

**Policy Internships and Fellowships Program
Final Report**

**Bringing Together Community and Government:
A Unique Opportunity**

Cathy Wright

Testimonial

I sincerely recommend participation in the Policy Internships and Fellowships (PIAF) Program. I have been able to be a part of the federal department, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), and learn about the challenges of working within government, as well as the opportunities to be innovative. The experience is very instructive, because it demonstrates how community issues are influenced by, and how they impact, relationships, priorities, policies and programs.

Working with the Skills and Learning Agenda has helped me to better understand New Brunswick's challenges in building a workforce for the future. Its focus has been on important community issues such as workers at risk, workplace training, literacy, and immigration. The Skills and Learning Agenda illustrates how the different components and players in the policy process affect each other.

Another outcome has been a new partnership recently established between representatives of two provincial government departments, the voluntary/non-profit sector and HRDC-NB. The partnership will oversee research on the voluntary sector from a labour market perspective. It will assess the capacity of the voluntary sector as an employer now and in the future. This is very exciting and will strengthen our communities for the future.

The experience has been very positive for my own organization, the Human Development Council. We were able to hire someone with new ideas and energy, who is exploring new directions. I was able to have regular contact with the organization, yet step back from the funding, workload and other stresses facing the voluntary/non-profit sector.

The PIAF program is timely, just as governments are developing stronger links with communities who, in turn, are asking for a more participatory approach to the public policy process. This program is very instrumental in serving as an important catalyst in thinking about how governments and communities can work better together.

**Cathy Wright, Intern
Policy Internships and Fellowships Program**

Bringing Together Community and Government A Unique Opportunity

1. Preamble – Home and Host Organizations

While the home and host organizations represent two different sectors, they are concerned with similar social issues. The internship has focused on better understanding the policy process at the regional, provincial and national levels. It has identified both the barriers and the opportunities for governments and communities to connect in the policy process.

Human Development Council: Home Organization

The Human Development Council (HDC) is a local social planning agency whose mission is to “promote and co-ordinate social development” in the Greater Saint John Area (a population of 122,000). For the past twenty-four years, HDC has been working with citizens to improve the overall quality of life.

Specifically, HDC has two key functions: to facilitate citizens’ access to information about community programs and services; and to develop opportunities for the community (usually locally but at times provincially) to work together on issues of social concern.

To “promote and co-ordinate social development”

HDC has played a leadership role or assisted in the establishment of a number of initiatives related to literacy, housing, health, employment and poverty. They include: the Saint John Learning Exchange, an intensive literacy training program; Housing Alternatives, a cooperative and non-profit housing resource group; the Urban Core Support Network (UCSN), a community coalition to address the issue of poverty; and the Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, a group of senior business leaders concerned about poverty.

Currently, the following activities are carried out through HDC’s information role:

- Operating INFO-line, an information and referral line
- Producing directories (free of charge) for seniors, youth, and individuals on limited income
- Producing a comprehensive *Human Services Directory* for professionals
- Producing a bi-monthly newsletter, *NEXUS*, profiling services and issues
- Exploring the concept of 211

The following activities demonstrate the current development role:

- Participating in the Vibrant Communities project - focusing on reducing poverty through multi-sectoral efforts
- Assisting the Urban Core Support Network to address policy barriers
- Serving on a Resource Centre for Youth Steering Committee
- Supporting the Saint John Community Loan Fund
- Wrapping up HDC’s Community Business Development Program -developing community businesses with individuals facing severe barriers to employment
- Working with the community on the Homelessness Initiative and playing a lead role in the development of a tenants’ handbook

- Assisting the community in understanding social issues through development of an “indicators report”, coordinating the community’s involvement in the Community Social Data Strategy of the Canadian Council on Social Development, and exploring other research opportunities

HDC receives funding from four key sources: City of Saint John, provincial department of Family and Community Services, United Way of Greater Saint John and revenue raised by the organization itself through sale of publications, memberships, donations and projects. Project funding comes from federal and provincial levels of government, foundations and faith organizations.

HDC has a core staff of three - Executive Director/Community Planner (a 4/5 position due to funding), Information Coordinator and Secretary/Bookkeeper – as well as two project staff, Manager of the Community Loan Fund and Manager of the Community Business Development Program.

**Human Resources Development Canada – NB Region
Host Department**

The mandate of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is to “enable Canadians to participate fully in the workplace and community.” HRDC serves citizens across their life span through its four components of Labour, Income Security Programs, Employment Insurance, and Human Resources Investment, supported by an extensive service delivery network and a strong policy agenda. Its responsibilities include managing the Homelessness Initiative, the Youth Employment Strategy, as well as income support programs for seniors and persons with disabilities.

“To enable Canadians to participate fully in the workplace and the community.”

HRDC-NB Region is responsible for fulfilling the mandate of HRDC within the province of New Brunswick. It does so through a network of seven Human Resource Centres Canada (HRCCs), located in major communities across the region. Most HRCCs are co-located with provincial departments to provide greater access to employment and financial services. The HRCCs are supported by regional offices in Fredericton and Moncton, which provide corporate and functional services. HRDC-NB is in Canada’s only officially bilingual region, from which a number of national services, such as the social insurance registry, are delivered.

HRDC is part way through a five-year plan of Modernizing Services for Canadians. Its purpose is to ensure that HRDC policies, programs and services are developed and provided to Canadians in a simpler, more responsive and sustainable manner. All regions are participating in this process, which will include a greater focus on accessing services through electronic or internet means.

The NB Region of HRDC has a number of notable characteristics. It operates under a Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA) with the Province of New Brunswick, whereby the authority, resources and responsibility for delivery of employment programs and services have been “devolved” to the province. Currently the HRDC-NB Region is working with the province towards developing bilateral initiatives in support of Canada’s Innovation Strategy: Knowledge Matters. This relates to the Skills and Learning Agenda referred to in this report; and I am working with the Strategic Services Unit, which provides leadership for the region in this area.

HRDC-NB Region has adopted the National Quality Institute Progressive Excellence Program. It is certified at Level I - i.e., integrating quality principles and practices into its organizational structure and processes, which include leadership, strategic planning, client focus and process management (issuing of cheques). It is currently working towards Level II. Strategic Services plays a leadership role in support of several aspects of this quality improvement initiative.

A new governance structure was created by the region in line with its quality approach, and parallel to the National Headquarters structure. Strategic Services provides secretariat support to the various governance committees. These committees focus on executive oversight of departmental objectives and priorities, strategic planning, human resources, service delivery and quality improvement.

Many of my colleagues in the unit coordinate and manage the evaluation and review activities, the development of environmental scans with the province, research activities and the analysis of documents in support of priority setting and planning, and they oversee the development of pilot initiatives.

While Strategic Services does not write national policy, it does play a role in “influencing” national policy development, which includes participation in a number of national working groups, and in the translation/application of national directions within the regional environment.

Challenges : - Poverty - Low education - Unemployment - Homelessness - Funding of agencies

HRDC places a high priority on ensuring that it has well-trained and supported staff. Each staff member develops an annual learning plan. In addition, the department assesses its success in supporting staff in a number of ways including satisfaction surveys.

2. Context

Challenges and Strengths in the Community

Poverty and low literacy levels are major issues in Saint John. One in three children and youth live in poverty¹; Saint John has the second highest percentage of single parents living in poverty in Canada, and a significant number of single people and persons with disabilities are also affected. In New Brunswick, 60% of the population have either very low literacy skills or can only deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out, but cannot cope with a workplace manual². Yet within the past year, funding for community-based literacy programs was under threat of being discontinued. Many individuals challenged by poverty and low literacy levels face other challenges related to accessing employment and adequate and affordable housing.

Most agencies in Saint John and throughout the province are confronted with continual funding challenges. As the International Year of Volunteers came to a close, the Human Development Council experienced another severe blow to its own funding base, this time from the City of Saint John. The provincial government reduced its funding to municipalities which in turn reduced funding to community agencies and to community

¹ *Urban Poverty in Canada*, Canadian Council on Social Development, 1999

² *International Adult Literacy Survey*, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1994

programs. The provincial government itself remains committed as a funding partner to HDC, and others in the community assisted in making up the difference. Sustaining this support annually will be the challenge!

Saint John is recognized, throughout the province as well as across the country, for its innovation in social development, and its high level of community cooperation, both locally and provincially. Coalitions and networks have been established around many issues including poverty, youth, teen pregnancy, homelessness, family violence and (lack of) employment. Like other places, Saint John is committed to building an inclusive community and promoting the integration of social and economic policies.

Saint John recognized for its innovation and level of cooperation

HDC is a member of the Urban Core Support Network, a local coalition of agencies, individuals living in poverty, faith communities, business and government. It promotes changes to provincial policies that present barriers to individuals and families living in poverty. The effort is well coordinated and has expanded to include groups with similar concerns in other parts of the province. Meetings have been held with senior provincial government staff and politicians to promote policy changes and to consider the establishment of a provincial working group.

The Human Development Council has been encouraging government and the community to invest in two key employment initiatives that are both social and economic in nature. It established a community loan fund for individuals who had a good business idea, but could not access a loan under \$5,000, and a community business development program for individuals facing severe employment barriers. However, the provincial government, a significant partner, was reluctant to continue its partnership. Accessing its continuing support was further complicated because the initiatives related to the mandate of a number of provincial departments. In addition, the provincial government was reluctant to set a precedent that would encourage other communities.

As described by the Director of Strategic Services at HRDC, there are “minimal opportunities, particularly opportunities which have little “risk” attached to them, to share each other’s world, to learn from each other, to see the challenges through other lenses”.³ The sentiment is echoed by community groups and individuals living in poverty, who viewed the internship as an opportunity for government to better understand community issues and to build stronger partnerships. Many also hoped that this experience could help access resources for community priorities. One recommendation from a business leader, half kidding and half serious was for me to “seek sole signing authority”!

“...minimal opportunities to share each other’s world, to learn from each other, to see the challenges through other lenses”

Changing Relationships with Government

Governments are recognizing the value of involving communities in the policy process. Furthermore, the agenda of provincial and federal levels of government is changing with a renewed attention to strengthening the workforce for the future and a focus on social policy challenges such as homelessness, poverty, early childhood development and youth employment.

³ Cheryl O’Toole, Director, Strategic Services, HRDC-NB Region

The federal government, including HRDC, has begun working with communities in a different way. The Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) of the federal government⁴ was a partnership with equal representation from different federal departments and the voluntary sector. It was established to develop a collaborative plan of action to strengthen the voluntary sector to better serve Canadians. A comprehensive strategy was developed by Joint Tables, and the Working and Reference Groups. It laid the foundation for strengthening as well as better understanding the sector, and illustrated the benefits of partnerships.

In the *Accord*, the Prime Minister is quoted: “A sector that engages Canadians in the life of their communities.... providing services and giving voice to shared concerns”.

The VSI provided significant opportunities for New Brunswick. The Human Development Council’s involvement in the Joint Capacity Table meant that the needs of small community agencies were incorporated into the strategy. Workshops on better understanding the policy process were organized by the VSI across the country, including Saint John. A number of consultations on different aspects of the VSI took place throughout the province. PolicyLinkNB, a partnership of federal and provincial government departments, academia, voluntary sector, business and citizens, received funding under the VSI. PolicyLinkNB promotes a better understanding of the policy process through workshops, research, and enhancing collaboration, which in turn lead to more effective policy design and delivery.

HRDC and Family and Community Services integral to PolicyLinkNB

The Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative (SCPI), better known as the National Homelessness Initiative, reflected a new approach of HRDC to equip communities with resources and responsibility to respond to challenges associated with housing and homelessness. SCPI was instrumental in establishing community steering committees that received resources to first develop a community planning process. Small selection committees with membership drawn from the steering committees then allocated funding for new initiatives that responded to the needs identified in the community plans.

Community groups and governments are concerned about similar social issues. With a growing interest in collaboration on the part of governments, we need to identify opportunities where more links can be built between the sectors.

3. Introduction to the Internship

Background of the Intern

I have been working in the social development field as both a paid staff person and volunteer for twenty-eight years. I have served as the Executive Director of the Human Development Council for the past seventeen years. Prior to my employment in the voluntary sector, I worked for the provincial government for ten years as a medical social worker, a child protection worker and a foster home coordinator.

My volunteer involvement has frequently been in a leadership capacity at the local, provincial and national levels; currently I serve on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Council on Social Development. I was involved in the literacy movement at the local, provincial and national levels for over twenty-four years. My work as a volunteer has been recognized through the Canada Volunteer Award, a CIDA Award in international

⁴ The VSI was established in 2000 and the *Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* was signed in 2002.

development⁵ and the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal. Both my professional and volunteer experiences have helped me to better understand community issues and how all sectors of society can work together in addressing these issues.

Interest in Policy Internships and Fellowships Program

The Human Development Council was concerned about the limited opportunities to discuss issues or initiatives with government. The President, Sue Davis, viewed the internship as beneficial and supported my involvement, as did the Board of Directors. A more in-depth understanding of the policy process and ways in which government and community can work better together was needed.

I was involved in the development of the PIAF program through the VSI. I felt it could be an opportunity to add value to the work in New Brunswick and promoted the program to both HRDC and Health Canada.

Adding value to the work in New Brunswick

Another factor that made this opportunity possible is the relationship between the host and home organization. I have been working with Cheryl O'Toole, Director of Strategic Services and others for the past two years to establish PolicyLinkNB. When the call for proposals for the PIAF program was announced, we identified our interest in seeing New Brunswick benefit and proposed our partnership.

Internship

I began the nine-month internship⁶ on October 15, 2002, in Fredericton, working as a consultant for the Strategic Services Unit of HRDC-NB Region, under the leadership of Cheryl O'Toole. I usually work four days a week in Fredericton and one day at home. Cheryl was instrumental in having HRDC cover my costs to stay in a Bed and Breakfast while in Fredericton (1½ hour-drive from my home in Hampton), as well as assist with travel expenses. This support was very helpful.

It was a transition, moving from a close-knit staff of five and board of directors as well as a supportive community to an unit of twelve and overall office staff of more than one hundred. It has been greatly eased, however by the friendliness and sense of community among the HRDC staff. It is a welcoming environment with an emphasis on working together, as well as social and wellness activities.

4. Summary of Work

Goals

The Human Development Council and Human Resources Development Canada - NB Region viewed the internship as focusing on the following goals:

- Enhancing my knowledge of government, specifically HRDC
- Better understanding the policy process, with particular emphasis on the Skills and Learning Agenda

⁵ Through the Canadian Bureau for International Education of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It involved working for an agency in Manila, Philippines for four months on a micro-lending program for street families.

⁶ The placement was initially for seven months, but was extended because money was available to cover more time, the extension would be beneficial and the home organization had confidence in my replacement.

- Bringing a community perspective to the work of the department, at both the regional and national level

The internship involves learning about the policy process from a number of perspectives: where does research fit in, how to accommodate issues that cross different levels of government and different levels internally, what are the points of intersection in the policy process for community groups, and what is the cost to both government staff and the community when work is delayed. There is an important element of trust in the intern; potentially sensitive documents, issues, and conversations are being shared with the intern by both federal and provincial levels of government. In addition, the flexible nature of the internship made it possible to be involved in other initiatives, such as the work on the voluntary sector.

Skills and Learning Agenda

The provincial and federal levels of government are in unison in their planning efforts to have a trained workforce for the future; both have produced guiding documents⁷. They agreed to collaborate and develop a strategy with new approaches and interventions in five priority areas: workplace training and development; literacy; immigration; lifelong learning; and broadband support. The majority of my work concentrated on workplace training and development, but to a lesser extent included literacy and immigration.

Stage set with positions papers by Federal and Provincial governments

The Skills and Learning Agenda has the potential to blend both social and economic policies of particular relevance to New Brunswick. Community agencies and government have informally expressed concerns that individuals with low skills and education levels may not be receiving adequate levels of services.

The process of developing a strategy to respond to the Skills and Learning Agenda for New Brunswick necessitates a strong working relationship between the federal and provincial levels of government. In New Brunswick, under the Labour Market Development Agreement, the responsibility for labour market issues has been devolved to the province, specifically to the department of Training and Employment Development. Previous collaborative efforts between the two levels of government provided a good foundation for this new effort.

The work on the Skills and Learning Agenda involves the efforts of many staff at HRDC-NB. The lead role comes from Strategic Services, while the federal/provincial unit serves as a resource on information related to jurisdictional matters, and the pan-Canadian unit provides labour market research information (particularly for information related to Workers at Risk). Similarly, the work involves a number of different staff from the provincial departments.

A few months before I started as an intern, the province and HRDC had agreed on the focus of and collaborative approach to, the Skills and Learning Agenda, but progress was admittedly slower than expected. Shortly after I started, general agreement was reached on a joint plan of action around the five priority areas. This formed the basis for

⁷ *Canada's Innovation Strategy: Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians, Achieving Excellence: Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity, 2002* and *Greater Opportunity: New Brunswick's Prosperity Plan, 2002*

a high-level meeting in Ottawa with deputy ministers from New Brunswick, HRDC's Deputy Minister, the Clerk of the Privy Council, and senior staff from HRDC-NB. The meeting reconfirmed the areas of focus for the Skills and Learning Agenda.

At this point in time, there is no confirmation of resources for a new strategy, which can complicate the process of collaboration. Furthermore, other federal and provincial departments also have a stake in these issues. The work on the Skills and Learning Agenda requires an important coordination effort between the two levels of government. One can begin to better understand how community involvement can easily slip due to uncertainty about resources or timing of the process.

As described by a colleague, the policy process moves “either like a glacier or like the Grand Prix”.⁸ The high level of involvement of senior staff did not necessarily mean that the Skills and Learning Agenda moved quickly in New Brunswick. During the “glacier period”, there was an opportunity to learn more about New Brunswick, its challenges and what was being written about labour force development, both within the province and from organizations and departments across the country. Patience prevailed and the collaborative effort began to make progress.

The policy process moves like a glacier or the Grand Prix!

Workplace Training and Development: Interventions for Small and Medium Sized Businesses and Workers at Risk

In mid-December, an informal research team, comprising Strategic Services staff, including myself, and a policy analyst and economist from the province, developed the parameters for an information-gathering phase. A consultant was hired for this phase. The consultant conducted a literature review of over 100 documents, summarizing each in relation to key issues, best practices, lessons learned, barriers and gaps. We now have information on the current policies of each provincial and territorial government. This documentation should certainly help us in our analysis of barriers and gaps, and inform our development of new strategies and our preparations for broader consultation.

At the same time, we agreed to inventory our own existing programs. I agreed to develop the inventory for HRDC. This gave me a good opportunity to better understand the department's programs, their barriers, and initiatives in the midst of change such as the Youth Employment Strategy.

Our preliminary readings and discussions identified a number of key facts:

- 80% of all businesses in New Brunswick have fewer than 20 employees,
- low education and low income levels put a number of workers at risk in the province; and
- workplace training receives minimal attention from employers for various reasons, including the economy of scale, lack of information about what is available and the low value attached to training.

At different meetings with the informal research team the atmosphere was very open, which made it possible to raise questions and consider how the work can be integrated with other government and community initiatives, such as local Employment Development Boards (called “CEDAs”) recently established throughout the province.

⁸ Quote from a senior staff member at HRDC in Ottawa

I have been working with the co-chair of the team from Strategic Services, and together with province, we have mapped out the next phase of the initiative, as it moves towards identifying strategies and new approaches. Broader consultation will occur in a later phase; the details are still to be developed.

Literacy: Comprehensive New Brunswick Strategy

The area of the Skills and Learning Agenda where progress has been slow is literacy. It is an extremely complex and multi-faceted area that requires commitment from all levels of government and from the community. It is important to respect the jurisdictional boundaries for this issue, which means that it is not possible to start any discussions without the full participation of both federal and provincial partners.

Respecting jurisdictional boundaries

It is discouraging, because there is a perception that literacy is an area in which heavy investments have already been made with undetermined results. A recent assessment commissioned by a partnership of literacy organizations and the provincial government raised some serious concerns, including a lack of information on results to date⁹.

I have been asked to be the lead person for HRDC in this priority area, which directly utilizes my past experiences both as a staff member of HDC and as a volunteer in the literacy field for many years. So it was encouraging to hear an observation from HRDC staff that the members of the literacy community in New Brunswick are coordinated and work well together. However, these groups are anxious for an opportunity to participate in the process and are disenchanted with the lack of progress.

In the meantime, my discussions with staff from another provincial department have focused on the need for essential skills¹⁰, the role of a prior learning assessment component, and programs with a workplace experience component to motivate participants and strengthen their attachment to the labour force. At the time of writing, staff from the province and HRDC will be meeting with me and with representatives from a community literacy program, the Saint John Learning Exchange, to better understand existing programs.

Immigrant Settlement: Service Enhancement to Support New Brunswick Immigrant Retention

I have limited involvement in this area, keeping abreast of developments through one of my colleagues who has the lead role in Strategic Services. The work to date has focused on gathering information. Many players - businesses, governments and community groups - are now involved in this issue, believing that it holds much promise for increasing the labour force. I attended a meeting at the university in Saint John last fall, when the Minister of Immigration, Denis Coderre, spoke to an audience consisting of members of the business community, agency representatives, and university students. The students voiced specific challenges to remaining in Canada, which illustrated barriers that had not been foreseen in the development of policies to encourage their participation in the labour market.

As an aside, the Human Development Council is organizing its annual meeting at the end of April and its keynote speaker will be Uzma Shakir, Executive Director of Agencies

⁹ *Comprehensive Training Needs Assessment of Literacy in New Brunswick*, Landal Inc, 2002

¹⁰ Conference Board of Canada emphasizes the concept of essential skills.

Serving South Asians and President of the Board of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.¹¹

Voluntary Sector

Working on the voluntary sector was not identified initially as part of my assigned responsibilities, although this is a natural fit for me and for the department. The specifics were developed with input from co-workers and the Director of Strategic Services. The first task was to develop a brief report, *Voluntary Sector Initiative: Accomplishments and Challenges*¹², to highlight the key areas of the VSI and the ways in which New Brunswick has benefited from the Initiative. Identifying the accomplishments of the VSI during the period from 2000 to 2002 can be a challenge because of the number of areas it covered. The summary also included a status report on the activities that are continuing and a description of the new structure overseeing the process. This (document) will help sustain the momentum within HRDC and serve as a reminder of the strengths and challenges of the voluntary sector.

A second focus of my work with respect to the voluntary sector incorporates a link between the sector and the Skills and Learning Agenda. To identify what we know about the voluntary sector as an employer in New Brunswick, I drew upon the experiences of other communities and the National Survey on the Voluntary Sector. Cheryl was very supportive of pursuing this focus with the province. We met with staff from the provincial departments of Family and Community Services (whose mandate includes the voluntary sector) and Training and Employment Development, who very quickly committed to funding the research.

All departments agreed that representatives from the voluntary sector should be included on the Steering Committee (to oversee the research). Currently, we are finalizing the terms of reference for the request for proposals. We are proposing two phases: the first, to develop the parameters of the study, drawing upon the experiences of others in Canada, and also incorporating input from both levels of government and the voluntary sector in developing the specific focus for New Brunswick; and the second phase, to conduct the actual research.

In learning more about the department, I was reminded of the importance of coordinating this effort with other parts of the organization that are involved with the voluntary sector.

HRDC's Role with Communities

HRDC recognizes that no one level of government or organization is capable of responding to the complexity and range of social challenges that we face as a country. This plays a part in HRDC defining its future role with communities, through a number of structures, including a national working group (at national Headquarters), under the direction of Liz Roothman.

The national working group is reflecting on the current roles, the needs of communities and the implications for the future. This involves many position papers, documents and "diagnostiques" (drawing together information on the issue, its impact on individuals and its relationship to the Department). This analysis provides a basis for identification of priority areas and approaches and ensuring a linkage to other policy issues.

¹¹ Staff from Strategic Services are being invited to attend the annual meeting.

¹² *Voluntary Sector Initiative: Accomplishments and Challenges*, 2003, Strategic Services, HRDC-NB

As initially agreed, my director encouraged an involvement in this national working group and we recently met in Ottawa with the chair to discuss my involvement. I am reviewing internal documents and participating on conference calls when appropriate. It was helpful to have previously worked with Liz when she chaired the Joint Capacity Table of the VSI. She contributes an in-depth understanding and a strong commitment to communities.

I recently had an introductory meeting with the Income Support Policy Group, which is examining the issue of the working poor. They welcomed a regional perspective. I spoke briefly about how the community of Saint John is working together to address the issue of poverty. In addition, I raised a concern about single parents on social assistance who will be falling into a deeper level of poverty when their children leave home. This had recently been brought to my attention by the Human Development Council, and was also new information for the Policy Group.

Exposure at the national level broadens one's understanding of the policy process and provides an opportunity to present a community perspective on relevant issues. These two policy areas, Communities and Income Support are referred to as medium-term policy areas, which means doing the analysis and laying the groundwork for a set of policy issues of growing importance¹³.

National Involvement broadens understanding of the policy process

I have met with regional staff in the Pan-Canadian unit (of HRDC-NB), working on the Homelessness Initiative and the Youth Employment Strategy, to explore a possible role for Strategic Services. Our relationship currently involves more information sharing. For example, I arranged for myself and one of the staff to hear a panel presentation (through an e-learning conference) on how to involve the business community in the issue of poverty; the presentation featured an individual from the Saint John Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative. The event was organized by Vibrant Communities, a cross-Canada program looking at how individual communities can reduce poverty.

HRDC supports many community initiatives that foster strong partnerships across federal departments, with provincial levels of government and with the voluntary/community sector. These enabling opportunities help communities respond to their own opportunities and challenges. It is exciting to contribute to the development of this policy issue.

Links to the Community

During the internship, I continued an involvement with three organizations: the Human Development Council, PolicyLinkNB and the Urban Core Support Network. It was advantageous to sustain my involvement, because it kept me connected, linking community experiences to my understanding of the policy process and relationships with government.

Links to community strengthened learnings

The continuing health of one's home organization (in my case, the Human Development Council) has a direct impact on the internship. I was able to be in regular contact with the "community planner" whom we hired. He is very capable and excited by this opportunity, and open to discussing and strategizing together. We deliberately renamed

¹³ Explanation from mentor, Karen Jackson, HRDC

the position, so it wasn't viewed as an acting position but could give breadth to an individual's energy and creativity (which it has!).

PolicyLinkNB is still in a pilot project phase, but more importantly its work of strengthening the voluntary sector, creating a "Community of Inquiry" for research, and building partnerships with academics, government and community relates directly to the goals of the internship and the interests of HRDC. This organization is a priority for the department, as reflected in the continuing investment on the part of Cheryl and her staff in Strategic Services.

Representatives from the Urban Core Support Network, including individuals living in poverty and myself, had the opportunity to make a case for linking poverty to the province's Prosperity Plan, during a very positive meeting with the Deputy Minister in the Premier's office. The Network continues to correspond with provincial officials on next steps, guided by input from meetings with agencies, business and government.

UCSN also organized a provincial conference in April 2003 on Policy and Poverty, "Together, Changing Policy from the Outside – In." Participants included individuals living in poverty, agencies, churches, government, business and labour. I presented a workshop on the learnings from my internship, which was well received. I hope to conduct similar workshops in the future and to provide opportunities to share perspectives on ways in which governments and communities can work better together. The next presentation is to a group of social work students at St. Thomas University in June.

5. Guiding Elements

Contribution of Reports

I am surrounded by a "sea" of materials from many sources. The internship began with about twelve inches of articles and papers, couriered to us, and the momentum never stopped. I read many internal HRDC documents describing the department's organizational structure, workplans, planning processes, challenges, and new thinking for the future. I have access to reports released by other levels of governments, including the Throne, budget and other kinds of speeches, status reports on specific issues, and strategy documents. I also have been reviewing documents produced by private and non-profit organizations. Reports are an important resource in enhancing my learning about specific issues and about the policy process.

Reading, writing, and inspiration from a number of people contributed to the richness of this learning experience.

Elements of the PIAF Program

The Policy Internships and Fellowships Program is very well-organized and its many components were instrumental in ensuring that each participant benefited as much as possible from this experience.

PIAF: Valuable opportunities for sharing and learning

The PIAF summer institute, a two-week training course at the beginning of the program, was very stimulating and challenging. It emphasized similarities and differences between government and the voluntary sector and covered different aspects of the policy process and the way in which decisions are made, both within government and the sector.

The institute involved a tremendous array of resource persons, besides our two leaders, Susan Phillips and Sharon Manson Singer. We had presentations from, and discussions with, experienced staff from provincial and federal levels of government, the voluntary sector and academic settings. The course was a benefit in its own right, regardless of what followed. The fact that it was located in Victoria, at Dunsmuir Lodge, part of the University of Victoria, with one of the best restaurants in town, was an extra bonus.

It is helpful to share experiences with the other eight interns and fellows from across Canada and with staff overseeing the program. We learn from each other in many ways, including initially sharing ideas on how to work with our host organization to cover personal costs associated with “living away from home”. During our monthly conference calls, we shared challenges and successes, both of which reinforced our own experiences.

Through the PIAF program, we attended two different conferences focusing on research and the voluntary sector. One, the ARNOVA¹⁴ conference in Montreal, focused on the possibilities of research on the voluntary sector and it was amazing to see how much research has been conducted by universities in the United States; we are only beginning in Canada. The second conference, “Moving Forward” was Canadian in nature and focused more on partnerships between practitioners, researchers and government. Both events contributed to my understanding of the need for research in the voluntary sector.

Although late in the game, I have begun to make use of the opportunity to have a part-time researcher, a student from Carleton University, assist me in my internship. I have asked her to see what she can find on literacy programs that involved a workplace experience as well as a focus on essential skills. I have also only just begun to utilize the intranet website for discussions with other interns and fellows.

Having access to a mentor, another resource associated with this program, was beneficial to me. Karen Jackson, who works for HRDC at national Headquarters, graciously agreed to serve as my mentor. The guidelines for mentors were broad and based on the intern’s own needs. However, I was not sure how (and where) to utilize a mentor. The distance was not insurmountable, but it precluded impromptu/informal get-togethers. One recommendation that emerged through discussions with PIAF staff was that the experience with mentors receive a higher profile and be a regular agenda item during the monthly conference calls.

Leadership and support in the host organization are vital and offer a form of mentorship itself. My Director, Cheryl, is very helpful in guiding my work and enhancing my understanding of the department. She made an effort to ensure that my experience could be utilized by the department, both nationally and regionally.

Nancy MacGarvie, a colleague in Strategic Services, who has been with the department for many years, also provides support and information. We are working together on the Skills and Learning Agenda. She links our work to the *Labour Market Development Agreement*, to the *Employment Insurance Act*, and to the reality of challenges associated with these processes. She was the one who recommended producing a summary of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, and guided its development.

¹⁴ ARNOVA stands for the Association for Research On Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Agencies.

6. Voluntary Sector- Public Sector Comparisons

The internship experience helped to better understand the similarities and differences between the voluntary and government sectors. I have organized my comparisons between sectors into five key areas: relationships and partnerships; access to resources - financial and knowledge; decision making and innovation; documentation; and caring communities.

- Relationships
- Resources
- Decisions
- Documenting
- Caring

Relationships and Partnerships

Relationships and partnerships are integral to the work of the voluntary and government sectors. Both sectors have many levels of partnerships and the same kinds of challenges in realizing their full potential. HRDC operates locally, regionally and at national headquarters. It connects with other federal departments, with provincial departments and with individuals, community agencies and businesses.

Similarly, voluntary organizations work with a number of partners: its different funders, other agencies, and the individuals that they serve. However, they step out of their comfort zone more often and work to build alliances with businesses, labour, media, faith communities and all levels of government. They understand that working together means taking risks and that the end product is not always predictable. The community seems to have a greater level of trust in (the voluntary sector) developing broad-based partnerships.

Access to Resources – Financial and Knowledge

Both sectors share certain experiences related to resources. At times (if not at all times), both sectors experience heavy workloads, and a sense of being overwhelmed. They both acknowledge that there is a challenge in getting their “fair share” of resources for social programs, that there is not enough money for new initiatives and that the individuals they serve often lack enough money for basic necessities.

The issue of resources has distinctly different challenges for the voluntary sector, however. The stress of not having enough money for one’s own organization to operate is truly significant and is one of the most challenging issues facing the future of the sector. Having insufficient resources continually devalues the work of the sector and sends a negative message to the individuals it is trying to serve.

Lack of resources is one of the most challenging issues for the voluntary sector

In terms of technology, government has a distinct advantage. I have enjoyed the luxury of having up-to-date computer equipment and programs, accessing technical resources (just calling someone with a problem!), and being able to simultaneously talk on the phone and check e-mails or visit websites, which saves more time than one can imagine.

Both sectors value information and knowledge, learning more about issues, best practices, and new ways of thinking, but each experiences different levels of accessibility. The public sector has greater access to research, to statistics, and to the capacity for research, planning and evaluation. Both sectors access studies and reports from different sources, including national voluntary organizations. The voluntary sector learns about best practices, if it has the time and knows where to look for the

information. There is limited capacity for research, limited access to local or provincial statistics (e.g., in environmental scans) and lack of knowledge of evaluation methodologies within the voluntary sector, however. A significant strength for the sector, though, is its direct access to individuals experiencing the issues, which keeps them focused and grounded.

Decision Making and Innovation

The decision-making process can be more straightforward in the voluntary sector. If the Board of Directors agrees on a new innovation or program and resources are not an issue, then the focus can be on implementation. New governmental directions and programs often have a much more complicated approval process. The implications for many citizens and stakeholder organizations must be carefully weighed.

The voluntary sector is much more likely to work on a social issue, and develop an innovative solution with a sense of urgency and without the promise of resources being available. There are many initiatives in Saint John that have been started because the need was great. The Human Development Council is part of a committee developing a “one stop” Resource Centre for Youth. It is proposing a new way of allocating resources to better serve youth. Their challenge is two-fold: to develop a meaningful service with the involvement of youth, and to convince decision makers to invest resources in a new way.

Working on an issue with a sense of urgency and without resources

Documentation

Both sectors are very challenged by the requirements for documentation and the time frames, but for different purposes. For government, it is the amount of documentation required in the planning process and in the allocation of funds. The voluntary sector experiences less pressure, except time, in reporting on the use of the funds. There is a high level of stress for the voluntary sector in clarifying and completing the documentation required for requesting funds. This discourages some agencies from applying because they lack the personnel or time to do all the paperwork.

Caring Communities

Both sectors care about what happens to individuals, to communities, and to the world internationally. Staff from both sectors volunteer in their own communities. They participate in office fundraisers for United Way, support families at Christmas and engage in other initiatives to support community agencies. There are individuals in both sectors who are willing to “go the extra mile” to be more flexible in working out solutions for individuals or communities. This caring connection is a true catalyst for working together.

7. Conclusions

The Voluntary and Public Sector as Partners in Public Policy

Non-profit organizations have been the country’s leading innovators¹⁵. Not surprisingly, my internship reinforced the value of the voluntary sector as a partner in the public policy process. It also illustrated the challenges. The following thoughts are a

These thoughts are a “work in progress”!

¹⁵ Peter F. Drucker, international philanthropist and founder of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management and Canadian Foundation for Nonprofit Innovation

“work in progress” and identify ways to strengthen voluntary sector and government partnerships in the public policy process.

Why

The benefits far outweigh the repercussions of not working together. Collaboration makes for responsiveness and provides a forward momentum. At times, working in government, I could feel the magnitude of the responsibility of guiding an approach to an issue to the best of my ability and understanding. I see this in other staff, particularly under tight time restraints. Partnerships with the voluntary sector contribute to the accuracy of one’s perspective and response.

When one talks about communities, it is important to recognize that the voluntary sector is a key player. Community agencies, non-profit organizations, and recreational and cultural groups are all members of the voluntary sector. They are the catalyst and the link to all sectors of the community, be it for ideas, resources, action, or cohesion. Most importantly, they are the link to individuals who are closest to, and most affected by, social policy issues.

Voluntary Sector, a key player in communities

“Just do it”!

I am always reminded of this quote from a colleague with years of government and community experience. We have many examples of the benefits of “just doing it”; from the Voluntary Sector Initiative at the national level, to a local community/government partnership that developed a guidebook on departmental policies for individuals on social assistance.

A key starting point is relationship building and this applies to both sectors. The more opportunities, both formal and informal, the sectors have to talk to one another, the more they will be able to work together. It does mean stepping out of one’s world. For example, there should be more effort on the part of senior government officials, whether in a provincial capital or in Ottawa, to meet with groups in the community.

Senior management at both levels of government have expressed confusion with the “how”; even universities have expressed uncertainty about how to contact community partners. It is important to recognize that the “how” needs attention; it doesn’t just develop on its own. Those who are not part of the voluntary sector can be overwhelmed by the number of different groups and unsure as to which ones they should consult. It is equally confusing for the sector looking at government and trying to figure out who is who!

Community and government partnerships bring creativity but also unpredictability. When groups are developing a common agenda and/or solutions there are a number of variables they can’t control, such as the process for getting the work done, balancing the concerns and perspectives of group members and working within the financial resources (or under conditions where they are lacking). There is a higher comfort level with such unpredictability within the voluntary sector than within government however. This may detract from the willingness of government to participate in a true partnership with community groups, characterized by a sharing of both the decision-making and the responsibility.

The “just do it” or, as a colleague said, “do it just” approach will be more effective if community groups recognize the importance of working together to meet with

government, rather than always operating as single entities. Furthermore, I would suggest that community groups take a lead role in initiating meetings with government, rather than wait to be involved.

Community – Government Brokers.....

Brokering

We have investment brokers, insurance brokers and information brokers. Perhaps there should be community-government “brokers” who could develop and connect the opportunities and links between sectors. Brokers would be knowledgeable about, and respected by, both sectors. The dictionary defines brokering as “meaning to broach, tap, or start a discussion.” Brokering could involve many roles: helping to understand and identify how and when to build community input; liaison; strategic information-gathering; troubleshooting; or mediation. A pilot project could be instrumental in defining and assessing these possible roles.

Knowledge Sharing - Learning Communities

Both sectors need to learn more about how to work with one another. These relationships can be, and have been, adversarial and based on misconceptions. From both perspectives, the element of trust and risk-taking is paramount and needs opportunities, time and experience in order to develop. There are a number of catalysts that can make a difference.

The ultimate goal of government and community partnerships is improving the overall quality of life for citizens, and this shared goal can be a catalyst for working together. We know that “Canadian communities are increasingly well managed and community leaders know their local needs.”¹⁶ Both sectors bring different, yet uniquely valuable sources of information that contribute to knowledge about each community. Statistics, studies, reports, funding sources, personal experiences, and community planning processes contribute to a better understanding of a community’s challenges and strengths. Sharing sources of information is a starting point.

Canadian Communities are increasingly well managed and community leaders know their local needs

Building informed communities is a joint exercise that needs to involve all sectors. It is also part of the policy process. It relates to many aspects of the policy process from issue identification, learning about the issue, research and development of options (final decision making being the prerogative of government), to implementation and evaluation of impacts.

Assessing the impact of all our interventions means working together and being knowledgeable about our communities. This could lead to a better investment of our resources in what *we know* has the greatest impact. Learning about our communities *and* the impact of initiatives, both government and community, can be a catalyst.

The internship was also a catalyst. Relationships were developed during the internship by focusing on the issues, learning about them and incorporating different inputs/expertise from the individuals involved. There was recognition of the knowledge we each bring, including myself as an intern. In addition, staff from both levels of government welcomed opportunities to meet with, or hear from, community groups working on similar issues, but from different perspectives.

¹⁶ *Delivering Federal Policies in the Regions: Partnership in Action, Final Report of the Task Force on the Coordination of Federal Activities in the Regions*, July 2002

Learning includes examining other models, including the relationship between government and the economic development sector. All three levels of government work together with leaders of the business and labour sectors, strategizing and planning economic development. We should be working towards a similar kind of partnership for social development.

In closing, I am very honoured to have had this unique opportunity to learn so much about governments, their priorities and the policy process. It is truly stimulating, integrating these learnings with my community experience and understanding. Greater levels of collaboration will be achieved, through the growing leadership of community groups and government. Thank you.