

Local Heroes: CAW 199 and Community Partners Build Affordable Homes and Community Spirit in Niagara

• Challenge •

According to statistics compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Ontario's Niagara Region ranks among the top five Ontario municipalities most in need of affordable housing. In 2001, some 9,000 people (4,227 households) were on the region's affordable housing waiting list, but little was being done to remedy the situation.

Niagara is composed of 12 member municipalities and has a combined population of 430,000. The issue of providing safe, permanent, affordable and emergency housing had been identified as a top priority by the Niagara Homelessness Committee. Members of this organization and Opportunities Niagara (the local Vibrant Communities convenor organization) hosted a community forum in December 2002 to generate interest in local affordable housing projects. They were approached by a member of the executive of Canadian Auto Workers Local 199 (CAW 199), an amalgamated local union whose members had been involved in several community projects since 1936.



• Strategy •

The greatest number of the region's homeless people live in St. Catharines and the city's mayor, Tim Rigby, was instrumental in moving forward the affordable housing issue. Together with Opportunities Niagara Manager Peter Papp, representatives of Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold, and CAW 199 Financial Secretary-Treasurer Malcolm Allen, Mayor Rigby established the St. Catharines Community Housing Projects Committee in early 2003.

After meeting with several community organizations to discuss how organized labour could be involved in improving living conditions for low-income members of the community, Bethlehem Projects of Niagara agreed to work with the committee. Bethlehem is a multi-service organization that provides transitional housing and life skills programs to low-income people. In the summer of 2003, the committee presented a proposal to the St. Catharines City Council to build a 40-unit affordable housing complex for Bethlehem Projects of Niagara.

• *Impact* •

By the winter of 2004, Niagara's regional government – through its Social Housing Corporation, Niagara Regional Housing – had secured a commitment from the federal/provincial Affordable Housing Program Agreement for 150 affordable housing units – the equivalent of \$4 million in funding. Over the next eight months, the Niagara Regional Housing project review committee selected 13 project submissions as priorities and short-listed five (including the Bethlehem Project).

The involvement of CAW 199 will follow a Habitat for Humanity model, which is based on supplementing the work of the construction industry through volunteer labour and charitable contributions. Members' efforts will complement overall construction and assist in potential efficiencies and savings. Without CAW 199's contributed labour, the financial challenges of the Bethlehem Project would have been severe.

This expansion of the original 40-unit submission to St. Catharines City Council to an application for 150 affordable housing units was the result of getting the right players to the table at the right time. Federal and provincial government and CAW 199 representatives have commented that the Vibrant Communities model is a highly successful mechanism for uniting the sectors of the community in support of poverty reduction.

Says Peter Papp: "Building strong relationships is the first ingredient in any successful undertaking. Using those relationships as a base, we have begun to effect real change in the area of affordable housing in the region. Because Opportunities Niagara is seen as non-parochial, unbiased and community-driven, we are able to engage multiple sectors, draw on one another's resources and create interrelated projects. People who normally wouldn't work together have a chance to build new relationships. We get the work done and build new skills within our organizations at the same time."



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