

Poverty Reduction in Saint John: What is Next?

Poverty reduction in Saint John has momentum. Informed by solid research, local non-profits, government departments, and passionate individuals from all sectors have championed new approaches to help improve the lives of our city's most vulnerable citizens. From these efforts come many valuable lessons: how poverty is systemic – passed on from generation to generation, most often in lone-parent families; how some policies act as a barrier, or 'welfare wall,'¹ to individuals wanting to make changes that would move them out of poverty; how the intense concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods exacerbates the challenges of living in poverty; and how the poor housing stock in the city forces many individuals and families to live in deplorable conditions.

These lessons have contributed to the momentum that has built around poverty reduction; Therefore we feel that Saint John is well-positioned for meaningful change in our poverty situation. There are areas of focus we must continue to work at in the community, but it is increasingly clear that the kind of deep-rooted changes we seek will only be enabled by legislative commitments made at the provincial level. The development of a provincial strategy for poverty reduction is necessary for large-scale, sustainable change.

We are inviting key community stakeholders to attend a community dialogue on November 28th, to provide input into what the priorities for action at both the provincial and community level should be. Our success in championing a provincial poverty reduction strategy depends upon informed input from diverse perspectives.

Changing Realities for Saint John

The Saint John economy is expected to undergo significant transformation in the coming years as multiple large-scale industrial developments emerge and the province introduces new strategies for achieving self-sufficiency. The potential for increased job opportunities and population growth could both positively and negatively affect Saint John's poverty situation. Critical questions to be addressed include: Will Saint John become the next Fort McMurray where social issues intensify under rapid economic growth, or will we find an alternative path? With changes in the dynamics of labour demands and housing markets, how can Vibrant Communities Saint John help ensure that people who live in poverty benefit from this economic development? One way to meet these challenges would be to ensure the work of Vibrant

1 in 3 children in Saint John live in poverty.

Saint John has the highest concentration of neighbourhood poverty of any urban centre in Canada.

Almost half of Saint John's poorest citizens are attached to lone parent families.

¹ The welfare wall is a commonly used term to denote the barriers facing individuals on income assistance when they attempt to move into the labour market such as limited wage exemptions, lack of affordable childcare and loss of health benefits.

Communities is well positioned within the larger developmental strategies of Vision 2015, Benefits Blueprint and True Growth.

Vibrant Communities Saint John

Since 2002, Saint John has been part of the national Vibrant Communities initiative. Vibrant Communities links communities across Canada in a collective effort to test the most effective ways to reduce poverty at the grassroots level. The Vibrant Communities approach emphasizes collaboration between sectors, identifying and utilizing local assets, and ongoing learning as essential elements in building comprehensive local initiatives which reduce poverty.

The role of Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) differs from a traditional organization that provides programs and services. VCSJ supports a network of stakeholders from business, government, non-profits, neighbourhoods and faith communities, as well as people living in poverty in the effort to reduce poverty. The following are the primary activities of Vibrant Communities:

Empowered Voice: VCSJ supports low-income residents to strengthen their voice and involvement in pursuing changes in their lives and in their community.

Research: VCSJ conducts a range of research about poverty. This includes community driven participatory research through neighbourhood dialogues and resident-led surveys, analysis of data to understand the nature of poverty in this community, and evaluation and learning to identify best practices and strengthen our approach.

Policy Influence: VCSJ acts as a knowledgeable voice on poverty reduction and is a conduit for the community to pursue policy changes that enable poverty reduction.

Connected Network: VCSJ builds stronger relations among partners from different sectors² so that they will assume greater ownership for poverty reduction work and develop targeted solutions.

Raised Profile: VCSJ builds community awareness about poverty challenges and solutions in order to develop broad-based community support for poverty reduction efforts.

As part of an annual evaluation process undertaken by VCSJ, 23 partners within the VCSJ network were asked to identify ways in which Vibrant Communities contributed to their work in poverty reduction. The responses included: providing support in accessing financial resources, helping increase organizational legitimacy, providing exposure to new approaches, providing access to research, acting as a conduit for working with neighbourhoods, and brokering connections to other community stakeholders.

² Non-profits, faith communities, business, government, and people living in poverty.

Community Momentum in Poverty Reduction

There is tremendous momentum behind the poverty reduction effort in Saint John. Vibrant Communities' direct efforts are an important part of this story, but perhaps more important are the various independent organizations and government departments who have, within their specific mandate, taken important actions that will contribute to reduced poverty. Some examples:

City commitments

The City of Saint John has committed to supporting vulnerable neighbourhoods.

The City Police have focused their community policing towards providing safety and security for the residents of the city's poorest neighbourhoods.

Policy research relevance/influence

VCSJ testified in front of the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology in June 2007. The Committee was examining urban poverty in Canada. Vibrant Communities Saint John argued that our vulnerable neighbourhoods would benefit from a tri-level urban development agreement, similar to those achieved in many western Canadian cities.

The Department of Family and Community Services has agreed to participate in and help fund the development of a comprehensive housing strategy for Saint John.

VCSJ successfully influenced the province's electricity rate design to address energy poverty, through participation in the regulatory process.

The Greater Saint John Community Foundation partnered with the Human Development Council and released Vital Signs – a report on the state of key issues in our community.

Community engagement

VCSJ³ led workshops in two vulnerable neighbourhoods that introduced 39 residents to education, training and employment preparation opportunities. The Result: 75% of attendees are now working on their next steps towards employment.

Crescent Valley residents (CV-ROC) conducted a comprehensive survey on resident needs. The results have been used to advocate for necessary changes in the community. Impacts include: investment in a new resource centre; introduction of community policing; road and sidewalk improvements; and new health and wellness services in the neighbourhood.

³ Multiple partners were part of these presentations: Family and Community Services, Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Service Canada, Learning Exchange, NBCC North End Centre, YM-YWCA, and the Self-Esteem Program for Women.

The South End Area Community Action Team (SEA-CATs) teamed with UNBSJ to conduct a door-to-door neighbourhood survey to better understand resident needs and priorities.

Community delivered programs

First Steps, with instrumental support from Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), School District 8 and the Province of N.B., established an alternative school to help young moms achieve their high school education.

The Partners Assisting Local Schools program (PALS) has grown to seven local schools located in vulnerable neighbourhoods, which are now partnered directly with local businesses. The Province has also announced funding for a community school program for the seven PALS schools.

ONE Change launched the Community Adult Learning Network Access Centre to assist North End residents in finding and securing training and employment.

The Urban Core Support Network (UCSN) applied for and received a multi-year grant from Status of Women Canada to launch "POWER UP", a skills development and leadership training program that will involve 100 women living in vulnerable neighbourhoods who want to move forward in their lives.

The Momentum Must Not Stop

Vibrant Communities is looking at what is necessary to continue in our collective effort to reduce poverty in Saint John. It is vital that we, as a community of individuals and organizations committed to reducing poverty, determine **what we as a community must continue to do.**

What are the Priorities?

The Vibrant Communities Leadership Roundtable and Staff have generated an initial framing of priorities for the community and for the province. They are based on our experience and learning over the past several years, and are intended to be a starting point for the discussions on November 28th.

The following four areas are suggested as the primary themes for a provincial poverty reduction strategy and for organizing the work of poverty reduction in Saint John in the years to come.

- Level the playing field of opportunity for children and youth who live in poverty
- Support vibrant neighbourhoods through resident-led community development
- Create a more dynamic housing sector
- Remove barriers to workforce participation

Each area is analyzed below in more detail with specific policy recommendations for the Province and the community.

#1 Level the playing field of opportunity for children and youth who live in poverty

Children and teens living in distressed neighbourhoods have poorer academic and wellness scores. At the same time, youth continue to drop out of high school: over 1000 dropped out from 2000-2004.⁴ These young people need additional resources and supports to help them succeed in school, prepare for employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency by adulthood.

	Provincial Role	Community role
Early Childhood Development	Invest heavily in quality early childhood learning, childcare and parent supports for low income neighbourhoods.	Continue the development of the Early Learning Centre Model for Low Income Neighbourhoods / Community Schools.
Access to Quality Programming	Fund quality after-school programs, 12 months of the year, for children and teenagers who live in poverty.	Contribute to PALS and after-school programs for children and teenagers in vulnerable neighbourhoods/schools. Ensure no child or teen is excluded from participating in school-based programs/services because of inability to pay.
Alternative Education	Invest in alternative high school education programs for teens that are at risk of not completing high school.	Champion alternative education solutions for teens and young adults who have dropped out of school.
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Employment	Make post-secondary education, training and employment achievable for low income youth.	Champion the establishment of an education-to-employment resource centre for youth. The centre would: a) Connect youth to financial aid b) Connect youth to part-time and summer employment c) Provide career counselling and post-secondary education and training opportunities.
Children's Health	Establish primary health services (Satellite Public Health or CHC services) in low income neighbourhoods / community schools	Establish community objectives to improve health and well-being (nutrition, fitness, academic achievement) of families who live in poverty. Engage all relevant organizations in contributing to results and measuring progress.

⁴ The figures are for School District 8. New Brunswick Department of Education.

#2 Support Vibrant Neighbourhoods through resident-led community development

Saint John has the highest concentration of neighbourhood poverty among Canadian cities.⁵ Almost half of those who live in poverty are housed in five vulnerable neighbourhoods. In one neighbourhood, the rate of poverty is 68%. The community and all levels of government must work in concert to build neighbourhood leadership and capacity to drive neighbourhood improvements and to connect to others who can help improve life opportunities for residents so that they can move out of poverty.

	Provincial Role	Community role
Build Inclusive Policies, Practices and Structures	Involve low income residents in improving 'government' policies, practices and programs that aim to reduce barriers to inclusion. One example is the Economic Unit Policy which prevents some individuals on income assistance from sharing accommodations.	Involve low income residents in improving 'community' policies, practices and programs that identify and reduce barriers to inclusion.
Build Leadership Capacity in Low-income Neighbourhoods	Respect, encourage and fund leadership development in low-income neighbourhoods. This will enable citizens to develop the necessary leadership skills to participate in the shaping of "healthy" public policy.	Ensure there are community coaches for vulnerable neighbourhoods to help residents: a) Lead neighbourhood improvements b) Foster coordination to deliver a range of programs, services and information c) Ensure neighbourhoods are firmly attached to municipal structures and other community leadership initiatives.
Access Through Neighbourhood-based Services	Bring government services to vulnerable neighbourhoods and help residents access quality education, recreation, employment and health services.	Help to expand services and programs in vulnerable neighbourhoods to improve resident access and connectedness to community opportunities that are fundamental to well-being.

⁵ Canadian Council on Social Development, July 2007.

#3 Create a More Dynamic Housing Sector

Because the poorest Saint John residents are generally renters concentrated in vulnerable neighbourhoods, they face unique challenges related to energy poverty, limited neighbourhood equity, and difficulty accessing many government and community resources. Existing federal/provincial housing programs are underfunded and oversubscribed.

	Provincial Role	Community role
Comprehensive Housing Strategy for Saint John	Participate in and help to fund the strategy's development and implementation.	To ensure future housing development meets community priorities, immediately proceed with the development of the strategy; engage stakeholders; commit to implementing the strategy's recommendations.
New Financial Investments in Affordable Housing Options and Neighbourhood Revitalization.	<p>Champion a commitment from the federal government to participate in an urban development (tri-party) agreement to fund comprehensive neighbourhood revitalization.</p> <p>Introduce a provincial housing trust fund and a land banking strategy to help communities implement affordable housing solutions.</p> <p>Champion a commitment from the Federal Government to increase its social housing budget.</p>	<p>Commit to <i>A New Deal for Vulnerable Neighbourhoods</i> and make this a community priority.</p> <p>Work with the Province to engage the Federal government in an urban development agreement to help revitalize vulnerable neighbourhoods.</p> <p>Introduce a Saint John Housing Trust Fund, land banking strategy and other cash and in-kind incentives to help stimulate affordable housing solutions and the revitalization of vulnerable neighbourhoods.</p>
Crescent Valley	As part of the comprehensive housing strategy, commit to a 10-year plan and sufficient funds to regenerate the Crescent Valley neighbourhood. Work in partnership with the Crescent Valley tenants and the Saint John community to develop and guide the plan.	Work in partnership with the Crescent Valley tenants and Provincial Government to help regenerate CV by expanding neighbourhood-based services, programs and supports that contribute to poverty reduction and improved quality of life.
New Legislation on Housing	Proceed with the establishment of a Provincial Housing	Encourage the Province to locate the Housing Commission in Saint

	<p>Commission that includes “municipal/community” representation and consultation.</p> <p>Re-evaluate the “most in need” policy for social housing eligibility. Enable “affordable housing” to become a stronger stepping stone to self-sufficiency.</p>	<p>John, where significant housing challenges and opportunities exist.</p> <p>Work with low-income residents to propose how affordable housing policies and practices can be strengthened to help people move out of poverty.</p> <p>Encourage private housing developers to include affordable housing as a component of their development plans.</p>
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#4 Remove barriers to workforce participation

Education and employment are key pathways out of poverty. Yet, the lack of affordable child care options, difficulty in achieving a GED⁶, personal health issues, limited supports and networks and negative experiences with school can act as barriers for someone making the transition into employment. In making the transition from social assistance to work these barriers effectively discourage individuals from pursuing opportunities.

	Provincial Role	Community role
Remove Welfare Wall	<p>Ensure policies reward workforce participation so that:</p> <p>a) Childcare is available and affordable for parents who work and who attend school</p> <p>b) Health benefits are provided until income is above poverty line</p> <p>c) Work supplement is expanded to enable low-income working families to achieve a living wage and wage exemption policy is also increased.</p>	<p>Champion change in policies to remove welfare wall. Continue to involve individuals challenged by the Welfare Wall.</p>
Access to Comprehensive Education and Employment	<p>Fund a range of responsive programs that assist individuals</p>	<p>Champion Learning Exchange as a Centre of Excellence/Learning.</p>

⁶ GED – The General Education Development diploma is recognized as meeting high school graduation requirements for the purpose of employment and further education.

Programs	<p>in achieving both: a) Education goals (literacy, GED, workplace essential skills); b) Employment goals (short-term employer specific training , job preparation and work placements).</p> <p>Provide individuals with the coaching supports needed to achieve these goals.</p>	<p>Provide diverse outreach approaches in the neighbourhood to connect individuals to a range of education and employment services.</p> <p>Encourage and work with employers to develop meaningful work opportunities.</p>
Targeted Supports for Post-Secondary	Sufficient Childcare & transportation supports are available for parents with low incomes who attend post-secondary institutions.	Ensure that information on programs and supports are available and easily accessible.

Questions

At the November 28th dialogue we will be asking for your input on each of the proposed policy recommendations. We will be asking the following questions. Each of the main questions below has some clarifying questions attached which can help you to think about your responses.

1. Is this policy recommendation important?

Based on your experience and perspective, how can the policy recommendations in the four areas outlined above be strengthened? Are there things that need clarification? What do you like best about these proposed recommendations? What are your concerns?

2. Is there current community engagement to champion this policy?

What kinds of leadership are required to move this along? What is your role in this? What kinds of supports will enable the momentum on poverty reduction in Saint John to continue? How might these supports be resourced and delivered in the community?

3. Are there critical policy recommendations missing?

Are there gaps? What might be the impact of excluding this? Is this something that can be added later as momentum builds?