

The Norlien Foundation:

Finding a better way to serve Calgary's poorest children

Providing more than financial support

Private foundations can provide inspiration, guidance and legitimacy to bright ideas and new initiatives. They are well positioned to experiment with policy approaches that government policy makers can learn from and subsequently adopt, if the outcomes are clearly beneficial to community. The role of the Norlien Foundation in supporting the OneWorld project at downtown Calgary's CUPS health centre is a case in point.

A philanthropic case study: the Norlien Foundation's OneWorld

Founded in the late 80s, the Calgary Urban Project Society (CUPS) became a major provider of basic health, social services and education support for the city's marginalized, impoverished residents. Over time, CUPS staff recognized that the challenges began with the children of their adult clients – the street people's kids – who start life impoverished, maltreated, developmentally deprived and destined for long-term dysfunction. In 2000, family donors to the Norlien Foundation, already a significant supporter of CUPS, committed the Foundation to intervening, in the best sense. Foundation members personally encouraged and endorsed CUPS efforts to develop a more comprehensive solution including daycare, health care, and counseling for the pre-school children and their parents. "They needed a facility to help teach the parents how to parent, to help them-



Finding innovative ways of reaching out to Alberta's poor.

selves, and to create a more positive environment for their kids," explains Norlien Foundation executive director David Elton. Believing that a holistic model would work better than the silo approach of separate government and voluntary services picking up and passing on children through various stages of life, the Norlien Foundation supported the creation of OneWorld, a centre that brought therapists and counsellors together on one site for the families.

By 2002, the Norlien Foundation was granting \$100,000 annually to OneWorld's operations. In addition to a substantial capital grant, the Foundation took on fund-raising among other foundations and public sources, on behalf of CUPS and OneWorld. In 2002 OneWorld moved into its own building and opened its

doors to nearly 60 children.

Success at the early stages of life

The Norlien Foundation now funds a specialist to work with the children for three years after they leave OneWorld and enter the public school system. The Foundation also created a scholarship fund for any children of OneWorld who successfully graduates from high school. "It's a 20 year investment," says David Elton. The initiative is admittedly experimental and "far beyond the capacity of any government agency," he says. But it may prove worthwhile, even cost-effective, and has to be tried because "we know what's traditionally being done doesn't work. It was this understanding

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(by the Foundation's patrons), which has made us so committed to OneWorld."

The initial results documented by a University of Calgary nursing school team are exciting. At age three most children entering OneWorld are diagnosed with speech and language and emotional problems. "But the majority of them are corrected by the time they start grade one," says CUPS executive director Carlene Donnelly. Their parents also

show reduced difficulty with parenting and less likelihood of child mistreatment.

Beyond funding, what Norlien provided is deep commitment to make the OneWorld experiment work. "It was not just a matter of writing a cheque, but also being at my side" in other fund-raising efforts and in seeking government support, says Donnelly. "We wouldn't exist if it weren't for Norlien." Non-profit organizations like OneWorld operating on the cutting edge of community services need flexibility

to meet emerging issues and to change responses, says Donnelly. "There's no way a government, particularly the province, could do that. There's too much inflexibility."

David Elton of the Norlien Foundation agrees: "Governments have to be all-inclusive, meet multiple interests, and they lose focus on the innovative. Most (publicly-funded) social services have little if any budget for innovation."