

## Impact Stories

### Vital Signs: How Is It Done?

Sourcing, collecting and verifying the data contained in each *Vital Signs* report is a painstaking, community effort. The process of researching, selecting and evaluating the information contained in each *Vital Signs* report involves hundreds of community volunteers and dozens of government, academic and community data sources.

Another part of the challenge is to interpret and communicate the complex statistical data in a way that's easy for communities to share and use. Community foundations are meeting that need by ensuring *Vital Signs* is reader-friendly, producing visually compelling publications, working with print, radio and television media and reaching further through Internet sites and blogs.

### ... And What Is It Doing?

**Communities across Canada, with the support of their community foundations, are using *Vital Signs* to identify priorities and to take action to improve local quality of life.**

#### **Waterloo Region Makes Learning a Priority**

The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation and the Cambridge & North Dumfries Community Foundation in Ontario co-produce Waterloo Region's *Vital Signs*. Serving an area that's home to two world-class universities and a top-ranked college in Canada, the foundations and their communities were troubled by the region's lacklustre performance in high school completion and literacy. Further research by the foundations revealed particular issues concerning school readiness and learning among young children. Working in partnership with local organizations, the foundations are stepping up efforts to engage the community in discussions about the importance of education with a focus on early learning.

#### **New Saint John Track Promotes Fitness for Everyone**

When its *Vital Signs* report indicated a local rate of obesity higher than the national average, the Greater Saint John Community Foundation committed itself to encouraging physical activity. By supporting the River Valley Track Association, the foundation is now helping to build a new running track for the residents of the Greater River Valley area. The 400-metre track, built to Canadian Track and Field standards, but intended for walkers, joggers and active residents of all ages, is scheduled to open this fall.

#### **Vital Signs Fills Businesses' Need for Accurate Information about Sudbury**

Local employers find that Greater Sudbury's *Vital Signs* report provides the information they needed to accurately describe life in Sudbury to potential employees. Local mining companies support the project and now use it in their national and international recruitment.



### **Calgary's Vital Signs Makes Minorities' Struggles Visible**

By raising awareness of the barriers faced by visible minority residents (a quarter of Calgary's population), the Calgary Foundation's *Vital Signs* report gave confidence to the city's diverse communities to work together to combat marginalization. The Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary's 1,000 Voices initiative is bringing together cultural community leaders and policy makers to address issues including racial profiling, access to health care, accreditation of foreign credentials and hate crime.

### **Students Turn Learning into Action**

Improving quality of life in a community takes a group effort – and that includes kids. In many communities, *Vital Signs* reports are used in schools to help students learn more about the problems 'in their own backyard' and to think about the ways they can take action to make things better.

- Last year, elementary and secondary school students in Montreal Island's two school boards took part in a project called School Needs. The project, led by the Foundation for Greater Montreal, encouraged youth to look at their own surroundings from different perspectives, to think about local needs and how their choices and actions could effect change. Next, the youth will become more involved in philanthropic activities in their schools and in the community.
- In Victoria, *Vital Signs* inspired local youth to contribute to the community in their own way. Students at Oak Bay High School were struck by what they learned in Victoria's *Vital Signs* about local homelessness and resolved to do something to help those living in shelters. After finding out about a shortage of basic hygiene supplies, essentials in their view, the teens collected soap, shampoo and body wash and provided them, assembled in individual kits, to shelters and street outreach programs. Their effort caught the attention of local hotels and businesses who donated boxes more of the needed supplies.

That's how it happens in a community: no one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

**Through combined efforts, like *Vital Signs*, community foundations are helping Canadian communities learn from each other, trade good ideas, avoid bad ones and overcome shared challenges.**

### **Communities Learn from Each Other How to Help Students Succeed**

Across communities, *Vital Signs* highlights the connection between lower income and lower educational success. That's why it's important that communities are also connecting on how to break this destructive pattern. In 2001, an ambitious program called Pathways to Education was started in Regent Park, one of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods. Providing local high-school students with a combination of academic, social, financial, and advocacy support, the program, in just a few short years has turned around the lives of hundreds of local students. Pathways has:

- Reduced the local dropout rate from 56% to 10%;
- Reduced school absenteeism by 50%; and
- Increased post-secondary enrollment of high-school graduates from 20% to 80% (over 90% of them, the first in their families to go on to post-secondary education).

This is a section of *Canada's Vital Signs 2008*

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The program's success in Toronto has sparked interest in other communities facing similar challenges. Pathways to Education programs have now been launched in the west end of Ottawa, the south-central area of Kitchener and in Montreal. As in Toronto, the development of new Pathways programs is being supported by the donors of local community foundations who understand that education creates better futures, not just for young people, but also for families and for communities.

### **Vital Signs a Model that's Catching On**

Started by the Toronto Community Foundation as a local report card, the *Vital Signs* program has spread quickly through the leadership of community foundations into 15 communities from British Columbia to New Brunswick. And now, it's started catching on outside of Canada. Community foundations from Europe, the U.S. and Australia have been exploring *Vital Signs* as a way to monitor local quality of life and the first non-Canadian version, *Sinais Vitais* was launched by the Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis in Brazil this year.

