



# ARTICLE | WHEN VIBRANT COMMUNITIES HAVE AN IMPACT

*BY: ADAM VASEY*

This article documents how Living SJ and the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, two members of Vibrant Communities' Cities Reducing Poverty network, have made the transition to a Collective Impact approach. Both communities participated in the recent field-wide study, documented in the [When Collective Impact has an Impact](#) evaluation report, on 25 Collective Impact initiatives across North America.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Collective Impact Forum and the Aspen Institute hired ORS Impact and Spark Policy Institute to conduct a study to better understand when, where and how Collective Impact initiatives are having an impact. To be eligible for the study, initiatives had to be in the United States or Canada, in operation for more than three years, and demonstrate that they had implemented at least two of the five conditions of Collective Impact: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support.



More than 150 sites were screened, and of the 25 study sites ultimately selected, two were members of Vibrant Communities' Cities Reducing Poverty network: [Living SJ](#) and the [Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership \(SPRP\)](#). This article explores how Living SJ and the SPRP have been using the Collective Impact approach to focus and align the poverty reduction work in their communities.

## LIVING SJ

Community leaders in Saint John came together in 2014 to embark on a Social Renewal Strategy, which involved in-depth consultations, research, and analysis that resulted in the

identification of 472 critical needs, 62 priorities, and 233 measures related to poverty. With child poverty rates in the city at 33% – and significantly higher in some neighbourhoods – community leaders adopted a clear and ambitious goal of ending generational poverty, and embraced Collective Impact as the best model to work toward this goal.

Ending generational poverty, Living SJ leaders determined, would require focusing on four interlocking pillars: transforming low-income neighbourhoods into vibrant mixed income communities; connecting low-income residents to employment through education and training; closing the education achievement gap; and improving the health of neighbourhood residents through neighbourhood-based models of care. For each pillar, a Collective Impact team was established and clear targets were identified.

Key to Collective Impact being adopted in Saint John was the many years of collaborative, community-based poverty reduction work that preceded Living SJ. From 2004 to 2013, Vibrant Communities Saint John, one of Vibrant Communities' initial six Trail Builder communities, had been working actively across sectors to raise awareness of poverty and develop place-based solutions. Further, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative in Saint John had been playing a leadership role in poverty reduction since 1997. This solid track record of working collaboratively to tackle poverty in Saint John produced many formal and informal systems changes that helped to lay the foundation for Collective Impact.

Also facilitating the transition to Collective Impact were Living SJ's strong relationships with all orders of government, and the fact that key funders in Saint John were increasingly prioritizing impact measurement. The decision to focus efforts on a clear goal and four key pillars, and begin to put in place shared measurement processes, helped to mobilize influential leaders from all sectors to support the initiative; Living SJ includes more than 100 partners representing business, three levels of government, neighbourhoods, and non-profit and philanthropic organizations.

With influential champions on board and a clear, strategic focus, Living SJ confidently embraced its identity as an entrepreneurial "living lab" for poverty reduction in New Brunswick. It was no coincidence, therefore, when in 2017 the Government of New Brunswick tapped Living SJ to manage a new \$10 million [Social Innovation Fund](#) to support projects that aim to end generational poverty. This was a prime example of Living SJ's Collective Impact approach sparking critical systems changes that could open the door to broader policy changes.



## SASKATOON POVERTY REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP (SPRP)

Those involved in the SPRP, like community leaders in Saint John, had been working collaboratively across sectors to tackle poverty well before Collective Impact entered the lexicon of community change practitioners. Created in 2009 in response to rising economic and social disparity in Saskatoon, the early work of the SPRP involved educating the community about poverty and the social determinants of health, defining poverty reduction, and developing a theory of change.

Much of the early work of the SPRP involved pushing for poverty reduction plans at the municipal and provincial levels. From its inception, the SPRP emphasized systemic or upstream change, and developed a multi-year, targeted Community Action Plan that recommended policy changes in five key areas: Income, Employment, Education, Housing and Homelessness, and Health. The SPRP was a partner on the 2014 province-wide [Poverty Costs campaign](#), which built awareness about poverty and its associated costs (estimated at \$3.8 billion). This campaign was influential in mobilizing the community to advocate for a provincial poverty reduction strategy, which the Government of Saskatchewan introduced in 2016.

While the field-wide study on Collective Impact found that meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience is a challenge for many initiatives, the SPRP has made equity and inclusion a priority since its inception. The SPRP's Theory of Change presents a shared vision for community leadership that is rooted in three telling statements: "A city that bridges," "We are all Treaty People," and "Nothing about us without us". Putting this focus on equity into action, the SPRP's First Voice Inclusion Action Team developed a [guide](#), based on community consultations, to support community organizations to include people with lived experience in their work.

The SPRP has achieved many positive results, including influencing numerous policy issues, launching a successful Living Wage campaign, and building strong campus-community partnerships. Using a constellation governance model, which includes over 70 partners from across sectors, the SPRP has been intentional about building strong, trusting relationships, which it values as a core output of the Collective Impact work. Clear terms of reference outlining the roles of partners have been helpful in mitigating power imbalances and reinforcing the SPRP's vision of community leadership.

Using a Collective Impact approach has helped the SPRP align its work as it develops a renewed poverty reduction plan for Saskatoon that incorporates shared measurement across its constellation model, a focus on equity and human rights – including how to create ethical space that questions how our shared history informs policy and practice – and a continued emphasis on strategic government engagement.

## CONCLUSION

As the examples of Living SJ and the SPRP illustrate, laying the foundation for Collective Impact takes a great deal of time and energy, and both initiatives have been putting in the long, hard work needed to mobilize the community around a common poverty reduction agenda. For Saint John and Saskatoon, using a Collective Impact approach has been critical to aligning the work, and leveraging the resources and partnerships necessary, to have an impact on poverty in their communities. It will be exciting to see what lies ahead on the Collective Impact journey for these two members of Vibrant Communities.

## ABOUT ADAM VASEY

Adam is Director of Policy, Learning & Evaluation with the Tamarack Institute's Vibrant Communities team. He is passionate about reducing poverty and building equitable, inclusive communities through policy and systems change. Prior to joining Tamarack, Adam spent eight years as Director of Pathway to Potential, the Windsor-Essex poverty reduction strategy.

