

Community Action in Saint John Making a Difference in the Lives of Young People

• *Challenge* •

Saint John has the highest proportion of single parents living in poverty of any Census metropolitan area in the country, according to Statistics Canada. While the proportion of single parents has declined in other Canadian urban centres over the last 20 years, levels in Saint John have remained constant. Single parents and their children also make up the largest proportion of people living in poverty in Saint John. The area has a high rate of birth to teens, most young mothers choose to keep their babies and many do not complete high school.

These statistics, combined with a high unemployment rate for young adults, has made education and youths priority areas for those concerned about poverty reduction in Saint John.



• *Strategy* •

In 2000, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), now the convener organization for Vibrant Communities Saint John, began working more closely with the Greater Saint John Teen Pregnancy Committee. This coalition of community organizations was formed in the early 1990s and already had developed numerous pregnancy-prevention initiatives. BCAPI members were interested in helping expand these programs, furthering plans to open a residence for homeless young mothers and increasing recreational, continuing education and employment opportunities for vulnerable young people.

In addition to the Greater Saint John Teen Pregnancy Committee, BCAPI members developed closer ties with several other youth-focused organizations, including the Resource Centre for Youth Steering Committee, St. Joseph's Community Health Centre and the First Steps Housing Project Inc.

• *Impact* •

Youths in Saint John are offered several pregnancy-prevention programs, including one in which teens take care of an infant simulator for several days and another in which they discuss relationships, safe sex, diversity and homosexuality. Unfortunately, the sustainability of these programs is a constant challenge.

The First Steps Housing Project Inc. opened its doors in 2002, thanks to community efforts to establish a residence for homeless pregnant and parenting teens. The young women who have come through the First Steps program, learning self care, homemaking, conflict resolution, budgeting and infant care, also were the catalyst for more recent initiatives to support young parents. BCAPI became involved in researching child-care options in Saint John and was instrumental in getting a slight increase in subsidies for young parents trying to complete their secondary education. This effort led to a deeper understanding of child-care issues in the wider community. It also underlined the need to provide further supports (for example, alternative education programs, transportation, and more accessible and affordable childcare) that enable young mothers to make a successful journey out of poverty.

Since its founding in 1997, BCAPI has brought new ideas and access to resources as well as a business approach and needed skill set. In its work in supporting youths, it has lent the strength of the business community to discussions with government officials and helped accelerate policy and program changes proposed by community organizations. Thanks to these efforts, youths in Saint John soon will be receiving more recreational and educational opportunities through the recently expanded and re-located Resource Centre for Youth. Funding from the Rotary Club of Saint John and the provincial and federal governments will help cover the costs of expansion.

Since assuming the role of Vibrant Communities Saint John convenor in mid-2004, BCAPI has continued to support the development of a more structured, cohesive approach to community revitalization.



In From the Field: Preliminary Initiatives from Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities

