

Together for Vanier: Crime Prevention Ottawa Sparks Change

A neighbourhood in transition

When the City of Ottawa underwent amalgamation in 2001, the former City of Vanier went from seven regional and municipal council representatives to one city councillor. Prior to amalgamation, it was common for Vanier's residents to engage elected and appointed municipal officials in casual conversation, heading off small issues before they became big ones. Redefining itself as a small neighbourhood in a large regional municipality – it covers only three of Ottawa's 2,800 square kilometers – Vanier's traditional problem-solving process faltered.

Distinguished by its francophone character, older buildings and proximity to the City's By Ward Market, Vanier began to struggle with higher levels of drug trafficking and prostitution. Increasingly unkempt streets and parks, and dilapidated businesses and residences contributed to a sense of decline. On the surface, Vanier's 15,726 residents – 69 percent of whom rent their homes compared with 37 percent in the rest of the city¹ – seemed to have given up hope for better days. Community members rarely reported crimes or concerns about suspicious activities to the police. A Community Police Centre, established to foster relationships and educate the public about crime and safety issues, had failed to attract much notice among residents in general. Neighbourhood Watch programs were nonexistent.

Moving in the right direction

Despite appearances, many community organizations and individuals had continued to work to improve the neighbourhood. *Centre de Services Communautaire Vanier* (CSC Vanier) began helping residents fulfill their personal and professional potential in the 1980s. Established by the (then) regional government, the centre offered crisis counselling, parenting skills workshops and community development activities. Over the years, it added skills training, employment support programs and legal clinics, and today offers financial and human resources to a wide variety of resident-focused programs and services.

Georges Bédard had worked as a city councillor during the 1970s and 1980s and, at the urging of community leaders, re-entered municipal politics in 2003. Now representing the communities of Vanier, Sandy Hill and Lowertown, Georges and others saw the potential for coordinating the efforts of social service agencies, the police and community organizations in order to better respond to the growing social and safety and security concerns of the ward.

Another key leader was newly-appointed Ottawa Police Chief Vern White. Hired in 2007, Chief White adopted a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood approach to crime prevention. He responded to growing drug and prostitution problems in the By Ward Market and Vanier by creating a street level crime unit that would take direct action against street-level drug dealing, prostitution and crack houses. He also offered support to local Business Improvement Areas (BIAs).

His efforts coincided with an initiative headed by Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO). This organization was established in 2005 as a result of recommendations made by a city-appointed panel for community safety. Operating at arm's length from the municipality, CPO contributes to crime reduction and community safety through collaborative, evidence-based crime prevention. CPO is a partnership of the City of Ottawa, Ottawa Police Service, United Way/*Centraide* Ottawa, Children's Aid Society of Ottawa and the area's four school boards. Beginning in 2006, it began planning a community-wide crime prevention strategy focusing on youth, violence against women and crime-affected neighbourhoods.

Late in 2006, CPO's board decided to take a more active role in community development and issued an invitation to Vanier community leaders. Using demographic, crime and socioeconomic information compiled by the Ottawa police in partnership with University of Ottawa Professor Holly Johnson and the city's planning department, CPO staff held an information meeting in January 2007 at CSC Vanier. Together with Councillor Georges Bédard and CSC Vanier staff, CPO offered to help identify and address Vanier's crime and safety issues. It also had startup funds available to lay the groundwork for a community-led process. Were they interested?

Meeting invitees – 25 representatives from Ottawa Police Service, the City's Parks and Recreation, Public Health and By Law departments, schools, the Pauline Charron Centre (for those 55 and older), *Quartier* Vanier Merchants Association (Vanier's BIA), Boys and Girls Club and representatives from Vanier's many cultural groups – gave a resounding “yes.” Although they did not participate in the first meeting, representatives from the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health were also invited and eventually became active partners in the initiative.

Meeting participants decided their first step should be to conduct a community survey. With the assistance of Holly Johnson, a CPO working group met from January to April 2007 to develop the survey tool, periodically consulting with meeting attendees on its design. In order to convey the hope that their work would be taken up by every resident, business owner, social agency and municipal, provincial and federal government representative associated with the neighbourhood, the working group decided to name the initiative “*Ensemble pour Vanier/Together for Vanier.*”

In May, the survey was distributed to households through Vanier's bilingual community newspaper (*Perspectives Vanier*), mailed to local organizations and placed in neighbourhood gathering spots. In all, 495 questionnaires were completed. Residents confirmed that drugs and prostitution and the declining appearance of their neighbourhood were at the top of their list of concerns.

In June, CPO helped organize a community forum where residents were able to hear the survey results and talk about their issues in detail. Says CPO Executive Director Nancy Worsfold: "We had expected 50 people to come and were thrilled when 115 showed up. Some of the residents became angry and upset when they described their experiences in the neighbourhood. They needed a safe place where they could describe incidents that had frightened and concerned them. Once they saw and felt that we were genuinely trying to provide a path forward, it became possible to turn the energy of discontent into energy for action."

Committees for change

The initial survey working group was re-formed as the Together for Vanier Steering Committee. Its role is to ensure support for other committees and projects, and to maintain communication among initiative partners. Led by the CSC Vanier and bringing together local service providers, its members monitor and document progress.

At the June 2007 forum, two working groups were established – beautification, and drugs and prostitution. Initially, CPO staff chaired meetings and provided information on useful models and activities. The beautification working group soon elected resident Debbie St. Aubin as its chair. Its action orientation now regularly attracts 20 people to its monthly meetings. The group has operated three neighbourhood cleanup days, two in conjunction with the City of Ottawa's "Spring Cleaning the Capital" campaign.

The 150 residents who arrived for a fall cleanup of Vanier's 10 parks in October 2008 found that the work done the previous spring had kept the parks clean. As a way to continue monitoring the community, the working group then instituted the Eyes on Vanier walking club. Spring through fall, up to 15 residents meet weekly to exercise their dogs, all the while taking note of derelict properties and signs of drug dealing and prostitution. As the group rounds a corner, cell phones come out and members report the situation to the appropriate agency.

Debbie's welcoming leadership style and preference for informal meetings have ensured a continuing flow of project ideas and citizen involvement. The working group has encouraged people to 'adopt' garbage cans and has attached signs naming the 'adoptive parent.' Concrete flower boxes that were filled with trash are now being reclaimed and will soon overflow with flowers bought with donations from Action Vanier, an umbrella of community organizations. Work is underway to establish community gardens. Thank you notes are written and sent to residents, businesses and organizations that take steps to clean and beautify their properties. The stationery features artwork by Vanier school children.

CPO continues to chair the drugs and prostitution working group, but residents are now beginning to consider taking on greater responsibility for activities and direction. Though reporting criminal and nuisance activity is the tool of choice for change (supported by a CPO-produced services handbook for landlords, now in its third printing), the working group has also conducted surveys and lent its voice to a successful lobbying effort to build a new drug addiction treatment centre for the Ottawa area.

In order to continue the trend of devolving responsibility for community development work from CPO, CSC Vanier and the police, residents are busy building a neighbourhood association. Having a charitable status number will allow Vanier groups to apply for project funding from a variety of sources. Association President Michael Horne is pleased at the community's interest in the association, including attendance at a forum the group organized jointly with Councillor Georges Bédard. CPO provided the fledgling group with funding for training its board of directors, Georges contributed some development money and – without any prompting – residents at a street party held a raffle and raised a few hundred dollars to support the association's work.

Says Michael: “Vanier residents have to figure out how they can develop the association as a long-term change agent. We've never had a neighbourhood association before and there is definitely an eagerness to tackle some of the issues we've been working on under the CPO umbrella. For example, I was recently approached by a social service agency that wants to share ideas and resources for youth at risk. Once we have a greater capacity for planning and managing community development initiatives, the world will be our oyster.”

The role of business leaders

Early in his appointment, Police Chief Vern White extended an offer of assistance to business owners across the City to help them make Ottawa cleaner and safer. *Quartier Vanier Merchants Association* was quick to turn his words into action. Association Executive Director Suzanne Valiquet and President John Therien connected with CPO and the Together for Vanier initiative, and meshed their cleanup efforts with resident-led beautification work. During the community's first spring cleanup, they dropped off a broom and t-shirt with every one of the 100 business owners along Vanier's principal commercial street. They asked people to devote 20 minutes every Friday to sweeping the sidewalk in front of their businesses and talking to their neighbours. They repeated the broom distribution efforts the following autumn and spring to owners along Vanier's second- and third-busiest commercial strips. The symbolism of “out with the old, in with the new” quickly re-instilled pride of place and broke down old habits of isolation.

Quartier Vanier Merchants Association decided to institute a weekly Farmer's Market over a six-week period in the summer of 2008. The community response was so positive that the market will run for 12 weeks in 2009 and will incorporate visual and performing arts elements. Paralleling the Eyes on Vanier walkabouts (nicknamed ‘walkaboos’ for their see-and-tell nature), the association hired private security officers to patrol the three commercial avenues and report property damage and drug and prostitution activities to the appropriate agencies. It also invested in new street lighting, garbage cans and graffiti removal services. *Quartier Vanier Merchants*

Association and the residents' efforts to beautify Vanier are now resulting in increased pride and a revived community spirit.

Many forms of leadership

CPO funding allowed CSC Vanier to hire Mehdi Louzouaz to work as a community liaison officer. His resident-focused, friendly approach has won many people over to the Together for Vanier initiative. As a child, Mehdi lived in Middle Eastern and African communities with his diplomat parents. Those experiences, combined with a background in social work, computer science and business, and ongoing work as an auxiliary constable with the Ontario Provincial Police (Kanata detachment), have made him an ideal community bridge builder and program ideas person.

Mehdi recently helped launch a bilingual Together for Vanier website (<http://www.togetherforvanier.com>). His plans for the summer include a "movies in the park" event every Friday in July, a "Say Hi" campaign, a major garage sale and barbecue, and the continuation of an outreach program he calls "Caravane Vanier." Every Thursday between the hours of 2:00 and 7:00 p.m., Mehdi, a CSC Vanier intake worker and a representative from a community partner organization park a van on a neighbourhood street and set up a table with coffee and events fliers. They talk with passersby about their needs and hopes for the community.

Mehdi also continues to broker relationships among established groups and those involved with the more recent, Together for Vanier-led work. Action Vanier, for example, began producing the *Perspectives Vanier* community newspaper in 2003 and organizes an annual maple sugar festival. Says Mehdi: "It takes time to blend approaches and meld programs and activities. People are still finding their way together, and we work to respect and appreciate one another's input."

Individual residents are discovering their own capacities for leadership. Shortly after moving to Vanier and pregnant with twins, Kate Greer-Close established Vanier's first Neighbourhood Watch. She wanted a safe community for her family and was undeterred by possible backlash from local thugs. Her example, and encouragement from Mehdi and Community Police Officer Fernando Vieira, led to the formation of five more Neighbourhood Watches; others are planned. Residents are taking back their public spaces. Where seniors had previously been afraid to walk the streets, they are re-emerging on Sunday afternoons and the parks are filling up with children.

Officer Vieira was assigned to Vanier in 2008 and continued the liaison and relationship-building work begun by his predecessor Marianne Laver. He had worked as a patrol officer in Vanier and downtown Ottawa for three years before his assignment and is always looking for ways to improve community-police relations.

Drugs and prostitution working group member Kimberly Yull relates a small but telling story about the impact of his efforts. "When Constable Vieira heard about a couple of pre-teens creating trouble in one part of the neighbourhood, he spent time getting to know the boys and

involved them in this spring’s cleanup day. He made sure that a resident who’d previously had run-ins with the boys was on hand at our celebration barbecue to award them Dairy Queen certificates as a gesture of thanks. Later that day, the man and two boys had their heads together looking over the kites the boys had won in a raffle. That kind of relationship building is what keeps kids and adults grounded and safe.”

The end of the beginning

A second community survey was conducted in February 2009. The 414 respondents listed as Vanier’s assets its sense of community, closeness to downtown, community services, people and proximity to shopping. Improvements noted over the last two years included a greater police presence, fewer sex trade workers, beautification projects, increased cleanliness, fewer drug dealers and more community involvement. Not all the news was glowing. Residents continue to have concerns about prostitution, speeding cars, loiterers, garbage and panhandlers. They would like to see a continued focus on security and beautification, and on squeezing out the drug and sex trades.

As residents and community organizations begin to grapple with the larger issues of poverty and crime – notably diversion programs for prostitutes, better ways to discourage the activities of johns, pimps and drug dealers, and the availability of affordable housing – there comes the recognition that the work to reclaim Vanier must continue.

Key Crime Trends in Vanier and Ottawa, 2007 to 2008

	2007		2008		% change	
	Vanier	Ottawa	Vanier	Ottawa	Vanier	Ottawa
<i>Enforcement-driven charges¹</i>						
Cocaine charges	50	545	85	631	+70.0	+15.8
Breaches of probation	19	232	32	263	+68.4	+13.4
<i>Incidents</i>						
Mischief to property	302	8,392	280	7,918	-7.3	-5.6
Theft under \$5,000, Vanier	485	14,978	473	13,727	-2.5	-8.4
Assault, including sexual assault	225	3,802	160	3,516	-28.9	-7.5
<i>Total, Crimes against the person</i>	387	6,854	275	6,037	-28.9	-8.3
<i>Total, Criminal Code Offences, excluding traffic</i>	1,813	44,537	1,626	41,185	-10.3	-7.5

1. Enforcement-driven charges figures result from increased levels of police presence and enforcement.

(Statistics provided by District Inspector Alain Bernard.)

Says Community Police Officer Fernando Vieira: “CPO has done a great job of acting as a community catalyst. There was a lot of energy for change here, but residents and organizations needed a group that could bring everyone together. Nancy Worsfold has been a tremendous leader and residents now understand that the work must never stop. They’ve come a long way, but there’s still a long way to go.”

Community Association President Michael Horne agrees. “We’re riding a wave of change and excitement right now, but it will be important to join our work with others like the Federation of Citizens’ Associations of Ottawa-Carleton. Having a presence in larger groups will give us access to higher-level thinking, research and planning going on elsewhere. Sharing our successes and setbacks with others and listening to their stories will help us expand our efforts. We need to hear more about the needs and priorities of our recent immigrants, for example. Finding leaders from within our diverse communities will help us to more fully live out our aspiration of moving forward together.”

District Inspector Alain Bernard oversees the allocation of resources for neighbourhood officers, school resources and the community police centre for a large portion of Ottawa’s downtown district. He has a particular fondness for Vanier and is pleased that the force’s presence and relationship-building work have been so successful in helping revitalize the area. Says Alain: “In policing, we’re always faced with the need to continue to advocate for social development. We need spaces and programs to divert young people from the kinds of activities offered by gangs. We know that we’re always slightly behind the criminals and that we have to play catch up. Strong, cohesive communities are the best defense we have against crime in any form, and we’re proud to have been associated with Together for Vanier.”

So proud, in fact, that he submitted a description of the initiative to the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OACP) Community Mobilization Awards program. CPO, CSC Vanier, the Vanier BIA and the police service submitted the bid jointly, hoping that the publicity would help reinforce the message to Vanier residents that they are on a good path and doing the right things. On June 22, Alain and beautification working group chair Debbie St. Aubin will go to Sudbury to receive the award on behalf of the community.

Ideas worth sharing

Crime Prevention Ottawa is currently in a strategic planning phase to determine the types of initiatives it will pursue in the next three years. For Nancy Worsfold, Together for Vanier confirmed that community development requires organizations to follow the concerns of the community. Says Nancy: “When you’re doing this work, you have to be open to the possibility that you don’t know everything and that the end point is uncertain. Funders, agencies and community leaders need to be aware of that dynamic. If people start with too definite a picture of the goals they wish to achieve, they can miss opportunities. What made this project so interesting and so enjoyable was the recognition that no one holds *the* answer for a community. Real connection and progress result from the confluence of people working together. You have to trust each other and assume that even if you don’t agree on everything, you *can* work together.”

People in Vanier are so pleased with their success, they can't keep it to themselves. Residents are spontaneously planning street parties and coming out in large numbers to committee meetings and planned activities. To help re-build Vanier's public image, Kimberly Yull and others immediately contact media outlets when they incorrectly identify Vanier as the location of criminal activity, and they request a correction. On the plus side, media are regularly featuring more positive stories about the neighbourhood. Residents who now understand the importance of reporting criminal activity have developed call networks to multiply their impact. What were the ingredients that led to this kind of change?

Vanier had a lot of assets from which to draw. These included CPO – a catalyst organization with the experience and funding resources to encourage collaboration. Business owners, the police, CSC Vanier and numerous community organizations joined the effort. Vanier had residents who cared about their community and were prepared to move to action instead of continuing to complain. As people became empowered to report crime, however, they maintained sympathy for people locked into prostitution and drug use.

It is a legitimate concern that discouraging criminal activity in one neighbourhood may only encourage it to flourish in another, but police understand the forever nature of crime and the importance of continuing to work against its influence. Says District Inspector Alain Bernard: "Every time we move a crack house out of one area, we know we're weakening its ability to gain a foothold in the next one."

Drugs and prostitution working group member Andrew Leuty is realistic about the long-term nature of crime reduction. "We've tried to make small differences and improvements in our community and we really appreciate the hard work of the police force. The more we can put a squeeze on people who prey on others, the better. My hope would be that the whole city would work together on initiatives like ours to make Ottawa a safer, closer community. We have to learn to care more for our own and other people's children if we want a world without crime." Impossible? Police Chief Vern White would say that it can happen – one neighbourhood at a time.

Anne Makhoul

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Endnote

1. Vanier population and rental data from 2006 Census, Statistics Canada.

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