



*Saint John Poverty Reduction Strategy  
Document for Discussion*

March 2008

In November 2007, ninety-one individuals - representing non-profits, government, people living in poverty, business, and faith communities - attended a meeting organized by Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ)<sup>1</sup>. The goal was to help prioritize action toward poverty reduction at both the provincial and community level.

### **Saint John is Ready to continue its Poverty Reduction Momentum**

Poverty reduction momentum in Saint John is being carried forward by numerous organizations and government departments who have taken important actions that will contribute to reduced poverty. Solid research informs new approaches to help improve the lives of Saint John's most vulnerable citizens. From these efforts come many valuable lessons:

- poverty is systemic – passed on from generation to generation, most often in lone-parent families;
- some policies act as a barrier, or 'welfare wall,'<sup>2</sup> to individuals wanting to make changes that would move them out of poverty;
- the intense concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods exacerbates the challenges of living in poverty; and
- the poor housing stock in the city forces many individuals and families to live in deplorable conditions.

### **Saint John Priorities**

The following four areas are the primary themes of a poverty reduction strategy in Saint John in the years to come.

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

This approach to poverty reduction needs to be responsive to the particular needs of neighbourhoods where there are disproportionately high numbers of people who live in poverty. These neighbourhoods, and their citizens, are a fundamental priority for poverty reduction. A poverty reduction strategy is not just about more programs and services. It also includes improved accessibility to existing programs, ensuring their responsiveness, enhancing programs integration, and sustaining supports throughout what is often a long and difficult journey out of poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

The provincial government has set the commendable goal of reducing the province's caseload for social assistance by 2500 people. Saint John offers an immediate opportunity to move forward with that goal. Strategies to reduce the social assistance caseload must be applied in ways that enhance quality of life and move individuals out of poverty for the long term. The learning generated from these efforts can form the basis of province-wide approaches to poverty reduction.

### **Support Vibrant Neighbourhoods Through Resident-led Community Development**

Saint John has a high concentration of neighbourhood poverty compared to most Canadian cities.<sup>3</sup> Almost half of those who live in poverty are housed in five priority<sup>4</sup> 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.

The top priority is bringing resources to priority neighbourhoods and helping residents access quality education, recreation, employment, and health services. Creating these opportunities is fundamental to setting a foundation for building leadership capacity in low-income neighbourhoods and promoting inclusive policies.

Saint John's priority neighbourhoods are mobilizing and residents are increasingly involved. Residents are informing priorities and approaches, as well as attracting new services and resources. Neighbourhood activity serves as a source of innovation and learning about programs. It is important that resident-led poverty reduction remain a fundamental principle within Saint John's poverty reduction strategy. Sustainable staffing for priority neighbourhoods is vital to support resident-led community development.

### **Level the Playing Field of Opportunity for Children and Youth Who Live in Poverty**

Building on the success of the PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools) program, the Resource Centre for Youth (TRC), and First Steps Housing, which are helping level the playing field for children and youth who live in poverty, we must now invest heavily in quality early-childhood learning, childcare, and other supports for parents from low-income neighbourhoods. Early childhood development interventions generate long-term benefits. An early childhood and parent centre has a multiplier effect where interaction among moms with young children accelerates learning, increases confidence, and improves access to services.

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<sup>3</sup> Canadian Council on Social Development, July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Priority Neighbourhoods are those with the highest concentrations of individuals living in poverty: Crescent Valley, South End, the Village, Old North End, and Lower West Side.

There is currently strong leadership<sup>5</sup> on the development of the Early Learning Centre model for priority neighbourhoods. A business case has been developed, and the community schools initiative holds great promise as a way of achieving this.

It is also vital that the province establishes primary health services<sup>6</sup> in low-income neighbourhoods and creates the basic conditions that enable good health. Health is a basic building block in reducing poverty. Such supports could be effectively linked into community schools and/or Early Learning Centres. The Children's Health Task Force has recommended that the community establish objectives in areas like nutrition, fitness, and academic achievement to improve health and well-being of families who live in poverty. The approach must be holistic and emphasize prevention.

### **Create a More Dynamic Housing Sector**

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

The top priority is the establishment of integrated government programs that enable financial investments in affordable housing options and neighbourhood revitalization. This requires:

- a commitment from all levels of government to participate in an urban development (tri-party) agreement to fund comprehensive neighbourhood revitalization;
- the introduction of a housing trust fund and a land banking strategy;
- a commitment from governments to increase its social housing budget; and
- the development of innovative partnerships with the private sector.

Currently there is movement on a comprehensive housing strategy for Saint John to achieve mixed-income neighbourhoods. There is a need to proceed immediately with the development of the strategy and a commitment – from the community and from government – to participate in its implementation. Government funding alone is not enough. A comprehensive strategy must also explore innovative partnerships with the private sector in light of the upcoming economic growth.

### **Remove Barriers to Workforce Participation**

The welfare wall is a commonly used term to describe the barriers facing individuals on income assistance when they attempt to move into the labour market. The province must address policies that

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<sup>5</sup> Early Childhood Development Coalition, neighbourhood groups, and Community Schools (NB Dept. of Education) with policy support from the Human Development Council, Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative and Vibrant Communities Saint John.

<sup>6</sup> Satellite Public Health or Community Health Centre services

serve as disincentives for workplace participation including: limited wage exemptions, lack of affordable childcare, loss of health benefits, inadequate supports for post-secondary education, and inability of minimum wage to meet the cost of living.

Education and employment are key pathways out of poverty. Difficulty in achieving a GED<sup>7</sup> or accessing essential skills preparation for the workforce, personal health issues, limited personal supports, and negative experiences with school can act as barriers for someone making the transition into employment.

A continuum of education and employment programs that result in living wage employment is required. Programs need to be located in the neighbourhood where people live, and there is a need for new strategies to improve awareness of available services. Education to employment programming should be tailored to individual needs and a range of options (e.g., literacy, essential skills, job specific training, workplace training, mentoring and support) should be available. The province's commitment to essential skills training is a step in the right direction.

The impending skill shortage heightens the urgency of providing programs that directly link individuals to workforce opportunities. For Saint John, this means involving employers more meaningfully into the employment preparation process. Approaches that meet the immediate needs of employers and support individuals in acquiring a set of essential skills for a specific job will require reaching out to employers and unions and having them play a role in the development and implementation of solutions.

### **It is Time for Serious Action on Poverty Reduction**

Saint John is well positioned to make significant gains in the reduction of poverty. There is engagement and leadership from diverse stakeholders and a common focus on priority neighbourhoods.

These priority neighbourhoods require resources, which will help residents access quality education, recreation, employment and health services. Investments in quality early-childhood learning, childcare and other supports for parents from low income neighbourhoods will provide long term returns, as will access to responsive and comprehensive education and employment programs. To fully realize these returns, there is a need for significant investments in affordable housing options and neighbourhood revitalization.

We must continue to strengthen and champion an intersectoral approach to poverty reduction in Saint John, and ultimately across New Brunswick. Learning about our priority neighbourhoods over the last three years has been a powerful experience and we must continue to base our plans, programs and policies on data and the experiences of residents.

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<sup>7</sup> GED – The General Education Development diploma is recognized as meeting high school graduation requirements for the purpose of employment and further education.



**POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY:  
RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTION  
Draft for Discussion  
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### **The Need for a New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Strategy**

Several Canadian provinces have taken the step toward a comprehensive poverty strategy, and New Brunswick's overall solution must respond to the unique needs of different parts of the province.

Poverty reduction is about fairness and equity for all citizens. It is also necessary for the long-term social and economic sustainability of our province. Investments in poverty reduction today translate into future savings<sup>8</sup> and increased workforce participation, which is vital for family economic success and economic growth of the province.

We welcome the movement towards a New Brunswick poverty reduction strategy. Saint John is ready.

We would like to thank the Leadership Roundtable members who have contributed to this strategy.

Donna Beaton – Social Development	Peter McGuire- City of Saint John, Common Council
Brenda Murphy – Urban Core Support Network	Lyn King- community member
Terri-Ann Cormier- community member	Barbara McGill- AHSC
Keith De’Bell- University of New Brunswick- Saint John	Narinder Singh – Saint John Non-Profit Housing
Donnie Snook – Inner City Youth Ministry	Tom Gribbons- BCAPI
Carolyn Stephenson- Service Canada	Bob Stranach – National Crime Prevention Centre
Pat Woods- City of Saint John	Randy Hatfield- Human Development Council
Paul Zed – Member of Parliament	Gregor Hope- BCAPI
Bonnie McGraw – St. Joseph’s Community Health Centre	Dale Knox- Tabufile
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### **Seeking Feedback**

What is exciting about this draft?

What comments do you have about the priority areas?

What suggestions do you have for moving this strategy forward?

To provide feedback or for more information, please contact Wendy MacDermott, Coordinator of Vibrant Communities Saint John [wendy.vibrantsj@nb.aibn.com](mailto:wendy.vibrantsj@nb.aibn.com) 693-0904

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<sup>8</sup> For example: There is well documented evidence which indicates that one dollar invested in early childhood education translates into a net benefit of \$17 in the future.