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Changing the odds: United Way Avenues of Change paves brighter futures for Surrey kids

One in three kids in BC starts kindergarten with odds stacked against their success – in the classroom and in later life. In Surrey’s Guildford West neighbourhood, this number is worse: it’s almost one in two.

United Way of the Lower Mainland is determined to change these odds and ensure more kids in Guildford West start school ready to succeed. United Way Avenues of Change is a bold early childhood initiative designed to tackle child vulnerability on a neighbourhood level. Research shows kids thrive when their neighbourhoods thrive.

United Way has committed to investing \$1.2 million over the next three years into this initiative. Today, \$400,000 was invested. These funds will act as a catalyst for the community and be used to implement neighbourhood-specific strategies tailor-made for the community to change outcomes for vulnerable kids including:

- mental wellness support,
- early childhood literacy support,
- health promotion,
- and a screening program that helps track children’s developmental progress.

“When we invest in children, we invest in the future,” said the Honourable Amrik Virk, M.L.A. and Minister of Technology, Innovation and Citizens’ Services, whose riding – Surrey-Tynehead – includes a large portion of the Guildford West neighbourhood. “I applaud the United Way of the Lower Mainland for their innovative and courageous approach to ensure children in Guildford get the best chance to succeed in life.”

“Surrey is the fastest growing city in BC with one of the youngest populations; in fact, one-third of Surrey’s residents are under the age of 19,” said Mayor Linda Hepner. “Investing in our children and families is essential to ensuring a healthy, more sustainable and prosperous community for tomorrow. This is why we actively support United Way in this important early childhood initiative.”

“From the start, United Way Avenues of Change has been a deeply collaborative neighbourhood project,” said Michael McKnight, President and CEO of United Way of the Lower Mainland. “We knew that in order to tackle a complex issue like child vulnerability, we needed to bring together people and partners at a local level who are passionate about ensuring children and families thrive.”

Key partners in the initiative are the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at UBC; the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC); the Children’s Partnership Surrey-White Rock, which consists of the City of Surrey, Fraser Health Authority, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, School District 36, Surrey Libraries; DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society and Options Community Services Society who will manage the implementation of the Action Strategies in Guildford West; and the residents of Guildford West.

About United Way of the Lower Mainland

United Way supports children, families and seniors in need. We are leaders in our field developing partnerships, tracking progress, and bringing the right people together to initiate change. UWLM funds 150 agencies throughout the Lower Mainland to deliver more than 300 programs and services. To learn more, visit www.uwlm.ca.

Backgrounder

- United Way Avenues of Change (UWAOC) is an innovative early childhood initiative spearheaded by United Way of the Lower Mainland in 2013. The goal is to ensure more kids start school ready to succeed.
- Guildford West was one of the pilot neighbourhoods chosen for this five-year initiative because it has a higher than average percentage of young kids considered “developmentally vulnerable” when they enter kindergarten—43% compared to the B.C. average of 33%.
- Vulnerable children are defined as those children who, without additional support, have a higher risk of struggling in school and in later life. Research shows that many problems—such as poverty, homelessness, obesity, and crime—have their roots in the first years of life.
- The Guildford West neighbourhood is bounded by Fraser River to the north and follows the Trans-Canada Highway east to 152nd Street. Its southern boundary is 100 Avenue and western boundary is 144th Street.
- The thing that makes this project different is that we are taking an innovative place-based, or neighbourhood-specific, approach to changing outcomes for vulnerable children.
- A place-based approach involves first understanding the local factors contributing to vulnerability, and then developing and implementing neighbourhood-specific strategies to address these factors. This approach recognizes that where kids grow up matters—the conditions of their neighbourhood have a direct impact on their development.
- The community engagement phase of the project completed in fall 2014 (under the project’s former name: My Neighbourhood, My Future), collected input from more than 800 parents, residents, and service providers in Guildford West.
- Community input helped identify the unique needs and challenges facing families with young children and develop four neighbourhood-specific Action Strategies that will be implemented starting this fall:
 - **Support on the Go:** A program that builds mental health wellness among families with young children, and offer kids and parents practical tools for stress reduction.

- **Health Promotion Ambassadors:** A new group of volunteers who reach out to families where they live, providing information on healthy eating, physical activity and other topics to promote healthy life choices.
- **Literacy Ambassadors:** A new group of volunteers who reach out to families where they live, teaching parents how to engage their children in early literacy activities.
- **Early Childhood and Family Check-In:** A new system of support that involves screening all kids at age 2 to ensure they're meeting developmental milestones and connecting them to appropriate services if needed.
- UWAOC is a deeply collaborative project. We know it takes a community working together to effect the greatest change. Guildford West has the capacity and partnerships in place to take on this initiative.
- Partners involved in shaping the Guildford West initiative alongside United Way have so far included:
 - the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC
 - the Social Planning and Research Council of BC
 - the Children's Partnership Surrey-White Rock, which consists of the City of Surrey, Fraser Health Authority, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, School District 36, Surrey Libraries (and United Way)
 - DIVERSE^{city} Community Resources Society and Options Community Services Society, our two local host agencies that will manage the implementation of several Action Strategies in Guildford West
 - Families and residents of Guildford West whose input helped to shape the Action Strategies

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