



## **Annual and Final Report**

**October 28, 11**

## **Introduction:**

Since VCSJ began in 2004, poverty reduction has become central to our community's conversation. There is a general understanding that poverty hurts us all and that collaborative action across sectors is required. In addition, VCSJ has been instrumental in driving culture change among non-profit organizations, supporting and applying gentle pressure to evolve towards a more effective, transparent, and coordinated system.

2011 has been an exciting year with the establishment of community inclusion networks with New Brunswick's poverty reduction strategy, the development of Saint John's municipal plan, and growing momentum to reduce poverty in Saint John. Again in 2011, VCSJ made adjustments in its staffing role in neighbourhoods, developed communication capacity and presence, and our priorities and roles, upon review however, remain robust. We recommitted that we still need VCSJ to play the following roles within our community:

- ⑤ Lead Poverty Reduction- develop and maintain regional poverty reduction plan, be the champion and voice of poverty reduction
- ⑤ Coordinate and Connect across sectors and among partners to implement the priorities of poverty reduction
- ⑤ Evaluate and Communicate progress
- ⑤ Stimulate Neighbourhood Revitalization via planning and partner investments
- ⑤ Support workforce participation among low-income adults.

## **NB Poverty Reduction:**

Over the last few years the government of New Brunswick sponsored a poverty reduction strategy and VCSJ staff and leadership have been actively involved in the conception and operationalization (staff and leaders participating on ESIC Board and sub-committees). In addition, VCSJ became the Region 2 Community Inclusion Network (CIN), which expanded our staff planning and process support to Sussex region. The Sussex community has created a leadership team, Sussex and Area Vibrant Communities, with 16 partner agencies (primarily non-profit at this time, but also government and private sector). In June, VCSJ submitted our regional plan (see attached), which provides detailed priorities for the next two years. We are also in the process of developing funding criteria to guide internal decisions as we will have access to new funds.

As a CIN, VCSJ led contract negotiations with the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation to operationalize this new form of partnership, which required modifications to traditional approaches to contracts, hiring etc. There have been many challenges associated with bureaucratizing a community based approach and VCSJ is actively serving as a mentor to emerging regions and developing opportunities for collaboration across regions on issues such as urban transportation and coordinated

communication through common website.

## Neighbourhood Revitalization

Neighbourhood revitalization remains an overarching theme and lens within Saint John's poverty reduction strategy. In 2011 VCSJ reviewed its staffing within neighbourhoods and eliminated our Neighbourhood Community Developer and Neighbourhood Assistant positions. Initially we intended to adjust the role and re-hire a lead neighbourhood staff. However, our review of progress revealed that most neighbourhoods had their own staff resources in place to support neighbourhood priorities. At the same time, one neighbourhood was still struggling significantly and two neighbourhoods were requesting our planning supports. As a result we re-routed resources into a neighbourhood organizer position (a position between Neighbourhood Assistant and Developer). We were able to offer this position to a former Neighbourhood Assistant. In addition, this fall we have re-allocated resources for a resident of Crescent Valley (and VCSJ staff) to provide follow up support to neighbourhood groups with prompts and encouragement to ensure progress and strengthen our ability to report collective impact.

### Supporting neighbourhood planning and priority setting:

*New: Anglin Drive Tenants Association and East Side Motivators*

*Ongoing: Crescent Valley and the Village*

- ⑤ Supported establishment or renewal of resident leadership
- ⑤ Supported and facilitated neighbourhood planning and priority setting
- ⑤ Sub committees established to implement priorities
- ⑤ Connecting neighbourhoods together with common priorities such as a cross neighbourhood committee with Social Development to address social housing concerns
- ⑤ Staff support to events (clean up, celebration)
- ⑤ Prepared residents for presentation to Council which resulted in immediate investments (lights, side walks)
- ⑤ Partner development
- ⑤ Ongoing meetings with staff, partners and residents to prepare for next steps

- ⑤ Motivating and encouraging residents through challenging times
- ⑤ VCSJ provides staffing to East Side Motivators and Village in partnership with their neighbourhood groups
- ⑤ Providing follow up supports to ensure plans and actions progress
- ⑤ Neighbourhood priorities include: housing improvements, lighting, addressing garbage, improved pedestrian safety, healthy activities for adults, access to primary health care, activities for children.

Infrastructure. 2011 saw the finalization of the City of Saint John's Municipal plan. The plan calls for intensive investment in priority neighbourhoods. VCSJ and partners hosted a session for residents to provide input into planning stages. 70 residents who would not have engaged otherwise provided insightful feedback to the planning department.

SJ Votes. Partners worked to increase voter turn out and increase awareness of poverty reduction and priority neighbourhood needs. Outcomes included 50% more polling locations, doubling of the use of advanced voting. A committee of partners is gearing up for 2012 municipal elections. Plans this year are to include refugee and newcomer community as well as host multiple community fora. Elections NB requested a renewed partnership by sponsoring a Special Edition of Around the Block.

Around the Block celebrated its 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary and 19<sup>th</sup> issue in October with a 20 page issue! In 2011 Around the Block generated \$20 000 and cost \$14 000 to produce (not including staffing). 131 residents contributed stories in 2011. We have been able to offer our coordinator additional hours to accommodate the longer paper and her responsibilities now include designing ads and layout out the paper as well as supporting neighbourhood planning.

#### Celebrate Success

Vibrant Communities Saint John partnered with the Saint John Learning Exchange to host a celebration BBQ and day of fun at Rockwood Park for adults who participated in programs to improve their lives. 200 adults joined us for yoga, zumba, a live musician, healthy bbq, geocaching and great fun. They also noted their accomplishments on a clothesline of success. We partnered with a local church to provide transportation to the location, which brought nearly half of those who participated. We have begun to use this mode of transportation regularly as it was very effective.

#### Transportation

Enhancing community transportation is a priority of the provincial poverty reduction strategy. As a result VCSJ is convening multi sectoral stakeholders to propose solutions to our regional rural and urban transportation challenges. Activities will include: interviewing and documenting ridership (urban) and those without transportation (rural), bringing together urban transit partners to discuss challenges, innovation,

possible solutions, and bringing rural stakeholders together to develop a rural community response to transportation challenges. Funding is available through the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation.

## Single Parent- Children & Youth

BCAPI engaged consultants to review their strategic direction and will continue to focus attention on breaking the cycle of poverty for children and youth from cradle to career. Vibrant Communities SJ has been directly involved in the following initiatives, however there are many additional programs and initiatives that we have played a less dominant role such as extended program funding for youth engagement project, exploration of a second Early Learning Center, and the introduction of Sistema into Saint John's priority neighbourhood schools.

### Teen pregnancy.

VCSJ staff supported strategic planning process in December 2011 to identify future directions with the Teen Pregnancy. Four priority areas were identified:

- ⑤ sexual health services in High School. Public Health and School District 8 are creating space and reallocating Nurse Practitioner staff to have 2 days per week in and high pregnancy high schools to begin January.
- ⑤ awareness campaign. Funding was provided by Greater SJ Community Foundation and the campaign will be launched November 15.
- ⑤ improved early childhood programming. Partners are exploring how to revitalize the early childhood coalition.
- ⑤ integrated and consistent youth programming. See Y.O.U.T.H SJ below.

### Facilitate YOUTH SJ

Youth agencies in Saint John do not have a history of collaboration. Turf wars have dominated the scenery. VCSJ hosted a series of conversations culminating in a retreat to determine whether organizations could collaborate on concrete and common issues. The result has been 4 major youth organizations creating YOUTH SJ, including a joint newsletter, a terms of reference, with a launch November 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. A concrete example of an outcome of this new collaboration: one youth agency has a van that they now rent at cost to other youth organizations.

### Canada Learning Bond.

Financial Institutions (Royal Bank of Canada, TD, Scotia, BMO, and Bayview Credit Union), Service Canada, and many non-profit and government organizations are collaborating to increase uptake of the Canada Learning Bond from 12%. One such event is Nov 19<sup>th</sup> blitz where parents can sign up. This effort has created a space to discuss post secondary education and has also challenged assumptions e.g., the majority of families contribute even though they do not need to. In addition, this is the first

concrete project, where we have been able to actively engage Service Canada in the communities' priorities. Additional opportunities to engage the business community in generating funds to enhance educational savings available to low income youth via the Canada Learning Bond will be explored in early 2012.

## Workforce Participation

Workforce participation remains a key component to our strategy. The role of VCSJ staff has evolved away from supporting establishment of new programs towards providing support for multi organizational coordination, follow up to 'un attached' individuals post workforce orientation events and enhancing efforts to involve employers. Pragmatically this has resulted in more VCSJ staff involved in following up with individuals from priority neighbourhoods. In addition, VCSJ is in the process of transitioning activities to other partners.

### Identifying learning needs and resources and promoting training opportunities

- Two neighbourhoods are hosting regular workforce meetings set up with community staff for residents.
- Worked with Red Cross and Social Development to bring a free First Aid Course to North End.
- Worked with four community schools in priority neighbourhoods to identify ways to connect with parents – targeting particular families at certain times or locations (child entering into kindergarten or part of Sistema program)
- Identify 1 staff person within Post Secondary Education to answer questions from residents to ensure consistent messages and warm reception
- Work with community partners to enhance opportunities for individuals to learn more about community and government resources and to connect with employers

### Coordination of efforts – connecting with employers.

Connecting individuals looking for work with employers continues to be a challenging activity yet integral to moving individuals out of poverty. VCSJ initiated the development of the Workforce Development Network (Enterprise SJ, NB Association For Community Living, SJ Learning Exchange, Multicultural and Newcomers Association, and Options Outreach) to enhance coordination of workforce related activities. One outcome of this network is a concept Enterprise SJ is leading to establish a coordinated “a workforce recruitment and matching service” for employers with entry level positions. Non-profit

organizations supporting transitions to work would use this service to enhance opportunities for their clients which in turn would enable agencies to focus more on readying an individual and providing followup and tracking. The concept is under development and a broad array of communities (justice, disability, poverty, mental health) are engaged. This model would be developed as a social enterprise and various sustainability options are being explored.

In October 2011, the Minister of Finance reported in the media there was a disparity between employers wanting to hire and growing social assistance caseloads. In response, VCSJ is preparing a meeting with regional caucus (including the minister) to discuss how investing in workforce development among those unattached to workforce can become a priority for the government. This conversation has engaged a variety of deputy and assistant deputy ministers as well as other regions of the province who were also interested in preparing a response. Further this opportunity is being used to the coordinated and highlight progressive approaches in Saint John that warrant investment in this time of fiscal restraint.

#### *Workforce Statistics in 2011*

VCSJ hosted residents from priority neighbourhoods for the following workshops involving staff from provincial government departments and community organizations:

- ⑤ 4 Job Preparation Workshops 52 participants
- ⑤ PACE Workshop– 16 participants
- ⑤ 3 Catch the Wave to Employment Workshops– 158 participants
- ⑤ University Bus 30 participants
- ⑤ Job Bus– 12 participants
- ⑤ First Aid Course - 10 individuals from neighbourhoods

In addition, VCSJ staff liaised and followed up with 19 individuals in 2011, 12 working (3 part time) and 6 taking education programming.

## **Communications, Research, and Evaluation**

VCSJ has enhanced its social media presence with a Facebook page and Twitter account. In addition, we have developed a bilingual website with distinct tabs for 12 Community Inclusion Networks which will be operational before end of November. VCSJ has developed templates to communicate poverty reduction progress to partners and the general public.

The research agenda has also been re-invigorated this year. VCSJ is contributing to establishment of Saint John (perhaps NB) as a data consortia partner with CCSD. VCSJ

has engaged in research to assess the actual costs of post secondary education for a low-income individual (youth and single parent) compared to available resources. The results are startling and confirm anecdotal reports that the disparity between income and expenses cannot be overcome by young single parents. We are in the process of confirming findings and will work with various departments to address policy issues uncovered. Lastly, VCSJ is working with the Social Policy Research Network to host a poverty reduction showcase in the early part of the new year.

## Funding

Funding Sources have remained fairly constant for the 2011-2012 (to April) year. VCSJ decided to allocate resources to work with consulting firm to develop a sustainability plan that includes communication and fundraising plans. This project will begin early November and be complete by end of February 2012. The Regional Development Corporation has agreed to renew a 3-year partnership with VCSJ, however their funding is intended to make up the difference between what we secure and what we require (assumes a decreasing investment). With the establishment of Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) and becoming a Community Inclusion Network, VCSJ receives core funding to replace McConnell funds and we have access to funding from two distinct grants; transportation and community learning. See financial report (to end of September) for additional details.

### Notes on Financial Report:

Many revenues are received for the entire year, while expenses have not all been incurred. In addition, funding from provincial government (most of our current revenue) begin April 2011, therefore, we are only half way through fiscal year with expenses. Lastly, additional expenses such as communications and sustainability plan have not yet been applied, but will over the upcoming months.

#### 2011 staffing:

*Coordinator 1fte*

*Social Planner and Workforce .8fte*

*Neighbourhood Organizer .8*

*Around the Block Coordinator .4 (.5 as of Sept)*

*Students and Research (.25) Fall*



## ...from the beginning

The following section provides an overview of highlights since the inception of VCSJ, from the perspective of Coordinating Committee members.

### Key Achievements

VCSJ has remained true to its intention NOT to run programs. We know poverty rates have decreased faster in Saint John than NB and other maritime cities. While we cannot take credit for these improvements, we have invested significant social capital into developing community capacity to reduce poverty and have grown in our ability to monitor and track collective process and impact. For instance, in 2011, at least 911 individuals (estimate overlap of 100 individuals) participated in transition to work programs or events across 7 organizations.

In the last decade, VCSJ partners have established many quality programs, specifically designed to break the poverty cycle and are demonstrating success. Not only are there new organizations, but also long-standing organizations are evolving at an accelerated rate towards evidence-based programs that align with priorities of the poverty reduction strategy. VCSJ has played an active role in stimulated the above mentioned transformations by consistently asking questions, such as 'what if'?

The Saint John community works together in a way that is not evident in other regions of New Brunswick. For instance, according to a recent Health Council report, Saint John is the only region in the province where residents of low-income and high income do not differ in terms of their perception of quality of health care. Officials report that the collaboration that takes place in our region has transformed the health system in such a way that it does not resemble or respond in the same ways as the rest of the system. Collaboration is the accepted means of addressing complex community issues in our region.

Structures have been built in SJ that support and perpetuate collective impact. For instance, the Coordinating Committee of VCSJ is a microcosm of the concepts of shared ownership and suspending the needs of the individual for the whole.

Priority Neighbourhoods are an established entity and priority in Saint John across partners and among the public. One stakeholder reported 'Its like priority neighbourhoods have always been here'. In reality the term was coined in February 2008.

The following are indicators and illustrations of impact of this approach:

- ⑤ Resident-led neighbourhood revitalization has taken such hold that each priority neighbourhood has resident leadership groups, many of which have their own staff to address local needs and priorities. High value is placed on community plans to guide responsive actions. VCSJ was able to re-allocate funds because neighbourhood groups had established their own entities. The infrastructure,

however, remains fragile. Part of the VCSJ sustainability plan will be to strengthen the financial sustainability of existing social infrastructure.

- ⑤ Around the Block, the community newspaper that reports ‘only the good stuff’ of priority neighbourhoods has transformed communication within priority neighbourhoods, enables service providers to communicate directly with 6000 residents, has grown as a successful social enterprise, and “engages residents in a way they have never been engaged before”.
- ⑤ 6 parks within priority neighbourhoods have received significant investments by the municipality and the province of New Brunswick
- ⑤ The City of Saint John has invested in physical infrastructure (weekly as opposed to bi-weekly garbage removal, additional lights, repaired or installation of side walks) in priority neighbourhoods, in response to resident recommendations.
- ⑤ The government has also re-assigned and aligned services prioritizing priority neighbourhoods (e.g., community police, leisure services staff, public health staff reorganized into neighbourhood teams to build relationships with residents)
- ⑤ The Province of New Brunswick has invested in improved lighting and other repairs in their social housing units

Transition to work, workforce programs have grown exponentially and organizations (both government and community) are beginning to work as a system- e.g., coordinated recruitment, promotion. Supportive opportunities for adults are taking root. An increased recognition of the role of employers in poverty reduction has led to more collaborative efforts with business organizations (such as Enterprise SJ), formal structures with business leaders (Business Referral Team) and a recognition of the need for a position to “broker” connections between individuals and employers.

Sustained engagement. Nearly every partner has remained involved in poverty reduction activities since the beginning of Vibrant. Recently VCSJ has had to turn down requests to join the Leadership Roundtable. In addition, business has actively stayed at the table and partnered beyond ‘just’ the role of BCAP (e.g., Enterprise SJ, Board of Trade, Fusion are distinct members of the LRT). In fact, one of the most active VCSJ partners is Enterprise Saint John.

#### *Achieving policy and systems change*

VCSJ and partners have been working towards a New Brunswick poverty reduction strategy since our inception. The resulting engagement process and crown corporation is a reflection of the Vibrant Communities approach to multisectoral ownership and local implementation. The immense momentum resulted in the government’s immediate change to policies championed by our community that prevented individuals from leaving social assistance. The province (at least ESIC) fully adopts the need to have individuals with lived experience participate in poverty reduction.

We have seen many indicators of organizations and systems operating differently. Youth

agencies are building means to resource share and are talking outcomes. Non-profits are diversifying revenue streams. Salaries among select non-profits have also been affected by the presence of Vibrant Communities. In 2009 VCSJ had a meeting with the Executive Director and a board member of a large non-profit agency and an issue that emerged was the rate of pay among VCSJ staff. The ED stated, it is wrong you pay your staff more than I am paid, and I run a million dollar organization. The response from the then chair was, 'It is wrong your board pays you less than we pay'. The Executive Director now makes a higher salary. There other such cases where VCSJ's rate of pay (which is published) has caused adjustment to the salary of other non-profit leaders.

VCSJ has also demonstrated that non-profit organizations can serve as an important transition to work opportunity, provided they pay living wage, support staff adequately, and celebrate successes. 50% of VCSJ's current staff lived in poverty prior to working for us (1 for 57 years, the other for 9 years).

## **Lessons Learned**

**A focus on learning is central to success:** VCSJ has driven a local learning agenda with in the community, encouraging and pushing partners to seek ways to improve, dig deeper, and engage in their own iterative learning. In addition, we have promoted and utilized learning from outside the community and have seen significant growth in evidence based practice among the non-profit sector.

**Community awareness and momentum fuels the interest, desire and commitment** of all partners, to achieve our goals. Strategies, actions, targets and results must be focused, well-researched, and clearly (repeatedly) communicated.

**All sectors of leadership must be engaged for the long term.** Relationships and trust are the cornerstone to building cohesion among sectors. There has been significant growth among partners in terms of appreciating and optimizing what each sector and organization can bring to the table. Our approach has been deliberately 'moderate' to preserve relationships in the hopes of better outcomes if we remain at the table. The role of VCSJ is one of relationships and compromise; not a leader in social justice.

Bureaucracies are built systems slow to change and unlikely to innovate...but it can happen with the right leader and with significant support. Even with the best leader, once tangible support is withdrawn, innovation shrivels and bureaucracy preserves itself.

## ***...Where to from here***

VCSJ remains committed to working ourselves out of a job. As organizations and departments increasingly turn their attention to priority neighbourhoods and poverty reduction, we begin to see the glimmer of possibility. The progress, however, is fragile

with very bad economic times in New Brunswick and Saint John. For instance, the Transit Commission announced this week further cut backs on bus routes. There is a growing need to mobilize broader community of interest in matters of policy and potential 'cuts'. This is a void VCSJ and partners can fill.

The Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation is in its infancy and government funding cuts resulted in no additional hires. This means the Corporation is staffed by redeployed government staff. The Corporation was designed to have a staffing complement with diverse experience including secondments from community. All of this to say, there is an even more urgent need to have an outside group asking critical questions related to process, governance, measurement, communication in New Brunswick and again this is a critical role for VCSJ.

Another focus in the immediate future is to clearly articulate 'what' sustainably reduces poverty in Saint John and to ensure that these essential services can be sustained through New Brunswick's economic crisis.

We reviewed and reconfirmed the following roles for VCSJ into the future.

- ⑤ Lead Poverty Reduction- develop and maintain regional poverty reduction plan, be the champion and voice of poverty reduction
- ⑤ Coordinate and Connect across sectors and among partners to implement the priorities of poverty reduction
- ⑤ Evaluate and Communicate progress
- ⑤ Stimulate Neighbourhood Revitalization via planning and partner investments
- ⑤ Support workforce participation among low-income adults by strengthening coordination and effectiveness within the sector and promoting transition to employment supports as a government priority.