the day labourer’s service. One of the companies, Qualico Homes, said it was prepared to employ program participants in full-time jobs, paying them \$12 per hour, and that it would contribute \$1,000 per participant to assist them with housing-related costs. The pledge highlighted the value of the initiative not only to the homeless but also to local businesses, and confirmed the viability of the program’s goals. It helped jumpstart the plan into action.

## **Results**

Results from year one of the pilot were very encouraging.

Compared with other employment programs for the homeless, Project Comeback was unusual. Most other programs focused on employment readiness, job search, and/or skill development without addressing housing considerations or providing ongoing support after placement. As a result, appropriate success measures for the initiative were unclear. Ultimately, drawing on the findings of a few comparable programs in the United States, Project Canada decided that the prime success measure for the project would be 12 weeks of continuous employment for 75% of participants – an admittedly ambitious goal.

In the end, during its first year of operation, Project Comeback accepted 50 participants into the program. Of these, 35 participants (70%) achieved at least 12 weeks of continuous employment, and a further three participants (6%) were mid-way toward that goal at year’s end. For all intents and purposes, the initiative’s target had been met.

In addition, in year one, 30 participants had successfully moved from homelessness to independent living in market housing.



Furthermore, a financial analysis urged by business partners in the initiative revealed the program to be highly cost effective. The cost of operating Project Comeback in 2005-2006 was \$301,091.20, or \$5,852.00 (rounded to \$6,000) per participant (NAGS, 2006). Says Susan Keeping: "When real costs are included – assertive case management fees for people who relapsed, addictions and mental health counselling, the costs of transitional housing – the actual figure is closer to \$10,000 per person." Given that shelter expenses for one homeless person range from \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year, Project Comeback achieved annual savings of between \$24,000 and \$34,000 per person, as well as reduced demands on other community resources and services.

Not captured on such a balance sheet, however, was the value in human terms. Fully 95% of the participants interviewed by evaluators (19 out of 20) ranked the project as good or very good. The list of benefits they mentioned included pride in their increased ability to participate and contribute to the community; improved support networks, quality of life, and self-esteem; and increased employability and independence. As two participants expressed it:

*I feel like I am slowly rebuilding my life. I now talk about my future. Before entering the project, I could only think about my next meal and where I was going to sleep.*

*I wake up in the morning with someplace to go and something to do. I have my own place and I am making several new friends. Before, I dreaded the start of each new day.*

Project Comeback also helped other Surrey residents to appreciate the problems of their homeless neighbours. Working group participants reported that, even among themselves, misconceptions about the homeless were replaced with increased community pride and spirit gained



from helping Surrey's marginalized citizens. Says John Stark, Project Comeback's working group coordinator: "This project is making us look at people for what they have to offer, not what they lack. One employer took on a worker with obsessive-compulsive disorder and found that he was the perfect match for a highly repetitive but exacting wood-working task. He found the employee he needed, and the worker secured a position that allowed him to feel a great deal of job satisfaction."

### ***Project Comeback: Strengths, Challenges, Evolution***

Beyond outcomes, the evaluation also set out to determine what was working well and what challenges needed to be addressed. Thinking about both was important for shaping the ongoing development of the initiative.

In many respects, the underlying strength of the project is its ability to respond appropriately to the particular needs and concerns of all involved, both participants and community partners. Keys to its success included:

- *Approachable and non-judgmental staff working on the basis of compassion and trust.* As one participant commented: "I was in government care; thus I am very suspicious of case workers. Project staff were different. They were patient and understanding. I felt I could be totally honest and open with them." Without such trust and confidence, participants probably would not have maintained their involvement with the project and realized the benefits that it had to offer
- *Individualized support responsive to the specific circumstances of each participant.* In the words of another participant: "This project saved my life. Staff recognized my potential and really worked with me to find a job that was suited to my abilities.



They didn't push me into something I didn't want to do, which would have been a disaster. Because they listened to me, I bought into the program, which made all the difference"

- *The absence of time limits on the receipt of services and supports, and a willingness to provide second and third chances, i.e., not giving up on participants.* Even in the early stages of the project, Saira Khan and other staff recognized that the path from homelessness rarely went in a straight line. Participants often made detours, even circled back, before moving ahead. Says Saira: "Experience has taught us that most participants cycle on and off through addiction, recovery, and relapse. It generally takes three cycles – three jobs, three housing experiences, and so on – before people begin to adopt the habits of a healthy lifestyle"
- *A wide range of partners contributing resources and supports, as well as diverse stakeholders present in the working group guiding the initiative.* Reflecting on the early work of the project, Susan Keeping noted the importance of having diverse partners bring their contributions and perspectives to the table. Although different priorities and understandings sometimes resulted in tensions, working through such tensions was the key to ongoing success. Says Susan: "Acknowledging differences openly is necessary to stimulate productive engagement and collaboration"

In fact, the year one evaluation did surface a significant list of challenges and emerging ideas to be pursued in year two and beyond. They included:

- Increasing the program's outreach to day labourers who were "couch surfing" or "living rough" as opposed to living on the street



- Providing more diverse employment opportunities suited to individuals whose health made manual labour difficult or who had other vocational interests and aptitudes
- Providing some workers with a more gradual transition to full-time employment, e.g., beginning with three days per week and moving to five as adjustments were made to the demands of full-time work
- Focusing more attention on the sometimes divergent views of workers and employers with respect to workplace behaviour, wages, entry positions, and opportunities for advancement
- Improving access to substance abuse counselling for participants in need of this support
- Giving further attention to participants' housing needs, including more transitional housing options and support for individuals managing relationships with roommates

Since the pilot project, Project Comeback has continued to move forward. Its funding support through the federal government was maintained and then transferred to the British Columbia provincial Ministry of Housing and Social Development in 2009 when labour market services were fully devolved to the government of the Province. In the process, the project's funding contract was extended until 2011.

In 2008, the project also expanded its staff complement from three to five, adding a Program Support Worker and a Job Developer. It also moved into new offices that include a resource room with four state-of-the-art computers (for job search, résumé preparation, and other purposes), and a kitchen.



The initiative has grown consistently over the course of the past five years. By 2010 it was accepting more than 80 new participants annually into the program, and providing referral and other support to other individuals not yet suited to the program. As of November 2010, it had assisted more than 238 people. Of those participants, 62% had secured employment for at least some period of time through Project Comeback's assistance. This represents a measurable contribution reducing the aggregate number of persons experiencing homelessness, estimated to be approximately 2,000 persons in the City (Surrey Homelessness and Housing Society).

To help keep pace with the need for supports not covered by program funding, the project also instituted a highly successful annual fundraising gala. The event serves not only to raise funds (approximately \$25,000 per year), but also to celebrate the success of participants, raise awareness about the program, thank supporters for their contributions, and engage new partners.

As it developed, the project also adjusted in various ways. For instance, a new survey conducted in 2008 revealed a growing number of women among Surrey's homeless. In response, Project Comeback increased its outreach efforts to women by connecting with such groups as the Surrey Women's Resource Centre and seeking employment placements of interest to these prospective participants.

The project also has stepped up its own efforts to address what it has come to see as its greatest challenge: addressing the need for supportive/transitional housing. For some project participants, the difficulties they have in securing appropriate housing or managing the relationships involved in shared accommodations undermine their efforts to move forward in other aspects of their lives. Some end up



back on the street or in the shelter system, which makes it more difficult for them to meet the demands of full-time employment. In some cases, participants relapse into substance abuse or other destructive behaviours. Moreover, lack of access to supportive/transitional housing has limited the project's ability to work with the deeply entrenched homeless whose multiple challenges need to be addressed before they can pursue independent housing and regular employment.

In 2008, Project Comeback prepared a discussion document on supportive/transitional housing and outlined the features of a facility that could help meet the need. It continues to seek funding to make this facility a reality.

### ***Wrap-up on Wraparound***

In a certain way, the problem of supportive/transitional housing underscores the distinctive strength of Project Comeback as a “wraparound” program in support of homeless day labourers: the understanding that multiple, interrelated problems require multiple, interrelated responses.

At the same time, it suggests a limitation of initiatives that operate mostly at the programmatic level: They may run into systemic issues that limit both their effectiveness and their reach, such as the underlying lack of appropriate housing options for many people who are homeless.

In the end, though, it is the story of personal change that best captures the power and significance of a program like Project Comeback: what it means, in practice, to provide a range of supports in a way that makes a difference in a person's life.

A 41-year-old Project Comeback client named Peter experienced a childhood of neglect and pain. By the time he



was 14, he had been placed in 18 foster homes. Throughout his life, Peter received inadequate dental care and his teeth deteriorated. He did not finish high school. He found work with construction, warehousing, and manufacturing companies in his early 20s, but he had difficulty handling his own and other people's anger.

Says Peter: "Project Comeback gave me new hope and new life. You get choices and people don't give up on you. Nobody's ever gotten mad at me. They gave me options and helped me through situations. I never felt forced to do anything. I felt respected. They helped me to find a place to live and to get back into working again. They got me my first pair of work boots; I was able to pay for my own after that. They also found someone to pay for my teeth. They got me the things I needed to get and maintain work: bus tickets, food, and basic necessities for setting up house. More recently, they got me a couch. Once I'm stabilized, I'd like to offer whatever I can for the next people who come along who need this."

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## CHAPTER 5

# MAKING HAMILTON THE BEST PLACE TO RAISE A CHILD



Some cities inspire envy – Vancouver for its beauty, Halifax for its history, Montréal for its excitement. That the City of Hamilton, Ontario, could inspire envy for its ability to come together over tough economic times may seem unlikely. But for people who want to live in communities defined by compassion and the desire to improve the life of every citizen (starting with its children), Hamilton is the place to be.

Hamilton's economic picture was so grim in the early 2000s that denial was not an option. Long-established factories and manufacturing firms were going out of business. The City's once proud harbour was mostly a dirty and depressed reminder of a better age. People were suffering the strains of no or low incomes, and despite a long history of community spirit and organization, hope was in short supply.

One of the key first steps in Hamilton's recovery was naming poverty as a critical issue. This act alone released



and harnessed a pent-up desire in the community for change.

### ***A City in Transition***

Hamilton is situated at the bend of Lake Ontario, between Niagara Region to the southwest and Toronto to the northeast. Historically, its port lands supported an infrastructure of steel companies and a diverse manufacturing base. Hamilton was known for its hardhat image, a place where people were proud of the dirt under their fingernails.

In the early 2000s, the worldwide economic downturn was having a dramatic impact on the City's traditional manufacturing base. Plant closures and a steady decline in the workforce at the two steel mills that dominated Hamilton's Lake Ontario skyline combined to drive up unemployment rates.

In response to this growing economic crisis, Hamilton's newly amalgamated municipal government developed a 20-year Economic Development Strategy. Released in 2001, it focused on the need to diversify the economic base of the community while concurrently developing a highly skilled, well-educated workforce.

Work also began on a Social Vision for the City. Joe-Anne Priel, General Manager of Community Services, recognized that changing the economic base was not enough. There needed to be a vision that put citizens at the centre of change. Working with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and an array of senior community and provincial government colleagues, the 2003 Social Vision group identified three flagship areas: children and families, affordable housing, and skills development.

In 2004, the Hamilton Social Planning and Research Council presented *Incomes and Poverty in Hamilton* to City



Council. This report described what many already knew, that Hamilton had one of the highest rates of poverty in Ontario and some of the lowest incomes by postal code in all of Canada. It detailed the impact of poverty on households in Hamilton and stated that poverty was an issue that could no longer be ignored. The report also presented new ideas about how to reduce poverty in the community. The report appeared at a time when collaborative approaches were being tested and new relationships were being built across sectors.

At the time, the Hamilton Community Foundation was directing its community fund to a three-year project, Tackling Poverty Together. This project began in 2004 with a focus on alleviating, reducing, and preventing poverty. It was renewed in June 2008 with a focus on improving the quality of life in specific neighbourhoods. To date, the foundation has invested more than \$8 million in community-focused poverty efforts.

By now, three powerful community agents – the Social Planning and Research Council, the City of Hamilton, and the Hamilton Community Foundation – were honing in on poverty. The core elements for community change were forming up.

Joe-Anne Priel recognized the need to respond to the *Incomes and Poverty in Hamilton* report in a new and innovative way. She turned to her community colleague Carolyn Milne, President and CEO of the Hamilton Community Foundation, for guidance. Carolyn had been following the work of Vibrant Communities across Canada and saw that multisector roundtables were using a comprehensive, collaborative approach to tackle the complex issue of poverty. She knew that if the community was ready for change, the right approach was at hand.



## ***The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction***

In late 2004, Joe-Anne and Carolyn saw the importance of bringing “unusual suspects” together to tackle poverty in their city. They reached out to Mark Chamberlain, a local business entrepreneur and (then) chair of the board of the Hamilton Community Foundation, and asked him to chair a community conversation about poverty with senior leaders in Hamilton.

“That first meeting was incredibly important,” says Carolyn. “We had talked to Vibrant Communities for advice and Paul Born made a crucial suggestion. We were struggling with how to define poverty for the purpose of the meeting. He advised us to put the question to the group. So we did. We asked each person around the table to describe what poverty meant to him or her. As each person – most of them well off and in positions of influence – did so, we discovered that many of them had lived through periods of poverty earlier in their lives. It was an emotional sharing of perspectives that set the tone for the group. The work, though it would take place on a city-wide stage, was intensely felt and understood at the personal level.”

At the end of the conversation, Mark Chamberlain asked the leaders whether they would be committed to tackling poverty. The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) was formed.

Paul Johnson was seconded from Wesley Urban Ministries to act as the roundtable’s Director in its first year of operations. Of its first meetings, he says: “This powerful group did not call for a community food drive but instead focused on the root causes of poverty. They knew they had to get the issue of poverty onto the civic agenda by engaging more people in the cause.”



Joe-Anne, Carolyn, and Mark also set out to secure the ongoing support of two convening organizations, the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Community Foundation. Both institutions agreed not only to participate, but also to provide core funding to hire a director and secretariat to steward the work of the roundtable in its early days.

Though the roundtable had a commitment to include leaders from different sectors, it initially decided not to include individuals with lived experience of poverty. Concerns had been expressed that people with lived experience might lack the self-confidence or experience necessary to engage fully in the work. Low income earners were asked to form a subcommittee, but within a few months the roundtable saw the value of their voice, and low income leaders were integrated into the larger roundtable. At this point, a principle of “no blame, all responsible” emerged. People who had not necessarily understood one another very well were able to work together in a new and unique way.

### ***An Aspirational and Comprehensive Framework for Change***

By 2005, roundtable members recognized the necessity of developing a community plan to tackle poverty. The Hamilton Poverty Matrix, commissioned by the HRPR, provided a demographic portrait of poverty’s impact on individuals and families in the community. Using the low income cut-off as a statistical measure, the Poverty Matrix reported that nearly 20% of Hamilton residents lived in poverty. Specific sub-groups experienced even higher levels of poverty: children under the age of 14 and seniors (24%), the Aboriginal community (37%), and recent immigrants (50%).

Meanwhile, the roundtable consulted widely in the community, gathering information about poverty reduction



work already under way, service gaps, and instances where collaboration could be enhanced. Though roundtable leaders saw a lot of energy being spent on poverty reduction efforts, rates were not improving. They were convinced that another poverty reduction program or project wouldn't make a significant difference. They knew they needed to involve the whole community in developing a comprehensive plan.

Eleven community-engagement sessions were held in late 2005 and early 2006. The roundtable also hired Michigan native Jay Connor from the Collaboratory for Community Support to conduct six community sessions in which participants learned a new way of thinking and acting. Each session was tailored to a particular group: business, government leaders, community organizations, roundtable members, and the broader community. Inspired by Jay's call to think and act purposefully and reflecting on the experiences of Vibrant Communities across Canada, the roundtable adopted the aspiration of "Making Hamilton the best place to raise a child." Putting the focus on children helped open a wider conversation about poverty's effects on families and community, since no child lives alone.

In June 2006, the HRPR launched Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child: A Change Framework. It invited citizens and organizations to make a commitment to get personally and professionally involved in reducing poverty for Hamilton children and their families.

The Change Framework identified five critical points in the lives of children and their families during which increased investment could have beneficial impacts: the early years (0 to 6 years of age), elementary school years, high school and post-secondary years, the movement to employment, and the accompanying period of wealth or

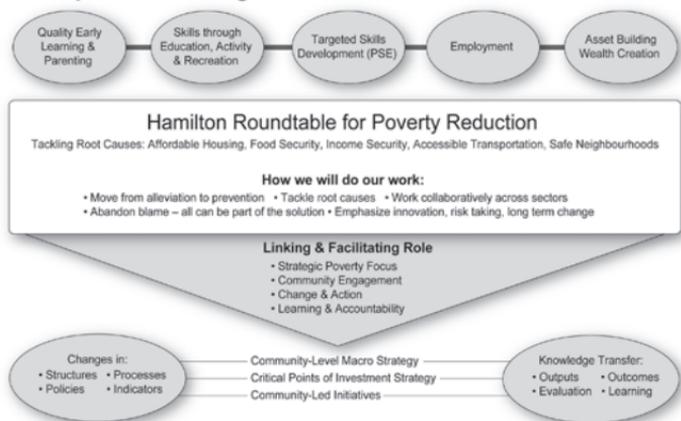


asset-building. HRPR members believed that if investments could be made at each of these critical points, the community could change the trajectory of its most vulnerable citizens.

Equally important, the framework identified a number of key roles that the roundtable would play, including as catalyst and coordinating body.

After considerable feedback from community partners, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction launched Starting Point Strategies in early 2007.

### The Aspiration: Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child



The HRPR reached out to existing collaborative planning tables in the community: Hamilton Best Start Network, Boards of Education poverty initiatives, the Skills Development Flagship, the Jobs Prosperity Collaborative, and the Affordable Housing Flagship. These groups agreed to work with the roundtable to leverage their results and determine shared community outcomes.

The roundtable adopted three overarching strategies to drive community change. The first was to focus on policies and systems that kept people living in poverty. The second



included working in partnership with other planning tables and key institutions on shared outcomes. And the third was to invite as many partners as possible to share in the community effort to tackle poverty.

The HRPR's comprehensive approach to poverty reduction recognizes that everyone in the community is "part of the problem of poverty and also part of the solution."

After the Change Framework and Starting Point Strategies were adopted, the collaborative work began in earnest. The roundtable played a pivotal role, connecting the elements of the various strategies, acting as a communications hub, strengthening ties among the collaborative partners, reporting on community progress, and advancing community knowledge about poverty reduction. Central to this was a dynamic staff team and volunteer leadership that created synergies among the various elements.

### **A Strategic Focus on Poverty**

The roundtable's Starting Point Strategies were launched in May 2007 at a community event involving more than 250 citizens and elected officials from all three levels of government. Thirty community solution posters encircled the room, representing organizations and collaborations already working on poverty reduction strategies – a visual signal to the community that change was happening and progress was being made.

Howard Elliott, Managing Editor of the *Hamilton Spectator* and a roundtable member, says it was remarkable to see "the number of times the issue of the systemic and long-term impacts of poverty shaping the community" came up in the paper's editorial department. This recognition compelled the *Spectator*, a daily newspaper, to act. One of its first, and biggest, decisions was to take on poverty from an edito-



rial perspective. The paper launched the Poverty Project, a three-year commitment to create a broader understanding of poverty in the city. This was followed up by the Code Red series in 2010. Combining hospital admission and mortality records with resident addresses, Code Red highlighted the 21-year life expectancy gap between high and low income Hamilton neighbourhoods, a finding that shocked the city's leadership and the resident on the street alike.

The roundtable's focus on public awareness was complemented by an equally rigorous emphasis on strengthening the political response to poverty. Hamilton Roundtable members met continually with municipal politicians to raise their awareness of poverty, the case for reducing poverty, and ways municipalities could play a lead role in poverty reduction.

In the lead-up to municipal elections in 2010, HRPR kept the community and candidates squarely focused on clearly articulated poverty themes. It became the point of reference for information for citizens and elected officials and helped ensure a high level of understanding and engagement in the issue. Roundtable members were actively engaging with organizations and politicians at the provincial and federal levels as well.

In spring 2008, the Ontario government initiated community consultations with the intent of developing a provincial poverty reduction strategy. Hamilton was one of the first communities to make contact with Minister Deb Matthews and host a local consultation, in which the community shared with the Minister the poverty reduction progress it had made. In July 2008, more than 250 citizens participated in a community conversation about the provincial poverty reduction strategy. Paul Johnson, Executive Director of Wesley Urban Ministries, believes Hamilton



played a significant role in the Ontario Poverty Strategy. “The provincial policy influence has been good for families. We did have influence; the messages from Hamilton were clear, crisp, and had impact. People are better off and there have been tangible investments as a result of our work.”

### **Engagement, Action, Synergies**

In addition to getting organizations to focus on poverty, the roundtable encouraged organizations and networks to do something – anything – that would make a concrete difference in the lives of low income families. These simple conversations translated into a wide range of substantial initiatives.

The employees of the *Hamilton Spectator* wanted to do something pragmatic for the children in their community and launched Kids Unlimited, a program designed to enliven and enrich the lives of children in low income households.

Mohawk College was another early institutional joiner. Its staff got actively involved in poverty reduction on two fronts. The college encouraged its students to become engaged in active citizenship in the community. College administration recognized that it was not recruiting students from Hamilton’s low income neighbourhoods. That began to change when Mohawk College worked with residents to deliver programs in the Robert Land community, a neighbourhood with limited services.

The United Way of Burlington & Greater Hamilton initiated a partnership with businesses located near the Port of Hamilton. Together they created From Here to the Bay. More than \$500,000 has been raised and invested in port area neighbourhoods to support early learning activities, literacy initiatives, and after-school programs for children and youth.



Building on its innovative Tackling Poverty Together program, the Hamilton Community Foundation began investing in priority neighbourhoods. Putting citizens at the centre of the work, they identified neighbourhood priorities and encouraged community services to wrap their support around these neighbourhoods. Nine local planning teams are now engaged in revitalizing neighbourhoods across Hamilton.

In addition to encouraging a broader and more varied number of players to get more actively involved in reducing poverty, the roundtable played a strategic role by ensuring that there were synergies between their activities. When meeting with local organizations, networks, and planning tables, HRPR members consistently asked the same question: “How can we better align our work and reduce poverty together in order to make Hamilton the best place to raise a child?” That simple question often led to new thinking and partnerships that ensured that the community whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Sometimes this meant bringing the right people together. When the roundtable connected members of the Affordable Housing Flagship initiative and school board representatives to explore common ground, they soon realized the connection between inadequate housing and school success rates. Children who must move six or times in a school year because of unstable housing generally do poorly in school. The Affordable Housing Flagship elected to concentrate its efforts on expanding the construction or renovation of affordable housing in neighbourhoods with high turnover rates in attempt to break the pattern. At other times, encouraging synergies meant becoming more actively involved in the planning activities. When the government of Ontario was introducing a pilot program to provide



summer camp programming in low income neighbourhoods in order to address the “recreation gap” for many poor families, the roundtable facilitated a conversation with local school boards, neighbourhood groups, and community partners to ensure a high uptake of the program by low income youth. The conversation also included finding ways to ensure that low income youth were well prepared to help deliver the local program.

### **Bottom-Line Results**

In June 2009, the HRPR was invited as a witness to the Senate Subcommittee on Cities to discuss its results. The roundtable showed (a) that a city could make progress on poverty reduction and (b) that the federal and provincial governments could play an important role in advancing what could be achieved at the municipal level. The HRPR could report, at the local level:

- **Unprecedented media coverage** of the issue. A poll commissioned shortly before municipal elections in 2010 found that 80% of residents identified poverty as their number-one issue-focused investment
- **Neighbourhood leadership** by the Hamilton Community Foundation, United Way, City of Hamilton, and Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction became a key strategy for citizen engagement
- Increased collaborative planning across individual organizations and sectors had led to **more effective services** for low income citizens in Hamilton
- More than \$10 million **invested in local poverty reduction priorities** through the Hamilton Community Foundation, United Way, City



of Hamilton, corporate investments, and new investments by the provincial and federal governments

- ***Influencing policy change***, including the development of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, which had increased the income and assets of children, youth, and their families

The Hamilton Roundtable's impacts on the community have been deep and wide-ranging. By 2009, the hundreds of organizations involved in the HRPR networks had carried out approximately 175 initiatives. These had assisted more than 100,000 low income residents in the areas of childcare, affordable transit passes, housing supports, and jobs. Not only had individual and household benefits for people living in poverty increased, but millions of dollars of new investment had been leveraged for poverty reduction efforts across the community.

These activities and results were a significant contributor to one of the biggest and most important changes of all: a reduction in the poverty rate from 20% in 2001 to 18.1% in 2006, resulting in 6,000 fewer citizens living below the low income cut-off at a time when other communities were experiencing an increase.

The most significant – and, it is to be hoped, most enduring – change during that period, however, was the improved capacity of the community to work across organizational and sector lines on the interconnected issues of poverty. There had been an increase in community collaborative efforts that modelled the roundtable's operations, including Local Immigration Partnership and Human Resources Planning tables.

Tom Cooper, Director of the roundtable, sums up these efforts in these words: "Hamilton has vastly increased its



capacity to tackle community issues.” Paul Johnson, now the City’s Director of Neighbourhood Development Strategies, believes the roundtable has profoundly changed the way Hamiltonians work. “It legitimized a collaborative approach by continually highlighting things that need to get done. The Jobs Prosperity Collaborative, Street Youth Planning Collaborative, shelter groups, and others recognized that citizens and groups are part of the solution.”

**CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE:  
DAVID CROMBIE AWARD**

The community of Hamilton took on one of the most complex challenges facing every Canadian community, poverty. Working collaboratively with its citizens and hundreds of local organizations, Hamilton has begun to turn things around. In the process, it has attracted the admiration of cities across the country and won the Canadian Urban Institute’s (CUI) 2009 David Crombie Award.

Glen Murray, CUI President and CEO, was enthusiastic in his praise of Hamilton. “Named after one of Ontario’s most beloved leaders, the annual David Crombie Award goes to those people or initiatives that work collaboratively on solutions for complex problems that face Canada’s largest urban region, the Greater Golden Horseshoe. By tackling poverty and making a difference, the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction has taught us all a lesson that is respected far beyond the Golden Horseshoe.”

Murray continues: “Where most communities only see poverty increasing, Hamilton has made Herculean efforts in not just slowing poverty but reducing it by almost two% in less than a decade.” (Canadian Urban Institute, May 21, 2009)



## **Renewal**

Toward the end of 2009, HPPR leadership began the process of reflecting on the progress being achieved on the issue of poverty across the community. They knew that significant changes were happening, but that more could be done.

Over the winter of 2009 and spring of 2010, the HRPR began having strategic conversations with community partners about renewal. A strong base of leadership had developed and change was occurring in the Hamilton community, but Mark Chamberlain, Chair of the roundtable, began asking more challenging questions. “We know that kids who go to school hungry can’t focus on learning. What would it take to make sure that all kids in school were fed?”

As a result of this process, the roundtable confirmed its aspiration of Making Hamilton the Best Place to Raise a Child and its Change Framework. It identified three values to drive forward the effort: inclusiveness, urgency, and collaboration.

Four action priorities are now shifting the roundtable’s focus: changing attitudes about poverty; addressing income disparity; including all citizens in community life; and promoting innovative ways to tackle concentrated poverty in neighbourhoods. Each of these priorities has specific strategies, time lines, and tactics to advance the work of the HRPR.

Bill Medeiros, a citizen member of the roundtable, believes that the organization has to work more closely with elected officials. “Politicians need the right information to make the right decisions. The action priorities give us an opening to raise issues with candidates and elected officials.”



The roundtable continues to play a supporting role in tackling the root causes of poverty by working alongside community partners that are addressing issues of food security, affordable housing, and accessible transportation.

Tom Cooper, Director of HRPR, and Sheree Meredith, Vice President of Hamilton Community Foundation, presented the Action Priorities to Hamilton City Council in November 2010, receiving unanimous approval. A *Hamilton Spectator* editorial also endorsed the roundtable's updated direction:

Poverty has a wide-ranging, negative impact on our entire community. Almost 20 per cent of Hamilton's population – more than 96,000 people – live in households with incomes below the poverty line. As well, almost 25,000 Hamiltonians work full- or part-time but still live in poverty. The vastness of the issue in Hamilton can seem insurmountable.

That is why, in large part, the action-oriented approach developed by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) is so welcome. As a community, we need to see that it's possible to make improvements. We need to know what has been achieved and what we can achieve in the future – in concrete terms – if we work hard and work together. To be sure, the action priorities the HRPR has set for the next three years are ambitious. But setting the bar high and developing measures of success are, in the opinion of HRPR leadership, the only ways to move forward. (*Hamilton Spectator*, 2010)

### **The Future**

Progress is already being made in key areas identified by the HRPR action priorities. Hamilton's City Council reports now align with the roundtable action priorities in the areas



of affordable access to recreation, market basket measure, living wage update, and a new strategy focusing on neighbourhoods. During the October 2010 municipal election, a common campaign coalition focused on the issues of living wage, affordable housing, and accessible transportation. A *Hamilton Spectator*/Nanos poll of citizens during the election reported that four out of five voters wanted municipal action on poverty reduction.

The focus on action priorities is changing the governance dynamics of the roundtable. New working groups are being formed for each of the priority areas. Roundtable leaders have been re-energized by the effort. Leveraging its strong base of community support, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction now seems poised to make even deeper inroads into poverty reduction.

### **Lessons Learned**

Comprehensive community change efforts are challenging. The roundtable learned that bringing a diverse group of stakeholders to focus on poverty is a heavy process but one that is worth the effort if you can stick to a framework for change. Says Tom Cooper: “There are people who will want to march ahead and others who will fall behind, but we need to move at a pace which will keep as many players at the table as possible to build capacity.”

Organizers have learned that it helps to celebrate successes at regular intervals, focus on communications and reporting, commit to a change framework, and dialogue with key stakeholders – including elected officials and community partners.

Sheree Meredith, Vice President, Philanthropic Services, at the Hamilton Community Foundation, describes the



importance of leadership in collaborative work. “Everyone has to own the problem of poverty, but you also need champions to advance the work. You need the right balance between ownership and leadership and between process and outcomes. You risk losing momentum if you don’t see impact and results for individuals.”

The dynamic of focusing on long-term change and short-term impacts continues to be a challenge for the HRPR. But focusing on longer-term systemic change is helping them get a broader view of the issue; they know this approach can result in deeper and more lasting change.

Paul Johnson notes that the roundtable has been credited with building a collective sense of community ownership and accomplishment. “The organization has a larger-than-life, magnetic appeal. A whole bunch of people in Hamilton now consider themselves experts on poverty reduction.” Paul believes that this will drive real change as the issue of poverty reduction is shared more broadly. “Different voices and people legitimize the work we are undertaking together. The challenge will be to maintain collective leadership in a way that is sustainable. There is no clearly defined roadmap for going forward, but our experience has taught us that if there is trust around the table, every individual, group, and organization can share the pain of change and the joy of community transformation.”

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CHAPTER 6

DISMANTLING  
THE POVERTY TRAPS  
IN SAINT JOHN

Saint John, New Brunswick, has a history of big things. Big tides on the Bay of Fundy, big shipbuilders, Irving Oil, and the big philanthropic contributions of the Irving family. In 1997, a newly formed organization called the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative drew together big-thinking, successful business leaders. Over the years, they have collaborated with a host of non-profit and government agencies. They have redrawn local perceptions of poverty and helped build a compelling case for the establishment of a provincial strategy for poverty reduction and social inclusion. Their big idea: Future successes are rooted in the health and prosperity of each citizen.



**Context**

Saint John is Canada's oldest incorporated city. Established in 1785, it was a bustling port and shipbuilding centre for most of its first 100 years. But when this maritime economy



went bust in the mid-19th century, the city's economy faltered. Since then, its fortunes have waxed and waned. Now, heading into the 21st century, it appears that Saint John may be finding its legs again. With growth sectors in energy, information and communications technology, health sciences, and tourism, the City's prospects are improving.

Notwithstanding this cautious optimism, or possibly because of it, many Saint Johners have become increasingly dissatisfied with one of the disquieting realities of local life: a poverty rate well above the national average – in 2001, its rate was 24.5% versus 16.2% nationally (Makhoul and Leviten-Reid, 2006: 2). What needs to be done to dramatically reduce the level of poverty in this community? That was the question on the table in 2003 as prospective partners in Vibrant Communities Saint John began talking about the possibility of developing a comprehensive, multisector initiative for poverty reduction.

### ***Forming a Multisector Collaborative***

In reality, a great deal was already being done to address the local poverty situation. Not only were government agencies and non-profit organizations taking action, but so were “unusual suspects.” In 1997, a respected business leader rallied his peers and created the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, a ground-breaking effort on the part of the business sector to play a leadership role in poverty reduction. In some neighbourhoods, low income residents themselves had also begun organizing to address poverty-related concerns.

Then, in 2002, a representative from each of these sectors was invited by Vibrant Communities Canada to meet with other local and national groups interested in exploring comprehensive, multisector approaches to poverty



reduction. Included in the Saint John contingent were the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, the City of Saint John, the Saint John Human Development Council (a local social planning council), and the Urban Core Support Network (a grassroots education and organizing body with a focus on women in poverty). Returning to Saint John, they agreed to form a working group to explore local interest in pursuing a multisector approach to reducing poverty.

A series of focus groups and interviews soon revealed not only interest but also a note of caution: Would a new initiative compete with existing groups for already scarce resources? Might a collaborative venture constrain the efforts of groups like BCAPI to forge ahead with their own promising strategies? How exactly would such an initiative add value to what was already being done?

As discussions ensued, a realization gradually emerged that to make a major impact on the local poverty situation, new ways of working were needed that could both maximize the effectiveness of existing efforts and mobilize still more resources. A comprehensive, collaborative initiative could contribute to this cause in at least five ways:

1. Conduct research to deepen understanding of the factors that contribute to poverty
2. Strengthen the capacity of partners to collaborate on solutions
3. Build public awareness and support for poverty reduction efforts
4. Remove policy barriers and strengthen public investment
5. Support continuous improvement through ongoing evaluation and learning (Gamble, 2010: 37)



In 2004, a wide range of partners – business, government, non-profit organizations, and people living in poverty – came together to create Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ). Working closely with the Human Development Council and the Urban Core Support Network, BCAPI agreed to convene the new collaboration. An initial set of 25 partners formed a Leadership roundtable to guide the overall initiative.

### ***Poverty and Plenty: Focusing on High-Priority Neighbourhoods***

Early in its work, VCSJ undertook research that significantly recast local thinking about poverty.

The first element of this research was *Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John*. Prepared jointly with the Human Development Council and the University of New Brunswick – Saint John, the report presented a “tale of two cities”: the circumstances of residents in “vulnerable neighbourhoods” with poverty rates greater than 30% versus life in more prosperous parts of the community (Peacock, 2005: 17). While the majority of citizens in Greater Saint John were residents of mixed-income neighbourhoods, a full 25% lived in five high-poverty neighbourhoods. Not only incomes but also education levels in these neighbourhoods tended to be low. Unemployment rates were high, and many people relied on government income assistance to meet their needs. The neighbourhoods themselves were marked by old and deteriorating housing stock, limited access to government and other services, and few economic opportunities.

Building on an earlier study conducted for BCAPI, the report also highlighted that the Saint John Census Metropolitan Area had the highest incidence of lone-parent



poverty in Canada, suggesting that the face of poverty locally is predominantly young and female. In fact, it went on, more than 60% of Saint John's lone-parent families live in poverty, higher than any other major Canadian city, and the vast majority of these families reside in what VCSJ would eventually call the City's "priority neighbourhoods" (Peacock, 2005: 10).

While *Poverty and Plenty* highlighted the spatial concentration of poverty, qualitative research considered the lived experience of neighbourhood residents. A deeper understanding emerged of the way diverse factors interact to limit life prospects and create a cycle of intergenerational poverty.

In part, the picture that took shape was of an interlocking set of substantive issues. While specific circumstances varied from one individual or family to the next, the basic dilemma was the same: the persistence of issues that actually reinforce a cycle of poverty from which it is difficult to escape. For example, teen pregnancy often makes it difficult for young women to complete high school; lack of high school completion then restricts their employment opportunities to low-paying jobs; a low-paying job forces them to rely on low-cost housing; reliance on low-cost housing tends to lead them to reside in a high-poverty neighbourhood; residence in a high-poverty neighbourhood means they have less access to services and amenities; reduced access to services and amenities means fewer developmental opportunities for their children; and fewer developmental opportunities can in turn result in lower educational attainment ... fating the next generation to continue the cycle.

However, substantive challenges such as these represent just the first layer of concern. When neighbourhood residents seek to address these issues, they too often run into



a variety of systemic barriers that make it difficult to move forward: public policies that may complicate rather than enable the movement out of poverty, service systems that are problematic to enter and to navigate, and public attitudes that stigmatize and isolate.

Finally, such a barrage of challenges may generate a feeling of entrapment and the belief that opportunities for improvement are non-existent. This lost sense of possibility can become a fundamental stumbling block in itself, discouraging people from taking up any opportunities that do exist and preventing them from joining with others to work for change.

Based on this research, VCSJ chose to refine its overall strategy by rooting its work in the realities of high-poverty neighbourhoods. In this way, it hoped to tackle the interlocking issues that face lone-parent families and other low income residents, and break the cycle of poverty (Makhoul and Leviten Reid, 2006: 4). In practice, this meant not only addressing a wide range of tangible issues, but doing so in a way that engaged neighbourhood residents in the process, improved the links between residents and other community partners, used grassroots experience to inform policy development and public investment, and altered public perceptions of poverty and the potential of residents to take leadership in neighbourhood development.

In sum, attention to the priority neighbourhoods became the driving force for finding new ways of thinking and acting that would make Saint John a more economically and socially inclusive community.

### **The Strategy**

The Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy was not created overnight but developed gradually as its various ele-



ments found traction, fed into one another, and gave rise to new initiatives. Although many of the strategy’s basic components were identified early on, they were brought to life through a spiralling process of research, action, learning, and change. Credibility, influence, and momentum grew as knowledge deepened, new relationships developed, and tangible results were achieved.

First formulated in 2005, the strategy was re-articulated at the end of 2008 in terms of four substantive elements and a series of basic approaches. Through this strategy, local partners aspired to the ambitious goal of reducing poverty in Saint John to the national average by 2015. As an interim target, they aimed to assist 2,000 individuals (800 households) in their journey out of poverty during the first three years of operation.

The mandate of Vibrant Communities Saint John was therefore to weave together the numerous government and community efforts aimed at poverty reduction and community revitalization.

**GREATER SAINT JOHN’S POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY**

*NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER TO BREAK THE POVERTY CYCLE*

- |   |
|---|
| <b>Strategy Elements</b>  |
| <b>Neighbourhood Revitalization</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Resident mobilization and training</li> <li>* Housing Strategy</li> <li>* Social, physical, and economic improvements</li> <li>* Mixed Income Neighbourhoods</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Single Parents</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehensive programs and supports:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Adequate and Affordable Housing Strategy</li> <li>* Childcare</li> <li>* School completion</li> <li>* Parenting</li> <li>* Health and Wellness</li> </ul> </li> </ul>    |
| <b>Children and Youth</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Level the playing field:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Early Learning Centres</li> <li>* School Supports / Community Schools</li> <li>* Youth Programs / Engagement / Leadership</li> <li>* Coordination of Services</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| <b>Workforce Participation</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Multiple Pathways and supports</li> <li>* Remove barriers: childcare, transportation, health insurance, tuition</li> <li>* Employer Leadership</li> <li>* Living wage replaces minimum wage</li> </ul>   |

**How we do it!**





Even a summary account of the work undertaken conveys the evolving nature of the work and the wide array of mutually reinforcing activities being pursued.

*Element One: neighbourhood revitalization*

At the core of the strategy was support for neighbourhood residents to take an active part in identifying issues and shaping solutions. This had been VCSJ's approach even before neighbourhoods became the focal point of its work.

Early in 2005, when a low income resident shared her concern about a rate increase that was being sought by New Brunswick Power, VCSJ took up the issue of energy poverty. As part of its intervention with the Public Utility Board, VCSJ created opportunities for low income residents to share their personal experiences of coping with the high costs of heating their homes. It later supported an existing neighbourhood association, O.N.E. (Old North End) Change, advancing its Winds of Change project to weatherize homes (Makhoul, 2006).

Involvement with O.N.E. Change soon expanded to include work on a "housing charette," a five-day planning and visioning exercise hosted by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in November 2005. The charette report outlined more than 200 ideas generated by resident youth, adults, and other interested parties to substantially improve the quality of life in the Old North End. It provided renewed focus for the ongoing work of O.N.E. Change and its growing base of partners in the neighbourhood and beyond.

In Crescent Valley, a neighbourhood consisting of a 388-unit public housing development, VCSJ played an even more proactive role. It convened a planning committee composed of representatives from business, community



organizations, and the three orders of government to raise the profile of local concerns and consider ways to dispel the neighbourhood's entrenched poverty. Recognizing that resident involvement was critical to any such effort, it decided to undertake a comprehensive household survey. With \$25,000 provided by the Province and a further \$10,000 from CMHC, the research proceeded.

The survey itself was undertaken directly by neighbourhood residents with support from VCSJ's Community Coach and technical assistance from a sociologist with the University of New Brunswick. Ten residents were hired and trained to conduct a door-to-door questionnaire. Testifying to the capacity of residents to engage their neighbours, all 400 local households were canvassed by the research team and a remarkable 54% completed the survey. As in Old North End, the findings identified a wide range of issues to be addressed – crime and safety, garbage control, street upgrading, recreational opportunities, and transportation, among others – and the desire of residents to work together and partner with others in the community to bring about change.

In 2006, a third neighbourhood began the process of engaging residents and organizing. Eighty-five residents participated in a South End “Meet and Potatoes” event facilitated by VCSJ. Subsequently, 15 to 20 residents began meeting every three weeks at the storefront of a neighbourhood church to consider ways to improve their community. SEA-CAT (the South End Area Community Action Team) soon identified affordable housing and community safety as initial concerns and invited speakers from various community organizations to make presentations and engage in discussions with its members. With help from the police, the group organized a spring clean-up of a local park, generating a strong turnout of local residents.



In many ways, the lessons learned from these early efforts shaped the steps to come: Not only are neighbourhood residents interested in taking an active role in their communities, they also are often better positioned than anyone else to solicit input and involvement from their neighbours; settings are needed where residents can work together on an organized basis; small but tangible initiatives can mobilize interest and build capacity and momentum; and supportive partners are often needed to make things happen.

Building on these insights, VCSJ and its partners put in place a variety of measures to support the neighbourhood development process (Makhoul, 2009a).

***Neighbourhood Assistants.*** With funds provided by the provincial government, VCSJ oversaw the hiring of residents to serve as neighbourhood assistants. The role of these assistants was to support the work of neighbourhood associations, and, especially, to help engage other residents in the process. Besides fulfilling a crucial function, neighbourhood assistants gained valuable experience that in many cases led to education or employment opportunities, or expanded roles in community leadership.

***Community Centres.*** In some cases, such as Crescent Valley, fledgling neighbourhood associations lacked appropriate spaces from which to organize their efforts and offer programs and services to residents. Responding to the Crescent Valley neighbourhood survey, the Province committed \$500,000 to support community policing, exterior building improvements, and the renovation of a new community centre. VCSJ assisted the newly formed CV-ROC (Crescent Valley-Renew Our Community) to secure resident input on the location and design of the centre. Investments in community centres were subsequently made in other high-priority neighbourhoods as well.



**Capacity-building Programs.** Two new capacity-building programs were established to help empower residents in their personal development and community work. Power UP! was developed by the Urban Core Support Network to assist low income women, mostly single parents, living in the priority neighbourhoods to pursue goals related to education, employment, and community leadership. During this ten-week program, participants consider the next steps they want to take in their lives, set personal goals, strengthen their voices and learn to work with others to solve problems. Similarly, through the Learn and Go program offered by VCSJ and St. Joseph's Community Health Centre, participants attend leadership workshops to learn how to improve their neighbourhoods, work with a mentor on a particular project, and pitch their projects to potential community partners. Concrete changes achieved by Learn and Go participants confirm for themselves and others that resident-led neighbourhood development works.

**Around the Block.** VCSJ made note of repeated comments from residents about the negative images of their neighbourhoods in the media and public and proposed that they create a resident-run neighbourhood newspaper. The paper not only would provide a vehicle for sharing positive stories about neighbourhood life, it also would (a) help residents to learn about projects and programs in which they might participate and (b) help the five priority neighbourhoods to begin connecting around common interests. Within six months of the initial meeting to discuss the idea, the first edition of the paper hit the streets. In just two years, *Around the Block* became an important tool for personal expression, community voice, information sharing, and community organizing. A neighbourhood resident is now employed as the paper's coordinator, 120 residents and 65 community partners have contributed articles, and more than 50 resi-



dents receive small stipends for helping deliver the paper. Published bimonthly, it has grown from eight pages to 12 and from a circulation of 6,000 to 9,000 (Makhoul, 2009b).

The growth of spirit and action in neighbourhoods are reflected in *Around the Block's* headlines: “Congratulations Bobbi!” (a single mom who participated in Learn and Go and served as a neighbourhood assistant lands a full-time job); “Our Dream Is Becoming a Reality” (ground is broken on a long-sought splash pad and recreational area for neighbourhood kids); “West Side Safe Walk” (residents organize a safe walk service to make it easier for children to participate in recreational activities); “Village Gets Greener” (youth from the neighbourhood partner with the Waterloo Village Association and Vibrant Communities to build planters to beautify a local street); “It Feels Good to Be Working” (local resident secures full-time job with support from new employment programs); and “Celebrating the Food Purchase Club” (neighbourhood residents organize a food-buying club to improve access to healthy foods).

Mixed with stories of neighbourhood pride and initiative are indications of the work taking place on the other three substantive themes that make up the Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy: single parents, children and youth, and workforce participation.

### *Element Two: single parents*

Young single women and their children represent the single largest group of people living in poverty in Saint John, and most reside in the priority neighbourhoods. Single mothers often became pregnant as teens, experienced broken homes or abusive situations, and as a result face ongoing coping or life-skill issues. While encountering all of the same challenges as other neighbourhood residents, they typically



need additional support. With leadership from BCIPI, partners in Saint John have begun to put in place a comprehensive set of services that enable single parents to meet their needs for housing; education and employment; child care and parenting support; and health and wellness.

For example, First Steps Housing was developed to provide a supportive environment in which young mothers can continue their education, further their personal development, and gain the skills required to thrive as individuals and as parents. Additional support to families is provided through the Saint John Early Learning Centre. Located in one of the priority neighbourhoods, the centre was created to provide a one-stop complex of services and programs for children aged 0-5 and their families. It includes a licensed day care, drop-in playgroups, literacy programs, pre-kindergarten preparation sessions, adult craft groups, and parenting workshops. The centre's location, one-stop approach, and relaxed atmosphere are seen as keys to its success.

### *Element Three: children and youth*

When children lack access to opportunities, they spend a lot of time trying to catch up to their peers. The Poverty Reduction Strategy seeks to break the cycle of poverty by putting in place the supports that children require through the key developmental stages of infancy, early childhood, mid-childhood, and youth.

The Saint John Early Learning Centre provides early supports to children and their families. In part, it helps prepare children for success in school.

Schools, in turn, require support. Elementary/middle schools in high-poverty neighbourhoods lack the resources of other schools. Partners Assisting Local Schools (PALS)



was developed to counteract this problem. Businesses, community organizations, and social service agencies contribute volunteers, expertise, and financial assistance to enrich the programming and facilities that schools in these neighbourhoods can offer to children.

After-school programming with a focus on youth engagement and leadership has also been developed. Examples include: the Resource Centre for Youth, a multi-service resource centre for teens that promotes youth development through community involvement; the O.N.E. Change Youth Council, a forum for youth to express their views on neighbourhood matters and organize their own efforts for neighbourhood improvement; and Teen Vibe, a youth engagement and leadership program that builds life skills, team work, communication skills, and healthy relationships. In Crescent Valley, local youth have been “adopted” by University of New Brunswick students who participate with them in a Backyard Book Club, organize visits to campus, and run summer camp programs.

Beyond these specific initiatives, VCSJ has helped develop a coalition of youth-serving agencies that seek to coordinate efforts on behalf of young people and their families.

#### *Element Four: workforce participation*

From its earliest days, VCSJ and its partners sought to address the employment challenges of neighbourhood residents. It quickly became clear that a gap separated residents in need of work from existing opportunities for training, education, and employment.

In part, the gap involved the sense among residents that there was no real prospect for them to secure good-paying, stable employment. Lacking hope and confidence, they felt there was little point to pursuing available programs.



The engagement and capacity-building efforts undertaken in priority neighbourhoods sought to address this issue in a general way by fostering a sense of possibility. However, in the employment field, more specific efforts were needed to help people connect with training, education, and job opportunities. First, information sessions were arranged in which representatives from various agencies met with residents to talk about the programs and services they offered. These sessions took place in the neighbourhoods and were organized in part through the outreach efforts of residents who had already become involved in neighbourhood renewal activities. Subsequent research confirmed that conducting sessions in the neighbourhoods themselves increased the chances of resident involvement, as did hearing about an initiative directly from a friend, neighbour, or outreach worker.

Later, two other initiatives were developed. A Job Bus was organized to provide interested residents with one-hour tours of various workplaces. The visits allowed participants to learn about specific employment opportunities and take a closer look at what those jobs might involve. Building on this beginning, Catch the Wave to Work went a step further. It offered a half-day workshop in which residents examined their personal assets, heard from employers about available jobs, and learned about programs and services to assist them in their next steps. Both initiatives provided important early stepping-stones along the pathway to employment.

Getting on the pathway to employment was one challenge, overcoming barriers along the way was another. A common stumbling block identified by neighbourhood residents was the level of formal education most employers require for even entry-level jobs (typically a high school diploma or its equivalent, the GED or General Equivalency



Diploma). People who possessed all of the practical skills required for the job were in danger of being held back by their lack of formal credentials.

In response, VCSJ and the Saint John Learning Exchange brought together employers, government representatives, and educational institutions to create the TIES 2 Work program. TIES 2 Work facilitates a match between employers with available jobs and prospective workers with low levels of education and limited work experience. It provides 12 weeks of job-specific essential skills training to participants who are then hired in positions paying a living wage (at least \$10 per hour). The program meets both the needs of workers and those of businesses struggling to meet their labour needs (Wright and Makhoul, 2009).

Work with neighbourhood residents also identified other barriers to employment. For instance, there was little coordination among the various programs providing employment-related services. As a result, it was more difficult for participants to obtain the combination and sequence of supports that might be most helpful to them. Moreover, data on participants' use of the existing programs were difficult to find; as a result, service providers had little to go on in thinking about how to improve the effectiveness of the system overall. To help rectify this situation, VCSJ convened a number of service providers to participate in a joint data-gathering initiative. The initiative is seen as the first step toward building a more integrated employment services system and for assessing its effectiveness.

Residents also highlighted a variety of public policies that tended to discourage the transition from income assistance to work: limited earning exemptions for people receiving government income assistance, loss of health benefits, and the second lowest minimum wage rate in the country.



Residents' experiences with these issues informed policy discussions among partners in the Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy and led to recommendations that were brought to the provincial government.

## **Results**

Results from the Greater Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy have been impressive.

First, the initiative has made significant gains toward its global objective of bringing the local poverty rate down to the national average. Even by 2006, Saint John's poverty rate had fallen significantly, from 24.5% to 20% (Statistics Canada, 2006). Importantly, the poverty rate in four of the five priority neighbourhoods had also been reduced, in the range of 5-7% (Asher, 2008).

While general economic improvement was a critical factor contributing to these results, VCSJ partners during this period were at the forefront of numerous activities to reduce poverty. By the end of 2008, the initiative was able to document that it had assisted 4,700 residents to make substantial gains in their movement out of poverty (Leviten-Reid and Makhoul, 2009: 4). This is more than twice its interim target and approximately one-third of the total number of low income households in the City of Saint John.

What's more, in the face of good economic times, VCSJ partners had managed to keep poverty reduction on the community's agenda, and, in fact, to build momentum in that work. Initial partner targets from each of its four key sectors were surpassed – 225 partners as opposed to the 72 originally targeted (Leviten-Reid and Makhoul, 2009: 4); significant changes were taking place in the way partners were working together to address poverty – both in terms of collaborating with one another and with residents



in priority neighbourhoods (Imprint Consulting, 2009); investment in poverty reduction activities had increased dramatically (nearly \$4 million in 2007 and 2008, including \$3 million specifically for priority neighbourhoods); and the wider environment was becoming much more supportive of local poverty reduction efforts. In particular, the provincial government had taken up the call to forge a provincial strategy for poverty reduction, modelling its initiative after the multisector engagement process used in Saint John.

By the end of 2010, results from the initiative had clearly reached new heights: Approximately 20,000 low income residents had benefitted from the initiative. While the number certainly includes families not technically under the low income cut-off rate, it suggests that the activities of Saint John partners touched a large proportion of people living in poverty in the city. Equally impressive is the number and variety of organizations and individuals involved in the effort. Nearly 700 multisector partners were participating in shaping the poverty reduction strategy (55 local businesses, 38 government departments, 480 people living in poverty, 87 not-for-profit organizations, and 30 other interested individuals). And millions of dollars were being invested in local poverty reduction efforts (Vibrant Communities Saint John, 2010).

Individuals struggling to get out of poverty in Saint John can take heart from the story of a fellow citizen. Making ends meet with part-time jobs and social assistance, she volunteered to help with a Vibrant Saint John survey. This first effort piqued her interest and she continued to take on leadership tasks, branching out into communications and organizational work. Along the way, she was given guidance, encouragement, and tools for developing her skills.



Her transition from social assistance to employment in a community-based initiative became a source of pride and satisfaction. She keeps a copy of her last social assistance payment notice as a reminder of where she came from and where she now happily resides.

### **Systems Change**

By the fall of 2009, the Province's engagement process had come to fruition with its release of *Overcoming Poverty Together: The New Brunswick Economic and Social Inclusion Plan*. More than a government plan, the strategy was to be jointly owned and undertaken by government, business, community organizations, and low income residents. The infrastructure behind the plan would be supported by government. At the provincial level, this entailed an Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation under the direction of a board representing all four sectors and including partners in Vibrant Communities Saint John. At the local level, it meant the creation of Community Inclusion Networks, mandated to pursue comprehensive, multisector strategies for poverty reduction in sync with the Saint John strategy.

Importantly, *Overcoming Poverty Together* also announced a series of first steps that the Province was taking to improve public policies related to poverty. The measures increased the income benefits paid to single employable persons on social assistance; allowed households receiving income assistance to share housing without financial penalty; enabled people to maintain health benefits for up to three years as they moved from income assistance to employment; and significantly increased the provincial minimum wage while adjusting it annually for inflation. Such steps reflected concerns that VCSJ partners had identified among residents in the priority neighbourhoods and for which



they had advocated. Along with longer-term plans signalled by the government in *Overcoming Poverty Together*, these changes fuelled confidence that the local work was now paying off at a promising new level (Government of New Brunswick, 2009).

In the end, not only new momentum but also new discourse and practice had been built in the area of poverty reduction. “Priority neighbourhoods” has become virtually a household word and a focal point for action – in the City’s new municipal plan, in the way government agencies are rethinking their services, and in the way non-profit organizations are targeting programs and recruitment.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty is a complex issue. It has many moving parts and these parts play out differently in the lives of different individuals, in different locales, and over different periods of time. Making a major dent in the poverty situation in a city like Saint John requires a robust strategy that mobilizes diverse and substantial resources, marshals those resources effectively to address the multiple specific challenges that poverty entails, and builds support for still greater efforts.

In this light, a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction means operating simultaneously on a wide range of substantive issues such as housing, childcare, education, and employment, and on a similarly broad set of process issues such as empowering people in poverty to play leadership roles in their own affairs, fostering collaboration across diverse sectors and interests, changing public perceptions of the issues and how they may be addressed, and altering systems so they better support desirable change. The trick, it seems, is linking these two dimensions so they give each other life: specific actions that make a tangible difference



pursued in a fashion that reveals the potential of working in new ways.

In Saint John, high-poverty neighbourhoods provided a reference point for this very type of work. The challenges to be addressed were wide-ranging, and they required diverse partners to find new ways to work together. As solutions took shape, the process grew stronger and still more significant initiatives became possible.

Success wasn't necessarily easy, let alone automatic. Building relationships is challenging work. Sometimes things click, sometimes they don't; more often than not, tensions develop and need to be resolved. And as robust as the VCSJ effort has become, it also remains notably fragile. How do you consolidate new ways of working in structures that realign resources and power for the longer, not shorter, term? How do you ensure that the at times heroic efforts of local residents and leadership become embedded as mainstream ways of working?

All in all, Saint John may not be at the end of its journey to overcome poverty, but it has made remarkable strides. Who says old cities can't learn new tricks?

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## CHAPTER 7

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM THE SIX CASE STUDIES

The local organizations and leaders in these stories set out to put a dent in poverty in their community. They mobilized residents to improve the quality of life in a Montréal district, lobbied municipal government in Calgary to pass progressive policies to help low income families access transportation, and pulled together a partnership of previously disconnected organizations to help homeless day labourers get off the street in Surrey. Addressing the interconnected cause-and-effect factors of poverty was a central feature of their efforts.

As we argued in the Introduction, the rationale for a comprehensive approach to poverty is solid. Poverty is a messy set of interconnected cause-and-effect factors that affect and are affected by each other. The ability of someone to secure and maintain a good job, for instance, depends in part on their access to safe housing, and their ability to pay for safe and secure housing depends in part on their income. Addressing bundles of factors, therefore, is critical to any successful effort to reduce poverty.





The challenge is that many local organizations that aim to make significant reductions in poverty are (understandably) not clear on precisely how to carry out a comprehensive strategy. The six case studies explored in this book offer three “lesson streams” that shed some light on just that: (1) four comprehensiveness strategies, (2) five processes for dealing with complexity, and (3) four elements in addition to comprehensiveness that are crucial to achieving effective poverty reduction.

***Lesson Stream 1:  
Four Strategies for Comprehensiveness***

The stories in this book illustrate four basic strategies for planning, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive changes: (1) the thousand flowers strategy – crafting an initiative that is comprehensive from the outset; (2) the pool ball strategy, which focuses on addressing gaps and creating cascading effects; and (3) the weaving strategy, in which “strategic drivers” are employed to focus the activities and other responses are woven in to address related factors over time; and (4) a hybrid option that combines elements of the first three.

There are plenty of gray zones between these approaches. Yet, each has its own set of strengths, weaknesses, and conditions in which it thrives or withers.

**Table 7: Summary of Strategies for Comprehensiveness**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Enabling Conditions</b>
Thousand Flowers	Addresses multiple cause-and-effects May mobilize broader community support	The scale of activities can be overwhelming Difficult to ensure “synergies” between activities	Constellation governance
Pool Ball	Easy to manage Flexible May provide quick results	May generate weak effects Ignores “ripple” effects of activities	Focusing on “high leverage” cause-and-effects
Weaving	Can help generate deep reductions in poverty because it addresses constellations of cause-and-effects	May be difficult to affect a larger number of people	Learn-by-doing approach
Hybrid	Able to address constellation of cause-and-effects for a large number of people	Difficult to manage and sustain	Organized around neighbourhoods Clear framework for change Strong multisector leadership group

### *1. The Thousand Flowers Strategy*

The first (and in some ways the most obvious) approach to tackling the interrelated cause-and-effects of poverty is to sow a thousand flowers – to be comprehensive from the outset, addressing as many of the cause-and-effects as possible at the same time. This has been also been called the strategy of “letting a thousand flowers bloom.” The precise details of this strategy’s shape and implementation vary, but it is typically manifested in lengthy consultation processes in the community, resulting in a broad and often detailed community plan.

The Core Area Initiative in Saskatoon provides a cautionary tale about the challenges of this ambitious strategy.



Local actors there responded to a broad desire to transform the City's struggling core neighbourhoods by engaging local residents and a large and diverse set of institutions in a systematic and well-managed multi-year process of consultation and planning. This culminated in a priority-setting session in which residents voted on 63 strategies in 13 domain areas, ranging from safety to housing and employment. It also helped create a palatable sense of optimism among neighbourhood residents and organizations.

The reach of the coalition's members exceeded their grasp, however: Its members could not determine the best way to organize themselves to implement this large basket of initiatives. Eventually, the Core Area Initiative ceased its operations and many of its members turned their attention to working on a few of the more prominent projects (Makhouf, 2007).

The Saskatoon example says more about the challenge of creating and implementing comprehensive plans than about the ability of the leadership involved. Researchers at the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change have studied comprehensive community initiatives in the United States for more than 20 years and found that it is common for local groups to become paralyzed at the prospects of the scale of effort required and/or to get bogged down with managing and adequately resourcing a large number of strategies and activities. Change efforts that aim at being comprehensive from the outset, they concluded, require a great deal of time, resources, and leadership commitment and yet even in these optimal conditions still run a high risk of "imploding under their own weight."

The story of Saint-Michel in this book offers clues about how to improve the chances of implementing and sustaining such a broad range of activities. The people and



organizations in leadership roles employed a form of leadership and governance in the planning and implementation of the poverty reduction efforts. The actors in Vivre Saint-Michel developed partnership clubs to design and manage the more than 42 project ideas that emerged out of their community conversations. The trick, notes Yves Levesque, the Director of VMSM, is to “not try to manage everything.” Rather than try to organize and coordinate everything from one central team and by formal arrangements, those involved with Vivre Saint-Michel convene and support the self-organizing work of local residents and organizations to address issues that affect them directly.

The people at the Centre for Social Innovation describe this approach as “constellation governance.” Instead of being managed by a centralized leadership, strategies and activities are handled by small teams, or constellations, of people and organizations with the buy-in and ability to participate in the work. These teams operate on the basis of an overall partnership, which is held together by shared goals and strategies and coordinated and supported by an intermediary organization, often managed by a Partnership Director, a Secretariat, or a “Community Support Organization.” The approach requires participating constellations to operate fluidly, organically, and independently.

Constellation governance comes with its own unique set of challenges. Relying on self-organizing actors can mean that critical issues (e.g., welfare reform) may go unaddressed simply because key organizations are unwilling to take them on. Coordinating independent grassroots initiatives so they are synergistic – not working at cross-purposes – is time-consuming and not always effective. Finally, it is not always easy to secure resources to fund the intermediary organization that is so critical to keeping the constellation



going. Despite the remarkable progress of *Vivre Saint-Michel*, for example, its leadership reports that coordinating the work of the partnership clubs is sometimes overwhelming and depends almost entirely on their ability to mobilize difficult-to-find resources from public and philanthropic organizations that typically prefer to intervene directly in the substantive strategies that emerge from such efforts.

Despite these challenges, the comprehensive-from-the-outset strategy is doable and can be effective. It requires setting up a collaborative, rather than traditional, governance, as well as skilful procurement of financial support and a coherent framework for change. The impressive number of activities in Saint-Michel addressed a larger number of poverty factors for a larger number of residents compared with any other community involved in the Vibrant Communities initiative.

## *2. The Pool Ball Strategy*

On the other end of the spectrum of comprehensive action is the pool ball strategy. Unlike a comprehensive-from-the-outset strategy, which aims to focus on multiple factors of poverty concurrently, the pool ball strategy aims to accomplish two things. Much like a well-directed cue ball sets other balls in action, it seeks to (a) address a need or gap in a community's response to poverty through a relatively discrete intervention, and in the process, (b) to target poverty factors that can affect positive changes in other factors.

This is the strategy taken by the community organizers in Calgary when they become involved in Fair Fares initiative. The "gap" was real, it was being ignored by other mainstream organizations, and the leadership of the newly formed Vibrant Communities Calgary organization was eager to get involved in something concrete. Giving persons



with very low incomes the ability to hop on a bus to get across the sprawling boomtown, they reasoned, was critical to helping them participate in a wide variety of recreation, training, health-care, and employment opportunities. Fair Fares would provide them not only with an improved quality of life and an increased measure of independence, but also with the only reasonable alternative to owning an automobile, an asset that the Canadian Automotive Association estimates eats up more than 50% of the entire annual income of persons on social assistance. The feedback from beneficiaries of the fare policy seemed to bear that out: They reported that on average (a) they used public transit more frequently than they would have otherwise, and (b) that having access to the pass improved their access to a whole variety of services and opportunities.

The key to the effectiveness of the pool ball strategy is to focus on those factors in the poverty trap mostly likely to open other pieces of the trap. When researchers at the Action on Inclusion project in the United Kingdom, for example, identified 47 different factors related to poverty, they found that income had the greatest cascading effect on all of the other factors (e.g., family stress, ability to secure decent housing, savings, access to food). They recommended, therefore, that a central plank of any poverty reduction strategy was doing whatever it took to help struggling families to increase their personal income, through paid employment, earned income, or income support programs.

Similarly, advocates of the Housing First approach to homelessness point to evidence that the most productive way to help people get off the street is providing them with stable homes first. A roof over their heads enables them to take advantage of other services (e.g., mental health)



and prepare for jobs. This in contrast to the other (more popular) approach, one that seeks to give people a host of services and temporary shelter first to stabilize them sufficiently so they can then “graduate” to more established housing. Finding a “high leverage” factor able to open more elements of a person’s poverty trap, therefore, is of critical importance.

In the end, however, even a well-designed and well-executed pool ball strategy that focuses on a relatively high leverage cause-and-effect area offers uneven chances of transformational change. Why? Because it cannot overcome the two fundamental limitations of the approach.

The first is that the pool ball strategy focuses on only one factor of poverty. Social assistance recipients in Calgary (the majority of those accessing reduced bus fares) are only incrementally better off than they were before the subsidized pass. They continue to struggle to make ends meet with very low monthly government allowances as they deal with the high costs of food, shelter, and clothing; face multiple barriers to securing employment; and continue to be trapped in a welfare system that penalizes them for patching together extra income and building up a savings account. Moreover, little is known about how to strengthen the synergies between improved access to public transit and other factors related to poverty.

The second limitation of the pool ball approach is that local organizations using this method tend not to monitor the ripple effects of their efforts on the lives they are meant to benefit. In the process, they systematically neglect following up on those effects. Had advocates of the Fair Fare initiative – or anyone else concerned about persons with low incomes – investigated, in more detail, the relationship between public transportation and work opportunities, for



example, they may have found that the type of employment opportunities Fair Fares is meant to help participants access lie outside the public transportation corridors and/or take place after peak hours of service. They may have even discovered ways to address these links. This may or may not be true – and that is the problem: the pool ball strategy lacks an impetus to find out.

To be clear, leadership of Vibrant Communities Calgary viewed the Fair Fares initiatives primarily as an opportunity (a) to address a gap that others in the community had missed and (b) to achieve an “early win” as it was trying to build traction for new organization and its poverty reduction effort. In that sense, the initiative was a success. At the same time, it serves as a perfect illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of the pool ball strategy. The strategy can be deployed quickly to take advantage of opportunities as they arise and is relatively easy to manage. It is most effective when actors manage to locate – and make progress on – a high-leverage factor related to poverty, such as income or housing. Even at its best, however, this strategy’s focus on only one cause of poverty at a time means it is unlikely to help break the poverty trap on its own.

### 3. *The Weaving Strategy*

The third strategy illustrated in these case studies is the weaving strategy. While the thousand flowers strategy addresses multiple cause-and-effect factors of poverty and the pool ball strategy focuses on discrete cause-and-effects able to create cascading effects in other areas of poverty, the weaving strategy focuses on developing interconnected strategies that create “synergies” between multiple cause-and-effect factors. For example, the effects of Project Comeback and the Job Bus were sufficiently powerful that



many program participants were able to escape their poverty trap and become self-sufficient.

The Niagara case study provides a simple example of the weaving strategy at work. Job Bus partners were able to assist hundreds of long-term unemployed social assistance recipients secure decent-paying jobs because of their ability to make a series of critical links. These included: (1) linking an untapped pool of prospective employees and hotel owners who needed the help, (2) linking skills training programs to the specific requirements of real jobs, and (3) linking employment opportunities and public transportation to those opportunities. In fact, all three links were essential: For example, if project partners had focused only on transportation without tapping into the pool of social assistance recipients eager for employment, the initiative would have failed.

One of the weaving strategy's secrets of success is that it enables people to get as close as possible to the realities of the poverty trap they hope to unlock.

For example, as Project Comeback partners first began to talk to homeless day labourers, they noted that their reluctance to apply for social assistance (they wished to be self-sufficient) made them ineligible to access homeless shelters and employment agencies who understandably – though mistakenly – assume that someone who is employed must be able to make ends meet. Furthermore, even after partners encouraged shelters and training agencies to make exemptions to allow day labourers access their services, they discovered that ready-to-work labourers had 50% of their wages garnisheed by the temporary labour agencies that brokered their day jobs. Further still, as the initiative worked out an arrangement in which progressive employers instead could bypass exploitative temporary agencies



and use non-profit organizations willing to find and screen employees, they discovered that most financial institutions were reluctant to open a bank account for these employees, which is something prospective employers require.

These intricate realities would have remained invisible had project partners not spent the time on the ground.

The Niagara and Surrey stories also illustrate the importance of learning by doing. Project Comeback includes an impressive range of activities that address issues of housing, employment, mental health services, life skills, financial literacy, and savings. These activities involve the orchestrated efforts of a diverse range of partners, including church groups, human service organizations, government departments, employers, and financial institutions. The manner in which all of these pieces were assembled was akin to solving a mystery, with each discovery uncovering new clues to how it might be solved. It would have been difficult (perhaps impossible) to imagine developing, in one bold stroke, the entire package and mobilizing all of the key players to create the intricate program design and sustain the kind of momentum the initiative displays today. It required an organic approach.

Paradoxically, the keys to the success if a weaving strategy are also the strategy's greatest limitation. Getting close to the issue of poverty and organically weaving together an orchestrated response over time is by definition more effective and manageable on a small scale than on a large scale. Partners in the Job Bus initiative meet the needs of only a small fraction of the unemployed in the Region and those looking to pay them for mid-level jobs. Similarly, Project Comeback partners have yet to expand and adapt their work to assist the other 90% of homeless persons in the community.



The prospects for scaling up each initiative vary, but partners in both instances face a common question: How can a local group employ a weaving strategy on a scale that still allows for a learning-by-doing approach but reaches thousands, not scores or hundreds, of people? We will turn our attention to this question later in this chapter.

#### *4. The Hybrid Strategy*

The cases of Saint John and Hamilton confirm that local communities can develop a response to poverty that combines elements of the three strategies described above. A hybrid strategy allows local leadership the flexibility and manageability offered by the pool ball strategy, which has been so critical to the Fair Fares initiative in Calgary. It is able to yield some of the concrete reductions in household poverty possible through the use of the weaving strategy, as, for example, in the cases of Niagara and Surrey. Finally, it can achieve a large range of activities affecting a large number of households, as in the case of the thousand flowers effort employed by Saint-Michel. The secret is to use a pool ball and weaving strategy to build a comprehensive approach over time.

The Hamilton Poverty Reduction Roundtable launched its poverty reduction campaign not with a detailed plan but with a poverty reduction framework and a select number of “starting point” strategies, one for each of its critical areas of investment. HPRR did this for two reasons. The first was to make the point that reducing poverty was a collective responsibility of the community. Had the roundtable prepared a fully developed plan, many people would have assumed that the issue of poverty was in the capable hands of only a dedicated collection of organizations – that it was not a universal issue requiring city-wide action. Next, they knew they needed to demonstrate to the community the



kinds of interventions required to address poverty, and to build some early momentum in their campaign. Hamilton's starting point strategies quickly turned into dozens – and eventually scores – of interventions and initiatives across the entire city.

Similarly, the change-makers in Saint John used their initial initiatives in each of their priority areas as entry points, not end points, to a relentless process of building an integrated response in each area from the ground up. For example, the group's initial response to underemployment in priority neighbourhoods was a job fair for local residents. After this "early win" provided an opportunity to build some relationships and explore the issue of underemployment more deeply, the group established a Job Bus to help people visit possible employment sites, which in turn uncovered the need to address the gap between job requirements and the education levels of residents. This resulted in the development of a customized training program that provided training and job placement to local residents, an initiative that subsequently opened the door to a conversation (and eventual strategy) with regard to why employment agencies and employers were not working more closely together in general. While these local organizations began working to improve the local workforce development system, they quickly turned their attention to an even broader conversation about barriers to employment inadvertently caused by the Province's social assistance system, which they shared in a series of meetings with representatives of the Province's civil service.

The cumulative effect of this is a comprehensive set of activities, touching on these pool ball and weaving strategies in multiple factors of poverty that have affected a large number of households. As of mid-2011, the leadership of



Vibrant Saint John is actively involved in 19 “strategy areas” that include 63 different interventions. The members of the various tables involved in the Hamilton Poverty Reduction Roundtable boast an astonishing 175 initiatives in their five critical areas of investment. These interventions range from discrete programs and services for a targeted group of people to initiatives that aim to shift a provincial policy.

The hybrid approach has helped leaders and organizations in Hamilton and Saint John generate some strong bottom-line results. They have assisted tens of thousands of low income residents and contributed, at least in part, to a measurable net reduction in the total number and percentage of people who live with low incomes. They have definitely helped “turn the needle” on local poverty.

What are the keys to the success of a hybrid strategy? They include the same conditions for success of the pool-ball, weaving, and thousand flowers strategies and at least three more.

The first is the value of organizing poverty reduction efforts around specific neighbourhoods. The leadership of Saint John and Hamilton root their work in the areas of the city with the highest concentrations of poverty. As noted by Jeff Wingard of the Social Planning Council of Hamilton, the reasons are simple: “The neighborhood lens is small enough that interventions are easier to put in place than if you have to work on a city-wide basis. You also get to hear the personal stories that put a real face on policy issues. For example, one [neighborhood resident] has done all the right things to build herself a better life. She took some carer retraining, secured a good job with a decent salary but then saw her rent jump from \$300 to \$1,100 a month in her rent-geared-to-income apartment” (Makhoul, 2008: 4).



Treating neighbourhoods as a centre of gravity for a comprehensive effort can also yield positive outcomes at multiple levels. In the 90-day work plan created for the McQuestern neighborhood in Hamilton, for instance, a high-powered group of local organizations worked with local residents to carry out 15 projects over a 90-day period. This included initiatives that resulted in concrete changes (a) at the level of families and individuals (e.g., creation of community gardens and a grocery shuttle bus to give people greater access to more nutritious food); (b) at the neighbourhood level (e.g., plans for an increase in mixed use housing and better signage in the streets); (c) at the city-wide level (e.g., improving transportation to and from the neighbourhoods); (d) at the regional-level (e.g., discussions regarding how to better connect employability programs to neighbourhoods); and (e) at the provincial level (e.g., pressure to deal with prohibitive increases in rent in rent-geared-to-income housing brought on by incremental increases in disposable income).

The second condition is that each group begin their work with a clear enabling ambition and a solid framework for change. The Saint John goal of reducing poverty rates by one half and Hamilton's ambition to make the City the best place to raise a child have encouraged local partners to commit to a long-term change process and have the patience to develop a comprehensive approach over time. In each case, a strong framework for change, based on strong research and input from local players, shapes the strategic thinking of the group, helps them make tough choices about where to spend their time and energy, and guides their efforts at monitoring and evaluating their work. Ask anyone involved in either effort about where they are going and their road map for getting there, and they will tell you.



The third condition for success is the diversity and strength of the leadership in both communities. While each group's leadership roundtable includes representatives from government agencies and non-profit organizations, the "usual suspects" in most poverty reduction efforts, they also involve persons with experience living with low income and private-sector leaders. This ensures that poverty reduction strategies are crafted based on firsthand experience of people with poverty and puts them at the centre of efforts to turn things around. It also means that the private sector is more likely to sign on with financial and other forms of assistance often critical to getting good ideas off the ground.

Crafting a hybrid strategy is perhaps the most powerful approach to tackling the interrelated cause-and-effects underlying the numerous poverty traps in communities. It is also the most demanding and complex one. One way of dealing with this complexity is to tap into some of the emerging "rules of thumb" from organizational and community change efforts across the world.

### ***Lesson Stream 2:***

#### ***Five Processes for Dealing with Complexity***

While the first lesson stream deals with strategies for comprehensive strategies, the second stream is related to the "processes" of working comprehensively. These include: getting a bird's-eye and worm's-eye view of poverty, navigating local context, learning by doing, making vertical and horizontal links, and finally being persistent and having appropriate expectations.

These lessons mirror those accumulated by change-makers and researchers in other complex domains such as health care (Glouberman and Zimmerman, 2002), business (Pascale et al., 2000), and even philanthropic foundations



(Heifetz et al., 2004). While we are not aware of any systematic effort to viewing community-wide efforts to reduce poverty through the lens of complexity, we suspect that the following five learnings may be a good start on such a list.

### *1. Getting bird's-eye and worm's-eye views*

Almost all of the actors in these case studies made an effort to view the problem of poverty and possible solutions from bird's eye and worm's eye views.

Local groups used a bird's-eye view to see the challenges of poverty in their community from 30,000 feet. They gathered data on local poverty trends, reviewed available research on different aspects of the poverty traps (e.g., the relationship between high school education and income in later life; between gender and ethnicity and poverty; or between child care and job prospects), and scanned the globe for "best practices" that might have potential in their community. The cumulative effect of these efforts was much greater insight into the general patterns of poverty in their community and possible solutions.

While conceptual frameworks and research studies can help underscore general patterns, they alone cannot reveal the unique and specific manifestation of poverty experienced by specific people and/or in a geographic place, nor can they reveal realistic solutions.

These case studies illustrate the importance of what Muhammed Yunus calls the "worm's eye view," which aims to understand poverty at ground level (Yunus, 2007). Frustrated with peddling abstract theories about poverty and its solutions, he left the confines of his university to spend years with struggling families and villages. As Peter Sims puts it, "He spent time with women who separated rice from straw with their bare feet ten hours per day. He toiled with farm-



ers in the fields to try to help them improve their irrigation systems and crop yields. And he went from home to home to understand how people made their living” (Sims, 2011). His hard-won grasp of the on-the-ground truth about rural poverty in Bangladesh helped him start the world-famous Grameen Bank, whose micro-lending strategy has helped millions in their journey out of poverty.

There are many ways to obtain a worm’s-eye view. The first is to have conversations with people experiencing poverty about their day-to-day realities and explore what might work, and for whom and why. Organizers in Saint John learned that low income residents were getting their utilities turned off in the dead of winter only because they had coffee with them. The organizations in Vivre Saint-Michel have an authentic handle on what local residents feel is most important to address because they have enabled the residents themselves to set the priorities for action. The leadership of some groups connected with people struggling to make ends meet through simulations like the “poverty game” or “living homeless for a day” or “poverty diets.” Almost all of the groups in the stories covered by this book used a variety of engagement techniques, such as surveys, focus groups, design charettes, conversation cafés, and community meetings.

The value of employing bird’s-eye and worm’s-eye views concurrently go beyond getting a more accurate picture of the nature of poverty traps. This approach also provides the most immediate and powerful way for persons with experience living in poverty to shape the work of poverty reduction coalitions and creates a sense of urgency among those coalitions’ members that poverty is not a problem to be studied, but rather a pressing state of affairs that requires concrete action and measureable results.



## 2. *Navigating local context*

In his own research on community building, Robert Putnam (2006) has pointed out that the success of the voyager depends in part on his/her navigational skills and in part on the wind, water, and tides. Similarly, complexity scientist Stuart Kaufmann argues that we need to think about efforts at community change as a movement on varied “fitness landscapes” that shift (often suddenly and unpredictably) as we try to move across them, sometimes because of our actions and sometimes because of the action of others (Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton, 2006).

In the same vein, the ability of and manner in which the six collaborative local groups in these stories address the interrelated causes of poverty depend, on the one hand, on their actions, and, on the other, on the context and structural conditions in which they operate.

One set of structural conditions that shape the possibilities for developing a more integrated approach to reducing poverty across the case studies is the specialized nature of formal public and non-profit systems. Most government agencies and human service organizations are set up to deal with discrete issues, such as health, education, or employment. Their emphasis on specialization is amplified by civil servants’ tendency to over-design interventions and require implementation agencies to deliver relatively quick results. The resulting “systems of silos” weaken – rather than strengthen – local efforts to dismantle poverty traps, which typically seek (a) the orchestration (rather than specialization) of multiple interventions and (b) flexibility (rather than rigidity) in action, and which operate with both a short-term and long-term perspective. The net result is a general pattern of fragmented responses leading to fragmented outcomes.



Public policies and systems represent only some of the contextual factors that shape the ability of groups to work comprehensively. The case study of Surrey's Project Comeback illustrates how the basic structure of the community can also influence the nature of a group's work. A large proportion of Surrey's residents are relatively new to the city, come from an astonishing range of ethno-cultural communities, and work and play across the sprawling lower Vancouver mainland. As a result, they have little connection to place and a relatively weak web of trustful relationships with other residents, otherwise known as social capital. Surrey also boasts relatively few locally based institutions (e.g., service agencies, civic clubs, professional networks), which are a community's tools for local change. To that point, the social planning council found that the City had one-eighth the number of civic organizations of its similarly sized, albeit older and more established, neighbour Vancouver. As a rule of thumb, the more social capital and greater institutional density a community enjoys, the more capacity it has for working together on complex issues. The fact that the partners in Project Comeback managed to mobilize an eclectic group of organizations to provide comprehensive supports to homeless day labourers in a community with deficits on both counts makes their story all the more impressive.

All of the local efforts in these stories were shaped in part by demographic, cultural, and institutional forces. The desire of Saint-Michel's leadership to engage residents in various community projects was both motivated and frustrated by the fact that two out of five families leave the neighbourhood every five years. The community organizers involved in the Calgary Fair Fares initiative had to "swim upstream" in their push for progressive public policy in a



conservative culture where many people value low taxes and believe that ending poverty in an economically well-off city is possible if “people would pick themselves up by their bootstraps.” The efforts of the partners in Opportunities Niagara to work comprehensively are magnified by the difficulties of working with 12 local and one regional municipality. These factors tend to constrain local efforts to work comprehensively.

Contextual factors can also provide opportunities. The relatively small size of Saint John (approximately 120,000 residents) and the Province of New Brunswick (approximately one million people) means that local leaders are better able to mount a wide-ranging poverty reduction campaign and influence provincial policy than their counterparts in Hamilton trying to work comprehensively in a city of 700,000 and a Province of 13 million. While the higher cost-of-living in booming Calgary makes it difficult for many low income households to make ends meet, it does bring with it a large number of good-paying jobs and a larger pool of corporate businesses that might consider employing progressive workplace practices.

These stories also bear out the general pattern that it is possible to change – not simply endure – many structural conditions that seem immutable in the short term, but not in the long term. Project by project, conversation by conversation, the many partners in Hamilton have managed to create a more collaborative culture among public and community institutions across the City and have helped ensure that reducing poverty is now one of the top concerns of the City’s residents. The report that many Saint-Michel residents now consider themselves as “citizens rather than residents” is a testament to the commitment to grassroots community organizing of the members of Vivre Saint-Michel.



In sum, in order to be both effective and resilient, local efforts to tackle poverty comprehensively will craft and adapt poverty reduction strategies that reflect – and yet often seek to reshape – the powerful, ever-shifting, contextual factors that vary from community to community.

### *3. Learning by doing*

The insight provided by birds'-eye and worm's-eye views can provide clues to where local poverty reduction groups might start, but still to be done is the substantial work of crafting and implementing interventions that have a chance of disrupting poverty traps.

Conventional management approaches typically stress the importance of an intensive up-front planning process that includes precise definitions of the problems being addressed; a comprehensive review of all of the options for intervening; a clear description of selected strategies; detailed work plans; and elaborate mechanics for monitoring and evaluating feedback.

Experts in the area of business and public administration have concluded that this linear approach is both unwieldy and unproductive for making progress on complex issues because it requires an impossible-to-attain level of understanding about the problem and solutions. It's even less useful for city-wide campaigns to reduce poverty: There are countless poverty reduction coalitions that fail to get out of the planning gates because they fall into "analysis paralysis."

All of the players in the stories used a learning-by-doing approach. It was most powerfully illustrated in the studies of Saint John and Surrey, but it is also evident in the background work of Saint-Michel, Hamilton, Calgary, and Niagara. Learning-by-doing uses probes and "safe-to-fail" and "small bet" experiments to reveal what does and



does not work. Over time, the cumulative result is a deeper understanding of poverty traps and promising solutions that can be designed on a larger scale.

This process is not only “good science” for unravelling the mysteries of complex issues like poverty, it is also smart community development. It limits the possibilities of “big failures” and expands the probabilities of “early wins,” both of which are critical to building and sustaining momentum in community change efforts.

The learning-by-doing process need not take place in a vacuum. Each of the local coalitions in this book developed a framework for change to guide their local efforts. Vibrant Communities partners invented this type of framework as an alternative to the rigid and often clumsy plans required by administrators or the rigorous but the clumsy and abstract theory-of-change descriptions advocated by evaluators. The framework-for-change tool is designed to balance the need to create a shared understanding with the organic process of learning by doing.

Each group’s framework for change varies, but they all share some common features, including: a working definition of poverty; a description of the key leverage points or drivers for local change; the principles or simple rules that guide the group’s behaviour; a target that describes the scale and pace of change in poverty that the group hoped to achieve; and a portfolio of strategies and a developmental evaluation plan that lay out how the group intends to obtain and judge the feedback on their efforts.

Frameworks for change have multiple uses. The Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, for example, uses its framework to shape the governance structure of its participating networks; communicate its approach with the broader community public; guide decisions about which



strategies to pursue and ignore; and organize its monitoring and evaluation processes and reports. When the group formally launched its work in 2005, it focused on its framework for change (not a community plan), along with a number of “starting point” strategies for each of the framework’s five critical points of investment.

Frameworks for change are not static. They are working hypotheses of how the group believes it can reduce poverty, hypotheses that are constantly tested through a process of trial and error and updated to reflect new learnings, endless changes in the local context, and the arrival of new actors with new insights and priorities. Many of the urban collaboratives in Vibrant Communities have upgraded their framework for change three times since they joined the network in 2002.

#### *4. Making vertical and horizontal links*

The change processes we have described in this book were initiated by people with bold ambitions to reduce poverty in their community. Paradoxically, one of the findings of these case studies is that smaller-scale efforts that affect hundreds of people are easier to manage – and in some cases are more effective.

It was pointed out earlier, but is worth doing so again, because it is so important: Smaller is better, and for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is generally “easier”: easier to see and understand the poverty by working closely with persons experiencing poverty; easier to develop the trustful relationships between organizations that are so essential to cross-organizational collaboration; and easier to manage smaller-scale ventures to address multiple interconnected issues and to get rapid – and comparatively strong – feedback on their effects on strategy and projects.



Smaller-scale initiatives improve the probabilities of relatively quick results required to build momentum in a community change initiative. Conversely, it is more difficult to do all of these things on a larger scale, involving more issues and more people and dealing with more entrenched issues over a broader geography.

This reveals what appears to be a practical dilemma for groups mounting comprehensive efforts to reduce poverty: whether to focus on programmatic (or micro) interventions that directly address the multiple cause-and-effect relationships underlying poverty for a group or area (e.g., an innovative educational program to help at-risk students finish high school) or a strategic (or macro) approach that aims to change the vulnerability context – the policies, traditions, and rules – that creates, shapes, and sustains poverty in the first place (e.g., changes to government regulations that penalize welfare recipients from accumulating top-up income and savings).

Happily, the dilemma is a false one. The partners in the Job Bus project managed to provide good employment opportunities and short-term transportation supports to a targeted group of people and to (re)start broader regional discussions on fixing the region's fragmented transportation systems. There are examples of micro and macro interventions in Hamilton, Montréal, Surrey, Calgary, and Saint John as well.

The solution, therefore, is to more deliberately and robustly integrate micro and macro interventions into one powerful cluster of activities. This can be done by approaching any combination of local interventions as a “community change laboratory.” This requires community change groups to treat programmatic interventions as serious efforts to reduce poverty, but also as experiments



that can uncover the structural barriers that need to be addressed in order to create a bigger impact. As the systemic issues are surfaced and better understood, local groups can organize whatever strategic interventions are required to address them.

This necessitates a subtle, but important, commitment by the leadership of local change efforts to what Aspen Institute researchers call “vertical collaboration” (Kubisch et al., 2010). In the case of Project Comeback, for example, rather than simply encourage mainstream organizations to temporarily adjust policies and practices that make it difficult for a small group of program participants to succeed (namely, policies of homeless shelters to accept only social assistance recipients, the reluctance of banks to open up bank accounts for homeless persons, the exploitative wage-garnisheeing practices of private sector temporary employment agencies), project partners would take an extra step and find ways to encourage these same organizations to change these systemic structures and behaviours permanently in order to benefit the many thousands of people not involved in the program.

If the image of the community change laboratory provides a powerful image of how to craft strategies more apt to lead to deeper reductions of poverty for a greater number of people, the image of a multiple laboratories linked together *horizontally* is that much more powerful. When the members of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction encouraged the participants of a local affordable housing initiative to concentrate investments into low income neighbourhoods experiencing a high turnover in low income families, they improved the chances that families would not switch schools, a key determinant in their children’s academic achievement.



With the benefit of distance and hindsight, the opportunities for even greater linking strategies in each of the six studies are relatively clear. For instance, when the leadership of Vibrant Communities Calgary chose to encourage a living wage movement in Calgary, initially by encouraging the City of Calgary to pass a living wage policy, they might have expanded their effort by finding ways to work with employers and government officials managing programs to help social assistance recipients secure work (a significant percentage of Fair Fare ticket holders), to ensure that their new jobs paid above-poverty-line wages and benefits. Similarly, the participants in Opportunities Niagara may have explored the possibility of creating a special job bus for the hundreds of residents moving into an expanded low income housing unit that developed in large part thanks to Opportunities Niagara.

Of course, this is all easier said than done. The day-to-day work of dismantling poverty traps is relentless. The admission of the leadership of Saint-Michel echoes the sentiments of leaders across the entire Vibrant Communities initiative: The task of keeping abreast of their 42 initiatives – never mind linking them vertically and horizontally – is significant.

Difficult? Yes. Impossible? No. The case of Saint John proves the point. The leadership there concurrently manages programmatic and systemic interventions in a variety of areas (e.g., housing, employment, and education) in five high-priority neighbourhoods and across the broader city and region. They are also careful to use the lessons of and results from their neighbourhood and city-wide experiments to inform their policy discussions with the federal and provincial governments. Their ability to work vertically and horizontally on poverty is perhaps the biggest reason



that they have had the greatest proportional impact on poverty of all of the communities participating among the six case studies and across the Vibrant Communities network.

### *5. Being persistent and having appropriate expectations*

Comprehensive approaches to poverty are not a quick fix. The time line for each of the cases in this book is measured in years, not months. The Vivre Saint-Michel initiative began in 1991. The efforts in Saint John arguably began in 1997 when local business persons founded the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. The initiatives in Calgary, Surrey, Niagara, and Hamilton were operating for several years before they generated their first tangible results.

The longer-term nature of comprehensive approaches echoes what most experienced community builders have known for some time. The evaluators of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative concluded that ten years is the minimum amount of time required before local efforts can hope to see substantive changes in workforce development systems and the job prospects of the unemployed. The researchers at the Aspen Institute (Kubisch et al., 2010) concluded that it can take decades to witness deep and durable population-level changes in the quality of life in a neighbourhood. Putnam and his colleagues (2006) describe the equally complex task of building social capital in disconnected community as "slow boring of hard boards," a metaphor that seems to capture the challenge of working comprehensively on poverty as well.

The success of poverty reduction efforts is also highly unpredictable. Brenda Zimmerman, one of North America's best-known experts on complexity, compares the challenge of making progress on complex issues to the task of raising child: It is possible to do all the right things, yet



the uncertainty of the outcome – good, bad, or mixed – remains. Many troubled kids come from homes with skilled and loving parents and neighbourhoods with abundant opportunities. In the same vein, even the most capable local leadership using the most sophisticated lessons described above can never be one hundred percent sure that they will achieve exactly what they set out to accomplish.

The poverty traps they are trying disrupt are sufficiently complex, and the environment in which they operate unavoidably fluid, and the task of working with diverse players so challenging, that the best that local groups can do is to improve the probabilities of – but never guarantee – progress.

The reality of long-term ventures with uncertain outcomes requires a paradigm shift on how to manifest accountability in poverty reduction efforts. Narrow versions of accountability reward would be change-makers for following a clearly laid out strategy and delivering hoped for outcomes on a precise schedule. Inventive accountability encourages an experimental approach to change and accepts that progress will be marked by endless instances of false starts, leaps forward, outright failures, and incremental success over the long term (Pascale et al., 2000).

### ***Lesson Stream 3: Four Additional Elements in Effective Poverty Reduction***

The third stream of lessons from these case studies confirms that however important it is, working comprehensively on poverty is only one part of effective poverty reduction. Successful efforts are equally dependent on the four other parts of the five-piece poverty puzzle that guides the thinking of everyone involved in Vibrant Communities. (See pages 7-8.)



- *Poverty is better addressed by poverty reduction not alleviation*

The first of these other elements is embracing a bold vision to reduce, not just alleviate, poverty. By their own account, the degree of success of groups in Saint John, Saint-Michel, and Hamilton is due in part to the bold vision each group has put in place about the future of their communities. The fear of a public outcry when goals are not met makes it risky for community leaders to embrace bold aspirations; sensibly, they back them up with concrete “stretch targets” that describe precisely how much poverty the group would like to see reduced. At the same time, high ambitions encourage groups to think “out of the box” and prepare themselves emotionally for a long-term poverty reduction campaign.

- *Poverty reduction is more effectively addressed by multisector collaboration and leadership*

Government agencies and non-profit organizations cannot tackle the interdependent root causes of poverty on their own. They need to hear from people experiencing poverty to help them understand the complex nature of their poverty traps. They require the buy-in, insight, and resource power of the private sector to ensure that the “market” is part of the solution to poverty (rather than part of the problem). Without this robust “social infrastructure,” local change groups have little hope of effectively employing the different strategies for comprehensive action discussed earlier in this chapter.

- *Poverty reduction is more effective when built on local assets*

While the stories in this book illustrate the sometimes forgotten power of local action, they also make it clear that local action can also reveal where and how the policies and



practices of provincial and federal governments can be adjusted to lead deep and durable changes in poverty for a larger number of people. While we were not able to explore the art and science of productive community-government partnership in more detail, a topic that is explored in other Vibrant Communities publications (e.g., Torjman and Makhoul, 2009), we witnessed, through these cases, how symbiotic local action and policy change can be.

- *Poverty reduction efforts are more effective when part of an ongoing process of learning, evaluation, and change*

Comprehensive strategies require extraordinarily strong systems for learning and evaluation. The success of the learn-by-doing approach seen in each of the stories in this book rests on just-in-time feedback, good measures of progress, and rigorous processes to help the local organizations make sense of what does and does not work. Some of the local networks struggled with these critical tasks more than others, but the effectiveness of each of their efforts was determined in part by the robustness of their learning and evaluation frameworks. Vibrant Communities has contributed a great deal of new thinking and practical tools to help evaluate community change efforts, but there is clearly a long way to go.

Those are the four principles in addition to comprehensiveness of a new approach to poverty. The *mechanism* that allows local communities to manifest these principles more robustly and effectively is a group of skilled staff persons who (a) support the strategic work of the leadership group that is stewarding the poverty reduction work and (b) help coordinate the day-to-day activities of the many organizations and volunteers doing the front-line work. Jay Connor, author of *Community Visions, Community Solutions*, calls these groups community support organizations and argues



that “like the manager at a construction site who attends to the whole building while carpenters, plumbers, and electricians come and go, the support staff keep the collaborative process moving along, even as the participants may change” (Connor and Kadel-Taras, 2003: 54).

The national sponsors and participating communities of Vibrant Communities were keenly aware of the importance of a strong intermediary group to support local poverty reduction campaigns and invested a great deal of financial and technical resources to ensure that they were in place early on in their community’s activities. This investment paid off; these groups proved critical to each one of the case studies in this book as well as to the Trail Builder communities in the national network.

### **Summary**

This book began with an argument that real progress in reducing poverty in Canada depends in large part on our collective ability to address the multiple cause-and-effect relationships that make up the poverty traps for struggling individuals and families. Shipler’s account of the struggling lone parent, caught up in a web of interlocking problems, is repeated millions of times in unique ways across the country every day (Shipler, 2003).

The cases discussed in this book provide a rich pool of learning about the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of more comprehensive and integrated responses to unlock these traps. Our hope is that community activists (and those that work to support them, such as government departments and foundations) will be able to glean useful lessons for action from them.

Any coalition interested in the principle of comprehensiveness can embrace the following guidelines to help direct their thinking and action.



1. Be aware of the four strategies for dealing with the interdependent cause-and-effect relationships underlying poverty, as well as their strengths, weaknesses, and enabling conditions. Manage each strategy accordingly
2. Employ bird's-eye and worm's-eye views in trying to understand the poverty traps of families and neighbourhoods, and then discover what does and does not work through a rigorous process of learning by doing
3. Navigate and adapt to the contextual barriers and opportunities for comprehensive approaches. The most effective and durable efforts are those that “fit” the landscape in which they operate
4. Seek to vertically link programmatic and systemic interventions and horizontally work across different domain areas in an effort to get both scale and depth of impact
5. Be persistent and realistic. It takes time for comprehensive efforts to bear fruit and many of them do not work out even when a group does all of the right things
6. Embed a comprehensive approach within a broader effort that focuses on reducing (not alleviating) poverty – a multisector collaboration that builds on local assets and operates based on an ongoing process of learning and change

Guidelines are not recipes, however. If we have learned anything in the last ten years, it's that local groups must craft a comprehensive approach that fits the unique context in which they operate.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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