

## Taking social innovation to new heights

By Heather Hudson

Betty Ann Baker has a reputation for getting things done.

She's practically the poster child for social entrepreneurship, responsible for spearheading dozens of innovative social enterprises, including the wildly successful Niagara Women's Enterprise Centre where hundreds of low-income women have learned new skills, gained sustainable employment and even started their own businesses.

The secret to her success? Knowing when and how to ask for help.

"When you're presented with an issue you want to address, you've got to find out what's going on in and beyond your own community... I talk to people and see what they've created and how they can help. One thing always leads to another when you ask for input," said Baker.

Taking note of Baker's approach, SHSC's Social Innovation and Partnerships office is working to help service managers, housing providers and tenants across the province jumpstart social enterprises that help residents participate in the economy in a meaningful way.

"People like Betty Ann are creating sustainable solutions: the people who participate in her programs are learning the skills of having real employment. And she's doing it by knitting together a group of partners who can do things she doesn't know about to build business solutions," said Director of Social Innovation and Partnerships Cynthia Ross.

"That's exactly what we're working to do. We're pairing up housing service managers who want to effect change in their sector with people who've been there. We're providing connections and resources they wouldn't otherwise have."

Baker herself embarked on her first act of social innovation in the early 1990s when, after years of working in housing development with Niagara Peninsula Homes, she recognized that many of the residents were single mothers who were under or unemployed.

"We started looking at ways we could help people in co-operative or non-profit housing to either secure employment or start a business."

With the Niagara region rich in agriculture and tourism, Baker and her team took a sector-based approach and plunged into the food industry. By first helping small-scale farmers and women who were doing unique preserving, they created a manufacturing centre and a "Best of Niagara" gift basket for other women to sell.

All this led to the creation of the Niagara Women's Enterprise Centre where Baker and her team established a food label that women could market under, a kitchen and, eventually, Niagara Presents, a community-based network that is still thriving today.

Despite tremendous challenges and even some failures along the way, Baker is undaunted in her quest to create social enterprises that change lives. Most recently, she's fulfilling the dream to engage youth living in co-operative and non-profit housing.

When the social housing renovation and retrofit program was announced, her office put in 70 business cases for their clients, most focusing on energy conservation. In yet another inspired act of social innovation, she took the plan one step further.

"When we secured grants for different pilots, we hired youth to give them work experience. Service Canada grants cover six months of work experience and we created a social enterprise called Team Energy, which gives a minimum of six months of employment after their work experience, offering them more than just skills but longer-term employment."

Ross says this is exactly the kind of forward-thinking idea her office can help turn into a reality.

"Housing providers are well positioned to support social enterprise themselves or work with partners in their communities to create social enterprises for their tenants. We can help them get it off the ground by creating opportunities and making connections."

To learn more about a shining example of social innovation in action, go to [www.niagarapresents.com](http://www.niagarapresents.com).