

**Developing A ‘Web of Action’
for Children’s Environmental Health in New Brunswick**

The New Brunswick
Children’s Environmental Health (CEH) Collaborative

A Narrative Description and Analysis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared for:

The Strategic Committee
New Brunswick Children’s Environmental Health Collaborative

By

Bonnie Hamilton Bogart, B.N., M.Ed.
Consultant in Public Health, Environmental Health and Social Development
Village of Gagetown, New Brunswick E5M 1H8
Tel: (506) 488-1888

June 5, 2012

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Introduction

In May of 2005, a core group of New Brunswick organizations and agencies began discussions on ways to reduce children’s exposure to environmental contaminants that may cause illness, disability, disease or death. From these early conversations, the idea emerged to create a broad network of New Brunswick agencies interested in working together on this issue.

Today, this network is comprised of more than 300 individuals representing approximately 20 sectors from nearly 100 agencies – including 3 levels of government, non-government organizations, educational institutions, private sector agencies and individuals. Its mandate has expanded to include the strategic goals of getting children outside and creating healthy environments for children where they live, learn and play. Thus, there is in New Brunswick today a broad scope of influence somewhat akin to a ‘web of action’ around children’s environmental health.

In the seven years since its inception, the Collaborative has achieved some important milestones, including the development of a collaborative model, a strategy for action, an implementation plan and concrete outcomes based on the plan.

Given the rapid growth of the Collaborative, and the forward momentum it has demonstrated, the Strategic Committee overseeing the work of the Collaborative felt it timely to conduct an initial evaluation of the Collaborative. Health Canada subsequently commissioned the evaluation, which would document the narrative of the Collaborative thus far and develop an evaluation framework and tools for future use.

This summary deals only with the narrative portion of the evaluation. Its purpose is two-fold:

1. To contribute to an enhanced understanding of the activities and progress of the New Brunswick Children’s Environmental Health Collaborative to date, including lessons learned and thoughts for the future; and
2. To provide an analysis of the approach used by the Collaborative to achieve community engagement.

The story line of the evolution of the Collaborative rolls out under these themes:

- Beginnings
- Who makes up the Collaborative?
- Finding Common Ground
- Creating the Strategy for Action
- Building the Collaborative Model
- Resourcing the Collaborative
- Implementing the Strategy
- Communicating the Message
- Impacts, Outcomes and Stories
- Looking to the Future: Thoughts from the participants.

Findings

Respondents noted significant changes within agencies as a result of their participation in the Collaborative:

- **Change agents.** The creation of strong personal agents of change for children’s environmental health. Participants initiated changes in their spheres of influence, contributing to cleaner, healthier workplace environments and safer environments for children.
- **Increased Awareness and Capacity-building.** Participants increased their own capacities to address children’s environmental health issues, and subsequently, built capacities within their agencies – both at the staff level and the management level.
- **Bridge-building/networking/collaborating.** By providing networking and collaboration opportunities, the Collaborative has helped to remove barriers and build bridges between and among government and non-government agencies.
- **Supporting agencies in their work.** The Collaborative’s work has directly and indirectly supported the work of the many agencies within its sphere of influence.

Successes of the Model

Successes included:

- Strong networks and working relationships initiated and maintained among government and non-government organizations
- An improved understanding of organizational cultures and how to work with them
- Culture of acceptance and openness to new ideas within the Collaborative – “a safe place” to explore solutions to complex issues
- Strengthened capacities within participants, agencies and communities
- Shared responsibility and shared results through collaborative relationships
- Mobilization of the resources of many sectors
- Significant steps toward solving challenging and complex issues in children’s environmental health

Suggested Areas to be Strengthened

These suggestions included:

Participants’ Understanding of the Model and Strategic Plan

- Update the Implementation Structure and the strategic plan to better reflect current status.

- Clarify goals, milestones, current structure and the roles and responsibilities of committees, teams and team leaders.
- Add a description of the responsibilities of team members.
- Develop strategies so that each participant is aware of how he or she fits into the structure of the Collaborative, and their role within the Collaborative.

Leadership

- Enhance participants' understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various levels of leadership.
- Focus attention on the practice of shared leadership.
- Attract and mentor new leaders.

Government Involvement

- Continue to communicate with, and develop networks among government agencies.
- Enter more formal partnerships with government agencies with respect to sustained core funding and project funding.

Conclusions

As the story unfolded, there emerged a distinct ripple effect that moved steadily from the source (the Collaborative) to many areas within the participants' spheres of influence, whether their participation was active (team leadership or membership, Strategic Committee membership) or passive (listserv membership, attendee at province-wide meetings).

In spite of the expected challenges of using a collaborative approach, the New Brunswick Children's Environmental Health Collaborative has made significant gains for the issue in terms of public and professional awareness, representation from a broad spectrum of sectors, actions to reduce exposures on many fronts, and building a level of "readiness for change" within government and non-government spheres of influence.

At this point in time, with the groundwork laid, the networks and collaborations activated, capacity-building begun and early goals met or in progress, participants have articulated a readiness for continuing to build the network and producing concrete, trans-disciplinary, multi-sectoral and multi-cultural advancements on children's environmental health.

Recommendations

Recommendations centre around three themes:

- 1) Explore ways to achieve stable funding to sustain the Collaborative.
- 2) Develop a plan for updating and strengthening the infrastructure of the Collaborative.
- 3) Set a course for the future giving priority to:
 - recruiting additional participants and members of the Strategic Committee

- strengthening capacities within the Collaborative
- increasing understanding of roles and responsibilities
- monitoring progress
- mentoring leaders
- communicating results and
- expanding the ripple effect and the ‘web of action’.