

Waterloo Region's Guaranteed Income Supplement Campaign

• Challenge •

An estimated 320,000 Canadians in 2001 did not receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) and associated spousal and widow's allowances for which they were entitled. Based on local population figures, organizers of OP2000 (the precursor to Vibrant Communities in Waterloo Region) estimated that 3,000 area residents were not receiving GIS payments.

GIS was established in 1967 as a monthly supplement for seniors who receive full or partial Old Age Security pensions and who have little or no other income. It provides up to a maximum \$560 per month, and receipt of GIS can automatically qualify recipients for other provincial income supplements. GIS receipt requires seniors to file annual tax returns, so those who fail to do so or who file late are not automatically added to Canada Revenue Agency's list of GIS recipients.

In 2001, OP2000 organizers consulted with community members to identify high-impact poverty-reduction opportunities. The GIS uptake issue provided an opportunity to conduct a time-limited, multistakeholder awareness campaign that would benefit low-income seniors.



• Strategy •

Many seniors fail to file a tax return because they have no taxable income or because they have health problems, mental and physical limitations, or literacy and language barriers that prevent them from doing so. If seniors do not file tax returns, do not receive Old Age Security or are homeless, they can be very difficult to reach. Some seniors are overwhelmed by the application process and some are opposed to accepting what they perceive as a government 'handout.'

Together, members of OP2000 and staff at the then Human Resources Development Canada designed a two-pronged strategy to educate hard-to-reach seniors about the GIS. One group developed and distributed communications materials. The second set up training sessions for social service agencies whose members were in regular contact with low-income seniors. HRDC staff and OP2000 members set a goal of submitting 600 new GIS applications for the 2002-2003 fiscal year.

• *Impact* •

Some 5,000 one-page fact sheets were delivered to organizations and professionals who work with seniors. Local media and ethnic publications carried stories about the GIS uptake campaign, information workshops and applications procedures. Two training sessions reached representatives from 64 social services agencies; estimates suggest that these 64 trainers reached another 2,600 people during community information-sharing events and helped some 800 seniors complete GIS application forms. Because applications are gathered from all of southwestern Ontario and cannot be tracked to one particular municipality, OP2000 and HRDC organizers agreed to estimate the success of their campaign using an 80 percent applications approval figure. By this measure, 640 of the 800 seniors in Waterloo Region received GIS for the first time in 2002-2003, exceeding the original campaign goal of 600.

Organizers felt that longer-term benefits to the community resulted from the relationships that were built during the course of the project. HRDC officials were particularly pleased to make contact with organizations that serve new Canadians. This population needs a firm understanding of the income-security program Canada makes available to seniors.

OP2000 was effective in its role as a mediating agency between community organizations and HRDC, and brought many new organizations into contact with an important benefit program. The strategies used in the GIS campaign formed the basis of an Opportunities Waterloo Region planning template for poverty-reduction strategies aimed at youths and the working poor.

Ongoing education and awareness campaigns must continue to ensure that all 3,000 eligible seniors in the Waterloo Region are to receive GIS. The program is not yet a household word and government officials are continuing their efforts to improve uptake of the benefit.

