

The Chagnon Foundation

Partnering with government to promote childrens' health

Preventing poverty and ill health through public/private collaboration

Private foundations are essential sources of financial support for charities who cannot deliver their programs with individual giving and government funding alone. In exceptional cases, a foundation may bring sufficient resources to the table to enable the government to tackle social issues that cannot be addressed adequately without a major and comprehensive public effort. One such case is the effort of the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation to improve the health of school age children, an effort conducted in direct partnership with the government of Québec. This unprecedented collaboration reflects the Chagnon Foundation's recognition that the government was not going to act alone to intervene in an area of crucial importance to healthy child development. It is also an example of the kinds of initiatives that private foundations can take, if their resources are sufficient, and an illustration of the way in which private foundations can contribute to public priorities.

A philanthropic case study: the Québec en Forme initiative of Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon

The Chagnon Foundation's mission, adopted when it first became active in 2000, is "to contribute to the development and improvement of health (defined as a complete state of physical,



Putting children's needs first

psychological, spiritual and social well-being) through poverty and disease prevention focused primarily on children and their parents." Prevention is a focus of the Foundation's work. The founder and his colleagues saw the gap in public health spending between the amounts spent on the treatment of disease and the search for cures, and the funds available for preventive public strategies to avoid ill-health -- less than three per cent

of the health care budget. The Foundation has also focused on the well-documented but not sufficiently addressed connection between illness and poverty. It has committed to directing its substantial resources (the largest in financial terms of any private foundation in Canada) to addressing the problem among children of disadvantaged families in Québec, with a long-term inten-

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tion of convincing governments to adopt a preventive approach to the problems of disease and poverty.

One of the Foundation's key-stone initiatives is Québec en Forme (A fit Québec). The program develops the physical and mental well-being of children in under-privileged families, through the vehicles of the school system and of community organizations across the province. Using consultants, teachers, existing community service specialists, local sports clubs and new community organizations created specifically to deliver the program, Québec en Forme targets children from four to twelve years old who rarely engage in sports or physical activity due to lack of means or opportunity. In some cases the activities are integrated into school timetables; in others they are scheduled after classes, on week-ends and throughout holidays. Launched in 2002, by early 2006 the program had reached 35,000 young students in 120 schools in more than 100 municipalities. The intention is to reach every community and school with an identifiable need – which means 80 per cent of Québec communities – before 2015.

Taking a front-end approach to health

The logic of the program is unassailable, says Chagnon Foundation CEO Dr. Roch Bernier. Despite two decades of economic growth, the number of poor households in Québec and across Canada has remained static. Early intervention in disadvantaged children's lives is essential if they are to grow into healthy and productive adults. Nutrition, exercise and counseling play important roles in illness prevention, and help to lift families and young people from the poverty trap. For such a preventive strategy to succeed in changing individual behaviours, it must be applied over an extended period of time. This is one of the reasons why governments have a difficult time committing the scale of resources necessary. In the early part of this decade, the Québec government was concerned about allocating scarce resources to a comprehensive, early intervention strategy. The Chagnon Foundation coaxed the government into action by providing half of the \$24 million needed for the four-year launch of Québec En Forme. Today, the Foundation is prepared to commit another \$15 million, matched by its partner, for a minimum 10-year extension of the program.

Persuading public policy and health services to commit to prevention, with an emphasis on children, was "more than we could do by ourselves", says Dr. Bernier. Adopting long-term horizons and turning over health service delivery to local communities and schools was difficult for any provincial government. "So we made a choice to partner directly with the government (so that we could both achieve our goals)."

The health of young children is soaring to the forefront of public attention – two-thirds of children and youth in Canada are not physically fit enough to protect themselves long term against heart disease and diabetes, according to the Canadian Medical Association. Québec en Forme's experience is already adding new insights to public strategies to reach children who may be overweight, inactive or physically awkward, especially those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. In 2006, Québec en Forme decided to accelerate its anti-tobacco education and to substantially increase nutrition and nutritional awareness, based on foundation-funded evaluations of the program's first four years.