

The CHALLENGE in BC's Capital Region: Engaging Business

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other local organizations.

Background

The Quality of Life CHALLENGE was established in the early 2000s. One of the first initiatives to become a partner in Vibrant Communities in 2003, it completed the first phase of its work at the end of 2006. It then went through a period of transition and renewed its strategies, goals and principles for a second phase of work. An important element of the CHALLENGE is its ongoing effort to engage employers in creating a better quality of life for all Capital Region residents.

Phase One: Sustainable Incomes

In 2003, the CHALLENGE researched the demographics of local poverty and examined the ways in which the community supported people living below the poverty line. A Poverty Matrix¹ developed by Vibrant Communities assisted in breaking down low-income population numbers into categories that allowed a better understanding of affected groups. CHALLENGE partners were surprised to discover that, while many programs and services existed to help a relatively small homeless population, a high number of employed and employable residents were at risk of moving deeper into poverty.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) provided the CHALLENGE with funding to support its Poverty Matrix research. In the early 2000s, HRSDC had a mandate to support community-based research aimed at improving employment and supporting employers. Following the conclusion of the Poverty Matrix research, the Department entered into a three-year Labour Market Partnership with the CHALLENGE. Together, they would explore ways to support employers within the context of workplace poverty. The CHALLENGE's Sustainable Incomes Working Group was the strategic overseer of this effort.

BC's Capital Region is home to a few large employers including government, postsecondary education and health, and a growing number of small high tech firms. However, most of the labour force is employed by small- and medium-sized businesses related to tourism – hospitality and retail.

The CHALLENGE had had some success in attracting leadership partners who were linked with business and, with them, created an employers working group. Business-focused events helped build relationships among employers, labour, employment agencies, government and the CHALLENGE. The Sustainable Incomes Working Group began publishing *The Employer CHALLENGE*, an on-line newsletter which drew attention to the activities individual employers were taking to improve their human resources (HR) practices. Highlighting their efforts had the effect of gradually raising the Region's HR bar. Good examples were collected into an "HR Options for Action" handbook. More than 700 copies were distributed among employer networks, employment agencies, government, labour and employment programs, and the document has been downloaded from the CHALLENGE website innumerable times.

In 2006, the CHALLENGE adopted a framework for identifying the costs of living for a family with two small children. To increase the data's appeal for small business owners and to avoid sounding judgmental, it was released under the slogan "Living Wage Dialogue." The report was front-page news and initiated considerable discussion about the Region's high cost of living. Momentum began to build around improving people's quality of life and helping them to move along a pathway out of poverty.

By the end of 2007, the CHALLENGE was able to report that more than \$1 million had been reinvested in the local economy thanks to higher wages and improved HR practices – improvements that were influenced by the Sustainable Incomes Working Group. Although it is difficult to measure the full impact of the group's work, it can be conservatively estimated that 3,200 households have moved further along the pathway out of poverty because approximately 320 employers have changed their human resource practices. Changes include hiring people with barriers to employment, increasing wages, or improving the work environment or benefits

Phase Two: Development of an Affordability Index

The relationships that were developing among the CHALLENGE, employers, employment agencies and other service providers created a 'learning and doing' environment. New projects which further explored how to break down barriers to employment continued to develop.

A visit to the Employer Resources area of the CHALLENGE website (www.qolchallenge.ca/resources/employer_resources.php) provides a chronology of the initiative's efforts to engage employers, develop connections, and change attitudes and HR practices. The 27 resources currently available represent community-based research at its best: Each new publication builds on the ones previously published.

The Region's Living Wage data was updated and re-published in 2008. By 2009, when the CHALLENGE was in its second phase of operations, the data was again updated and released under a new name "The Affordability Index." The discussions around the index has expanded the Living

Wage Dialogue and now encompasses a wide range of issues affecting income and costs. It has helped build the understanding that the responsibility for change includes more than employers and government. Finding ways to reduce the cost of housing, for example, requires society-wide input and policy change.

Starting in 2007, another three-year Labour Market Partnership with HRSDC focused on creating Labour Market Dialogues between employers and people with barriers to employment. These included individuals re-entering the workforce, those without English language skills and persons with disabilities, mental health challenges, addictions or low literacy skills. After three years of dialogue, there was a greater understanding of the barriers to employment and there were deeper, more meaningful partnerships linking businesses with agencies that serve the affected groups. These connections have resulted in new collaborative initiatives headed by the READ Society (literacy) and by the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society. The Victoria Disability Resource Centre is now represented on the CHALLENGE Leadership Roundtable.

Last lessons

The CHALLENGE used community-based research and positive reinforcement as opportunities for engagement. Learnings were communicated widely through business breakfasts, newsletters, decal presentations, awards ceremonies, publications, media and theatre. These communication tools and events, and the continued popularity of *The Employer CHALLENGE* newsletter confirm that business owners appreciate seeing their efforts profiled – it’s good for business.

The CHALLENGE has learned to be responsive to shifts in the local business and employment climate. Its current priority is to involve business more deeply in poverty reduction and policy work. This latest step in an intentional learning journey is the result of carefully-built relationships and a growth in the community’s understanding of what it takes to make a healthy living environment.

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Endnote

1. The Poverty Matrix report can be found at: <http://www.qolchallenge.ca/pdf/DynamicsofNeed200305.pdf>

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