

Vibrant Communities Edmonton's Make Tax Time Pay Initiative

• *Challenge* •

While helping to develop the strategic plan for Vibrant Communities Edmonton in 2004, a representative of Alberta Human Resources and Employment (AHRE) realized that the community initiative also had potential to inform and educate low-income residents about underused government programs. In particular, the department was concerned about the low uptake of the Alberta Child Health Benefit (ACHB), a program that provides eligible families about \$265 a year per child for prescription drugs, dental and optical care, and emergency ambulance services.



Uptake rates were holding steady at 36 percent in Edmonton and AHRE staff were looking for more ways to publicize the program. Research by staff at Vibrant Communities Edmonton (VCE) uncovered six other municipal, provincial and federal benefits, subsidies and tax credits that are available to families with low incomes. Since VCE's main goal is to help families out of poverty, the next step was to find ways to extend the current benefits-and subsidies-promotion efforts for all seven offerings.

• *Strategy* •

AHRE investigations had discovered that low-income people underuse the Alberta Child Health Benefits for a number of reasons: They don't know the program exists, they delay filing or registering for the programs or they believe the registration process is too difficult. By offering timely information and help, VCE hoped to remove some of these barriers.

Throughout 2004 and early 2005, VCE staff interviewed key stakeholders about the best ways to approach a benefits-awareness campaign. Since 1970, Canada Revenue Agency had been training community agency volunteers in centres across the county to help people prepare their federal tax returns. In collaboration with the Canada Revenue Agency, VCE members launched Make Tax Time Pay, a multifaceted benefits-awareness campaign. The campaign included identifying and securing tax assistance locations that would be accessible to low-income families, providing the necessary training and support materials for volunteers, preparing an infrastructure that could handle the increased number of benefits applications, and planning a publicity and education campaign.

The Make Tax Time Pay campaign design was made more effective by a variety of resident, nonprofit, business and government stakeholder groups that provided information on programs, feedback on the package of materials prepared and input on what would be most helpful for program beneficiaries.

Building community awareness requires many partners. VCE citizen representatives Fatima Tahri and Mathilde Balu, for example, helped shaped thinking about the best ways to reach new immigrant groups and individuals in English-as-a-Second-Language programs. Members of the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce and the local branch of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business attended VCE overviews in the fall of 2005, and both agreed to inform their organizations about the Make Tax Time Pay campaign. VCE Leadership Council members have contributed office supplies for various free tax-preparation sites. The City of Edmonton has provided some matching funds for VCE activities over three years, as well as in-kind staff support for project development and evaluation. VCE co-chair Dr. Wayne Shillington, President of NorQuest College, lent his media relations assistant Martin Schuldhaus to the campaign. Martin's expertise in working with the media was instrumental in marshalling the positive radio, television and print coverage, and in designing the campaign's overall media strategy.

The best advertising is by word of mouth. Members of Edmonton's On 'R Own Home Society, an organization whose members live in affordable housing complexes, have agreed to spread the Make Tax Time Pay message to 1,600 families living in 28 housing developments in southwest Edmonton. Homesteader, a similar organization in northeast Edmonton, has begun a similar awareness campaign in its housing developments, involving local partners in the wider community.

• Impact •

If the Make Tax Time Pay campaign is successful in its goal of helping 500 more Edmonton families receive ACHB, these households will have access to a total of \$132,500 (assuming one child per family). If all 14,417 remaining eligible residents eventually collected the benefit, that amount would climb to nearly \$4 million, money that would also benefit the local economy. Similar gains could be realized from the other six benefits programs, subsidies and tax credits.

Campaign organizers have developed a reporting form to track applicants' filing history and past receipt of the seven benefits, subsidies and credits. Provincial Alberta Child Health Benefit records will help estimate how many more families receive the benefits once tax season is over. Canada Revenue Agency will be able to compare how many people visit its tax filing centres in 2006 compared with previous years. All of these indicators will help Vibrant Communities Edmonton gauge the campaign's impact and highlight areas for possible improvement. Now in full swing, Make Tax Time Pay is a promising tool to help families get out of poverty.

This year's project has shown that a community-building approach helps develop social capital among participating organizations and neighbourhood members. Sustaining and extending the community learning that will result from this year's campaign will be applied to further develop toolkits. Possible policy changes will be suggested to make some benefits easier to access.



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