

## Neighbourhood Development Initiatives in Saint John

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### • *Challenge* •

Research undertaken by Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) and other community partners indicates that nearly 50 percent of single-parent families in the Saint John Census Metropolitan Area live in a collection of neighbourhoods which are seen as poverty 'hot spots.' They register high concentrations of low-income households, elevated crime levels, older and neglected rental properties and little economic activity. The proportion of children and youth, and the number of people receiving government support are higher in these neighbourhoods than in other parts of the city.

Given this understanding, VCSJ has determined to root its poverty reduction strategy in addressing the challenges faced by low-income neighbourhoods. In this way, VCSJ can tackle the interlocking set of issues that face lone-parent families and other low-income residents and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.



### • *Strategy* •

VCSJ has taken a supportive role in the activities of ONE Change, a citizen-led neighbourhood advocacy group in Saint John's Old North End (ONE). Since a number of the challenges of the Old North End are closely related to the issue of inadequate housing, VCSJ participated in a ONE Change housing charrette – a five-day planning and visioning exercise hosted by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) in November 2005. The charrette report outlines more than 200 ideas generated by resident youth, adults and other interested parties to substantially improve the quality of life in the neighbourhood.

VCSJ had assembled a planning committee that had met for several months prior to the ONE Change charrette in order to raise the profile of Crescent Valley, a 388-unit public housing development also located in the North End of Saint John. This committee is composed of business, community organizations and three orders of government (officials and politicians). Deep and persistent poverty levels in Crescent Valley motivated the committee to learn about other public housing transformations and to brainstorm possibilities for the Valley.

Research strongly suggested early resident involvement. The planning committee decided to design a comprehensive household survey which was thoroughly tested with residents, who were firm in stating that every household should be canvassed for participation. Over the years, divisions had developed between members and non-members of the Crescent Valley Tenants' Association, so it was particularly important that the survey be designed and delivered in an inclusive, transparent manner.

Trevor Holder, an MLA whose constituency includes Crescent Valley and who is well-known to neighbourhood residents, helped secure \$25,000 from the province to undertake a survey and perform follow-up analysis and project work. CMHC added another \$10,000 to the effort. Survey assistance from Social Development Canada has come in the form of expertise donated by an economist who specializes in performing the correlated analysis of survey data.

Gail Taylor, Community Coach for VCSJ, spearheaded an intensive, five-month survey preparation and implementation process. With the help of a sociologist with extensive survey expertise from the University of New Brunswick Saint John, a team of Crescent Valley residents was trained to facilitate a 17-page survey. The survey instrument had been vetted by several experts and the team conducted a door-to-door survey process. Astonishingly, residents themselves determined to ensure that every household in the Valley was approached to participate. Project funding helped to pay for training and work hours logged by the ten neighbourhood residents who carried out the survey. Funds also helped VCSJ establish a survey office in Crescent Valley in a residential unit donated by the New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services.

The survey coordination team included a retired, well-respected vice-principal who had worked in Crescent Valley for many years and a literacy educator who was known and trusted by residents. The presence of these women lent credibility to the project and helped reassure residents that the project's ethical controls and confidentiality agreements were worthy of trust. Additionally, four focus groups for youth were conducted with the assistance of the area school and City's Leisure Services Department.

### • *Impact* •

By early February 2006, some 205 Crescent Valley households (54 percent) had completed surveys. A thorough analysis of the data is expected to take up to three months to complete, but VCSJ organizers are keen to capitalize on the energy and community trust already built through the survey process. The survey team celebrated the completion of their work at a special dinner and discussed the kind of neighbourhood-based advisory council they wanted to form – independent from, but inclusive of, the Tenants' Association. This group will plan the preliminary report back to the community when survey results are accessible and form a core group that will hopefully expand as other residents come forward to help revitalization efforts and determine how resident-driven work in Crescent Valley will interweave with VCSJ and other community initiatives.

Already, resident survey facilitators report that their door-to-door connections have resulted in a new sense of friendliness in a neighbourhood that was previously characterized by division and wariness. One of the biggest hurdles VCSJ now faces is to help Crescent Valley residents interface with the planning committee and other working groups in ways that avoid tokenism and support the community to contribute their voices to change. The VCSJ Crescent Valley planning committee has recently been transformed into a neighbourhood change working group in order to link to revitalization initiatives that are springing up elsewhere in the city.

