

# Vibrant Communities Saint John Tackling Poverty and Building Community

*By Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

December is a month when we are highly attuned to those in need, particularly those with low incomes and often with the many needs that frequently accompany a lack of resources. It is relatively simple to shell out some cash, write a cheque or donate with a credit card. It is less easy to give personal time and effort, especially all twelve months of the year. But that is what one of the leaders of a community initiative called Vibrant Communities Saint John is suggesting as the best way to avoid and solve the persistent challenge of poverty. Without aiming to solve the underlying complex issues and factors which create these heartbreaking situations, the needs will not go away and become reality for one generation after another.

Our community has been highlighted as one which shows greater than average levels of poverty but on the positive side, one which is truly meeting with success and showing significant leadership (and receiving recognition) for tackling this challenge. Starting with the establishment of the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative over eleven years ago, community leaders targeted the issue and later, took advantage of an opportunity to leverage funding and expertise from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and from there, the Vibrant Communities group began to take shape.

Now, Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) is six years into a mandate to weave together the numerous community and government efforts aimed at poverty reduction and community revitalization. It is led by a multi-sectoral leadership team with representation from the business community, three levels of government, non-profit groups, and most importantly, individuals who have direct experience with poverty.

Many individuals and groups have contributed directly to poverty reduction efforts since the start of VCSJ. The impressive tally includes 55 local businesses, 38 government departments, 480 people who are living in poverty, 87 not-for-profit organizations, and 30 other interested individuals.

The focus of the poverty reduction efforts have been to break the cycle of poverty by providing opportunities, developing skills, and removing barriers for individuals living in poverty. Wendy MacDermott, Coordinator of VCSJ, states, "At this time of year we see an outpouring of generosity and kindness as we consider how fortunate we are. In order to have fewer hungry tummies and cold rooms next year, we need to break the cycle of poverty and that requires year-long investment (time and financial), collaboration, and innovation".

VCSJ's poverty reduction strategy was updated this Fall through a community collaborative process, with a renewed commitment to increase affordable housing and decrease substandard housing, continue skills building among residents to lead improvements to their communities, eliminate barriers to meaningful employment, increase flexible, quality childcare in priority neighbourhoods, support children and youth to succeed in and complete school and to reduce teen pregnancy to name a few priorities.

VCSJ has a Leadership Roundtable comprised of a wide range of thirty-three committed community leaders who take their mission to the many sectors of our community where practical and long-term solutions can be addressed and partnerships forged. "Partnerships like the one we have with Irving Oil to offer Learn and Go, a program that provides 40 residents with skills building workshops and a mentor to make concrete changes within their neighbourhoods is a prime example of new ways of working together to simultaneously improve lives and communities" MacDermott adds.

Our community can take some satisfaction in the strides in reducing poverty in Saint John which have been made over the last decade and which have been documented in the Greater Saint John Community Foundation's Vital Signs Annual Reports. Significant reductions in poverty from 28% in 1996 to 20.8% in 2006 (decrease of 26%) are evidence of progress. In NB, the child poverty rate decreased from 16.7% to 12% between 2007 and 2008

"We can all contribute to reducing poverty, from the employer who considers essential skills when hiring and offers flexibility to accommodate a single parent, to a retiree who offers time to teach kids in a priority neighbourhood how to golf, to a non-profit group who partners with another service to provide continuity of support, to a government department that changes a policy that created a barrier to employment, to neighbourhood leaders who emulate positive leadership and inspire hope in others" concludes MacDermott. The collective impact of these small changes results in a more resilient community that contributes to the social and economic fabric of Greater Saint John.

**Info: Wendy MacDermott, Coordinator, 693-0904 Vibrant Communities Saint John 116 Coburg St, E2L 3K1**



Vibrant Communities Saint John has a leadership roundtable of 33 community leader. Pictured at a tree-lighting ceremony in Crescent Valley are, from left, Wendy MacDermott, Vibrant Communities co-ordinator; Lisa Morris, co-ordinator, Crescent Valley Resource Centre; Lesley Dickson, public affairs, Irving Oil Ltd.; Nancy Savoie, board president, and Anne Driscoll, executive director of the resource centre.

*Photo: Jane Barry/For the Telegraph-Journal*



***Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880, [sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com](mailto:sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com). To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)***