

***Vibrant Communities Calgary:
Awareness, Engagement and Policy Change***

How do comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives contribute to poverty reduction? The six Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities are experimenting with a variety of approaches. This series documents their experiences. For each Trail Builder, an initial story will present the key ideas guiding its work: how local partners understand poverty, the role they can play in reducing poverty, their goals and the core strategies to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and adjustments. Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative in which representatives from 15 urban centres have come together to explore local solutions to poverty. Trail Builder initiatives will provide insights that fuel the learning within Vibrant Communities and with others interested in the role that collaborations can play in tackling poverty.

The United Way of Calgary and Area's slogan says: "For a city to be truly great, it must be great for everyone." This inclusive statement is also symbolic of the City of Calgary's efforts to strengthen its social fabric in the face of rapid growth and expansion. Since 2000, Calgary's population has grown at an average annual rate of 2.3 percent and the city is now home to just over one million people. Growth in its west end suburbs has been so rapid that efforts to provide basic road and sewer services have struggled to keep pace with construction.

Even with the wealth generated by the oil and gas industry and the diversity of its economy, Calgary has experienced a widening of the gap between its richest and poorest residents. Since the turn of the millennium, however, City employees have begun to adopt a triple bottom line approach to their work, paying equal attention to the social, economic and environmental impacts of their programs and services. In 2004, for example, the City of Calgary's Community Services department initiated Fair Calgary – a

lens which looks at City services to make sure they are equitable and fair.

In harmony with this approach, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has chosen to focus on raising the profile of poverty in Calgary and challenging what it sees as the prevailing view of poverty – namely, that it results from individual behaviour and can be overcome by people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Instead, VCC believes that there are important systemic factors that contribute to poverty and that the whole community has a vital role to play in changing these conditions. By increasing public understanding about the root causes of poverty, VCC hopes to spark new community action which will achieve a substantial and ongoing reduction in the number of Calgarians who live in poverty.

Vibrant Communities Calgary seeks to harness the experience and expertise of a wide cross-section of the community – nonprofit, government, business, individual citizens – in bringing about structural changes that will make it easier for people to move out of poverty. VCC strongly believes in the value of healthy debate. The initiative seeks to create a safe space for people from diverse perspectives and experiences to explore together the complex issue of poverty. Such dialogue is crucial for generating dramatic new responses to a serious and persistent problem.

History and functioning

In 2002, the United Way of Calgary and Area established the Sustained Poverty Reduction (SPR) Working Group. MCC Employment Development, a community economic development organization, joined United Way in this undertaking, with the goal of establishing poverty

reduction initiatives that would address the root causes of poverty.¹ United Way and MCC representatives attended the first national Vibrant Communities meeting in Guelph, Ontario and agreed to be co-convenors of Vibrant Communities in Calgary.

In 2003, the United Way also began to cultivate a group of regional leaders under the umbrella of its Sustained Poverty Reduction initiative. The intention was to use the leaders and SPR Working Group to inform and inspire each other. The Working Group would meet monthly and undertake projects, while the leaders' group would meet four to six times a year and provide access to higher-level change makers who could support the Working Group's efforts. However, as its activities evolved, the Working Group gradually established a life of its own. Now known as the Steering Committee, its members were leading several Action Teams. By late 2004, it was agreed that the Steering Committee should establish itself as a distinct initiative and subsequently was named Vibrant Communities Calgary.

VCC continues to receive valuable support from United Way, including an 18-month funding commitment that began in June 2005, staff participation on its Steering Committee and Action Teams, and various kinds of practical assistance (e.g., the provision of meeting rooms). Since the spring of 2005, MCC Employment Development has acted as Vibrant Communities Calgary's charitable agent. The current structure satisfies a requirement that VCC be permitted to receive charitable funding while allowing greater autonomy and control of the types of work it can undertake. In June 2005, VCC was confirmed as one of six Vibrant Communities "Trail Builders" – a designation that comes with a three-year funding commitment and additional coaching supports.

Ramona Johnston originally was hired in 2003 by United Way's SPR Working Group to lead the sustained poverty reduction work, beginning with research into the concept of establishing a 'living wage' for employees in Calgary. In the summer of 2005, she became Manager of Vibrant Communities Calgary. Says Ramona: "VCC partners wanted to take an approach that focused on structural issues and were prepared to challenge some of the deeper thinking about poverty in Calgary. By bringing in a wide range of people in a constructive dialogue around the issues, we hoped to influence the programs and policies that affect people who live in poverty. Our interest in political advocacy meant that we had to have the autonomy to function independently. We now are on a new footing with partner organizations that might communicate differently with us than they would with a funder. Our independence also enables us to speak publicly and eventually normalize discussions about historically divisive issues such as low wages."

VCC Initiatives Ltd. is now incorporated as a Part 9 not-for-profit Alberta company. Its Steering Committee is currently led by Amy Alexander from the City of Calgary and Cathy Able from RBC Financial. Its 18 other members participate as representatives of the business

community, social agencies, municipal government, postsecondary education, labour, non-profit organizations and as individual citizens. The Steering Committee advises a four-person Board of Directors. A Human Resource Committee oversees the recruitment, hiring and supervision of the VCC Manager and the Resource Development Committee guides VCC's fundraising efforts.

Poverty in Calgary

Thanks to Calgary's booming economy, the median income for a Calgary household in 2001 was \$65,488 – more than \$10,000 higher than the median for the rest of Canada. The large gap between rich and poor is revealed by the statistics that show the top ten percent of households had an average annual income of \$248,600 in 2001, as opposed to \$13,000 for the poorest ten percent of households. Statistics released by the City of Calgary show that in 2003, 17.2 percent of Calgary residents lived below Statistics Canada's before-tax low income cut-offs, an estimated 161,000 people. Though Alberta's minimum wage increased from \$5.90 to \$7.00 per hour in the summer of 2005, the provincial rate remains ahead of only Newfoundland, PEI, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.²

"People do not choose poverty. At the root of poverty are systemic economic, social and political factors that go beyond individuals. This is why we need a concerted effort at the community level – because poverty is not an individual issue, it is a systems issue. Only by addressing the underlying and interrelated root causes – including inadequate education and skills training, low wages, insufficient availability of quality affordable housing, unaffordable childcare, and transportation barriers, will we achieve sustained poverty reduction."

– Vibrant Communities Calgary's Community Plan for Sustained Poverty Reduction, 2005-2008

A report released in 2003 by TD Bank Financial Group drew attention to several trends which could derail future prosperity, particularly in the Edmonton-Calgary corridor [Burleton 2003]. Continued reliance on the oil and gas industry for economic growth and on labour imported from other provinces and countries masks the longer term implications of problems such as rising school leaving rates and post-secondary education costs, and low levels of research and development spending and venture capital financing. These issues, combined with urban sprawl, expensive public transit, growing physical infrastructure replacement needs and low earnings growth at the bottom end of the income spectrum, point to the need for a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to poverty reduction.

The definition of poverty adopted by Vibrant Communities Calgary states that: “Poverty is the condition of a human being who does not have sufficient economic and other resources to live with the dignity, choices and power which support full participation in society.” Using this definition, VCC and its partners have identified five supports or pillars which must be addressed to achieve sustained poverty reduction:

- economic security (including both employment income and public income supports)
- education and skills training
- basic supports (e.g., housing, transportation, child care, food security)
- physical and mental health
- full participation in society.

Levers of change

Many VCC partners belong to organizations which have been working diligently on

various programs (e.g., developing affordable housing or providing skills training). Rather than have VCC do more of the same, the partners conducted a scan of the poverty reduction work under way in Calgary and realized that not enough was being done to tackle the underlying, systemic causes of poverty. They decided that the best use of their collective experience would be to use collaboration, education and mutual problem-solving to spark new community action and implement bold new solutions to the problem of poverty reduction.

VCC focuses its energy on two strategies that its Steering Committee feels the initiative is well suited to address: increasing public awareness and civic engagement, and making changes in public and private sector policies and practices.

One of VCC’s key messages has been to remind Calgarians that sustained high poverty levels cost all citizens more in health care, education, welfare, social service and criminal justice spending – and result in less investment in goods and services. Research conducted by the United Way in 2004 estimated conservatively that poverty in Calgary results in millions of dollars per year in spending in these areas. Conversely, VCC urges, poverty reduction will improve the quality of life for all citizens and continue to make Calgary an attractive destination for new investment.

Despite the pervasive bootstrap attitude toward poverty, Vibrant Communities Calgary is encouraged by the growing local interest in the goal of a substantial and sustained reduction in the number of Calgarians living in poverty. Calgary’s media, for example, has pointed out that the provincial government’s “Alberta Advantage” – marketing the province’s ability to attract trade and investment while maintaining a high quality

of life – has come at the expense of the working poor and those on social assistance. There is evidence that the community has been mobilized around the “Imagine Calgary” dialogue – a two-year initiative led by the City of Calgary to create a 100-year vision and 30-year strategies to ensure a high quality of life in the long term. By mid-2006, Imagine Calgary will have engaged thousands of members of the public and business, community and government stakeholders in its broad-based dialogue.

Structuring the work

To help focus long- and short-term poverty reduction efforts, VCC initially developed a number of targets for the household benefits, community engagement and cultural shifts that it wished to achieve.

As recently as December 2004, VCC proposed to help the following numbers of households: 200 in 2005, 300 in 2006 and 500 by the end of 2007 (1,000 households in all). However, VCC’s results from the past year alone have had positive impacts on the lives of several thousand Calgarians. The earlier household target-setting exercise is one which will need further consideration, and the definition of “contributing to positive outcomes” revisited.

Increasing the number of Calgarians who are involved with VCC’s work continues to be of central importance. To achieve its goal of broadening community involvement, VCC will engage the leadership of 130 individuals and 60 organizations by the end of 2007. As of November 2005, 70 people from 43 entities were working with VCC. Participation has come from community groups, governmental and quasi-governmental bodies, individuals living in poverty, private sector representatives and the general public.

Vibrant Communities Calgary’s approach – building public awareness, engaging citizens and bringing about changes in public policy – all involve creating a deeper understanding of poverty’s systemic factors. VCC will consider it a sign of progress when Calgarians are engaged in conversation and debate about poverty-related issues and when they see that collective effort is required to change the conditions that create obstacles to broad economic well-being. Progress also will be evident when poverty and related social issues assume greater prominence on the political, health and education agendas and when VCC is called upon to speak about poverty issues.

Overall success will be gauged by generating a shared focus on:

- reducing poverty versus alleviating the effects of poverty
- comprehensive, deep-rooted solutions versus quick fixes
- a culture of multisectoral collaboration versus individual, isolated efforts
- a culture that sees everyone as part of the problem and the solution rather than blaming individuals or groups
- an emphasis on innovation, risk-taking and long-term change as opposed to cautious, short-term responses.

Current efforts

Vibrant Communities Calgary participants believe that a community-wide understanding of poverty will result in greater community involvement and the development of policies that will reduce poverty. Simply stated: An informed community will take action. The work now under way reflects the complementary nature of VCC’s approaches: Though listed separately, each informs and influences the other.

Making changes in policies and practices

In the summer of 2003, the United Way of Calgary and Area's SPR Working Group began a 20-month project to increase the capacity of nonprofit organizations to help develop public policy. As luck would have it, the policy issue on which they chose to focus – the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) benefit – came up for renewal in the fall of 2004 [Makhoul 2005a]. The eight principal participants, representative from across the disability spectrum, were widely praised by provincial government representatives and others for their final submission and for their ability to communicate the concerns of a diverse community.

As a result of the review, the program is now more responsive to the needs of AISH recipients. More than 8,000 Calgarians had their monthly AISH benefits raised by \$100 in 2005 (from \$855 to \$955), with a further \$50 increase (to \$1,000) scheduled in 2006. These increases are welcome but relatively modest, since they only restore benefits to their 1999 value.

In late 2004, thanks to contacts and a reputation for collaboration made through its work with the AISH review process, VCC's offer to assist in a campaign to promote transit passes for AISH recipients and low-income Calgary residents was gratefully received. VCC was seen as possessing the energy, fresh ideas and contacts necessary to accelerate a discussion that had started in the late 1990s. By re-branding "The Calgary Committee for Discounted Transit Passes" to "Fair Fares Calgary," VCC helped residents to conceptualize the issue. Their assistance in mounting a successful letter- and postcard-writing campaign demonstrated broad community acceptance of the issue and helped

convince the City to establish the low-income transit pass program [Makhoul 2005b].

In November 2005, VCC presented a submission to Calgary City Council's budgetary process, focusing on the need to reinvest in social infrastructure and continue efforts to secure more resources from the government of Alberta. Specifically, VCC recommended that the City: a) adopt a "No Sweat Ethical Procurement Policy," b) increase support of its Family and Community Support Services (a joint municipal/provincial fund that supports Calgary poverty reduction programs), and c) finance the administration and revenue losses of the low-income transit pass program, regardless of provincial support.

The City has since supported the No Sweat Ethical Procurement Policy with a budgetary allocation. VCC staff and volunteers will work with the City to develop this policy over the next year, potentially building in a provision that the City purchases all goods and services from Living Wage employers [Vibrant Communities 2005].

Increasing public awareness and civic engagement

The Fair Fares, AISH and ethical procurement initiatives demonstrate the dimension of change VCC is hoping to achieve. By enabling people of diverse backgrounds to collaborate, the partners have been successful in building bridges which allow them to cross over into different community sectors. As they achieve greater recognition, partners believe their capacity to draw more people into the VCC fold will expand accordingly.

VCC has developed an e-mail network, which it uses to post information bulletins and requests for action. In the lead-up to the City Council decision to provide reduced fare transit passes for low-income Calgarians, councillors were debating several funding options. Some proposals, like the suggestion that senior citizens' discount pass rates be increased (they currently cost \$35 per year), were quickly abandoned after protest from seniors' groups. However, a second recommendation to remove funds from Family and Community Support Services garnered substantial early support.

By encouraging its members to speak up with e-mails, letters and phone calls to local councillors and media outlets, in the space of one week VCC helped convince City Council that robbing one set of poverty reduction initiatives to pay another made little fiscal or social sense.

Similarly, the Fair Fares postcard campaign used the weight of public opinion to convince City councillors that the public was in favour of reduced fare transit passes. VCC's network of community partners and its e-mail update system helped spread the word about the upcoming vote; the postcard photograph of a mother and two young children waiting in a transit shelter made for an eloquent appeal for help to Calgarians in all income brackets. The serendipitous nature of the media attention paid to the AISH issue (remarks by the Premier led to nightly media reports of the financial difficulties faced by people living on AISH benefits) was a powerful example of quickly an issue can come to prominence.

Looking ahead

Vibrant Communities Calgary's commitment to a more innovative and risk-taking

approach has not been without challenges. The City of Calgary's commitment to establishing the low-income transit passes needs more provincial support to pay the program's estimated \$2.5 annual cost after 2006. In the coming year, VCC, community groups and the municipality will work with the province to arrive at a long-term funding solution.

Establishing dialogue around the issue of how many Calgarians live in poverty also presented difficulties to VCC. The thorny topic of statistics and their interpretation brought a fresh set of organizations into the discussion – not all of whom were in agreement with the material presented. Members of VCC's Communications Action Team recognized that changing attitudes is slow, painstaking and expensive. It must involve both change agents and people who experience poverty first hand. It also must work within the existing social climate. An Ipsos-Reid North America poll conducted in November 2005 showed that two percent of Calgarians identified poverty – a broad category which included poverty, the poor, homelessness and welfare – as the most important issue facing the province [Ipsos-Reid 2005].

On the positive side, participants' efforts have led to an increasingly positive profile of VCC's work in the media, a number of new and deepening alliances and the carving out of a common ground of understanding poverty issues. In particular, VCC's work in the area of Living Wage has helped to legitimize the issue and it has paved the way for other community organizations to enter into the discussion.

The No Sweat Procurement Policy and Living Wage issue also brought into focus the changing perspective of VCC as it works through particular initiatives. The Living Wage Action Team originally had a target of establishing a

municipal living wage policy, putting private employers and the voluntary sector into a later phase of the work. Recent reflection has led organizers to consider a multipronged approach with a focus on government which would be strengthened by building a broader base of support among business and nonprofit sectors. It will be important to its work for VCC to continually gauge its position relative to the public, private and nonprofit sectors.

Vibrant Communities Calgary also planned to work in the area of standard eligibility testing. Preliminary research into eligibility screening requirements for various services showed that they were inconsistent and onerous, but that finding common ground for a standard test was going to be much more difficult – and perhaps not as effective as originally thought. With the current patchwork of tests, people who do not meet the criteria of one organization may be eligible for help by another. Having one standard instrument might mean that many more people would fall into one, bigger funding crack. VCC will further consider the issue of accessibility and whether agencies can be encouraged to devote additional resources to helping clients fill out paperwork.

In the fall of 2005, VCC experienced a change in volunteer leadership on its Learning and Evaluation Action Team. Poor attendance at committee meetings resulted in a shift in direction; the four committee members will each join one of the three issue-based action teams – Living Wage, Fair Fares and Communications. A review of this decision in next year's project evaluation will determine how well the group's original objectives were achieved.

In the three years since its formation, members of VCC have learned a great deal about the need to stir the waters in order to challenge dominant perspectives on the issue and bring about deeper changes. Their forthright approach has generated a fresh burst of ideas and energy. Successes with AISH, Fair Fares Calgary and the Living Wage initiative have helped VCC partners establish and strengthen their local reputation. Their successes in influencing the direction of the AISH program and the discount transit pass issue are hopeful signs of things to come around the deeper policy changes which lie at the heart of poverty reduction.

Anne Makhoul and Eric Leviten-Reid

Endnotes:

1. MCC Employment Development is a nonprofit community economic development organization with charitable status. Its original 1991 mandate was to offer job entry assistance to recent immigrants, but it now also provides training in small business operation to the underemployed, micro loans for small businesses, a savings incentive program, youth entrepreneurship and literacy programs and public access to a computer lab with Internet hook-up.

2. For more minimum wage rate information, visit: http://www110.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/psait_spila/lmnec_eslc/eslc/salaire_minwage/report1/index.cfm/doc/english

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2. Ipsos-Reid. (2005). *Ipsos Trend Report Alberta (Q4, 2005)*. <http://www.ipsos.ca/reid/abreidreport.cfm>

3. Makhoul, A. (2005a). *Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Public Policy Initiative*. Caledon Institute of Social Policy: May.

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5. Vibrant Communities Calgary. (2005). *Year-End Report: December 1, 2005*. Calgary.

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