

Project Comeback: A Lifeline for Surrey's Homeless Day Labourers

Since its founding in 2003, Vibrant Surrey has functioned as a solutions incubator. It examines existing initiatives that need development or other kinds of support and, as appropriate, joins in as a partner. Vibrant Surrey members also suggest ideas for development that seem well-suited to a collaborative approach. The most successful Vibrant Surrey-influenced initiative to date is "Project Comeback," a community action project that helps homeless day labourers find sustainable employment and independent housing. The project is facilitated by the Newton Advocacy Group Society (NAGS) – a Vibrant Surrey member – and supported by a collaborative that includes 55 partners from government, service agencies and business.

Starting a conversation

One of the presenters at a 2004 Surrey Homelessness and Housing Task Force community forum was both working as a day labourer and homeless. The idea that individuals could have a job but not be able to afford a roof over their heads sparked considerable conversation. Newton Advocacy Group Society Executive Director Susan Keeping and community worker Saira Khan talked about the day labourer issue at NAGS, then brought the discussion to Vibrant Surrey. Both women thought that the Vibrant Communities model could help address the employment, housing and support hurdles confronting this group. Only precariously attached to the workforce, day labourers do not qualify for Employment Insurance; neither can they obtain welfare or other employment, housing and program supports.

Further conversations were held with the wider Vibrant Surrey membership which included Vancity Credit Union, Coast Capital Savings, United Way of the Lower Mainland, government representatives, city employees and members of the Surrey Chamber of Commerce (now the Surrey Board of Trade). Says Susan: "We made it very clear that we didn't have any answers to the problem, just that we were interested in hearing people's input and sharing information. The group got engaged with the ideas and we were encouraged by the response."

Coast Capital Savings sponsored the first of what became a series of lunchtime meetings to facilitate multisectoral engagement around the issue of homeless day labourers. Held in mid-February 2005, 40 people were expected at the event but fully 60 attended. Participants were asked three questions: how they identified the issue, what they could do at that moment to make a difference and whether they wanted to be part of a working group. By meeting's end, attendees committed to forming a working group that would focus on services for homeless day labourers. Because the membership wanted to include all sectors in their discussions, John Stark – the Coordinator of Surrey's Homelessness and Housing Task Force – agreed to invite eight construction company owners to a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Surrey Chamber of Commerce; two subsequently joined the working group.

In May 2005, Susan and Saira returned to the Task Force and described the process and ideas with which they had come up to help day labourers. John Stark agreed to work as a coordinator of the, as yet, unnamed project. Funding provided by Vancity Credit Union and United Way of the Lower Mainland allowed the project to hire John for the next year. He facilitated the working group and oversaw the development of both a vision document and a year-end evaluation of the initiative.

Surrey's day labourers

Between January 11, 2002 and March 15, 2005, the homeless population in Surrey – those who qualify for shelter beds and those who do not – increased by 74 percent, from 215 to 375.¹ The proportion of street homeless, or unsheltered people, went from 109 to 256 – a 135 percent increase [Goldberg et al 2005]. These trends, combined with the growth in Surrey's overall population, were a serious cause for concern. Solutions for Surrey's homeless had focused mainly on the provision of shelter beds and employment programs.

Research from 2005 also showed that 18.6 percent of Surrey's homeless population worked as day labourers. This group of people is generally paid minimum wage, receives no benefits and has no guarantee of work from one day to the next. Day labourers usually perform heavy labour or menial tasks – mainly in the construction industry – and are expected to provide the steel-toed work boots, hard hats and other items required by the job. Because they prefer not to apply for assistance, they did not qualify for shelter beds in Surrey until 2006. At that time, policy changes were made to allow them access to overnight accommodation. Before 2006, most were forced to sleep outdoors, in vehicles or in wet/cold weather shelters or a drop-in centre that only allowed them to sleep sitting upright.

The majority of homeless day labourers work between three and four days a week, despite the many challenges facing them. Many have previously held full-time positions in the mainstream labour market and know what is required of them to maintain full-time employment. Some possess specific skills which make them attractive to potential employers. Others have previously received counselling or training to improve their employability. All want to break the cycle of homelessness in which they currently find themselves.

Day labourers generally have low levels of academic achievement. Many do not possess a high school diploma and some struggle with literacy and numeracy problems. Lack of educational attainment inhibits their ability to apply for and sustain employment, which in turn severely limits their career options.

Most homeless day labourers suffer from low self-esteem and depression, whether hereditary or as a result of their current living situations. Many self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. Other challenges include criminal justice involvement, inadequate or no identification, poor support networks and unresolved issues stemming from childhood abuse or neglect [NAGS 2005].

Day labourers are ineligible for employment programs which are tied to income assistance. Their commitment to work and their reluctance to collect income assistance demonstrate a desire to be self-sufficient and securely employed. The Surrey Homelessness and Housing Task Force and other community service providers believed that with the right assistance, empowerment and support, day labourers stood a good chance of leaving homelessness behind.

Project beginnings

Even as working group participants began to formulate a plan to assist day labourers, Saira Khan met with shelter users and people waiting in line at daily work assignment gathering places to hear what kind of help they felt would improve their circumstances. The answer was clear: They needed to continue working. Says Saira: “Several people told us that work was the only thing that made them feel normal and valued, and without the ability to work, they felt they might die. The majority also expressed an aversion to group housing arrangements and shelters. They wanted their own dwelling, preferably living on their own or with one other housemate.”

Discussion moved to action shortly after the construction business representatives joined the working group. The owner of one company offered to pay group members \$2,000 to find him two employees. He was frustrated with day labour companies that were charging \$16 an hour – \$8 for their services and \$8 in wages for workers that were often unsuitable. He laid out particular requirements: Applicants had to have a criminal record check, possess all necessary identification and have an active bank account. All three conditions presented significant hurdles. He estimated that it would take three candidates to find one suitable worker, and he was correct.

“We learned a lot and spent too much money finding the first worker,” says Susan. “The second time around, we involved faith groups in supplying the job equipment and home furnishings the candidates required. One request for help with moving on a Saturday morning brought people with couches strapped to their cars, pots and pans, and all the things you need to establish a home.” Donations of goods and time were not included in the overall costs of the exercise, but they were significant. Saira alone donated approximately 20 to 30 hours a week to the work.

A project is launched

On the advice of one of the working group members, a funding application was made to the Vancity Credit Union in July 2005. The \$10,000 awarded was used to help pay John Stark’s salary for facilitating the working group and overseeing the development of a vision document. The initiative was now officially named “Project Comeback.” By August 2005, the vision document was ready to present to Melinda McGraw at Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). Following her

participation in the first Vibrant Surrey discussion, Melinda had sent a representative to the lunch meetings to keep her informed of project developments. Service Canada funded the initiative through HRSDC's Employee Assistance Support Program.

Project Comeback would strive to meet two goals. First, it would assist, empower and support homeless day labourers in finding find full-time, sustainable employment and independent housing. Second, the project would significantly improve the lives of project participants, while addressing the growing incidence of homelessness in Surrey. The identified target group was composed of 47 of 256 (18.4 percent) of Surrey's unsheltered homeless.

Project staff used every possible network connection, shelter and day labourer gathering point to identify candidates. If the subsequent screening interview was successful, an individualized enhancement plan was developed around the client's specific needs. If applicants were deemed ineligible, they were sent to an appropriate organization for treatment and could re-apply.

Enhancement activities aimed at helping people live healthier, happier lives were usually offered on the weekends or in the evenings. Workshop and support activities included anger management training, conflict resolution, financial planning, goal setting, life and social skills, literacy development, identifying and understanding substance misuse, relapse prevention and time management.

Service Canada funds were used to hire team leader Saira Khan and two assistants and to pay for workshops and employment activities. Labour support expenses – job-related equipment, housing costs, clothing, food vouchers, transportation, identification registration and criminal check fees – were covered through working group member donations and fundraising.

Funds from Service Canada came with the requirement that project participants go to a government office to be processed ('case managed'). For some people, presenting themselves to a project official in an office setting created a great deal of anxiety. Saira and her assistants offered candidates bus tickets, a drive and moral support, as appropriate. They also brought people to look at housing, prepared them to meet with landlords, helped them with their appearance and in establishing personal bank accounts – a feat in itself, given the poor credit history of most of the project participants. Fortunately, a creative manager at a Surrey branch of the Vancity Credit Union agreed to give the group a try and adjusted some rules to make direct payroll access possible.

Though Service Canada funding came with strings attached, it also paid for a project resource room where night or split shift workers could come for conversation, computers, food and access to a telephone. It also gave Project Comeback a presence. Previously, group and individual meetings had taken place wherever space could be found.

Results

Organizers agreed that Project Comeback's success measure would be 12 weeks of continuous employment for 75 percent of participants. (Similar programs operating in the U.S. suggest using between 60 to 80 percent as a success measure.) An evaluation sponsored by the United Way of the Lower

Mainland at the end of the project's first year reported a success rate of 71.4 percent. Fifty people were accepted into the project, and 34 of the 49 people placed in jobs worked 12 continuous weeks. The 71.4 percent figure, combined with another 6.1 percent of participants who were working toward the 12-week employment target at the time of the evaluation, put the project's overall success rate at 77.5 percent. In all, 30 participants were still living independently in market rental housing at the end of the evaluation period.

The other 19 participants went in a number of different directions. Some moved without leaving any contact information, a few relapsed into addictions, one was incarcerated, and others dealt with chronic illness and mental health issues and were helped to access disability benefits. Whenever possible, Project Comeback workers and members of the working group offered support. Working group members and outreach locations also helped to reconnect clients with community shelters, drop in centres and meal programs.

The cost of operating Project Comeback in 2005-06 was \$301,091.20, or \$5,852.00 per participant (rounded to \$6,000) [NAGS 2006]. Says Susan Keeping: "When real costs are included – assertive case management fees for when people relapsed, addictions and mental health counselling, the costs of transitional housing – the actual figure is closer to \$10,000 per person." Given that shelter costs for one homeless person range from \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year, Project Comeback achieved annual savings of between \$24,000 and \$34,000 per person, as well as reduced demands on resources and services.

The community and personal gains achieved by Project Comeback cannot be easily captured in a balance sheet. The first year evaluation reported that 95 percent of the participants interviewed (19 out of 20) ranked the project as good or very good. The list of benefits they mentioned included pride in their increased ability to participate and contribute to the community; improved support networks, quality of life and self-esteem; and increased employability and independence.

Project Comeback also helped other Surrey residents to better appreciate the problems of their homeless neighbours. Working group participants reported that, even among themselves, misconceptions about the homeless were replaced with increased community pride and spirit gained from helping Surrey's marginalized citizens. Says Project Comeback working group coordinator John Stark: "This project is making us look at people for what they have to offer, not what they lack. One employer took on a worker with obsessive-compulsive disorder and found that he was the perfect match for a highly repetitive but exacting woodworking task. He found the employee he needed and the worker secured a position that allowed him to feel a great deal of job satisfaction."

Attitudes were not the only things that changed. In 2006, thanks to an evaluation conducted by the City of Surrey in cooperation with the BC Social Planning and Research Council, policies were altered to allow day labourers access to shelters. Not all shelters seem to have implemented the new regulations, however, and work remains to be done to clear misperceptions and ensure access.

Another issue highlighted by the success of Project Comeback is the question of appropriate housing options. The Newton Advocacy Group Society sponsored two large Project Comeback

fundraising events – dinners with silent auctions and entertainment. The \$50,000 raised is being held in trust pending a decision to fund short- or long-term housing strategies. Ideas under consideration include offering short-term micro-loans to cover first month damage deposits, and longer-term projects to build supported housing. Organizers recognize that transitional housing is available to day labourers for only 18 months or less and that other models must be explored.

Lessons learned

For Susan Keeping, a great deal of Project Comeback’s success has arisen from the continuing, spirited dialogue among working group participants. Bridging differences in understanding has required a commitment to keeping an open mind and working toward solutions that satisfy all parties. She believes that, at its most basic level, friction stems from imbalances in power. Says Susan: “Acknowledging differences openly is necessary to stimulate productive engagement and collaboration.”

Business representatives continually challenged the rest of the working group to account for every project expense. The United Way-funded evaluation report, for example, drew protest from business members for not providing any financial detail. Says Susan: “We planned to have an event to celebrate the report and its findings, but our business partners were clear that the document didn’t tell them what they needed to know. One representative agreed to work with a committee to ensure that the performance-style reporting common in business would be reflected in a companion document. Business people wanted to know more specifically what was spent, how it was spent, details of what every employee accomplished and how the various project elements interacted.” Both reports were released in early 2007.

Project Comeback has allowed social service participants the chance to adopt more fiscally-focused language and practices, while business people have learned to become more open in their thinking about people in need. Says Susan: “Many successful business people have brought themselves up by their own initiative and they have a hard time seeing why other people can’t do likewise. Even with that mindset, business wanted to get involved with Surrey’s annual homeless count, but they were aware that they might alienate certain parts of the community. Everyone has grown through the process of working together.”

From the clients’ perspective, Project Comeback has demonstrated the need for a service delivery continuum. Counselling, recreation and opportunities for community connection alleviate the loneliness of living in a basement apartment. Without these supports, participants reported relapsing into drug and alcohol habits. Says Saira: “Experience has taught us that most participants cycle on and off through addiction, recovery and relapse. It generally takes three cycles – three jobs, three housing experiences – before people begin to adopt the habits of a healthy lifestyle.”

In 2008, funding from Service Canada’s Homelessness Partnership Strategy is paying for a consultant to work with housing and outreach service providers. They are coordinating service efforts and creating a model for collaborative case management.

Project Comeback partners are also reviewing long-term, sustainable funding agreements that potentially could be struck with the three orders of government and other interested sectors. They would like to widen the array of employment opportunities offered through Project Comeback. In addition, they want to secure funders and operators for the housing component, use more volunteers to reduce the project's skills development costs, and find more corporate sponsors to cover expenses such as banking services, job equipment and cell phone charges.

Suggestions for other planners

1. Post notices in public places and use word-of-mouth marketing to reach the target population, especially couch surfers and those 'living rough.' (Most participants heard about Project Comeback from employment centres or other project partners.)
2. Expand the list of job opportunities (the project serves mostly able-bodied, strong males in the construction industry).
3. Encourage employers to pay the going rate, commensurate with experience.
4. Continue to liaise with employers to solve problems and ensure satisfaction (word-of-mouth program recommendation is equally important among employers).
5. Establish an education/training fund – liaise with public and private educational institutions and nonprofits to establish flexible, practical programming.
6. Consider more transitional housing options: a) allow for a period of adjustment between living rough and independent living, b) consider co-op housing purchases, c) build a landlord pool to ensure reasonable housing standards, educate landlords on their responsibilities, point out the benefits of participating, d) provide rent subsidies.
7. Provide better access to mental health and addiction services – currently, they are long listed, short-term or inaccessible. Participants need immediate and long-term medical support services.
8. Specific considerations need to be given to Aboriginal people. Provide access to appropriate services and supports.
9. Expand the government participant list.

Final words

A 41-year-old Project Comeback client named Peter experienced a childhood filled with neglect and pain. By the time he was 14, he had been placed in 18 foster homes. Throughout his life, Peter received inadequate dental care and his teeth deteriorated. He did not finish high school. He found work with construction, warehousing and manufacturing companies in his early 20s, but he had difficulty handling his own and other people's anger.

Says Peter: "Project Comeback gave me new hope and new life. You get choices and people don't give up on you. Nobody's ever gotten mad at me, they gave me options and helped me through situations. I never felt forced to do anything. I felt respected. They helped me to find a place to live and to get back into working again. They got me my first pair of work boots; I was able to pay for my own after that. They also found someone to pay for my teeth. They got me the things I needed to get and maintain work – bus tickets, food and basic necessities for setting up house. More recently, they got me a couch. Once I'm stabilized, I'd like to offer whatever I can for the next people who come along who need this."

He's back.

Anne Makhoul

Endnote

1. Surrey's plan for dealing with homelessness is a component of the Surrey Crime Reduction Strategy, released in 2007. The City's work on the issue uses statistics generated by the Greater Vancouver Regional District's annual homelessness counts, which provide both quantitative and qualitative information. In May 2003, the 24-hour count found that 44.5 percent of Surrey's homeless had been on the streets for more than six months, 61.5 percent had an addiction, 39.6 percent had a medical condition, and 27.5 percent had a mental illness. The 2002 survey found that 75 percent had dropped out of school; 65 percent had less than Grade 9 education.

References

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2. Newton Advocacy Group Society. (2005). *Project Comeback: Employment Pilot Project for Homeless Day Labourers in Surrey – Vision Document*. Surrey, August. <http://www.newtonadvocacygroup.ca/downloads/ComebackVisionAug3105.pdf>
3. Newton Advocacy Group Society. (2006). *Report on Project Comeback*. Surrey, February.

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