

Saint John Neighbourhood Assistants Inspire Hope

Challenge

The participation and input of people living in poverty are vital to the relevance and success of multi-sectoral poverty reduction initiatives. Getting people out to community events – especially when they are struggling to meet family and job commitments – can be difficult work. However, attending an event can be the first step in building relationships with neighbours and learning about useful community-based programs and activities. It all starts with the right invitation.

Solution

In the summer of 2006, Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) began supporting resident-led development in two neighbourhoods – Crescent Valley and the South End. They offered new programs for building skills, and used resident and partner input to identify neighbourhood goals and priorities. In 2008, VCSJ expanded that effort to the City’s five priority neighbourhoods – parts of Saint John where residents and community groups are working to create opportunities for people living in poverty. VCSJ created Neighbourhood Assistant positions as a means of gathering input for local action plans. The decision recognized that residents with lived experience of poverty are the best people to both spread VCSJ news and gather information on community needs and priorities.

Says VCSJ Coordinator Wendy MacDermott: “An evaluation of our early neighbourhood work confirmed that one-to-one contact brings people out of their homes and into the community. One of our first Neighbourhood Assistants had taken it upon herself to knock on people’s doors and personally invite them to events and meetings. We decided to expand on her efforts and build that sense of identity and connectedness in all five priority neighbourhoods. We hired people who were either on fixed or limited incomes as part-time Neighbourhood Assistants for six-month terms.”

Outcomes

VCSJ organizers believe that hope is the key ingredient in neighbourhood mobilization. Neighbourhood Assistants build hope by connecting residents with one another and communicating that the larger community cares about them. The Assistant position – though short-term – has helped people build the skills and confidence they need to take their own next steps to prosperity and fulfillment. One former assistant, for example, is now the manager of her neighbourhood’s provincially funded Community Access Centre.

Neighborhood Assistants are supported and guided by the neighbourhood Community Developer, a newly created VCSJ staff position. The Community Developer provides learning opportunities, guidance and mentorship, and focuses on progress toward neighbourhood plans. A December 2008 provincial decision to help support VCSJ’s neighbourhood development work for three years will fund the Community Developer’s salary.

Says Wendy MacDermott: “The most important job for both the Neighbourhood Assistants and the Community Developer is to get people coming out to events and we’re already seeing the results of their efforts. People who were previously too busy to participate are now organizing neighbourhood pot luck dinners. One group of teens took the idea from the children’s book *Stone Soup* to build a collective dinner – they provide spaghetti and invite others to bring along other parts of a meal. Young mothers concerned about a racial assault started a discussion group and have connected with anti-bullying groups. Together they hope to inspire the whole community to focus on what we all can do to make Saint John a safe place to live.”



Village neighbourhood Earth Day 2009 cleanup event – good, clean fun

In 2008, Neighbourhood Assistants organized barbecues, connected residents with relevant programs, shared information about activities and events, and represented resident concerns to a variety of VCSJ partners (e.g., community policing, leisure services and community centres, and discussions about the province's forthcoming poverty reduction strategy).

Residents and organizers in the five priority neighbourhoods are now participating in a planning process that will guide much of the work for each Neighbourhood Assistant in 2009. VCSJ anticipates that as part of their duties, each Assistant will engage 20 new residents. As they gain confidence and meet more people, Assistants will also be in a position to identify good candidates for the positions they vacate. Building resident engagement all starts with a friendly outlook and an enthusiastic invitation. Knock knock!

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