

**Vibrant Communities Saint John**  
**Mid-Year Report - Year Two**  
**June 20, 2006**

**1. BACKGROUND:**

Saint John is one of six Trail Builder communities participating in the Vibrant Communities Pan-Canada Initiative which aims to reduce poverty through community-led, multi-sector, comprehensive approaches.

In 2003 and 2004, the Saint John community developed a Poverty Reduction Strategy with the assistance of Vibrant Communities Canada and local leadership provided by the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), the City of Saint John, the Human Development Council and the Urban Core Support Network. The four local organizations established the *Vibrant Communities Saint John Leadership Roundtable* to guide the strategy's development and implementation.

The 3 year goal of the strategy is to assist 2000 people in their journey out of poverty and within 10 years to achieve a reduced poverty level, comparable to the national average. The Strategy's 3 year implementation plan was officially launched in February 2005 and is nearing its mid-point.

This report highlights the progress of the Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy, from January to June 2006

**2. FUNDING:**

In December 2005, BICAPI, the convening organization for Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) again received \$100,000 from the JW McConnell Family Foundation to support a second year of operations.

Matched funding was also achieved thanks to continuing commitments from the Government of Canada's National Crime Prevention Partnership Program (\$75,000); the Province of New Brunswick (\$25,000); Tabufile Atlantic Limited, provider of office space, furnishing and equipment for VCSJ staff (valued at \$12,000 per year); and BICAPI (which contributes a portion of the Coordinator's salary).

Securing this funding was critical to ensuring a resource infrastructure that could support the objectives and actions of the VCSJ LRT, Working Groups and Committees. *Another objective realized by the VCSJ funding base has been the leveraging of new funds for specific "poverty reduction" projects in Saint John, totaling \$448,000. This year, \$72,000 has been raised.*

- Crescent Valley Neighborhood Development Project – Province of NB and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (\$35,000)
- Influencing Healthy Public Policy for Pregnant and Parenting Young Women Project – Public Health Agency of Canada (\$25,000)
- Winds of Change weatherization project for the ONE Change neighborhood – N.B. Environmental Trust Fund (\$5,000)
- Mentorship and Neighborhood Development, KAIROS, (\$3,000)
- A Pilot Mentoring Initiative for Young Single Mothers, Greater Saint John Community Foundation, (\$4,000)

- Understanding the Early Years, Social Development Canada (\$380,000)  
[2005 achievement]

VCSJ is also profiting from the contributions of students. For a second consecutive 5 month term, VCSJ benefited from a St. Thomas University Social Work Internship and the skilled services of a graduating student. And, thanks to the Province of NB, the Government of Canada and UNBSJ, 3 students have been employed this summer to assist the work of VCSJ.

### 3. STRUCTURE

#### a. Leadership Roundtable (LRT)

This year, the LRT (28 members) reformatted its meetings to encourage in-depth learning and meaningful discussion within key areas of concentration. Each month, one aspect of VCSJ work is presented for discussion and thoughtful feedback. The new format has also allowed each working group/committee to showcase their work and to better understand their fit within a collective effort.

#### b. VCSJ Working Groups and Committees (# of committee members)

- LRT Coordinating Committee (3)
- Investing in Children and Youth Working Group (8)  
+ Task Force on Children's Health (15)
- Education to Employment Working Group (14)
- Housing Working Group (12)
- Research and Evaluation Committee (6)
- Advocacy and Mentoring Committee (10)  
+ South End Area Community Action Team [SEA-CAT] (28)
- Neighborhood Change Planning Committee (26)  
+ Crescent Valley Survey Action Team [CV-SAT] (11)

### 4. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

According to Vibrant Communities theory, poverty reduction can be achieved when communities desiring a better future think comprehensively about the causes and effects of poverty on their community and act to lead change by applying a three-pronged approach:

**A. Build Community Capacity to Act** - Four sectors of the community are engaged in poverty reduction leadership work that is inclusive and respectful. Together the sectors are learning and collaborating on poverty solutions and strategies.

**B. Champion Institutional Change** – Collaborative action focuses on influencing improved policies and practices of government, business and community to remove the barriers to poverty reduction.

**C. Benefit People and their Communities** - Collaborative action leads to results; poverty barriers and traps are reduced/removed; there is evidence that people are journeying out of poverty by utilizing new opportunities (community resources, tools, supports) to build their assets not only at individual levels but collectively as neighborhoods and constituencies.

The VCSJ Research and Evaluation Committee has been examining the work of the local initiative to date, to get a better sense of how individual projects complement the three complementary approaches to poverty reduction listed above.

The remainder of the mid-year report will attempt to highlight how the work of VCSJ supports the three approaches.

## A. BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO ACT

Engaging, Collaborating and Learning are three key components to building community capacity. The following describes our work in this area:

113 people, drawn from four sectors, are active members of the VCSJ Leadership Roundtable, Working Groups and/or Committees. Using this measure, VCSJ's three year target for community engagement has been exceeded:

	<b>3 Year Target</b>	<b>Year One</b>	<b>Current (18 months)</b>
<b>Business</b>	16	20	20
<b>People Living in Poverty</b>	16	6	38
<b>Government (3 levels)</b>	20	28	29
<b>Non-Profit/Community</b>	20	25	26

In 2006, 3 new neighborhood groups have evolved to lead change in high poverty areas of Saint John. Two emerged as a result of VCSJ leadership and 1 emerged independently.

- Crescent Valley Survey Action Team (CV-SAT)
- South End Area Community Action Team (SEA-CAT)
- Waterloo Village Neighborhood (The Village)

*This year a new VCSJ objective is to facilitate supportive networking and shared learning among the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods.*

Because the VCSJ initiative is dedicated to learning about poverty and how to reduce it, VCSJ is developing a Learning Plan to frame the poverty reduction themes, describe the collaborative processes and their benefits, and capture what has been learned. Analysis of this learning will help VCSJ to communicate more broadly and bring more resources to the poverty reduction table. A community informed is a community engaged and poverty reduction entails change in every sector in order to be meaningful over the long term.

This year, staff, LRT members, working groups and committees continue to gather new information on what is needed to reduce poverty. We are learning from statistics, reports and surveys and through dialogue what is unique about poverty in Saint John and what is not and the most appropriate actions this city can take to reduce poverty. This rich pool of data has been variously organized into reports and stories, presented at teleconferences and forums, discussed at meetings and within sector networks.

Ongoing access to the wide expertise available through the Vibrant Communities Canada teleconference network is a primary learning source from which we continue to benefit. Similarly, travel to conferences and meetings with VC and ANC workers, expands our perspective in significant ways.

Another VCSJ learning is that implementation of new actions will require an even larger network of knowledgeable and committed people, institutions, businesses and organizations inspired to provide concrete help. *Thus, an objective of Year Two must be to engage more partners to increase the community's capacity to act.*

Here is a snapshot of current learning, resulting from the work of VCSJ Working Groups and Committees:

#### RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

- Dedicated resources to further investigate poverty in Saint John have helped VCSJ to rationalize its focus of work, not only on specific areas of concentration (*housing, education to employment, children and youth*), but also on specific priority populations: *single parent families, young adults who have not completed high school and neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.*
- Demographic profiles for high poverty neighborhoods have been developed providing each neighborhood group with vital information for planning and action.
- Post 2001 census data has been gathered to examine high school drop-out rates and teenage birth rates. The disturbing results continue to build the rationale for targeting priority populations described above.
- An investigative report and community building project led by BCAPI and VCSJ, and funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, enabled Saint John to identify the current challenges to high school completion for pregnant and parenting teens. Actions and champions were identified to address the gaps:
  - Availability of quality affordable childcare is blocking young parents from continuing their high school education.
  - High school completion is hindered by isolation from supportive environments, and lack of (or lack of awareness of) academic options.
  - It is difficult for pregnant and parenting young mothers to understand the scope and depth of available services in our community.
  - While teen pregnancy is increasing in Saint John, prevention efforts are hampered by lack of resources.
- VCSJ is working with the Saint John Police to develop neighborhood baseline crime and victimization statistics to track the relationship between neighborhood development and neighborhood safety.
- The R&E committee this year is gathering information to help VCSJ determine the mechanisms to set targets, measure and report on the effectiveness of the actions that have been determined by each of the VCSJ working groups/committees. This summer, the "logic model" tool will be tested for its appropriateness. The logic model is a planning and evaluation tool that describes the rationale for an action, its objectives, activities, targets for improvement, measurement tools and methods, and reports the progress/findings as a means to learn from results and adjust for improvements.

#### NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE

- A priority of VCSJ is using mentoring strategies to provide supports and tools identified by developing neighborhood groups. A considerable body of research and best practices was reviewed, causing VCSJ to facilitate a neighborhood development approach to mentoring that would support those who live together in close proximity to share resources and information and provide or facilitate expertise to assist group-building and advocacy at the neighborhood level. This strategy has already resulted in strong evolving groups equipped to make presentations outside their neighborhoods, and learning empowerment skills through coaching and collective action.

- VCSJ is engaged in 4 neighborhood development initiatives offering multiple learning, mentoring and collaborative action experiences at a micro community level. Learning and mentoring processes are intended to be flexible, participatory and action-based aimed at building both strong citizen leadership and strong community supports for actions that will enable people and their neighborhoods to journey out of poverty.
- Networking within the pan-Canadian comprehensive community initiatives of VC Canada and Action For Neighborhood Change has helped VCSJ carry the learning of the more experienced to local neighborhoods.
- Crescent Valley Neighborhood's start-up learning process, coordinated by VCSJ, has included:
  - Gathering information through focus groups (youth and adult) and through an in-depth questionnaire, designed to collect resident viewpoints about a wide range of quality of life components and ideas for change.
  - Training 10 residents to facilitate the door-to-door survey.
  - Facilitation of survey to 400 households and achieving 54% rate of completion.
  - Continuing training and coaching to ready the resident Survey Action Team to lead the next process of reporting results, and establishing priorities and actions.
- The South End Area Community Action Team (SEA-CAT) has newly emerged as a result of VCSJ hosting an initial "Meet and Potatoes" neighborhood gathering in March 2006. 20 adults and 10 children, representing the diversity of the neighborhood, regularly eat and meet, plan and learn together. Needs and priorities have quickly been determined. Meeting agendas are learning agendas - in part, process (group building) and in part, action.

#### HOUSING

- A background report has been developed that describes Crescent Valley's vulnerabilities and recommends neighborhood rehabilitation, conversion from public housing, and a start-up action plan.
- A municipal housing strategy has been researched and developed for eventual presentation to Common Council. The plan includes:
  - A community housing trust
  - Municipal leadership in the campaign for more government housing dollars
  - A warm apartments campaign, initiated in the OLD North End neighborhood
  - More emphasis on neighborhood renewal and flexible zoning
  - Support for homeownership in vulnerable neighborhoods
- A neighborhood housing renewal business plan, *Maritime Habitat*, has been prepared for discussion and possible development.

#### CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- An inventory of local services accessible to children and youth who live in poverty has revealed that:
  - Transportation cost is a major barrier to participation for children and youth who live in poverty.
  - Effectiveness of services is often unknown by the community because of lack of common targets, measures and reporting.
  - Most services operate independently, offering little opportunity for children and youth to receive what they most need - targeted and comprehensive poverty-reduction supports.
- The Children's Health Task Force, launched in January 2006 to recommend and champion up to 3 actions that would improve the health and wellbeing of children 5 to 12

years who live in poverty, has spent its first 5 months in a learning phase. While presentations and reports from experts (parents, health, education and social and economic development experts) has provided adequate evidence of major gaps in opportunities for children and youth living in poverty, the task force has also learned the community lacks statistical evidence from which to measure the gaps and evaluate improvement.

#### EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT

- After a year of investigation and reporting on the experiences of 100 individuals – learners, instructors, community and government services, trades and employment groups - the Education to Employment Working Group, a 14 member multi-sectoral collaborative, has determined a Community Learning Strategy that will target single parents and unattached youth living on income assistance who are between the ages of 19 and 34 and lack a high school education. The initial focus is on four areas of action:
  - Increase the capacity of the community to support and follow individuals who are currently in community adult learning programs as a means to reduce the numbers of students who drop out and to assist them with next steps planning and connecting.
  - Enhance the ability of programs and partners to prepare individuals for employment
  - Support current and new efforts to break the cycle of youth dropping out of high school
  - Promote the Education to Employment report as a learning tool with community organizations, government departments and business organizations who have an interest/involvement in this area.

#### **B. CHAMPIONING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

Championing institutional change means acting to strengthen attitudes, policies and practices of government, business and community to help reduce poverty

Evidence of institutional change is resulting from years of community leadership building, learning and networking that has helped Saint John to build a poverty reduction strategy, establish VCSJ and influence changes within the sectors. Some recent examples of institutional change are:

- The Saint John Police are demonstrating active engagement in neighborhood development. Their goal is to increase community policing resources in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and incidents of crime. This year a new community policing facility is being built in the Old North End Neighborhood to support the priorities of ONE Change. Funding for the facility has come from provincial, municipal and private contributions.
- The Province of NB has been allocating a growing share of its housing funds to Saint John, demonstrating its understanding of the significant need and demand in this city.
- VCSJ staff participation (and extensive learning) throughout the 6 month long Public Utilities Board Hearings helped to produce a government decision to cap electricity rate increases that has a positive effect on low-income households in Saint John.
- In February 2006, the Premier announced five 5-year goals for New Brunswick. One of the goals is that NB will have the highest poverty reduction rate among all Canadian provinces. VCSJ has written the Premier to congratulate the Province and offer our help.

- Community, government and business organizations have collaborated to develop and manage new service models that aim to help children, teens and adults living in poverty to build the personal and financial assets they need to leave poverty behind. Examples of these services are highlighted below and throughout this report.

### **C. BENEFITING PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES**

Benefiting people and their communities points to evidence that interventions at the policy and program levels are helping people move forward out of poverty.

#### CHILDREN AND YOUTH:

Target: _____	<u>500</u>
Achieved to Date:	500

Current children and youth “target” achievements were under development prior to VCSJ’s beginnings. VCSJ’s role has been to recognize and communicate the exceptional value of new program models where local groups, through new collaborations, respond in more comprehensive and timely ways to the needs of children and youth who live in poverty. These new service models include:

PALS is a school-business-community partnership (community school) that aims to comprehensively address the needs of the children attending a K-6 or K-8 school, located in a high poverty neighborhood. This program has expanded in one school and has begun in a second school this year. Partnership development arrangements are underway for 2 additional schools, with implementation scheduled for the Fall semester. This year, with PALS operating in 2 schools, 500 students are benefiting

THE RESOURCE CENTRE FOR YOUTH (TRC) is a multi-service, one-stop resource centre for teens, providing health services and programs, social and recreational activities, education and employment counseling, and community development/volunteer experiences. The successful result of a \$2 million dollar fundraising campaign will enable the TRC to move to a larger newly renovated facility in the Fall. The TRC is also helping to develop teen programs in the Old North End neighborhood and has plans to assist Crescent Valley neighborhood in the Fall. This past year, the TRC registered more than 2000 teens in various programs and services.

FIRST STEPS provides a residence and a comprehensive range of supports and programs for homeless pregnant and parenting teens and their babies. This past year, First Steps, with the help of BCAP, the Provincial Government, and the School District, added an alternative high school classroom and a community childcare home service. This past year, 25 women and 17 babies lived at First Steps, 7 women lived in the Next Steps apartment program, 6 women participated in the pilot alternative classroom and 3 women received in-home childcare.

EARLY LEARNING CENTRE – a business plan is under development to establish a model “Early Learning Centre” in a high poverty neighborhood. The plan envisions a comprehensive range of programs, services and supports that will engage neighborhood parents and their children 0 to 5 years in life learning experiences.

## EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT:

Target: 500  
Achieved to Date: 15

While progress is modest in the 3<sup>rd</sup> category of measurement - *direct benefit to people* - VCSJ is secure that the foundation for success is being built through the VCSJ Education to Employment Working Group members and the organizations they represent. Of all areas of VCSJ concentration, the education to employment working group had the most work to do in gathering enough information to enable priorities and action plans to emerge. Now in place, the following success stories are the seeds being planted for expansion and new growth.

- 6 of 6 students, who attended the First Steps Alternative High School classroom, completed their courses and 1 received her high school graduation certificate.
- VCSJ brokered a partnership between the John Howard Society and a local employment agency which was seeking unskilled employees for a business client. As a result, 5 people, recommended by the John Howard Society are now working full time. Plans are in place to hire additional employees through this partnership as well as another under development with the Coverdale Centre for Women.
- Two new bursaries funds were established, one for First Steps residents and the other for OLD North End neighborhood teens, who are pursuing post-secondary education.
- The New Brunswick Community College has launched a \$2 million scholarship campaign, locally, to support the financial needs of students attending community college.
- The Working Group continues to support the development of a proposed pilot project that will establish a comprehensive learning program - combining academics, essential skills and employment preparation - for 100 adults.

## SAFE and AFFORDABLE HOUSING

TARGET: 1000 people OR 300 households  
Achieved to Date: 170 (120 affordable housing units approved, 50 households through the Winds of Change warm apartments pilot in the OLD North End)

While Saint John has made significant gains in the construction/renovation of affordable housing, the community has virtually exhausted existing government funding. There are 200 additional units waiting for approval and funding. New funding streams are being examined and championed.

VCSJ participation at the PUB hearings may prevent many households across New Brunswick from falling deeper into poverty. PUB recommendations, released this week, supported many of the requests of VCSJ. Benefit to low income households will now depend on what recommendations the provincial government and NB Power adopt.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

In the six months since over 40 supporters took part in VCSJ's Year End Reflection session, December 2005, this initiative has matured a great deal. While significant challenges remain, there is a greater certainty around the collaborative role that Vibrant Communities can play as Saint John seeks to achieve significant poverty reduction.

Midway through year two, our greatest challenge remains managing expectations. Since VCSJ has become recognized as a key supporter of the city's True Growth initiative (encompassing the innovative, supportive and economic communities of Saint John), we are also expected to produce real and lasting solutions to the challenge of local poverty, without necessarily having all of the financial and organizational capacity to manage the change now desired by the community.

Related to the challenge of managing expectations is the question of securing organizational and project funding. VCSJ has generally avoided local fundraising efforts, in large part to avoid competing with some of our worthy local non-profit groups. However, to produce significant change (especially in specific neighborhoods) VCSJ may need to secure future funding from new partners.

Fortunately, there are real opportunities for new partnerships. The province has dedicated itself to poverty reduction in the next 5 years, and VCSJ is working with local agencies to ensure that Saint John remains the innovative champion of reducing poverty, in our city and across the province.

