
VITAL SIGNS: CONNECTING COMMUNITY NEEDS TO COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY IN CANADA

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INTRODUCTION

CANADIAN COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS ARE KEY SUPPORTERS OF THE CHARITABLE sector across the country, which is one of the largest in the world. A key challenge for philanthropy in this vibrant environment is how to sort through competing priorities, identify highly strategic opportunities for support, and clear some space for deeper conversations and solutions. Through the *Vital Signs* program, a growing number of community foundations are trying to do just that.

As community philanthropists, community foundations take a broad approach to community vitality. They support the full scope of the charitable sector, responding to and highlighting emergent needs, helping shape public policy discussions, and supporting social innovation. This article takes a detailed look at *Vital Signs*, a national program developed by Canada's community foundations to bolster this perspective on community philanthropy.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS AND VITAL SIGNS

For many years, Canadian community foundations have been working to deepen their involvement in building more vital communities, bringing together people from all parts of the community to stimulate new ideas and build participation. The growing emphasis on community leadership is the result of two key realities. First, community foundations' broad networks give them a natural opportunity to engage community members with high levels of social capital. Secondly, community foundations' ongoing work as asset-builders and grant makers gives them a strategic perch from which to see trends, challenges, and connections in Canadian communities.

For the past three years, a program called *Vital Signs*, which is led at the national level by Community Foundations of Canada, has provided a new level of precision and drive to community philanthropy. *Vital Signs* is an annual community check-up conducted by local community foundations to measure the vitality of Canadian communities, identify significant trends, and assign grades in at least ten areas critical to quality of life. Each community's report card data is a compilation of numerous research sources that help communities make connections between issues and trends in different areas. The creation of the report involves a community engagement process to determine key research questions, identify research sources, and, at the end of the process, elicit the communi-

REPORT

ty's response to the compiled data. The findings are presented in a reader-friendly format to make them as accessible as possible.

As a tool, the *Vital Signs* program, which will include 18 Canadian community foundations in 2009, has had a positive impact on community philanthropy in four key ways:

- With recent and trend data, community foundations have important information with which to target their grantmaking to address urgent and sometimes hidden needs.
- Using the *Vital Signs* publication, community foundations are able to reach out to prospective donors and provide valuable strategic information to existing donors.
- Through the community engagement aspect of *Vital Signs*, community foundations build new relationships, reach new groups, and create forums for networking and collective action.
- By publishing critical information in a format designed for the public, and by doing so simultaneously across the country, community foundations contributes to important public policy debates in Canada.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

Community knowledge is at the heart of the community foundations' capacity to work with donors to have a philanthropic impact. Community foundations already gather plenty of information about trends, assets, and needs in their communities, through their broad network of community relationships, the community leaders who volunteer on their boards of directors and committees, and their wide-ranging and open grant proposal processes.

Vital Signs takes this web of information gathering one step further by injecting hard data in areas that correspond to a foundation's grantmaking fields of interest. Importantly, *Vital Signs* is not about conducting new research, it's about gathering existing research from a variety of sources (national, regional, local, government, non-government) that pertain to the geographic area that a foundation is mandated to serve. This ranges from the census information to annual statistics from school boards, hospitals, and women's shelters. The program requires that data is sought within the following ten issue areas: The Gap Between Rich and Poor, Safety, Health, Learning, Housing, Getting Started, Arts and Culture, Environment, Work, and Belonging and Leadership. As is relevant locally, community foundations may add issues areas; for example, many choose to highlight transportation issues.

Typically, a *Vital Signs* report contains four to ten statistical indicators in each of 10 to 12 issue areas. Examples of indicators are youth unemployment rates, average-waiting times for subsidized housing, and the percentage of elected official coming from visible minorities. The selection of which indicators "tell the story" is at the discretion of each community foundation, but over the years this evolves as new perspectives and data emerge.

Collected data becomes one of several inputs that guide the establishment of granting priorities. For instance, when its *Vital Signs* report indicated a local rate of obesity higher

than the national average, the Greater Saint John Community Foundation supported the local track association and helped to build a new running track for residents.

Low literacy and learning findings in *Waterloo Region's Vital Signs* were behind The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation's decision to make a \$100,000 four-year commitment to a new education-support program. Pathways to Education had drastically reduced dropout rates in Toronto and encouraged students to pursue post-secondary education. By sharing the story of this unique program with donors in the Waterloo Region and connecting it to the data findings in *Vital Signs*, the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation leveraged a nearly matching amount of support for the Pathways program.

For community foundation donors who are eager to target their grantmaking to address the most pressing needs, *Vital Signs* is a valuable resource. Typically, copies of the report are widely available through inserts in daily newspapers and direct mail-outs to the community foundation's own donors and other partners. At least one foundation, the Toronto Community Foundation, has gone the next step and developed a companion publication, *Vital Ideas*, which catalogues high-impact and closely vetted grant opportunities in the same issues areas (Learning, Health, etc.) that are covered in Toronto's *Vital Signs*. By directly linking research about the community with real grantmaking opportunities, the foundation provides donors with the complete knowledge needed to engage in strategic community philanthropy.

The Red Deer & District Community Foundation found that the biggest impact of *Vital Signs* came from the way it engaged the community and, consequently, the foundation's board, in a process of priority setting. Through *Vital Signs*, homelessness and the environment were identified as key priorities. In response, the foundation created new funds dedicated to supporting those areas and has hosted fundraisers attracting both existing and new donors.

FRAMING COMMUNITY REALITIES AND NEEDS

While *Vital Signs* is not designed to involve original research, sometimes the act of compiling data and putting it into the public realm allows community foundations to uncover and highlight areas in need of attention. In the Canadian context, there are many ways that data about quality of life in our communities is shared: think tanks, governments, media, etc. *Vital Signs* is an opportunity for discovery because it gathers data across the established issue areas, whether or not those are the usual domains of discussion in a particular community, and whether or not that data has previously had public attention. As a consequence, from time to time *Vital Signs* reports shine the light on urgent matters that have received insufficient attention.

For example, *Calgary's Vital Signs* 2008 brought public attention to a number of disturbing statistics about how immigrants were settling in Calgary. Due to the local economic boom, Calgary has become a magnet for migrants from other regions of Canada, including many newcomers. *Calgary's Vital Signs* revealed that while 50% of employed immigrants who come to the region have post-secondary educational credentials; their average income is 63% lower than non-immigrants. By raising awareness, the report gave confi-

dence to the city's diverse community 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.

When the Community Foundation of Ottawa sought to highlight domestic violence statistics in its 2008 report, they made a significant discovery. No statistics about shelter use were being kept across the city's shelters. The shelters all kept data and offered to work together to create a citywide tally. In talking to shelter staff, the foundation also learned that a stunning total of 5,150 women had to be turned away due to full capacity at these shelters. This information was the lead story in the city's largest daily newspaper on the day *Ottawa's Vital Signs* launched, which raised more broadly an awareness of domestic violence and the statistics on women being turned away from shelters.

The Sudbury Community Foundation has given its report a Northern Ontario flavour, publishing data about a number of communities in the region facing similar challenges and opportunities. As well, to reflect its significant Aboriginal population, *Sudbury's Vital Signs* contains a section titled "Aboriginal Community Life," which contains such statistics as population growth, education attainment, and income levels. In these ways, the Sudbury Community Foundation uses *Vital Signs* to demonstrate its connection to, and builds awareness of, regional and Aboriginal concerns.

A SPRINGBOARD FOR ACTION

As *Vital Signs* evolves, participating community foundations are treating the publication of their reports as the beginning of a cycle, not the end. An enormous amount of work goes into gathering input and data and publishing high-quality reports. Typically, staff and volunteers spend hundreds of hours combing through data, making content clear and reader-friendly, selecting photos and community stories, and much more. The next step is to share what has been learned with the community and begin a discussion about the community's quality of life.

The Toronto Community Foundation, which is where the *Vital Signs* model originated, has a rich approach to linking its report findings to action. The foundation hosts Toronto Dialogues, a "transformative dialogue" informed by *Toronto's Vital Signs*, in which the foundation convenes people who share a concern for a particular problem, such as housing, public space, or youth safety, to explore the problem with an eye to generating tangible actions. Participants have often never worked together before.

GALVANIZING RICH CONVERSATIONS

Realizing the full value of *Vital Signs* requires a commitment to using it as a catalyst to engage the public and media in the emergent narrative about the state of our communities.

Sometimes this is done directly. Through a sponsorship, 25,000 copies of a four-page summary of *Vancouver Vital Signs* were distributed to health centres, libraries, community centres, and schools across Vancouver. More often awareness is generated through the media. *Vital Signs* has been met with tremendous interest on the part of local and

national media. All participating foundations publish their reports on the same day, which helps build profiles and interest. *Vital Signs* is a top story of the day in all of the publishing communities. In most cases, reporters and editorial boards write companion articles, and in a few cases executive directors of foundations publish monthly newspaper columns discussing *Vital Signs* findings and community responses.

In 2007, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) began publishing *Canada's Vital Signs*, a report focused on national data. In 2008, CFC went one step further and published the report as an insert in *The Globe and Mail*. In doing so, its goals were to get into Canadians' homes with data about issues that need immediate attention, such as poverty rates and the economic integration of immigrants. The insert was designed to catalyze public discussion on these and other issues, and to provide stories that could inspire ideas and action.

CHALLENGES

Practically speaking, one of the challenges facing the *Vital Signs* program is obtaining sufficient and up-to-date data. The census is done every five years and, apart from that, information gathering about the population tends to be done through surveys. This means that for smaller communities there is frequently an insufficient sample to produce reliable results. Local sources such as school boards, transportation and health authorities, and municipal governments tend to be helpful in providing data, and some foundations commission local polling to add details about local perceptions or concerns. Whereas foundations always start their *Vital Signs* process with the question "What do we want know?" ultimately the content of the reports is circumscribed by what data are available.

Since the *Vital Signs* program relies heavily on the media to carry its message, there is an inherent lack of control over what will ultimately be communicated to the general public. The most compelling data in *Vital Signs* tend to leap into the headlines and create a need to be vigilant about asserting a connection to philanthropy. Stories about how communities are responding to that data tend to be secondary for the media, and community foundations need to work very hard to maintain the connection to action.

Media clippings related to *Vital Signs* number in the hundreds each year, putting the top data stories firmly into the community spotlight. But it is harder to measure a consequent rise in community philanthropy and related strategic grantmaking. The Victoria Foundation has received two, \$1-million gifts as a direct result of publishing *Victoria's Vital Signs*; donors contacted the foundation for the first time after seeing their report. But examples like this are not frequent, and the work of building community philanthropy through *Vital Signs* must be seen as a long-term process. When existing donors are considering their own granting choices, we see *Vital Signs* having an impact. Ultimately though, *Vital Signs* is just one of many tools that community philanthropists use to make decisions, alongside such valuable vehicles as charitable marketing campaigns, and historical and personal connections to certain causes.

Broadly speaking, *Vital Signs* is not intended to package up community philanthropy and high-impact granting into a tidy box, and even for a foundation's own discretionary

granting, it is one tool among many. Further, *Vital Signs* can create a challenge by raising expectations that community foundations will take responsibility for solving all the problems that are discussed through the reports. Balancing the task of publishing the reports annually with the equally important need to respond to the issues raised by the report is also an ongoing challenge.

CONCLUSION

Vital Signs is a relatively new approach for Canada's community foundations. It was born in Toronto in the mid-90s when the city began looking at the amalgamation of the city with several neighbouring boroughs. A group of community leaders then came together because they wanted to be able to measure how the new expanded city was doing. In 2001, *Vital Signs* became a Toronto Community Foundation initiative.

As *Toronto's Vital Signs* grew in popularity and profile, community foundations across Canada began to take notice. In 2006, CFC began coordinating the program on a national level and participation in *Vital Signs* has grown steadily, from an initial pilot with six community foundations to 18 foundations in 2009.

The fit with community foundations' role is so strong that *Vital Signs* is attracting attention outside of Canada as well. Community foundations from Europe, the U.S., South Africa, and Australia have been exploring *Vital Signs* as a way to monitor local quality of life. In 2008, the Instituto Comunitário Grande Florianópolis in Brazil launched, *Sinais Vitais*, the first non-Canadian version.

Vital Signs has been very successful in allowing community foundations to initiate and fuel important conversations about quality of life and inequalities. *Vital Signs* encourages us, and others, to take a transformational approach.