

**Policy Change from the Ground Up –
Working for Changes in Income Security Policy
April 7, 2006**

Comments by Sherri Torjman

I am very pleased to be convening this learning series. It is an area that Caledon has been exploring in a variety of ways for quite some time through our work in Vibrant Communities and a number of other initiatives. What particularly excites me about this learning series is that it is focusing on concrete examples where our local partners in Vibrant Communities have been working on the ground in their communities and with various levels of government to bring about policy changes that support poverty reduction. So this is an exceptional opportunity for us all to explore in very practical terms what is involved in community efforts to shape public policy.

For those of you who are new to Vibrant Communities, this initiative was started in 2002 as a community-driven effort to reduce poverty in Canada by creating partnerships between people, organizations, businesses and governments. Vibrant Communities links up to 15 communities, from British Columbia to Newfoundland, in a collective effort to test the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Together, these communities make up the Pan-Canadian Learning Community. They hold regular teleconferences and use regional and national forums to discuss local efforts to reduce poverty and develop solutions by learning from each other's experience. Currently six trail builders are implementing community plans. Although this learning series is open to all who are interested, it is also one of the activities of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community.

Most of you will have seen by now an overview of this learning series. If not, it is available on the Vibrant Communities website. Briefly, the purpose of the series is to facilitate peer learning among people interested in strengthening community involvement in shaping public policy. The first session, which we held last month, featured an interview with Michelle Hebert Boyd of Health Canada about her work on linking community experience to public policy.

A few of the points made by Michelle were:

- Community/government collaboration on policy issues is not business as usual. It takes creative re-working of how people do things – in government and in communities.
- The role of bridge persons or organizations is critical for enabling such collaboration to happen.
- Even though there are significant challenges involved in working this way, there are valuable opportunities as well in terms of policymakers gaining access to the ideas and insights of people who know the issues that are being addressed in communities.

Today's session looks specifically at income security policy and the range of ways that communities can work to improve public policy on income security issues. We will explore Waterloo Region's Guaranteed Income Supplement initiative, Edmonton's Make Tax Time Pay program, and Calgary's work with the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program. With us today to discuss these initiatives we have Mary MacKeigan of Opportunities Waterloo Region and her colleague Sanjay Govindaraj from the Region of Waterloo's Public Health Department, Karen Gingras of Vibrant Communities Edmonton, and Ramona Johnston from Vibrant Communities Calgary. Welcome to you all, and thank you for agreeing to share your experiences with us today.

Before asking Eric Leviten-Reid to facilitate interviews with each of the panelists, I want to make a few comments about policy change related specifically to income security policies.

Generally speaking, work around income security falls into one of three major streams. One has to do with the adequacy of wages for people who are working. The second has to do with reducing the costs that people pay for basic necessities. The third has to do with reform around income security programs, and this is where our examples fit today.

In this country, most people of working age are expected to earn their own income. The problem is that in many cases, the wages being paid are less than adequate. So much of the work that is going on with respect to wages has to do with ensuring adequate minimum wages and with encouraging employers to pay reasonable living wages. There is a body of work across the country developing in respect to living wages.

In the cost reduction area, there is some interesting work going on in terms of things like subsidized bus fares, affordable housing, and reducing costs for recreation. Again, we won't be talking about this today, but I wanted to put it on the radar because it is very important.

The income security system in Canada is very complex. Suffice it to say that there are two major kinds of income security programs. One set seeks to supplement low incomes. A second set, like disability programs, pensions, or Employment Insurance, seek to replace income entirely for people in certain situations.

There are four major kinds of interventions. The first has to do with awareness. In many cases, because we have such a complicated systems, people are not aware that they are eligible for programs. A second has to do with improving eligibility – in many cases people have become ineligible for programs due to their rules, such as Employment Insurance. A third area of work has to do with improving the adequacy of a program, such as Calgary's work around AISH. Finally, there is a set of actions to remove barriers that are embedded in programs – most often we hear about this in terms of welfare, because in many cases people can't earn any income on it because of programmatic guidelines.

All this to say that there are many possible interventions in the income security area. Our panel today is made up of people who have been involved in specific references about particular programs.

Interview with Mary MacKeigan and Sanjay Govindaraj

Just before beginning the interviews, I want to mention three broad themes that we might bear in mind in relation to the overall effort to enhance government/community collaboration on policy issues. As we discussed in our last call, we can see this work as involving three underlying elements:

- *Voice – Strengthening community voice and involvement.*
- *Responsiveness – Enhancing government responsiveness.*
- *Bridging – Building bridges that enable government/community collaboration on an ongoing basis.*

We may want to revisit these themes later in our discussions today or in future sessions.

Welcome everyone to the panel. I know that we could spend a full session on each of the initiatives you have been involved in but for today we are simply going to give folks a thumbnail sketch of your experiences and the lessons you have learned from them.

Mary and Sanjay, let's start with the work that was done in Waterloo Region on the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

What issue or challenge were you facing?

When the GIS initiative was being planned, Opportunities was going through a transition from supporting individual organizations on individual projects to more collaboration-focused work. The GIS is a monthly supplement available to low-income seniors. It provides up to \$590 per month, although at the time that we were doing this it was \$540, to recipients and also qualifies people for some provincial income supplements. The GIS was a huge issue – thousands of people were not accessing supports that were available. We decided this was the perfect issue around which to try to galvanize community support.

We wanted to get a lot of organizations talking and working together to produce some quick successes – to prove collaboration could work. We wanted to experiment with combining energies without one organization being in control – proving that as long as there is clear trust and good relationships, it is possible to achieve results with very limited resources invested.

What was your strategy for addressing it?

Using present relationships and connections and building on the community support we already had. Sharing - getting all the partners together in one room. We had a planning

meeting which explored the whole issue of GIS uptake and said, “Now, how do we address this?”

Ultimately, we set up a two-pronged strategy for reaching eligible seniors and helping them access the GIS: 1. one group developed and distributed education materials; 2. another set up training sessions for staff in social service agencies that dealt regularly with low-income senior citizens.

We made an effort to be very non-threatening – the plan was not coming from us, it was just an issue we had found. It was more about providing passive leadership because Opportunities at that time was having a challenge in redefining itself from leader and funder to collaborator, taking on more of a “servant” style of leadership. The first piece was developing a close partnership with HRDC, which we did by approaching them and asking what help we could give them – this resulted in a very close and long-lasting partnership, which continued after this project. It was a good issue to work on because we could actually the potential impact in terms of numbers and dollars to organizations that we approached as partners. Made sense because it was easy – non-profits are all exhausted. The issue went across groups there was no threat that we were taking over someone else’s agenda or area of work.

What outcomes were achieved, or what outcomes do you anticipate from this work?

We proved that collaboration works! As long as an initiative is truly cooperative, there is a huge prospect of sharing skills, resources, even spaces – organizations donated staff, locations, connections, contacts - we didn’t have ANY funding for this initiative – just staff time. Even copying, developing posters – it was all done by different organizations. HRDC did training and information sessions. Collaboration ensured that no single organization was overexhausted or taken away from their own focus and work.

We directly impacted approximately 640 seniors.

One big thing we learned was that we could redefine Opportunities. We were able to remove fears about us from local non-profits – they felt that at points in the past, we’d taken undue credit for things that happened in the community. In this case we shared credit, took on an issue that no one else was working on (so we weren’t stepping on any toes), and stayed in the background. This success enabled us to get people involved in starting our youth poverty prevention program (YES) and other work. And the work has still continued – it was successfully spun off to Service Canada and other groups. Right now, people in the region are working on doing GIS outreach in more of the ethnic communities.

What advice would you offer to another group thinking about undertaking a similar initiative in its community?

They need to first look at building trust and relationships with partners – that needs to come first.

Pick up something that you can build momentum behind – there are so many competing issues with poverty, you need to pick an issue that can have a spark to it. Anything that will be dragged on for a long time can kill momentum, especially if the collaboration is new. Keep in mind that partners are also stressed with resources and have their own things going. You need to build relationships quickly so that you can move forward on an initiative and people can see success. And share success – the impact of this is huge!

As the initiative grows older and better-established, it will build capacity to be able to wait for results – you won't always have to pick initiatives that will have quick successes, but they are good to start with.

Questions

You mentioned the short time frame – how long did it take you to impact 640 seniors?

It was around 10 months from the time we started with the issue.

How did you get the information that there were thousands of eligible seniors not accessing the benefit?

In our meeting with HRDC we figured out the number of seniors who were eligible due to income and how many were accessing the GIS. We were able to develop an approximate number.

Where could I get more detail on the federal program?

At www.sdc.bc.ca you can access a table of rates.

Interview with Karen Gingras

Now Karen, Vibrant Communities Edmonton is engaged in a similar initiative to the GIS Campaign but taking the concept a step further.

What issue or challenge were you facing? (Focus is on improving the delivery of existing programs)

As part of our key strategies to building Family Economic Success for people who are working and earning low wages, and building on existing infrastructure in Edmonton, we decided to focus on increasing the uptake of existing benefits and subsidies. Because we have representatives from Alberta Human Resources and Employment on our Leadership Council, we initially thought we'd focus on the Alberta Child Health Benefit. However, with additional research we learned that there were six other benefits and subsidies sponsored by the municipal, provincial and federal government for people who are working for lower wages.

Because AHRE shared some of their research with us, we learned that the ACHB

provides up to \$265 per year per child for prescription drugs, dental and optical care, and emergency ambulance services; only 36% of those eligible are receiving it.

People don't know programs exist, delay filing or registering for them or believe the process is too difficult.

What was your strategy for addressing it?

We knew from research shared by AHRE that we needed to do more than an awareness building campaign. We needed to address the barriers to people applying for the benefits and subsidies and while awareness is an issue, other issues were perhaps even more important. The issues we needed to address were: getting taxes done (all applications require tax assessment forms) and helping with the applications because some are pretty complicated.

Elements of the campaign: create a strategic plan that guides implementation, create a multi sectoral subcommittee to ensure we are covering all aspects required and ensure the sub committee members were key stakeholders – people living with low income, CRA, AHRE, City of Edmonton and a non profit organization, recruit co-ordinators for free tax preparation sites in the four quadrants of Edmonton to ensure access for people with low incomes, provide materials to help sites recruit volunteers, work with CRA to provide training and support materials to volunteers, prepare an infrastructure to handle the volume of applications, publicize the tax assistance clinics, provide the tools to each volunteer to ensure applications are completed, arrange pick up of completed applications, mail in applications.

What outcomes were achieved or anticipated?

We are aiming to assist 500 households this year (for ACHB alone this would mean \$132,500 for low-income households assuming one child per household). It could be as much as \$4 million if all eligible Edmontonians took up the benefit.

What advice would you offer to another group thinking about undertaking a similar initiative in its community?

It is important to have an action plan that has input from key stakeholders, to ensure it is very flexible yet maintains minimum standards and branding control, have sufficient resources to support the marketing – very costly even with the incredible infrastructure that is available to us. As an example, we trained 750 volunteers, provided over 550 binders in the community, printed over 8500 brochures and inserts targeting business, 500 posters, 500 brochures targeting business, have access to networks to market the free tax prep sites, team up with CRA, AHRE, City of Edmonton, have skilled people as co-ordinators.

There are also pitfalls to avoid. Avoid trying to do this on your own – it really limits capacity. It is important to partner – without the partners that we had, we couldn't have

done what we've done. Ensure you have sufficient resources – for marketing materials, training materials, tools, networks. Maintain control of messaging. Have people skilled in community development as site co-ordinators because they have to work in partnership as well, and getting a site going is time consuming and complex. Have a message that people can relate to – test market the messaging

We also learned some lessons for community involvement in policy change in general. First, that it isn't always about policy change. Sometimes you can enhance a policy through community involvement. Secondly, share the resources and knowledge. For example, the United Way in Calgary hired someone to increase the uptake of existing benefits and subsidies. She learned about our campaign, contacted us, we gave her our resources and contacts at CRA and permission to use the name MAKE TAX TIME PAY, and they are now operating MAKE TAX TIME PAY.

The networks that we have built because of this campaign are now helping us in our other strategies. For example, the people we trained through the CRA volunteer income tax program were people we would not have otherwise had access to and as result, we have reached a broader market. Now, we have people signing up for financial literacy workshops, and churches and other groups asking to have the opportunity for train the trainer workshops on financial literacy so they can deliver it to their congregations. We have built a solid connection with AHRE and that is now working to help us with our Employer Sponsored Child Care initiative, and outreach to businesses to use MTTP as an HR tool is happening through our AHRE connection. As well, through AHRE and CRA we are working on the possibility of having a tick box on the T1 general, whereby people interested in the ACHB can apply for the benefit through their tax return.

Questions

Was any consideration given to working with existing tax preparation centers like H&R Block?

We did try to connect with H&R Block and we were unsuccessful. You almost need to have someone else other than the tax preparer on site helping with the application, because the tax preparer is focused on taxes.

How did you develop relationships with important government organizations? What should and shouldn't you do?

- In Edmonton, we adopted some principles of operation. One was “no blaming,” and that created a safe place for people to come.
- Picking the right people to join the leadership council was also important.
- Ask them what their challenges are and how you can help, don't approach them with a report and say, “You guys aren't doing your job.”

With regard to the branding control comment you made, you said you need to manage that carefully – can you expand on that? What did you do to maintain the branding control?

When people called us and asked if they could send something out, we offered to redesign it and print it out with the right colours and messaging. We did what they wanted said, but made sure it had Vibrant Communities and Make Tax Time Pay on it. It was more work for us, but I think it was more effective.

When will your tax prep kit be ready?

We are completing our evaluation in May. Based on that, we will be preparing the kit. We plan to have it ready in September and to do orientation in October and November.

Interview with Ramona Johnston

Welcome Ramona. With Vibrant Communities Calgary, policy change is really central to your whole approach to poverty reduction. You are involved in several policy change initiatives. We are going to focus today on something called the AISH Initiative but I'm sure we'll touch on some of your other work as well.

What issue or challenge were you facing?

The United Way recognized that one of the key strategies to achieve sustained poverty reduction would be to influence public policy. Historically, the non-profit sector in Calgary has tended to be so overwhelmed with meeting the immediate needs of clients that we have had very limited engagement with policy-makers.

The purpose of the AISH public policy initiative was to serve as a pilot project with two hoped-for outcomes: to provide meaningful input into the redesign of the AISH program, and to increase the capacity among a select group of agencies in the area of public policy and mutual problem-solving and use these lessons learned to work on subsequent policy initiatives.

AISH is the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped. It is our provincial income support for people with severe and permanent disabilities.

We chose AISH as the focus for the pilot project because it was an issue that was of increasing concern to the government as well as a number of United Way's funded agencies who were seeing clients struggling under the current program. AISH benefits had not been increased since 1997 and there were growing concerns over rising costs related to transportation, childcare and special needs. The provincial government had recently conducted a comprehensive review of its low-income supports, and there had been such tremendous controversy over the AISH program that in the end it had been left out of changes that were implemented to the other low-income programs.

What was your strategy for addressing it?

We engaged eight disability-serving organizations (five of which stayed involved until the end of the project) to participate in a collaborative problem-solving process, along

with a senior AISH administrator and a Calgary MLA who had helped lead the low-income review that I mentioned earlier.

We had hoped to involve the AISH administrator and MLA as fully participating members, however, they both felt that they could best contribute to this process by acting as an ongoing resource when we had questions about either AISH or influencing government. This also allowed them to avoid a conflict of interest when it came time for them to support our recommendations.

The process focused on AISH but two consultants also helped us to address the more general question of how policymaking happens and how non-profit groups can play an effective role in trying to bring about desired policy change.

Over the course of 13 months we developed a report with specific recommendations and ultimately presented this to government. We continued to meet and maintained regular contact with government over the following seven months, until the policy changes were implemented.

What outcomes were achieved or anticipated?

We were one among many voices that were calling for changes to AISH; the Calgary Roundtable report was given careful consideration in large part because of the collaborative way in which we had worked. When we presented to government we were applauded for bringing solutions and not just complaints.

At the end of the government's review of the policy substantial changes were announced including:

- An immediate increase in benefits last April to \$950 per month plus an additional \$50 per month that just took effect on April 1 of this year;
- Full exemptions for employment earnings were increased from \$200 a month to \$400 for singles and from \$775 to \$975 for couples and families;
- Exemption rates for additional earnings were raised from 25 to 50 percent up to certain maximums;
- Supplementary benefits are now being provided for certain important expenses; and
- A commitment to improving client services and coordination of programs.

Success of this initial policy change effort has encouraged other community-based policy change efforts, including Vibrant Communities Calgary's support of the Fair Fares initiative to secure affordable transportation for people on low incomes.

What advice would you offer to another group thinking about undertaking a similar initiative in its community?

Timing

- This work takes patience!

- Timing is in large part dependent on the government readiness to hear recommendations and the timing of the legislative cycle; it's extremely difficult to advocate for policy change during the six months before or after an election or change in leadership, unless you can turn your issue into an election / leadership issue. (ex. AISH, Fair Fares)

Mobilize community

- Success is largely dependent on how willing and ready the government is to listen to the recommendations, and this, in turn, is largely dependent on where the issue is on the public radar screen – mobilizing the community to contact their elected officials is critical.
- Provincial policy change requires provincial mobilization – the Government of Alberta is not going to change a policy if it is just Calgary asking them to do so. (ex. AISH, Fair Fares)

Engage policy makers and advisors

- It is critical that we engage key policy makers and advisors from both the political and administrative arms right from the beginning and keep them engaged throughout the process.
- Important to let the Minister/Alderman know how involved and supportive the administrative staff have been. (ex. AISH)

Involve on the ground department staff

- Front-line government staff should be involved and engaged early in the process. They can be asked to review and comment on draft policy recommendations and provide insights on what is or is not working. (ex. AISH – case workers)

Clarify expectations and commitments for community consultations

- Are you inviting people to inform, consult or collaborate? Will participants be further involved as the work unfolds? (ex. AISH)

Clarify expectations for external partners

- You may want to involve some organizations as external partners in the process, where they would be involved at various key points (providing feedback on recommendation, opening doors to policy makers) but not aligned too closely (perhaps because they are not in good favour with the Government because of an adversarial approach). It is important to clarify the role and expectations of these external partners so they do not feel they have a voice equal to the internal partners. (ex. AISH)

Need to continually feed back to the government the collaborative nature of the initiative

- Throughout the process we continually inform the government on how appreciative we are that this is a collaborative process. Government then reflects this appreciation back to us through correspondence or when we present our recommendations. (ex. AISH)

Understanding about the senior bureaucrat involvement

- Senior government administrators may feel they are unable to participate at some points during the process, due to potential conflicts of interest. Encourage them to fully participate at the beginning of the process to share government's view, and at the end of the process to support recommendations and help carry them forward. (ex. AISH)

Remain credible

- Important to always remain credible by citing accurate data and reasonable recommendations.

Questions

Was any analysis done with regards to a living wage? Is the AISH now actually a sufficient income?

Absolutely not. It is still grossly insufficient. The maximum benefit that one can receive is \$1000 per month, and obviously that is below any poverty level. So we want to celebrate success and to celebrate that government is moving in the right direction, but we don't want to let them think this is good enough. Some groups wanted to advocate for doubling AISH, and we didn't think that was possible at that time and in this province. We ended up not making any recommendations about actual dollar figures. Our recommendations were much more at the policy level. We certainly recommended the amount needed to meet a reasonable poverty line and needed to enable someone to not be poor, but we used that language rather than recommending a dollar amount. Groups advocating for a specific increase were quickly being alienated by government.

Did you make any recommendations about indexing?

Yes, absolutely. We made a very clear recommendation that this needed to be indexed to inflation.

A big focus of our work has been trying to build a broad collaboration and involve business people. I didn't hear from any of these presenters about whether business was mobilized in any way to support these initiatives.

Karen – In Edmonton, we've learned we need to have a broader outreach to the working poor. The Industry Business Liaison Officers from AHRE are helping us get in touch with mall administrators so that we can get all the businesses to use our binders as an HR tool. We also developed through our initial campaign a brochure geared towards businesses, which was sent out through the Chamber of Commerce. It identified what businesses could do for employees, including putting benefit information in with their T4 slips.

Sanjay – In Waterloo, we had business partners in our planning meetings.

Ramona – The AISH Initiative was led by the United Way, which of course has high-level business involvement on its Board – so they were in favour of it but not involved. We have people involved in Fair Fares who bring the business perspective to the table, and business involvement will be key in moving our living wage work forward. We have just applied for a community grant to help us engage the business community over the next three years.



Click here to visit the Tamarack website for more engaging content! www.tamarackcommunity.ca