



CASE STUDY | NEW BRUNSWICK'S COVID-19 RESPONSE TO VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

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When COVID-19 restrictions were announced in New Brunswick, communities were ready to respond quickly to the needs of vulnerable residents across the province. This was largely due to the established Community Inclusion Networks collaborating with four sectors (non-profit, business, government, and citizens) locally, and their close partnership with the provincial government.

OVERVIEW

On March 13th, the Government of New Brunswick closed schools, recreation and non-essential businesses. On March 19th, a State of Emergency was declared, closing any remaining non-essential businesses, services and banning social gatherings.

Those working in the non-profit sector in particular, have been concerned about how to keep delivering their supports to residents who rely on their programs and services. With new information and policies handed down daily or weekly, the non-profit sector has had to figure out:

- 1) Where to get accurate up-to-date information;
- 2) What regulations mean for operations; and
- 3) How to adapt to continue serving clients.

This case study explores how New Brunswick's poverty reduction collectives quickly mobilized their community response to food security and transportation access for vulnerable residents across the province.

About the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC)

The Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) is a Crown Corporation overseeing the provincial poverty reduction strategy. ESIC works with 12 regions (Community Inclusion Networks [CINs]), which together cover the entire province. Each CIN has a mandate to develop a local plan aligning with the provincial 9 priority actions and in collaboration implement the plan with community members (www.gnb.ca/poverty).

This approach allows flexibility for the broader strategy to support regional differences in political, economic, social, geographic and demographic characteristics.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Here are the three key concepts we hope you will walk away with after reading this case study:

- Poverty Reduction collaboratives have built and/or sustained and grown the local social capital and developed mechanisms (relationships, advisory groups, funding channels, asset maps, etc.) needed for a quick, organized response in an emergency.
- A formal connection with the provincial government has been beneficial in rapidly addressing the gaps emerging in each unique New Brunswick community.
- Communities are looking for transparent and clear messaging from the province, and to see they are being listened-to.

THE PROVINCE'S RESPONSE: FOOD AND TRANSPORTATION

Stephane Leclair, Executive Director of the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) describes the process as being “natural” and “easy” to ask the Community Inclusion Networks (CINs) to take on the role of information intermediaries and coordinators of transportation (first), food security (second), and available community services. The coordinators have been convening and collaborating across all four sectors – business, non-profit, government and citizens - in each community for the last 10 years to implement local poverty reduction strategies; they have well-established connections, visibility and trust with local organizations and residents in each community.

Transportation access and food security were the most obvious places to start in helping people weather the crisis. Particularly in a province as rural as New Brunswick, there are large gaps in public transportation. Some municipalities don't have taxis, Uber/Lyft or bus service, thereby leaving many vulnerable community members that do not drive, to rely on volunteers to help them get to essential places such as medical appointments, food banks or grocery stores.

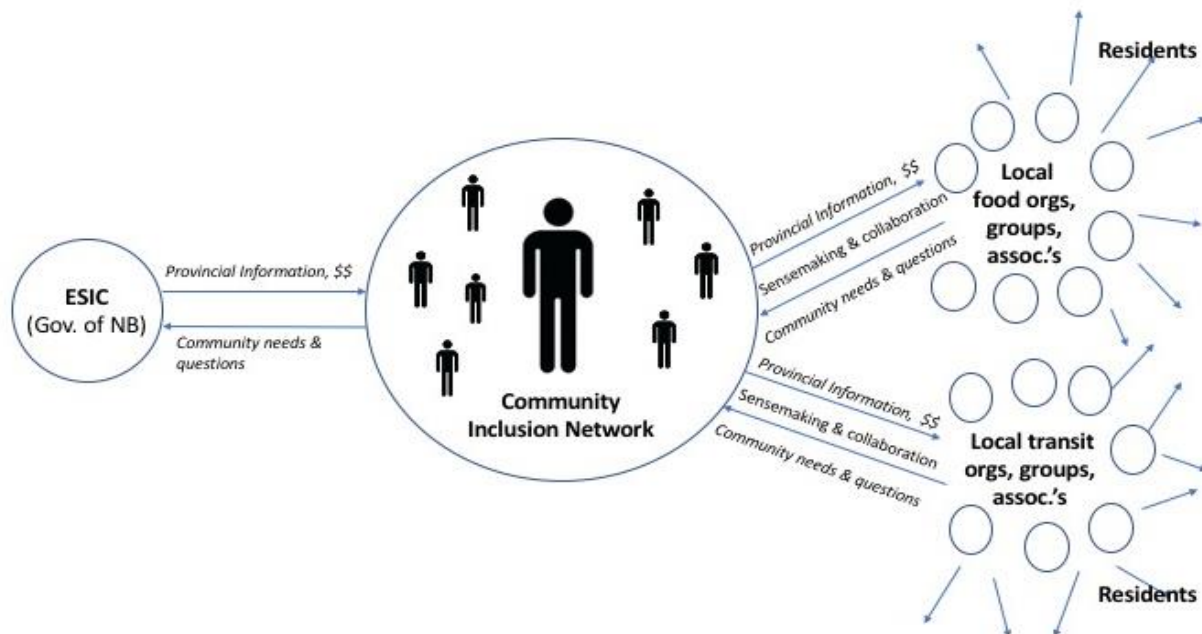
Once the restrictions were announced, ESIC and the CIN Coordinators started meeting a minimum of twice a week and immediately began assessing who in each community needed service and which organizations, groups and associations needed help to provide that service. The Coordinators, with their local partners, have been essential in doing this assessment rapidly and identifying who has which strengths, how the community is coming together, where the gaps remain, and what else is needed.

The communication flows two-ways, from province to community and back, through the staff Coordinator for each of the 12 CINs. At least twice per week, ESIC and the Coordinators receive the most up-to-date information from one another. Coordinators distill the information and share it with

“The Community Inclusion Network Coordinators want the information to be transparent, clear, supportive, and to know that we’re listening to them.”

Stephane Leclair, ESIC

communities in their region, helping to interpret the implications where needed. Then, CIN Coordinators provide information from their communities on where the gaps are emerging. The province provides as many answers as possible, searches for more information as needed, and helps re-allocate financial and staff resources to meet the unique needs in each CIN region.



The response is different in each CIN. For instance, some CINs had community transportation initiatives already in place and could strengthen and adapt them with the province's support, whereas the ones that didn't are having to set-up an entire transportation system during the pandemic.

ESIC is collecting information as-they-go to understand what worked well, what didn't work during the crisis response, and what should continue beyond the pandemic. For instance, the development of a transportation provider network and providing the necessary checklists and protocols related to COVID-19 has been invaluable to the CINs.

WHAT THE PROVINCE IS LEARNING

Asset mapping is critical to helping communities organize fast. CINs that had done [asset mapping exercises](#), or whom had well-established extensive networks were able to organize quicker. They were in a much better position to know who was doing what in the region, who had which assets, and their contact lists were up-to-date to turn the information over to ESIC and other stakeholders.

They would have benefitted from having a central [2-1-1 phone service](#). Despite some CINs that have a local database, everyone has been calling different numbers for different information. A central phone number with an operator guiding people to all the services they may qualify for and noting which are open, altered or closed, would be more effective.

Direct communication. Amidst the chaos, CIN Coordinators have appreciated having a set schedule for

meeting together to see one another and receive information from the province; and to have clear instructions regarding their priorities and scope of work. This has allowed Coordinators to be in the loop, feel supported and confident that they are contributing meaningfully.

GREATER SAINT JOHN EMERGENCY FOOD PROGRAM

The [Greater Saint John Emergency Food Program](#) is an example of a neighbourhood-led Collective Impact response where organizations who were working together and connected through Living SJ (Community Inclusion Network), were able to move quickly to establish a collective food security response in the City of Saint John.

Everyone has been thinking about food security during the COVID-19 crisis, as neighbours self-isolate, workers are laid off, and programs providing meals to low-income and at-risk populations are closed. As of the beginning of April, in the midst of the crisis, 80% of United Way Saint John, Kings and Charlotte County's funding requests were for food security initiatives.

The Emergency Food Collective was the first beneficiary of the local United Way's [Atlantic Compassion Fund](#). They began small, but adapted and expanded as new restrictions were introduced. The collective was originally started by Inner City Youth Ministry, P.U.L.S.E., Waterloo Village Neighbourhood Association, Carleton Community Centre and Horizon Health Community Development in order to get food to families whose children typically access school lunch programs. With children remaining at home for full days, there has been additional pressure on families who already struggle to make ends meet.

They started by adapting the paper bag lunch program - an initiative of the Inner City Youth Ministry to pack and deliver bagged lunches to inner city schools students. With schools closed, they switched to bringing the bagged lunches to non-profit organizations that were still open to distribute them. When those organizations closed as well, and anticipating that COVID-19 restrictions would not be short-term, the collective secured a bigger packing and distribution space in a cruise ship terminal owned by the Port of Saint John, and they transitioned from a volunteer-based operation to partnering with and re-deploying staff from organizations in priority neighbourhoods. This move also helped several non-profits maintain employee hours; for instance, drivers with the Boys and Girls Club of Saint John were re-deployed as bag packers and delivery drivers, and administrative staff at Carleton Community Centre were re-deployed to taking phone calls for the Emergency Food Response. Finally, with a delivery model established and the need for food increasing in the community, they expanded

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Alexya Heelis, United Way
Saint John, Kings and Charlotte



the service to others in the community, including isolated adults and seniors.

The program that started out as a brown bag lunch continues to strengthen. Some partners have joined organically while others, including donors and businesses, have been recruited by the United Way, and through Living SJ partners – both of whom have a birds-eye view of who is doing what and which assets they could contribute. They have been directing organizations to a single system approach and helping fill the needs of the expanding food collective, rather than duplicating efforts. The Waterloo Village Neighbourhood Association, Crescent Valley Resource Centre, Boys and Girls Club of Saint John and several others have come to play key roles in this initiative and contribute the resources they can make available.

The local United Way, with provincial connections, advocated on the collective's behalf to recognize them as an official provincial food response for the Saint John area. This gave them access to the New Brunswick Food Depot Alimentaire (a warehouse procuring and distributing food to food banks and food programs across New Brunswick) to get their food from one place, rather than making five or six trips to the grocery store each day. It is making the initiative more sustainable to be part of the system; and they are using this opportunity to also link smaller food initiatives to Dustin, a Coordinator of the Emergency Food Response program, so that they can get their food orders in bulk for better prices and in one trip.

Organizations that haven't primarily been involved in food security put their organizational missions and operations aside in order to be client-centered – pitching in to fill any gaps so that individuals and families needs are being met. The Emergency Food Response is a real testament to the skill of Saint John's grassroots organizations and what they can accomplish by employing a Collective Impact neighbourhood-led approach.

As of April 6, 2020, the emergency collective had served 1,998 individuals in 629 households, with an average of 125 deliveries per day.

NEXT STEPS

For the future, they are hoping to retain the efficiencies that are being created in the local food system. With new funding for the New Brunswick food depot, there are enough resources to provide food to all of the food banks; the more food banks who use the system, the more purchasing power they have to buy bulk products cheaper than market price. And, they are emphasizing sourcing from local farmers in New Brunswick so that they aren't reliant on buying produce from Ontario and other provinces.

The collective, United Way, foodbanks, YMCA, Living SJ and other partners are now starting to plan for recovery by discussing how to transition support back to food banks without over-burdening them and making sure everyone still has a food source.

CONCLUSION

The success of Saint John and New Brunswick's rapid response is founded in the local poverty reduction tables building and sustaining or expanding the social capital needed to help residents and communities thrive in positive economic times and to survive in crisis situations. Their mechanisms: formal relationships between the province, grassroots associations and non-profits, funding channels,

leadership and advisory groups, etc., help communities to shift gears and roll out resources quickly where they were needed. The trust that Coordinators and their partners have built in the community made them a natural source of good information and space for collaboration. And community development activities, such as asset mapping or building community transportation systems, gave them a headstart in being able to adapt their systems and practices, rather than build from scratch.

While COVID-19 is changing communities at home and around the world, we have a collective responsibility to seek out the positive stories of human resilience and glean learning from instances, such as in New Brunswick where communities responded effectively and efficiently, and determine how we improve before the next crisis strikes.

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