

TAKING STOCK

How Canadian Child and Youth Agencies are Responding to Economic Challenges

Case Study #12: United Way of Chatham-Kent

Creating a Community Hub for Social Innovation

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Creating a Community Hub for Social Innovation

United Way of Chatham-Kent

Background of the organization

There are currently over 100 United Ways across Canada whose volunteers and staff strive to meet urgent needs in their communities through partnerships with community leaders from government, labour, business, special interest groups and individuals.

United Way of Chatham-Kent was established in 1948 and staff and volunteers continue to work with local social service agencies to help develop and deliver innovative, high-quality and effective programs to meet the needs of individuals and families throughout the municipality of Chatham-Kent. They partner with agencies that:

- Assist children and youth through organizations including Chatham-Kent Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Chatham-Kent Family YMCA;
- Help families through organizations such as Family Service Kent;
- Help improve the lives of the disabled and the challenged, through organizations including the CNIB, and Canadian Hearing Society;
- Support social and community planning agencies that are working together to build healthier communities.

The three primary focus areas for the local United Way are 1) From Poverty to Possibility, 2) Strong Communities, and 3) All That Kids Can Be. Each of the local United Way's current activities fit into these broad strategic areas of focus.

When the opportunity to rent, and subsequently own, a building that would provide space for a not-for-profit incubator and offer small offices for local social service organizations became available, United Way of Chatham-Kent jumped at the chance. The goal was to build a vibrant multi-tenant, mixed-use community resource centre.

Issue or situation

In 1997, during a period of municipal amalgamation, United Way of Chatham-Kent initiated a grass roots, voluntary sector-initiated community building project entitled "Nurture the Future." The focus at that time was on economic development and community capacity building and included a dream to develop an incubator space that would support numerous community projects and programs. For the decade prior to 2006, the organization had been located within the J. G. Taylor Community (WISH) Centre in the east end of Chatham. Finding itself bursting at the seams, the hunt for a more appropriate space to facilitate their goals began in earnest.

In 2006, United Way of Chatham-Kent moved its programs into "The 425" – the name affectionately given to the United Way's new home at 425 McNaughton Avenue West in Chatham. Beginning with a lease arrangement for the first four years, the opportunity for a new home came when a local family offered a vendor take-back mortgage on the facility. Modeled after The 215 Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto, the vision for "The 425" became reality and the United Way Centre for Community

Innovation was launched. At the time, United Way of Chatham-Kent identified a number of community issues and challenges that needed to be addressed, including the need for the organization to have a stronger voice at the decision-making tables in the community.

Challenges

The local United Way faced two significant challenges. The first was that many discussions about community issues continued to take place in silos with little or no collaboration, and without United Way at the table. Because they were not always participating in those early discussions with municipal and other community stakeholders, they were not able to intervene and help provide solutions when it was most advantageous.

Second, while their new building offered a huge improvement over their previous home, it was unsuitable for many of the activities taking place there. In addition to United Way's offices, the new space had attracted nine other organizations to co-locate at "The 425". These included the Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent, Chatham-Kent Block Parent Program Inc., Chatham-Kent Drug Awareness Council, Family Group Conferencing (a program of Chatham-Kent Children's Services), Changing Ways, Habitat for Humanity Chatham-Kent, St. John Ambulance, Local Immigration Partnership Program and St. Clair Catholic District School Board "Step Forward Program" – all of which had space requirements for their programming.

Essentially a large rectangular space with a kitchen at one end, a boardroom at the other, and offices along the periphery, the huge open space in the middle was not ideal for the mix of activities taking place. For example, one of the innovative programs operated out of "The 425" is an alternative education program for up to 15 students who were unable, for a variety of reasons, to benefit from a traditional high school setting. In partnership with the St. Clair Catholic District School Board, the "Step Forward" Program provides an opportunity for the students to earn their high school diplomas – with focused attention. The youth attend the program on a daily basis, with a teacher and teaching assistant providing instruction in an alternative classroom setting. It was a challenge for these students to study in the large, open multi-purpose space in the middle of the building, and privacy was a major challenge.

Actions taken

In early 2011, United Way of Chatham-Kent received funding from The Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) and the Municipality's Community Partnership Fund to renovate "The 425" to better accommodate existing and prospective not-for-profit organization tenants and community activities. The OTF funding allowed the organization to create a separate training room and a classroom for the students in the alternative education program, while the grant from the Municipality funded a teaching kitchen for students as well as other tenants.

Renovations were completed in the summer of 2011 thereby allowing the United Way Centre for Community Innovation to promote the use of the new Training Room (large enough to accommodate 80 to 100 individuals in theatre style or 30 to 40 individuals at tables) and other meeting rooms in the facility to the general public for group meetings, workshops, seminars and other professional development sessions. With the exception of two vacant offices, they are currently at full capacity in a ground floor space that is fully accessible.

Programs and initiatives that currently operate in the facility include regular meetings of Prosperity Roundtable, Habitat for Humanity, Zonta Club, Youth Engagement Partnership Group and United Way Youth Committee (and others), special event planning meetings for the Amazing Race, Bushels of Hope Campaign and BackPacks for Kids Program, as well as weekly meetings for United Way staff and volunteers and Changing Ways anger management classes. Several of “The 425” tenants have been able to increase their staffing levels, thanks to the additional accommodation provided.

Outcomes

A significant initiative that came out of the “*Nurture the Future*” Project was the establishment of the Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent, one of many strategic initiatives spearheaded by the local United Way. The Coalition was initially established to encourage Chatham-Kent to become a more welcoming community, to attract immigration and new and needed skill sets to the region, and to offset outmigration of youth. Other recent local initiatives have now assumed primary responsibility for the attraction and retention of immigrants and newcomers.

A big shift over the past five years is that United Way of Chatham-Kent is now recognized as an integral partner in community planning. The organization is now actively engaged in conversations about how to create a stronger, safer, more caring community. They continue to be leaders in the initiation of collaborative community dialogue around issues of poverty reduction, drug and alcohol misuse and youth engagement, while incubating a number of committees that are looking at different aspects of these issues. The local United Way is committed to tri-sector integration – bringing business, government and voluntary sector partners together – to identify issues, mobilize resources and create solutions.

Chatham-Kent communities are reaping the benefits of “The 425”, the United Way Centre for Community Innovation. Over the past twelve years, several community-building projects, initiated and/or supported by the local United Way have become their own charitable organizations or not-for-profits. These include the Chatham-Kent Children’s Safety Village, East Side Pride (which began as a neighbourhood revitalization project), NeighbourLink (a network of Christian churches) and Habitat for Humanity Chatham-Kent.

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