

October | 09

## VCSJ 2009 Evaluation Report



## Imprint Consulting Inc.

Imprint Consulting Inc. (Imprint) is a New Brunswick based consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and organizational change. Since 2001 Imprint has successfully delivered numerous consulting mandates and projects which include the evaluation of social change programs, organizational development initiatives, strategic planning processes, and various other evaluation and planning mandates. For more information see [www.imprintinc.ca](http://www.imprintinc.ca)

## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>How we know what we know .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Context .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>VCSJ Strategies for 2009 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Poverty Reduction Investments .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Key Changes and Progress .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Reflections on the Neighbourhood Approach .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Self-Directed Voice: Case Studies .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Where to From Here .....</b>	<b>17</b>

## Executive Summary

Saint John is completing its 5<sup>th</sup> year as a Trail Builder in the Vibrant Communities initiative. In that time, VCSJ activities have touched the lives of over 3500 low-income individuals in Saint John. The leadership and capacity to reduce poverty in Saint John has grown and matured over this time. This document provides a review and reflection on key questions relevant to this moment in time for Vibrant Communities Saint John. The approach for this evaluation combines questions guided by the input of our national partners – Tamarack Institute, Caledon Institute of Social Policy and J.W. McConnell Family Foundation – with additional questions generated locally. The purpose of this evaluation is to report on progress, and to inform strategic direction and next steps for poverty reduction in Saint John.

It is an interesting time for poverty reduction in Saint John. This evaluation report occurs at a time when the province of New Brunswick is launching a comprehensive poverty reduction plan with a process and structure that mirrors that of a Vibrant Communities approach. A comprehensive policy reform that aligns with priorities for locally driven, multisectoral responses accompanies the launch of the poverty reduction plan.

Considerable progress has been made in Saint John over the past five years. We see an increasingly positive environment for partnerships and a heightened spirit of collaboration. A prime example is the TIES 2 Work program, a workforce essential skills initiative that resulted from government and community partners jointly understanding key gaps in the community, then marshalling the resources to make the program happen.

A central approach in Saint John's poverty reduction strategy is the focus on five priority neighbourhoods. This remains to be seen as a robust strategy, and many community partners are now organizing their work through this lens. Over the past three years we see increasing financial investment from a wide variety of sources into the neighbourhood work. There are many successful initiatives such as Power Up!, Around the Block community newspaper, Learn & Go, and the Youth Engagement Program. We also observe greater coordination between programs in a way that supports people moving from support to support more efficiently.

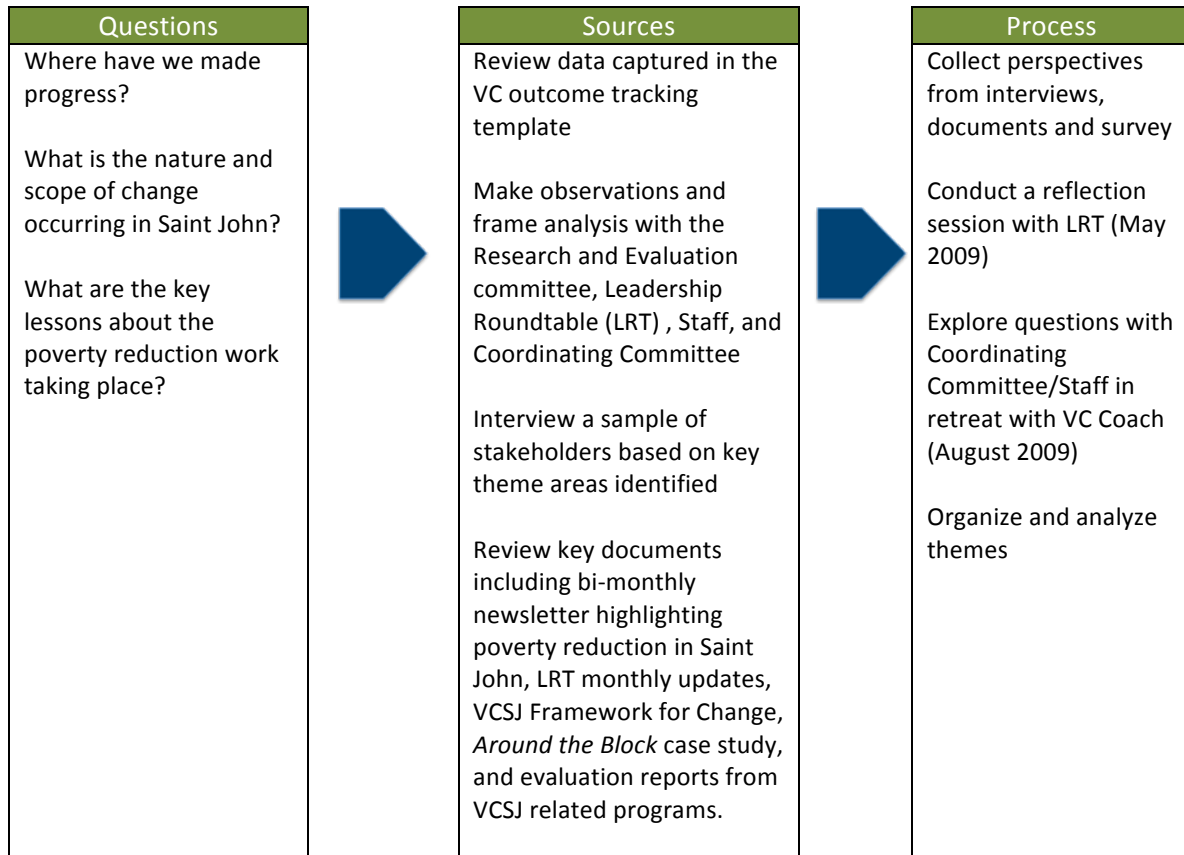
There are some areas where the effort is not translating into the level of results that are hoped for by those working on poverty reduction. While there are some positive housing projects that are now completed or are moving forward, the momentum towards an overall affordable housing strategy seems to have stalled. There are still too few infant daycare spaces in the community, and teen pregnancy prevention needs increased attention. Furthermore, many initiatives still face sustainability challenges.

Neighbourhoods that have become stronger and are self-sufficient require less support from Vibrant Communities. Going forward, VCSJ will encourage those neighbourhoods, but will work more directly in supporting the strengthening resident voice and capacity building in other priority neighbourhoods. VCSJ will increasingly work in the background as neighbourhood organizations become stronger and more independent. VCSJ will remain a connection point where leaders from all sectors can come together and work collaboratively towards reducing poverty.

## How we know what we know

This evaluation was led by Jamie Gamble of Imprint Consulting. Kathryn Asher of the Human Development Council assisted in the collecting of data and preparation of case studies.

This evaluation was researched and developed by analyzing a set of critical questions about Vibrant Communities Saint John as follows:



## Context

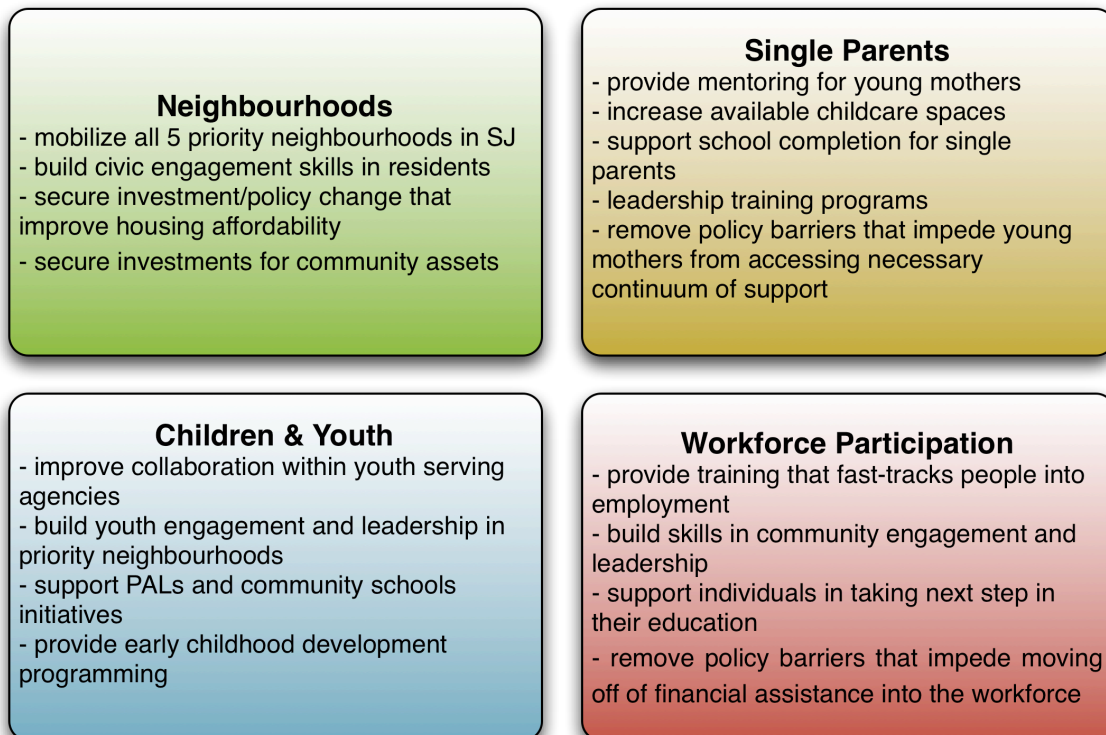
The poverty in Saint John is concentrated in specific, geographically defined neighbourhoods. Its suburbs are the wealthiest communities in the province, yet the neighbourhoods that ring its central core have among the highest rates of poverty in all of Canada. In the city of Saint John, one-in-four families is headed by a lone parent; an estimated 60 per cent of these families live in poverty. As a result, the City of Saint John has one of the highest child poverty rates in Canada.

In recent history, community partners in Saint John have rallied in an effort to significantly reduce the rate of poverty. This effort involves partners across all sectors, including a high level of engagement from the local business community.

At the time of this report, the Province of New Brunswick is leading the development of a provincial plan to reduce poverty. The process undertaken to develop the plan mirrors the Vibrant Communities model of having business, government, non-profit organizations, and low income voices and is championed by the Premier, critical criteria advocated for by VCSJ and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. While still in development, the approach that is emerging for this initiative is built on a community-based model that emphasizes multi-sectoral engagement and ownership, and local decision making.

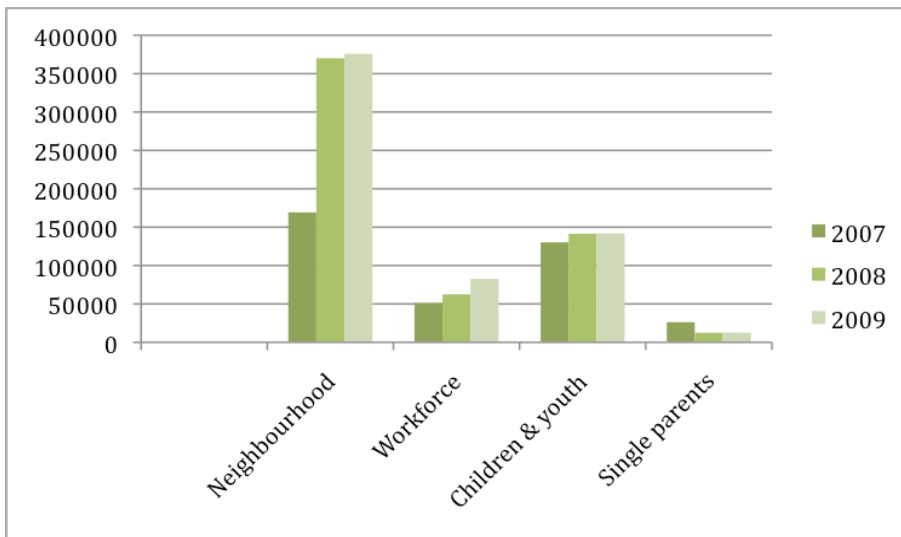
## VCSJ Strategies for 2009

The following diagram outlines the key strategies of Vibrant Communities Saint John. These strategies align with a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy developed by multiple partners working in Saint John. VCSJ focuses its attention on the strategies in neighbourhoods and workforce participation (refer to Appendix A for outcomes), and the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative's (BCAPI) on single parents and in children and youth. The overall effort is a collective one with multiple programs and initiatives championed by neighbourhood residents, non-profits, businesses and government departments.

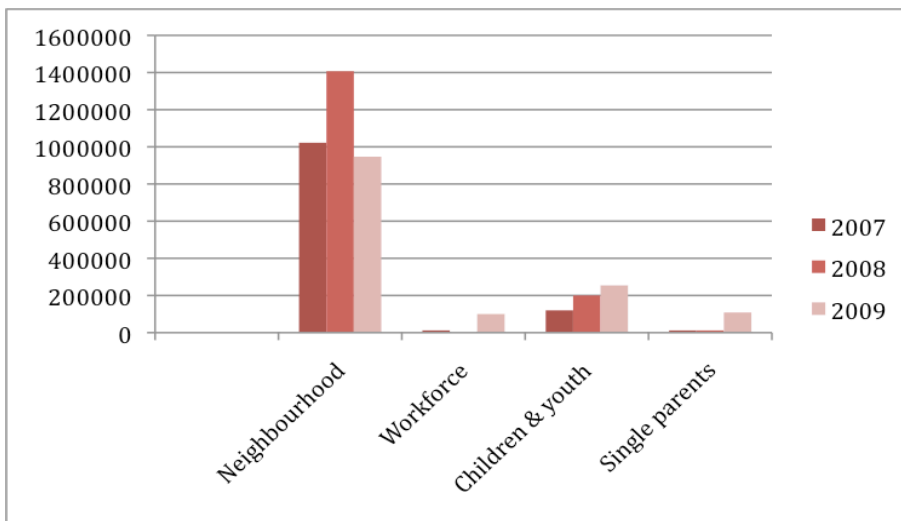


## Poverty Reduction Investments

For this evaluation, the pattern of how money has been directed into Vibrant Communities related poverty reduction was reviewed. This section outlines a summary of investments into the strategic areas of neighbourhoods, workforce, children & youth, and single parents. The first graph (in green) is money that has flowed directly through Vibrant Communities Saint John. It includes an allocation of staff time and effort based on a reasonable estimate of where their energies are directed. It is important to note that some of this is activity directly undertaken by Vibrant Communities, while others is the work of other poverty reduction partners where the funding flowed through Vibrant Communities. The second graph (in red) is poverty reduction activity that Vibrant Communities was in some way connected to, but the funds did not flow through Vibrant Communities.



Poverty Reduction Investments – Funds via Vibrant Communities



Poverty Reduction Efforts – Funds Connected to Vibrant Communities

Overall we see a concentration of effort into neighbourhood with a significant increase occurring in 2008, which is approximately one year following the decision to have neighbourhoods as a key strategic focus. There is a steady increase in workforce efforts, and an emergence in 2009 of money moving directly into community activity in this strategic area. There is minimal direct activity by Vibrant Communities into the strategy area of single parents as this is a core focus of VCSJ's partner organization BCAPL.

Throughout this time period there are increases in the business community's investments directly into poverty reduction efforts. For example, Irving Oil Limited funds Learn & Go, and Brunswick Pipeline supports the Crescent Valley Resource Centre. There are many other non-monetary contributions by the business community through the Job Bus, TIES 2 Work, and Catch the Wave to Work workshops which are also new in 2009.

In addition, the PALS program partnering businesses with schools championed by JD Irving and BCAPL continues to grow. A new provincial literacy program (ALF) initiated by a businessperson has also been established with the objective to ensure children are reading at an appropriate level by grade three.

Notes on these graphs:

It is important to note that these graphs are a rough breakdown. It is also very important to recognize that much of the investment and effort is done by community partners. This data does not take into account activity and investment before 2007. Not included in the graph is the housing commitments made by the provincial/federal affordable housing agreements: \$8.2M in 2006 and \$6M housing 2009-2010 (note: these are funds that have been committed but not necessarily spent). For a future exercise that can inform the overall poverty reduction strategy, it may be useful to report to the community on all poverty reduction investments taking place in Saint John.

## Key Changes and Progress

There has been great progress in poverty reduction in Saint John in 2009. In 2009 over 1300 different residents were directly affected by poverty reduction efforts. A range of effects have been realized including: securing full time living wage work, improved social networks, essential skills training, and fulltime living wage work.

This section organizes reflections, observations and data about the progress of 2009 into three distinct categories: *systems changes*, *programmatic changes* and *stuck*. *Systems changes* are transformative in nature where there has been some form of fundamental shift such as a change in relationship, resources or policies. These kinds of changes tend to result in ongoing impact. A *programmatic change* is a specific, often temporal initiative that requires ongoing program activity. There may be ongoing impacts that stem from a programmatic change (e.g. a participant in a program who develops new skills) but the program itself requires sustained support to continue (e.g. ongoing funding to run the training program). *Stuck* refers to areas where despite investments in effort and/or money, limited progress is being made.

## Systems Changes

**Community alignment in poverty reduction:** True collaboration is difficult to achieve. Saint John has made significant progress in building a culture where partners working on poverty reduction can come together and participate in a process of shared analysis and joint problem solving. This approach has been building throughout the tenure of VCSJ, but many observers note that 2009 has been a breakthrough year in the culture of local collaboration. A result of this is increased flexibility – as demonstrated in the various departments and organizations working together on an early childhood centre initiative and others on several workforce initiatives that are stretching their mandates to help some innovative approaches develop. This also appears to help shift thinking towards longer-term objectives as illustrated by the development of an early childhood development centre.

Challenges do remain in developing this culture of collaboration. Some established organizations have remained outside of this collaborative activity, and for some the presence of Vibrant Communities is seen as competition for scarce resources. Efforts are underway to try to understand the needs of these organizations, and to integrate them into the broader poverty reduction process underway.

2009 has seen partners pick up the challenge to attend to the unique needs of low-income neighbourhoods. The language and approach of priority neighbourhoods is being widely adopted. Many non-profit and government partners are turning their attention and aligning services with neighbourhood priorities.

- Public Health, the Community Health Center, and VCSJ are hosting a series of workshop (at the request of the Health Region) to raise awareness about the need to work ‘differently’ when working in the community.
- Public Health is realigning their service delivery to develop neighbourhood-based teams of health care professionals.
- Not for profit organizations like the Clothes Closet have developed satellite locations in 3 neighbourhoods.
- Community Policing are re-aligning their staffing to ensure each priority neighbourhood has designated staff.
- Several local employers are rethinking their Human Resource policies, specifically, looking at alternatives to GED requirements for hiring.
- The City of Saint John’s Integrated Community Sustainability Plan has priority neighbourhoods as a top priority and recommends investment in neighbourhood capacity building.

**Integrating services:** In 2009 VCSJ increased focus on connecting services to better assist individuals to move through their pathway out of poverty. This idea of seamless service delivery and multiple pathways helps to ensure that individuals who are not ready for complete self-sufficiency are connected with their next stepping-stone. For example, participants in Catching the Wave to Work employment workshop were exposed to some opportunities for employment and subsequently enrolled in TIES 2 Work – an employer-specific essential skills training program. Several TIES 2 Work graduates are now employed and some are pursuing further

education or training. Early indications suggest this has strengthened the effectiveness of some time-limited interventions and allowed for follow up that is customized to the individual.

There is a need to better understand this integration and the impact this has on individuals moving out of poverty. An evaluation priority for 2010 is to better monitor the individuals following these pathways.

**Strengthening resident voice:** Helping to support the engagement of resident leaders has been central to the neighbourhood revitalization effort. There are signs that the voice of neighbourhood residents who are living in poverty is stronger, and increasingly independent. Two examples particularly highlight this: the effort to reverse a decision to close a neighbourhood school, and the emergence of a community newspaper *Around the Block*. These examples are presented in detail later in this report as a case study.

“The respect that some of the residents have received from people in significant positions (Major and Council, Chief of police, etc.) for what they have been trying to accomplish in CV has been just phenomenal.”  
*Priority Neighbourhood Resident*

**Emergence of a provincial poverty reduction strategy:** 2009 saw a great amount of provincial effort and resources committed to creating a poverty reduction strategy that engaged low income voices, government departments, the not for profit sector, and the business community. This approach mirrors the Vibrant Communities model where all four sectors must work together to scope the issue and implement results. The culmination of this process is a provincial roundtable hosted by Premier Graham, where four LRT Members of VCSJ were invited to participate, including two low-income women. Further, the final event included at least one low-income resident from each region of the province.

**Emerging policy developments:** A window of opportunity for policy change is opening in New Brunswick. In the process for the New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Strategy an ‘options’ document has been presented that outlines significant changes in policy. The changes under consideration include extending health card benefits, removing wage exemptions, and reforming the economic unit. Poverty reduction is seeing commitments from New Brunswick’s two dominant political parties, and there appears to be a commitment to carry forward with the Poverty Reduction Strategy recommendations by whoever forms the government in the 2010 election. Such changes have the potential to result in significant transformations that will affect nearly all low-income New Brunswickers.

In the last 12 months the minimum wage for New Brunswick was raised by \$0.50 to \$8.25, and a revised emergency home heating program has been announced that provides up to \$550 dollars to low-income households based on their expenses.

There is also some promise with respect to human resource policies within the provincial government. Under current policies, high school graduation or the equivalent (GED) is required for any job with the provincial government. In a recent meeting with the Office of Human Resources, Post Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Regional Health Authority, Enterprise Saint John, University of New Brunswick-Saint John, the Saint John Learning Exchange, and Vibrant Communities, the Office of Human Resources agreed to support participation in TIES 2 Work. Two individuals would be hired (casual) based on essential skills

and be supported by staff to obtain their GED within two years.. While this is a marked step forward, much work is required as provincial union representatives were not willing to provide an exemption in their own agreement to enable adults without high school or GED to obtain these positions.

## Programmatic changes

There are additional programs supporting poverty reduction that are addressing gaps identified in the continuum of support needed to move people out of poverty. An indication of growth is that several programs that previously needed to actively recruit participants now have growing participation and in some instances waiting lists.

Evolving the ownership for poverty reduction is important because it extends the impact and reach to affect more individuals and households, which can account for a significant increase in our reported individual and household assets. For instance, in the area of neighbourhood revitalization we reached 1029 individuals in 2009 compared to 1567 in the four previous years combined.

**Workforce Programs:** In previous years VCSJ invested in learning about the barriers adults face in securing adequate employment. In 2009 this phase of research and analysis has turned into action. A growing number of individuals (174) were affected by workforce participation efforts than in any previous years (e.g., 54 in 2008). Strong partnerships are developing between community agencies, government departments and neighbourhoods to connect individuals to existing opportunities. There are an increasing number of training programs to prepare residents to move from poverty to independence. Specifically, the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour has invested in the Saint John Learning Exchange to develop and deliver an essential skills program TIES 2 Work. In addition, new partnerships are developing with employers. Eleven employers participated in transition to work programs in 2009, all for the first time.

**Neighbourhood Programs:** The City of Saint John Common Council approved a motion to continue the \$150,000 investment in neighbourhood-based revitalization for 5 years. This money supports the neighbourhood assistant role that helps with resident engagement and coordination in the priority neighbourhoods. Learn & Go was offered again in 2009 with full funding from Irving Oil Ltd. This program helps to motivate and train low-income residents to build their leadership skills and improve their neighbourhoods. The community newspaper *Around the Block* is a source of good-news stories about Saint John's priority neighbourhoods. (To learn more, see case study presented on page 11.)

Power Up is a ten-week leadership and personal development training program run by the Urban Core Support Network (UCSN), a managing partner with VCSJ, with funding from the Status of Women Canada. Power Up is designed to help low income women who reside in one of Saint John's priority neighbourhoods take their next step in improving their lives. In the first two years of the program's operation approximately one half of participants have become employed or have gone on to other training. Participants are more aware of their communities, have strengthened personal networks and most participants report increases to self-esteem and

confidence. Several graduates from this program have since taken on increased leadership roles (including paid) in their neighbourhoods.

Hazen White St Francis School and the Carpenter's Training Center are collaborating to provide an after school carpentry program four nights a week for Crescent Valley youth who are struggling with, or no longer attending, school. No additional funds are required for this project.

**Children and Youth:** The provincial government is funding four early learning centers including one site in Saint John. A pilot project, funded by T.R. Meighen Family Foundation, that expanded the successful youth engagement programs of the Old North End into the South End and Crescent Valley is now looking to transition into a long term sustainable program and expand into the West Side. An extension of this work is a new Youth Learn & Go training program where youth leadership councils work together in a structured process to realize change in their communities.

**Single Parents:** First Steps, a transitional shelter for homeless, pregnant youth, has now integrated a mentoring program for young mothers referred by other partnering agencies who are no longer directly involved with the young moms.

## Stuck

There are some areas where the effort is not translating into the level of results that are hoped for by those working on poverty reduction.

While there are some positive housing projects that are now completed or are moving forward, the momentum towards an overall affordable housing strategy seems to have stalled. There are still too few infant daycare spaces in the community, and teen pregnancy prevention needs increased attention.

Some positive programmatic changes of the past now face some sustainability challenges. First Steps Housing, and youth after school programming face funding pressure, and the community schools concept was diluted with more schools included but fewer additional resources per school. Reduced funding for non-profits remains a challenge and while there is positive progress with government on policy issues and an overall poverty strategy, tensions remain because of funding pressures.

There are also some areas – 'welfare wall' policies and workforce participation programs – that may have previously been designated as stuck that are now moving forward in a very positive way. There is also a sense of caution that while there are many significant gains in working across sectors, these are potentially fragile connections and will require ongoing stewardship to keep them moving forward.

## Reflections on the Neighbourhood Approach

The report *Poverty and Plenty* (2005) revealed the concentration of poverty in five neighbourhoods in Saint John. Since that time, Vibrant Communities has put priority neighbourhoods at the centre of the strategy for reducing poverty in Saint John.

Given the tenure of the neighbourhood approach, it is timely to consider the appropriateness of this strategy. Was this focus the right one, and what has been learned through this process about working in a neighbourhood approach?

Since 2006 there have been numerous accomplishments:

- Neighbourhoods are organizing and many have active citizen groups.
- In Crescent Valley, a full time neighbourhood staff is funded by the City of Saint John and local business.
- Neighbourhood Assistants are hired for each priority neighbourhood.
- Priority neighbourhood capacity building is the central strategy for the City of Saint John's sustainability plan.
- A plan is under development to redesign an entire neighbourhood resulting in a shift from 70% poverty to less than 30% by increased density and mixed development (funded by Social Development).
- North End Works identifies 15 potential small businesses with low-income residents and develops a skills profile based on more than 450 residents of the Old North End and Crescent Valley.
- Four of five priority neighbourhoods have identified plans and immediate actions for 2009.
- Over 140 residents have taken next steps towards independence through UCSN's Power Up, PRUDE's Breaking Free, and Learn & Go.
- Over 100 Saint John residents have participated in a poverty workshop delivered by UCSN to better understand the challenges of living on a limited income.
- City of SJ invests \$150,000 yearly to grass roots neighbourhood development.
- New lights are installed in Courtenay Bay as requested by residents.
- One Change secures funding from National Crime Prevention of Canada for a three-year Youth Inclusion Program.
- City of Saint John invests \$900,000 in Crescent Valley infrastructure improvements including improvements to roads and sidewalks.
- *Around the Block*, community newspaper, celebrates priority neighbourhoods and its one year anniversary, with nearly 100 residents contributing.
- \$750,000 is invested in rebuilding South End's Rainbow Park.
- The teens in Crescent Valley have a dream of a safe and fun place for children to play, and the Flemming Court Park committee has raised \$ 570,000 from different sources bringing that dream closer to reality.
- 50 new affordable housing units approved and 323 units built in last 3 years.
- Four youth are supported to finish school in one-bedroom apartments with 60 more on the waiting list with ONE Life, a ONE Change project.
- Coverdale's new program the Clothes Closet provided 940 business casual clothing items to women in its first 9 months of operation.

- Uptown Clinic began with more than 80 individuals on methadone treatment in its first four weeks of operation.
- Crescent Valley and South End residents organize and implement a comprehensive survey of what residents want for their neighbourhood.

In setting focus on priority neighbourhoods, attention is garnered in a way that can help to rally momentum, increase the numbers of partners engaged, and shape the nature of engagement by the partners. Success tends to attract further attention to the neighbourhood and its issues. The neighbourhood work has taken on an emergent quality whereby efforts take on a life of their own: for example, the university has 'adopted' Crescent Valley, which has subsequently increased resources available to the neighbourhood.

Vibrant Communities' direct efforts are focused on skill building with neighbourhood residents. For example, VCSJ's program Learn & Go gave residents an opportunity to build some of their skills such as engaging other residents, planning and implementing a community priority, and teamwork. Hiring people coming out of training programs such as Power Up! creates a continuum from community involvement to employment.

Supporting residents to take on leadership roles is vital. As the cases outlined in this report demonstrate there is a strengthening 'resident voice' emerging. This is strongest in Crescent Valley. This has been a long process that started with the survey work of 2006. This was not only helpful to profile some of the challenges of the neighbourhood, it built the spirit of Crescent Valley residents and demonstrated that people wanted to work together. Resident engagement is also very high in the Old North End. Resident engagement is not as high in the South End, Lower West Side and The Village.

Central to neighbourhood capacity building has been the neighbourhood assistants program. Low income residents from priority neighbourhoods are hired and work with a community developer (VCSJ staff) to engage residents, identify needs, and work towards neighbourhood-based solutions. This role works closely with existing neighbourhood groups and also provides transitional, supported, and part-time work for low-income residents. Of the 8 neighbourhood assistants of 2009, four are working and two are attending school (college and completing high school). The neighbourhood assistant plays the role of a safe insider to help bring residents beyond their comfort zones to supports and opportunities that may be of benefit.

Establishing and maintaining trust involves a significant commitment of time and effort. Frequent communications are needed to manage emerging issues and concerns. Funding is often at the root of these concerns. Accomplishments are often a mix of efforts within and outside of the community and involve multiple partners. It can be difficult to manage the sharing of this credit, even when efforts are made to acknowledge all involved. There is a tension between the need to go slow in order to build relationships and trust, and the need to go fast to demonstrate results.

There are still many challenges to the work in neighbourhoods. In Crescent Valley, there is a core group that is highly engaged, but it has proven difficult to expand beyond this group, particularly in involving younger or male residents. Just as there can be silos in government departments and between non-profit organizations, there can be resident silos within neighbourhoods.

As previously mentioned, the neighbourhood work of Vibrant Communities has been most active in Crescent Valley. Because this neighbourhood is defined by social-subsidized housing the composition of the neighbourhood is almost all low-income. This presents a challenge in that when people do make progress in their lives and become self-sustaining they exit the neighbourhood. Their success, and the role they often play in the neighbourhood work, is then a lost asset to the community.

This may also provide some explanation as to why resident engagement has been more difficult in the South End, Lower West Side and Village. These are more mixed neighbourhoods and they have not experienced the same momentum that has built in Crescent Valley. Things have started only to stop. Perhaps a different approach than Crescent Valley is required to support and stimulate resident engagement and capacity building. At the same time, the creation of the neighbourhood assistant role provides an opportunity for lessons about the neighbourhood work to migrate between the different priority neighbourhoods. There is a growing appetite for figuring out how to effectively support this.

There is a collective sense that the focus on neighbourhoods was a positive strategic move for poverty reduction in Saint John. This strategy has been successful on focusing resources, as illustrated by the financial analysis earlier in this report. Partners, as well as some who would not think of themselves as partners, are aligning with neighbourhoods on their own, without the direct involvement of Vibrant Communities. Now that this focus has been achieved, the next step is to increase inter-neighbourhood collaboration, improve referral mechanisms between programs and initiatives, and to look for the appropriate entities to steward the neighbourhood work for the long-term.

## Self-Directed Voice: Case Studies

Upon reflection, one transformation VCSJ has noted is the self-directed voice that neighbourhoods are increasingly taking. This has been most evident with the emergence of the community newspaper, *Around the Block*, and the opposition in Crescent Valley to the potential closure of their neighbourhood K-8 school, Hazen-White/St. Francis.

### School Closure

The mobilization of Crescent Valley in opposition to the school closure was spearheaded by resident and dedicated volunteer Nancy Savoie and Shannon Campbell, then-coordinator of the Crescent Valley Resource Centre (CVRC). They identified the issue and brought long-time neighbourhood volunteer Ann Barrett onside.

The opposition surfaced for many reasons. The proposed alternative school for the Hazen-White/St. Francis students was located outside the community, which would prove problematic for the majority of parents who are without their own form of transportation. Although students would be bused to school, they would have no way home from after-school extracurricular activities. There was also a concern that the children would lose their sense of community, that they would be labeled, and that they would struggle in a bigger school with larger classes.

Nancy, Shannon, and Ann led the charge, which initially involved holding community meetings at the CVRC where residents and board members came to share their ideas. Based on this, the team decided to conduct a door-to-door survey to find out more about how neighbourhood kids used the school and to source signatures for a petition. They also aligned with the school's parent committee. The group ensured they were part of the process laid out by the school board to solicit feedback: attending district meetings, making presentations (with quotes from residents), and organizing a letter writing campaign with submissions from CVRC board members, school volunteers, and residents. As a final effort they met with the then-Minister of Education, Kelly Lamrock. In the end the Minister of Education reversed the school district's decision to close the school, which the community marked with a well-attended celebration organized by Nancy to recognize their feat and the fact that their voices were heard.

*"It's so great to see that our voices were heard and Hazen-White/St. Francis school was kept open. It gives me the feeling that if they listened on this issue someone else may listen on another important issue in the future. It made me realize that when you aim for something to keep going and don't give up. Now I can hold my head up high and say that we did it. People need to fight for what they want, the only way to get it is if you speak up."*

*Priority Neighbourhood Resident*

The nature of this "voice" is one that comes in part from neighbourhood residents, but in whole from those connected to the neighbourhood. The core team—Nancy, Shannon, and Ann—includes a resident, and two non-residents (both of whom work or volunteer in the neighbourhood). They brought on side a small, but dedicated, group of residents and solicited the input of many others. Residents showed a strong presence when they attended a school board meeting in record numbers. It is thought that if Nancy and Shannon had not championed this effort nothing would have been organized. However, it is believed that without the leadership of the non-residents the residents may not have pursued the issue.

It is thought that the opposition to the school closure largely represented the voice of those living in Crescent Valley, though maybe not all because only some residents were involved and of those not involved, not all were supportive (some thought it was wasted time, thinking the school would close despite their efforts).

The success the community achieved with this effort has had a significant impact on the community as well as on the residents who found their voice. It has instilled a sense of pride and afforded them new hope that their voices can make a difference.

The LRT discussed this issue and decided that because the neighbourhood was mobilizing, they would support where needed but did not want to disempower by being a heavyweight jumping in the ring. VCSJ did write a letter to the minister, even though the superintendent of the school district is a member of the LRT. VCSJ had no role in the opposition to the school closure—it was organized strictly within Crescent Valley through residents as well as the board and staff of the CVRC—so much so that there was uncertainty about where Vibrant stood on the issue at the time. The Old North End also mobilized and engaged many partners to support the work while CV mobilized residents.

To support this voice going forward residents need to continue to be given a forum where they can express their opinions and where concerns and issues can surface. The Crescent Valley

Resource Center has begun a process to invite residents to share their thoughts, concerns, and to provide them with updates on progress.

## Community Newspaper

In the spring of 2008 VCSJ brought together neighbourhood residents and community partners to explore the idea of starting a newspaper for the city's five priority neighbourhoods. A similar publication in Newfoundland, discovered on a trip by VCSJ Coordinator, ignited the spark. The goal was to both give voice to the neighbourhoods and bring them together. There was a mere six months between the initial meeting and when the first issue of *Around the Block* emerged, a free eight page spread with 6,000 copies that circulated in the neighbourhoods and other key locations. The paper is now coming up on its one-year anniversary and has increased its size to 12 pages and its circulation to 8,000 copies (comparable to that of *Here* magazine, a local alternative newspaper). The undertaking has been financially feasible thanks to support from the City of Saint John (primarily to cover the coordinator's salary) and advertising, with VCSJ covering any shortfalls.

While VCSJ championed the initiative initially, over time they have started to hand off the role to neighbourhood residents and community partners (from the nonprofit and public sectors, and to a lesser extent the private sector). Juanita Black, a Crescent Valley resident, is now the coordinator of the paper (a VCSJ employee). Outside of Juanita's role, the paper is largely volunteer run, with VCSJ and the Human Development Council continuing to oversee the efforts. All told, there are 35 to 50 volunteers at any given time.

"The newspaper has made a big difference in Crescent Valley. Now there's a more positive outlook instead of focusing on the negative; it is encouraging to residents."  
*Priority Neighbourhood Resident*

The newspaper is designed to represent the voice of people living in the priority neighbourhoods. Contributions from residents have far outnumbered those of community partners. (At the time of the interview there were 117 resident contributors compared to 65 partners.) This undertaking is considered to be among the most significant ways neighbourhood residents have used their voice. While there is a desire to see more residents involved, there is thought to be a good balance between community organizations and residents.

"I write for the community newspaper so people can see how far I've come since a couple of years ago, I hope this will motivate them."  
*Priority Neighbourhood Resident*

There are a number of ways residents and partners have been involved, including: being a contributor (articles and photographs), layout and design (each neighbourhood crafts their own page), proof reading, delivery, acting as a sounding board, etc. Residents have also been given the opportunity to attend free writing workshops and partake in outings with photojournalism students. Some residents are regularly involved, while others have contributed only a piece or two. Residents are of course also involved as readers. There is a great deal of anticipation in the

neighbourhoods when the paper is due and it is not uncommon for residents to be waiting on their doorsteps for it to arrive.

Residents have become involved because they have something to say, because the newspaper affords them a voice. Some have at first been unsure about their ability to write for the paper, but have done so and been successful. The paper has given residents a sense of satisfaction. They find it to be an enjoyable activity, one where they can meet people from both within and outside their neighbourhood. Seeing one's work in the paper has been a source of pride and as one interviewee said, has allowed her to discover that she loves to write. The paper is thought to help residents take more pride in their community. It helps counter the stigma around low income neighbourhoods that the residents themselves often believe. One appeal of the paper is thus that the stories are positive, good news stories, void of negativity.

In practice, the newspaper has brought the neighbourhoods closer together, both through working on the paper as well as reading about and often attending each other's events. It has also helped move ideas across neighbourhoods.

There are a number of thoughts on how this voice can be supported going forward. One thought was to continue encouraging residents to write stories about why they decided to get involved to motivate others. It was also said to be important to ensure residents are given leadership roles and that as many as possible are encouraged to come to the meetings and, if it feels daunting at first, to reassure them that they do not have to participate, it is just important for them to be there. Because some neighbourhoods have a harder time getting residents engaged, specifically asking them and having them work towards deadlines may be necessary in certain instances.

## Where to From Here

VCSJ's overall strategy remains true to the vision laid out in its framework for change. Going forward, however, VCSJ will emphasize some work differently. For instance, up to this point VCSJ has focused heavily on research to inform the initiative's directions and relied on qualitative and descriptive evaluation. Beginning in 2010, there will be a shift to focusing evaluation efforts on measuring the impact and effectiveness of our poverty reduction work. In other words, understanding better how people are moving through various pathways out of poverty. An evolved Research and Evaluation committee will guide this work. A second area in which the focus will shift is awareness. Poverty has become part of the local discourse. The work in the next few years will be to develop communication tools that monitor and report on progress and the inter-related nature of poverty reduction efforts, thereby enhancing coordination and collaboration among stakeholders. To that end, communication efforts will strive to engage those who have felt on the periphery or do not identify with 'poverty reduction'. The four pillars, neighbourhood revitalization, workforce participation, children and youth, and single parents continue to form Saint John's poverty reduction strategy.

As the poverty work in this community matures, the objective is to grow the sense of ownership in the community and diminish the role of VCSJ as a service provider. VCSJ will reduce its direct programming role, while sustaining current initiatives by transitioning leadership into existing

community organizations. There was significant benefit to producing products (e.g., *Around the Block*) and filling a service gap (neighbourhood staffing) to grow VCSJ's credibility and demonstrate the value of an intersectoral collaborative, strengths based neighbourhood approach to reducing poverty. In 2010 the plan is to sustain the important work that has been incubated and to sustain the following core functions of VCSJ

- keep community focus on poverty reduction
- identify gaps and promote responses based on promising practices
- enlarge discussion provincially
- champion the issue, lend credibility, advocate for policy change
- provide critical eye and evaluate