

Vibrant Surrey

A YEAR IN REVIEW

September 1, 2004 to August 31, 2005

Vibrant Surrey had set a very ambitious programme for 2004-2005. The previous two years had been dedicated to establishing relationships with community leaders, building knowledge of local poverty issues and gauging the community's willingness to work together to address them. It was now time to broaden the scope of our engagement with community and build toward action.

Our objectives included:

- Developing a more comprehensive picture of poverty in Surrey
- Identifying meaningful ways of connecting with those who experience poverty
- Identifying if there were local applications for a variety of poverty reduction tools provided by our national partners, Vibrant Communities
- Following through with projects we already had underway
- Getting our message of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives out to the community
- Developing our own 'made in Surrey' approaches
- Testing the usefulness of those and our understanding of the poverty experience with those who live it

We also wanted to stay open to emerging issues and promising ideas, even as we engaged new partners and brought new resources to all of these activities. And finally, we committed to examining our structure and ways of working with the goal of moving towards a model of governance that would enhance our capacity for innovative, responsive and respectful comprehensive community engagement. Our overall goal for the year was to establish a plan for action, with the community's support and commitment behind it.

We can now say that we are well on our way to accomplishing most, if not all of that. The details for that action plan have not been established, but we have confirmed that we are on the right track and have steps in place to complete the plan this fall. Most importantly, Vibrant Surrey has now defined how it will bring 'value added' to current efforts for reducing poverty in Surrey. This is a critical turning point, as it moves us from vague notions of creating change to clarity of purpose that can be easily recognized and evaluated. As a result, we have defined our approaches or areas of work and we are now ready to commit to distinct strategies with measurable outcomes.

a) Developing a more comprehensive picture of poverty in Surrey

Over the previous year, a great deal of information had been compiled encompassing the local experience of poverty, the diversity of responses coming from our community and poverty reduction tools tested in other communities. In September 2004, a tool was designed to summarize that information and share it easily with the community. The format was a series of fact sheets that are easy to understand and could have a variety of applications. We foresaw being able to share information readily using this format as our initiative evolved. For now, we wanted to share with the community some of what we were learning so we could gauge if we were on the right track.

The information was divided into four sheets: the first provided an overview of who was living in poverty in Surrey, the second gave detailed information about who was at risk and why, the third contained descriptions from front line workers of the increasing depth of poverty they

were witnessing and some strategies they felt would make a difference, and the final sheet introduced a key poverty reduction concept, the sustainable income.

The data for the first three sheets had been compiled through interviews, focus groups and a community workshop, as well as a review of local literature. Over this past year, we have gone back to the people we have spoken with and others currently living in poverty or those working with them to gauge the accuracy of what we were reporting. The response has been unanimous: the picture is accurate and to the point.

Our next task was to put together an asset list, detailing all that our community could bring to a comprehensive poverty reduction approach. As other local efforts to measure community capacity were already underway, such as the City of Surrey consultations towards creating a new social plan, Surrey Solutions, a two level government led initiative to mobilize the community and the Children and Youth Committee (CYC) asset list development project, we felt it best to put our energy into participating in these parallel efforts to create the most comprehensive picture possible. It is our hope that, between the City's Gap Analysis and subsequent Social Plan for the Well Being of Surrey Residents and the CYC's asset list, we will soon have a more complete picture of Surrey community capacity.

We also wanted to build connections with other 'tables' in the community where poverty related work was being done. Examples include the Homelessness and Housing Task Force, the Food Security Network and South Surrey/White Rock's CAN. Vibrant Surrey's message to these groups has been that we are committed to working alongside community groups and do what we can to enhance their efforts.

b) Identifying meaningful ways of connecting with those who experience poverty

One of the biggest challenges faced by Vibrant Communities as a whole is finding meaningful ways of engaging with those who will be most impacted by their activities. While Vibrant Surrey has made efforts to connect and work with those living in poverty, achieving meaningful participation in planning, implementing and evaluating our work is an ongoing process.

This past year has seen some progress in that area. The first step was a review of Vibrant Surrey terms of reference that laid out a more specific commitment:

We have a commitment to fostering new relationships, with a special emphasis on ensuring that low-income residents shape solutions meant to address their needs. We provide support to enable their contributions, which means recognizing and addressing the realities of those living on low income. We acknowledge the diversity of experiences of poverty. We support community organizing and believe that broad social inclusion is a priority. To that end we are prepared to commit resources and focus on ongoing learning and improvement.

Working with NGOs directly concerned with the welfare of those living in poverty, we designed initial tools for gathering information that made sense for the people we wanted to reach. Using traditional methods, such as focus groups and surveys, but ensuring that resources were in place to cover participation costs and the venue and host were safe for participants, we were able to identify a variety of ways people would like to be involved and

the vehicles for doing so that suit them best. These include everything from electronic bulletins, surveys, forums and advisory committees to working directly alongside other VS participants. This has also resulted in identifying individuals who are interested in working with us to make this happen.

c) Identifying if there were local applications for a variety of poverty reduction tools provided by our national partners, Vibrant Communities

As a member of the Pan-Canadian Learning Community, also known as Vibrant Communities, we are able to access tele-learning opportunities that examine concepts and tools related to poverty reduction.

This past year we have participated in:

- a tele-learning series over several months
- a follow up on a previous learning initiative
- three 1.5 hour tele-seminars
- two conference calls with a funder's network
- five Convenor committee tele-meetings

The tele-learning series focused on the use of 'living wage' or 'progressive human resources practices' campaigns as a means of increasing every resident's capacity to secure their future and participate in the local community. The series was attended by representatives of four community members: the Surrey Chamber of Commerce, SRS Vocational Services Society, The Professional Firefighter's Association and Career Connections. A final report was drafted and recommendations were presented to the convening committee to delve more deeply into the possibility of including a progressive HR practices campaign in VS approaches to poverty reduction. The group was directed by the convening committee to prepare a presentation detailing the steps required to implement such a strategy.

In the previous year, several communities, including Surrey, had participated in the Gender and Poverty Project. Last fall, a follow up call was done to determine how individual communities were progressing with their efforts to understand and address the unique ways that women transitioned into poverty. An application had been submitted, unsuccessfully, to implement local projects that built on previous efforts. Communities were urged to do what they could to continue with this work and share their experiences through the convenors' conference calls.

The tele-seminars included a look at comprehensive community initiatives in the United States as well as the social purchasing portal as a poverty reduction tool and TRIEC, a Toronto-based multi-sectoral initiative to facilitate finding work for skilled immigrants in their field of expertise. Local HREC staff also audited this last seminar. It provided some promising ideas for addressing local employment issues in the immigrant community.

Tele-meetings with convening committees across the country allow Vibrant Communities to understand better how other communities are progressing, compare notes on a variety of issues and work together with Tamarack and Caledon to enhance our capacity to learn and grow together. Specific areas covered in these calls include providing a peer-to-peer learning session examining how to evaluate the difference a Vibrant Community activities make

without undermining the empowerment of local groups; providing input to scheduling and content of learning opportunities for the coming year; participating in an evaluation of Vibrant Communities at the half-way mark in the initiative; working out how to support Tamarack in securing funding for the Trail Blazers while also allowing individual communities to apply to the same funder; and planning the agenda for the upcoming face-to-face meeting.

The funders' network calls provided an opportunity to private and public sector funders to learn more about comprehensive approaches and examine how this innovative approach to creating social change might influence their approaches to allocating resources. Participants were also encouraged to avail themselves of the communication and education resources being made available through Vibrant Communities, and to see themselves as an important component in this national effort to engage communities in addressing poverty.

d) Following through with projects we already had underway

Three projects had been started the previous year: the Surrey Social Purchasing Portal, the Seeing is Believing Project and the CED project.

The Surrey Social Purchasing Portal is modeled on the Vancouver project that has gained national interest and is now being replicated across the country. Administered by Community Innovations Inc., one of the founding partners of Vibrant Surrey, the portal was conceived to link socially responsible corporate purchasers with business services providers who are committed to providing well-paying permanent jobs to those with multiple barriers to employment. Funding from Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and Western Economic Diversification (WED) has allowed the project to proceed to the next phase: staff have been hired, marketing materials designed, an advisory committee established and program elements are being developed. SPPSurrey has made presentations and created connections all over Surrey and plans to a formal launch this fall.

Seeing is Believing is a pilot project we hope will duplicate the success of its British model in linking socially responsible corporate leaders with groups or neighborhoods struggling with the realities of poverty. Canadian Business for Social Responsibility leads this project in Canada. Surrey is participating with Vancouver and Toronto as one of three pilot sites. Funding has been secured through HRSDC and WED and preparations are well underway for the first tour in November 2005, followed by a second tour in February 2006. Coast Capital Savings, a leading member of Vibrant Surrey, will be hosting the first tour.

The CED project was conceived as a follow up to the Hidden Resources report, which determined that Surrey has favorable conditions for Community Economic Development. This project proposes to facilitate local leadership for identifying and supporting CED projects in Surrey. There have been talks between local representatives of all levels of government over the last year towards pooling resources, an activity that potentially could result in an agreement similar to the Vancouver Agreement. To date nothing concrete has resulted but channels are open and Vibrant Surrey would welcome the opportunity to work with all local leaders in advancing our capacity for economic development within our most economically disadvantaged communities.

e) Getting our message of comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives out to the community

One of the most concrete indications of the progress Vibrant Surrey has made in defining itself has been the development over this year of three communication tools: a new brochure, an enhanced website (www.vibrantsurrey.ca) and an effective PowerPoint presentation that lay out the Vibrant Surrey message in an attractive, accessible and informative way.

Along with the Face Of Poverty fact sheets, these tools have proven to be a very effective means of conveying the Vibrant Surrey message as we made presentations to community groups, such as the Whalley Business Improvement Association, and participated in community forums like the Vancouver Leadership Conference and Vancity's consultation on local funding directions for the coming year.

Our next step is to develop a presentation booklet and conference display wall to be used in larger, more corporate gatherings or for conference presentations to large groups.

f) Developing our own 'made in Surrey' approaches

A turning point in our process of building towards an action plan was a key meeting in February 2005, during which Mark Cabaj of Tamarack led the convening committee in defining what it is that makes us different, and how we see ourselves working alongside others in our community. Mark called it 'identifying our own theory of change'. This is what we came up with:

What is poverty?

- Poverty is more than just a lack of income. It is multidimensional - including things like safe and affordable housing, a feeling of hope for the future, participation in community, financial savings, etc. A variety of factors outside of an individual's control can contribute to poverty: age, gender, ethnicity, migration, health, physical and developmental ability etc.
- A household's/person's journey out of poverty can be understood and captured by their progress along a multi-dimensional continuum. Vibrant Surrey has chosen to adopt the Caledon framework for poverty reduction to reflect a way of achieving an enhanced quality of life. This framework identifies key interventions along a continuum of change, from meeting basic needs to removing barriers, building skills and promoting economic independence while building community capacity.

How can Vibrant Surrey make a difference?

We believe that there are three approaches that, taken in combination, will have the most impact in reducing poverty in our community:

Community Economic Development: a participatory process bringing together a diversity of interests and sectors by which communities initiate and generate their own solutions to socio-economic problems leading to positive concrete changes for individuals and communities.

Community Capacity Building: strengthening the capacity of the community infrastructure to respond to a variety of needs and opportunities. Together we can do more!

Research and Education: in order to understand the socio-economic factors that contribute to poverty, we will develop, implement and evaluate various approaches that are appropriate to the target populations, in partnership with community.

Once these approaches had been established, the difference in our sense of purpose was palpable: we knew where we were headed, we could easily relate it to the work we had done to date and we could clearly define it for others. The next step, of course, is to commit to specific strategies that will result in measurable outcomes but first we had to confirm that the community saw our approach as valid.

g) Testing the usefulness of those and our understanding of the poverty experience with those who live it

Now that we had studied the experience of poverty in Surrey, gained an understanding of what others were doing to respond and clarified our own approaches to poverty reduction, we needed to find out if others had the same picture and agreed with our proposed approaches.

Our plan was to hold focus groups with some of the low income groups we had connected with previously, as well as a series of meetings with other stakeholders, including community groups as well as government and business representatives.

The goals were:

- To describe what we have learned about the experience of poverty in Surrey, and determine if that was accurate
- To introduce the work of Vibrant Communities and Vibrant Surrey to date and present the proposed approaches to poverty reduction.
- Get feedback on the approaches and test for community support

The timing for our consultation, May and June 2005, conflicted with a number of other community events and so we weren't able to consult as broadly as we had hoped.

We did hold a community meeting, did a presentation to a multi-agency committee and held three focus groups, two with women and one with youth. These meetings and focus groups involved approximately 50 people in all. A proposed breakfast forum for the business community was postponed to the fall.

Here is what we learned:

1. We need to strengthen our relationships within the business community in order to engage a significant enough number of business people in this consultation to be able

to gauge the needs and responses of the business community as a whole. It was recommended that we join the Chamber of Commerce as a first step. This was done in August of this year.

2. Our picture of poverty in Surrey is fairly accurate, but we would benefit from learning specifics from individuals representative of each population at risk, but particularly women, youth and immigrants
3. There is almost unanimous support for our approaches, as well as an eagerness to be involved. It is the combination of the three approaches that is seen as being so potentially effective.

Our next steps will be to complete one more focus group with the immigrant community and meet with the business community this fall, and incorporate what we learn from them in our action plan. The final step will be to confirm with all those who participated and the community at large that the plan reflects their input.

h) Staying open to emerging issues and promising ideas

As we worked towards building an action plan for the next two or three years, some emerging issues were so compelling that members were inspired to mobilize community responses, with the support of Vibrant Surrey.

The *Community Mobilization* project came about when agency representatives started talking to each other about the growing sex trade in Surrey, and the vulnerability of low-income women to being sexually exploited. Anecdotal evidence suggested that older sex trade workers who had outlived their 'usefulness' to pimps or boyfriends had migrated to Surrey, drawn by cheap rent and brisk business. These women had no protection or support systems, were generally believed to be in very poor health and were likely homeless. There was also a concern that young immigrant women might be coerced into providing sexual services from urban homes. And some believed that Surrey was a conduit for the trafficking of women and girls from other parts of the world to the United States. Concerned agency representatives applied to the National Crime Prevention Centre to conduct a needs assessment as a precursor to mobilizing the community to provide protection and support services to these women.

Project Comeback was the brainchild of a concerned citizen who had heard a presentation from the local Homelessness and Housing Task Force on the incidence of homelessness for some men who work at day labour and were not eligible for government support. She approached Newton Advocacy Group Society (NAGS), who agreed to host a community meeting to gauge the extent of support for a specialized pilot employment program for this target group. Sponsored by Coast Capital Savings, hosted by NAGS and supported by Vibrant Surrey, the event drew a standing-room-only response and resulted in the launch of Project Comeback. With development funding from Vancity Credit Union, a vision statement was written, the program was launched and a proposal for longer term funding was developed for submission to HR&SD. To date, three men have been housed and two have found permanent jobs, thanks in part to two local developers who have committed to taking job-ready candidates.

i) Engaging new partners and bringing new resources

Vibrant Surrey has enjoyed phenomenal growth since August 2004. New members include SRS Vocational Services, K'la How Eya Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Surrey Chamber of Commerce, Surrey Women's Centre, Surrey Food Bank, South Fraser Women's Services Society, Servants Anonymous, New Westminster and District Labour Council and Tong Louie Family YMCA.

Kwantlen University College, a very supportive member for some time, expanded its participation with the inclusion of Steve Dooley, director of the National Institute for Research on Sustainable Communities.

Unfortunately, we have also lost two members: SRS Vocational Services and Surrey Social Futures (a founding member) both closed their doors this summer. It is with deep regret that we witness agencies that have given so much to their communities dissolve. Their contributions will not be forgotten.

In the coming year, it is our hope to connect with more business leaders. As a step towards that goal, we will be co-hosting a Chamber of Commerce networking event with SPPSurrey in September. We plan to follow that with a meeting for those business folk who are interested in learning more about how we can work together.

Our members have contributed a great deal in the way of resources, expertise, meeting space, financial resources, and for some, considerable time and effort. Without their support, Vibrant Surrey would not exist. We particularly want to thank J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Coast Capital Savings and United Way of the Lower Mainland for their financial support.

J) Examining our structure and ways of working

As the Vibrant Surrey message spreads and our membership grows, it becomes more and more important that we insure that our structure and ways of working continue to reflect the values that we hold and that they enhance our capacity to follow through with the commitments we are poised to make.

Throughout this year, efforts have been made to study governance models in other communities and clarify our goals and values so we can identify the structure that would work best for us. Determining our purpose and approaches was a big step, but now we have to put our commitments into operation.

Over the coming months, we will design a memorandum of understanding to establish expectations of members and the convening group as a whole. This is an important step in defining roles and responsibilities within the group, as well as benefits derived from membership. We will be aided in this process by Mark Cabaj, who will guide us in understanding better how to maintain balance between having a recognizable structure that

members and outside groups can work with, and retaining the flexibility and fluidity needed to respond to diverse needs as well as innovative ideas and opportunities.

Members have also expressed the hope that Vibrant Surrey can continue to incubate promising projects, enhance resource and relationship development, open doors and broker opportunities into action for the benefit of all.

Looking forward:

Now that we are nearing the end of our consultation process, have clarified our approaches and are solidifying support in the community, we can move into action.

As an aid to shaping our plan for action, here is a summary of ideas and projects that members have highlighted for consideration, sorted according to our established approaches:

1) Community Economic Development:

Project Comeback
SPPSurrey
Seeing Is Believing

Needs further investigation: Women's CED Fair, TRIEC, Living Wage/Progressive HR Practices campaign

2) Strengthening Community Capacity:

Community Mobilization Project
Supporting local leadership in advancing CED in Surrey
Develop VS capacity as facilitator and broker

Needs further investigation: collaborating with Canadian Business for Social Responsibility in establishing local orientation/resource materials for new business champions

3) Research and Education:

Understanding better the local experience of poverty for women, immigrants and youth.

In closing:

This has been a dynamic year, rich with new ideas and new relationships, one in which we became clearer about who we are and where we want to go. We heard from our community that we are on the right track: now is the time to take action.



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