

***Quality of Life CHALLENGE:  
Fostering Engagement, Collaboration and Inclusion***

*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, the goals they have set and the key strategies they will use to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and subsequent 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.*

***Introducing the CHALLENGE***

Residents of British Columbia's Capital Region take great pride in their quality of life and rightfully so. Unfortunately, not all residents share fully in the opportunities the area offers. BC's Capital Region encompasses 13 separate municipalities and has a population of 325,755 [Statistics Canada 2001]. Despite the difficulties presented by such a patchwork municipal structures, the Quality of Life CHALLENGE is charting a bold new way for people throughout the region to work together to improve quality of life for all, particularly those disadvantaged by poverty.

The CHALLENGE is a joint initiative of the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (the Community Council) and a great many individuals, organizations and businesses throughout the region. In 1999, the Community Council produced its first comprehensive report on a series of quality of life indicators on employment, health, housing, neighbourhood affordability, participation and

safety. In September 2001, 60 people from all sectors and from most of the region's 13 municipalities gathered to study the report and explore trends. That day, they founded the Quality of Life CHALLENGE as a way to engage the entire region in a common effort to address critical community concerns.

During that gathering, three key issues were identified as the focus for attention over the next five years: housing, sustainable incomes and community connections. Throughout the following year, wide-ranging discussions were held to help shape the aims and direction of the CHALLENGE, and to put in place the mechanisms and resources needed to carry out the work.

The Community Council is the project's lead partner, holding fiduciary responsibility and supporting the operation of the CHALLENGE's shared leadership model. Other Leadership Partners and supporters – Coast Capital Savings, the federal government, Shaw Communications Inc., local radio stations The Ocean and Jack FM, the *Times Colonist*, Vibrant Communities, the Vancouver Island Health Authority, the United Way of Greater Victoria and Number 41 media – all have made multi-year commitments to the CHALLENGE, contributing their expertise, influence and financial support. The Steering Working Group is charged with ensuring that the vision, principles and direction for the CHALLENGE are upheld and deliverables are achieved. Other Working Groups and Task Forces support each of the three priority areas as well as core functions. To date, more than 1,400 people have participated in the CHALLENGE. Their excitement, creativity and commitment are transforming the methods of working in BC's Capital Region – and beginning to generate significant results.

### ***Defining quality of life***

Quality of life is a complex issue. It involves economic, social and environmental dimensions. These factors are often intertwined and require integrated responses. Although the CHALLENGE currently focuses on three priority issues, it maintains a comprehensive perspective which considers the roles played by numerous factors in determining quality of life. To tackle this multi-faceted phenomenon, the CHALLENGE engages partners from many aspects of community life. Together they bring the range of perspectives, insights and capacities needed to take effective action.

A vibrant community is one with strong relationships. Studies have shown that connecting people with each other enhances their ability to talk about and address community issues, and together overcome barriers to improve the quality of their lives. Well-connected communities are more resilient. They have greater capacity to assess problems, nurture leaders, build stronger organizations and mobilize resources.

Developing this type of community capacity is the overall purpose of the CHALLENGE. Despite its focus on concrete issues such as adequate income and housing that is affordable, its broader goal is to foster a culture of engagement, inclusion and collaboration. Such a culture is the determining factor behind a community's quality of life. Keeping this culture strong is the key to achieving tangible results in the long term.

This insight, however, is often lost in the press of daily life. As Sue Stovel, Chair of the initiative's Steering Working Group points out: "It is much too easy for the energy of a community to be consumed by the day-to-day effort to deal with immediate concerns. Some opportunity is

needed to build underlying capacity and to focus on systemic issues. The CHALLENGE creates a space where people can look at the bigger picture, identify the issues behind the issues and create new ways of working together to improve results in the long run.”

### *Lessons from the past*

The CHALLENGE is building on the lessons learned from a series of initiatives undertaken in the region over the last ten years. In its own way, each of these initiatives has considered how collaborative efforts can address complex issues. Specifically:

- the Creative Chaos Forum explored the process of multisectoral problem solving (1994)
- the Capital Urban Poverty Project was a partnership that documented the scope of poverty throughout the region and raised awareness of this issue (2000)
- the Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CR-FAIR) brings stakeholders together to address regional food security issues (since 1994)
- the Victoria Downtown CRUNCH facilitated dialogue and action among individuals, social service agencies, businesses and government with respect to critical downtown issues (1997-2000)
- the Housing Affordability Partnership was established to be a catalyst for housing solutions (since 2000)
- the Common Ground Community Mapping Project links neighbourhoods with municipal planning processes.

The Community Council has been an important contributor and legal sponsor of each of these initiatives. Tracing its roots to the 1930s,

this independent nonprofit organization plays a unique role in the community as a catalyst and facilitator, helping to bring partners to a common table and supporting their efforts to generate constructive solutions to complex problems.

For the Community Council and many of its partners, the CHALLENGE is one more step in a learning process. Based on these earlier experiences, a set of working principles has been developed to guide the CHALLENGE. These principles are considered vital to its effectiveness. In fact, it is believed that this initiative can succeed where others have struggled precisely because participants are coming together around such a well-established set of guiding ideas.

The working principles are:

- cooperation with others to build community capacity
- understanding the underlying problems and opportunities
- broad participation from a variety of voices
- inclusion of people who experience the issue first hand
- communication in ways that everyone can understand
- sharing of power, information, resources and leadership
- openness to innovation, various points of view and participation of all sectors
- action on practical, effective solutions
- appreciative recognition for positive reinforcement and celebration.

More than mere words, the principles are reflected throughout the design and operations of the CHALLENGE. They are used regularly as a check to see if the initiative is operating in ways consistent with its understanding of the factors that allow for success. By naming these

principles and applying them in practice, the CHALLENGE seeks to deepen and expand the community's culture of engagement, inclusion and collaboration.

The process appears to be succeeding. As a result of the CHALLENGE, more and more people are taking up this way of working. As participants apply these guiding principles in various concrete initiatives, others in the community hear about the progress being made and become involved. Some are even picking up on the general approach without becoming formally engaged in the initiative itself.

And that is very much the aim of the CHALLENGE: To encourage a general way of being where people are prepared to take action that creates a good quality of life for themselves and others, and where people are adept at working together for the common good. Indeed, ownership of the initiative does not lie with any individual or organization but with all members of the community who choose to become involved. In the long run, it is only through this kind of commitment and capacity for collaborative action that a good quality of life for all community members can be created and maintained.

### ***Levers for change***

The CHALLENGE also has identified seven key levers through which it believes it can bring about substantial improvements in the quality of life for all residents. These levers translate principles into operations:

1. *Shared Leadership: The CHALLENGE believes that systemic change often begins with one individual's commitment and gradually grows through the support of others. Everyone has the capacity to be a*

*leader and create change. By encouraging a sharing of leadership throughout the community, the CHALLENGE works to expand the number and diversity of people who are working to improve quality of life for all.*

Within the CHALLENGE, leaders come from all sectors. Individual residents have spoken out at municipal council meetings in support of a proposed Regional Housing Trust Fund. Employer Champions are leading a local push for corporate social responsibility. Local governments are making important policy and bylaw changes to support housing affordability. People who have experience living on a low income are challenging stereotypes and raising awareness of the realities of living on low income. Community groups are developing and sharing innovative solutions to community problems.

2. *Awareness-raising: A central strategy of the CHALLENGE has been to create public awareness around quality of life issues. This strategy is based on the belief that an informed community will move from awareness to understanding, to commitment and finally to action.*

Credible research is the starting point for building awareness about poverty and other issues related to quality of life. In 2000, the Capital Urban Poverty Project helped to put the issue of poverty on the agenda of decision makers in the region. However, when the CHALLENGE was founded in 2001, there was not yet widespread recognition of the extent of poverty within the region. An essential part of the CHALLENGE has been to strengthen public appreciation of such issues through a comprehensive communications strategy using media partnerships (e.g., Shaw Cable, radio stations The Ocean and Jack FM and the *Times Colonist*), public events (e.g., the CHAL-

LENGE's annual Community Celebration), and other communications tools (e.g., Quality of Life CHALLENGE website, newsletter and publications).

An example of how awareness is created is the October 2003 release of *Making Room: The Human Face of Housing Affordability*. Research for this publication was based on interviews with 90 people living on low incomes. The report received widespread acclaim for effectively communicating the complex realities of housing affordability in the Capital Region. More than 1,500 copies were distributed free of charge; half were requested by members of the public and the rest were sent directly to people who were in a position to influence changes in housing affordability. At the end of the report was a list of options for action which communicated the message that everyone has a role to play in improving housing affordability.

The *Making Room* report has been credited as one of the key factors in creating a public climate in which municipalities could support a Regional Housing Trust Fund. With six of 13 possible municipalities participating in 2005-06, this Fund will raise more than \$638,256 for housing in the region, which will leverage up to 12 times that amount annually.

Packaging information in timely, accessible formats helps to bridge the awareness gap between those who are involved in an issue and people who potentially could support the efforts under way. Says Mabel-Jean Rawlins-Brannan, Director of the CHALLENGE: "When people are informed about the quality of life in their community, they can make better decisions to preserve and enhance it – for everyone. We are all stakeholders in our future. Not only governments, but also each person, business, institution and community organization can influence the quality of life, especially if we work together."

3. *Recognition: Positive reinforcement is a powerful motivator. By sharing success stories, people are encouraged to replicate the strategies that are working, have the courage to try something new and different, or the strength to carry on with the good work they are already doing.*

This asset-based approach focuses on the capacities and resources that exist within communities, organizations and individuals, rather than on their needs. Needs-based approaches, over time, tend to make people dependent on services provided by others, while asset-based approaches encourage active citizenship and develop the potential of communities.

The asset-based approach is integral to the recognition strategy employed throughout the CHALLENGE. Rather than overwhelming the community with information on the deficiencies and problems, residents in the region are presented with reliable information on the challenges people face along with stories of celebration about how people are addressing these issues. Celebration and recognition of people's efforts deepens their self-identification as someone committed to making a difference.

The CHALLENGE applies this asset-based approach to the formation of many of its relationships. For example, when employers are invited to participate in the CHALLENGE, the invitation takes the form of a request to profile their existing, exemplary human resource practices. This begins the relationship with an acknowledgement of good work already under way. Because employers are engaged through the sharing of their own case studies, they tend to be more open to hearing other ideas for action on how they could improve their practices. As they make further changes and report them to the CHALLENGE, employers provide more inspiration for others and help build a statistical

and narrative record of how their efforts affect employees. Quality of Life CHALLENGE decals are presented to everyone who contributes to achieving the goals the initiative has set. In addition, annual celebrations and media stories provide opportunities to acknowledge contributions and reinforce the message of how citizens can work together to improve quality of life for all.

4. *Community Ownership: People's energy and commitment to community building is best unleashed when they drive the process and are allowed to self-organize their efforts with others.*

Three aggressive targets were set as a tool to inspire people to take up the CHALLENGE, particularly in the areas of housing, sustainable incomes and community connections. Until 2006, the CHALLENGE targets are to ensure that 1,000 more low-income households have a safe, decent and affordable place to call home, 5,000 low-income unemployed or underemployed people have sustainable incomes from paid work and 1,000 stories are shared about people who are working together to improve the quality of life in BC's Capital Region. After 2006, participants may choose new targets, depending on progress and local needs at the time.

The primary role of the Quality of Life CHALLENGE is to act as a catalyst and facilitator of action, rather than take a central part in leading initiatives in the implementation phase. This approach allows the local citizens to take ownership of the targets and enhances the capacity of the community to self-organize in response to issues of concern.

The support the CHALLENGE provides to individuals and organizations varies according to the needs of the group and the CHAL-

LENGE's capacity at any given time. Support may take the form of letters of support, assistance with proposal or plan development, connection to others involved in the issue, facilitation of group processes, advice from potential service recipients, or partnership on pilot projects.

5. *Relationships: As individuals are engaged, new networks are created and personal relationships formed which reinforce energy and commitment to the work. The CHALLENGE engages people by opening lines of communication across all sectors of the community, gradually building relationships among groups and individuals. The result is a closely-woven web – as the threads multiply and overlap, the structure becomes stronger.*

The success of this approach is evident in the overall growth of the CHALLENGE and the increasingly strong ties among participants. From an initial gathering of 60 people, it has now had participation from 1,400 community members, many of whom became involved through contact with other participants. Moreover, ties among partners have intensified over time. Many of the CHALLENGE's Leadership Partners are involved in the initiative because of the work of one or two individuals in their organization. This was the case with Coast Capital Savings, the CHALLENGE's first such partner. Coast Capital Savings is now a significant financial supporter and more than 23 of its employees are engaged in all three priority areas, despite the fact that Coast Capital Savings' initial focus was on housing and communications.

6. *Inclusion: The CHALLENGE recognizes that including a diverse group of people who have experience with living on low income is critical in developing effective poverty reduction solutions. In order to*

*understand the diverse needs of people living on a limited income, the voices of these individuals must be heard. Hearing stories directly from those with experience inspires others to take action.*

The CHALLENGE has taken a number of steps to ensure that people who have lived on a low income are included as full participants in its work. A Community Action Team composed of individuals who have lived on low incomes is represented on most working groups and has initiated a number of projects itself. Members of the team developed an Inclusion Policy for the CHALLENGE and, on the strength of their input, changes were made in CHALLENGE operations which ensured that the needs of low-income participants are met consistently, respectfully and with discretion. Team members also developed the Poverty Experience exercise, which is used to help employers, government representatives and community agencies better understand the realities and challenges of living on a low income.

*7. Monitoring and Measuring Change: Providing reliable information on changing conditions highlights where progress is being made and where new efforts are required. It motivates community action by confirming that change is needed and is happening.*

In order to make informed decisions about where to focus attention and resources, it is essential to know what is changing. The CHALLENGE tracks changes in the quality of life in the region by working with other organizations to monitor selected indicators across social, economic and environmental categories. These indicators provide snapshots of the quality of life over time and include measures of priority areas, such as the numbers of households in core housing need and of people living in poverty.

Statistical research is enriched by the experiences of people living on low income.

The CHALLENGE reports trends and outcomes through a quarterly newsletter (*The Indicator*) as well as through its report on quality of life indicators published every five years. It was the data from the first of these reports which led the community to found the Quality of Life CHALLENGE.

### *How it all comes together*

The principles and levers are not the end of the story. They are starting points for improving the quality of life of local residents in tangible ways.

Too many residents of BC's Capital Region lack adequate housing. Some 22,205 households (16.7 percent) were identified as being in core housing need in November 2001: households that were unable to find accommodation that meets basic standards for adequacy and suitability without spending more than 30 percent of their income. In fact, the Victoria Census Metropolitan Area is now one of the highest priced housing markets in Canada. Numerous factors are at play, including reduced availability of land for new housing and the downloading of responsibility for social housing to municipalities.

The CHALLENGE is supporting the efforts of partners to bring together all the key actors in this sector (public, private and voluntary) to find constructive responses to the problem. In particular, it is helping to raise public awareness about the housing problem and build support for innovative policy initiatives. The awareness raising, relationship building and organizing has begun to pay off with the support municipalities

have shown for the Regional Housing Trust Fund, and the campaign continues.

Affordable housing, however, is inextricably linked to sustainable incomes. Research shows that when the shelter costs of low-income households are higher than 30 percent of their incomes, households struggle to meet other essentials, such as food, clothing and transportation. Lowering shelter costs is one response; increasing incomes is another.

Through its sustainable incomes initiative, the CHALLENGE has begun to address a variety of issues that contribute to unemployment, underemployment and inadequate income. It has supported pilot projects to help the unemployed meet their transportation needs, overcome dental problems that pose barriers to employment and secure work clothing. More recently, it has focused on helping employers to improve human resource practices. Through “the employer CHALLENGE,” employers are speaking to each other about human resource practices that help low-income households. An “HR options for action” booklet has been developed to share local stories of exemplary human resource practices and highlight 50 actions employers can take to better the circumstances of low-income workers or prospective workers. The initiative has the potential to substantially alter the circumstances faced by workers in the region and changes are beginning to be seen.

The CHALLENGE also supported the development of the Victoria Social Purchasing Portal, an innovative, web-based business-to-business service that encourages targeted purchasing to create community economic development opportunities for BC’s Capital Region. This initiative will support the growth of existing local businesses in the region while creating opportunities for the chronically unemployed.

Established businesses use the social purchasing website to identify local businesses that can supply necessary goods and services. As they grow, these businesses in turn agree to hire new employees from employment services and training agencies. Buyers obtain the goods and services they require; local businesses are strengthened and employment opportunities are generated for the chronically unemployed.

Behind all of these efforts lies the core capacity of community members to come together and create practical solutions to difficult problems. The CHALLENGE’s community connections initiative is highlighting the full extent to which the people of BC’s Capital Region have been doing just that. Already, 700 stories have been documented on issues large and small, from environmental concerns to recreation, food security, homelessness and social justice. Each year, Quality of Life awards are presented to stories which exemplify the working principles.

Such stories are at the centre of the CHALLENGE’s approach to its work – affirming what can be done when people come together in a spirit of collaboration and creativity to make their community work for all its members. The CHALLENGE is writing its own chapter in BC’s Capital Region’s book.

*Eric Leviten-Reid and Anne Makhoul*

Copyright © 2005 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340

Fax: (613) 729-3896

E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org)

Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)