

MARGARET WENTE

## Eight charities that deserve your cheer

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If you're feeling a little Grinch-y this holiday season, here's some advice: Lend a hand to somebody else. It will lift your mood. Nothing makes people happier than helping others.

But how? There are 1,001 worthy causes out there. Deciding which to support is hard. So I've teamed up with the folks at [Charity Intelligence](http://www.charityintelligence.ca/) [http://www.charityintelligence.ca/] to find some that will use your money well. This year, we decided to focus on small, grassroots agencies that help vulnerable women and youths. They all do a lot with very little, and all meet CI's highest standards for efficiency and transparency.

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"We consistently find better giving opportunities off the beaten track," says Kate Bahen, the managing director of Charity Intelligence. She's passionate about her work. CI is a small, non-profit agency whose purpose is to help donors make intelligent giving decisions. It uses volunteers, most of them recruited from the financial world, to evaluate charities across Canada and produce major reports on different charitable sectors.

The following list is by no means exhaustive. It's a sample of the many excellent agencies that are doing great work across the country. None are household names. But they all deserve your support.

[Aunt Leah's Place](http://auntleahs.org/) [http://auntleahs.org/], New Westminster, B.C.

Foster care is often tumultuous for kids. And in B.C. and many other provinces, kids in care lose their government support when they turn 19. Many of these vulnerable teens end up homeless. Aunt Leah's helps to find them housing and make the "transition to independence and adulthood." It also helps teen mothers in foster care by providing a residential program for the moms and their babies. Says one young mother, a graduate of Aunt Leah's who is now supporting herself and her child: "I don't think I could have raised my son on my own without that help."

**Camp Kirk** [<http://www.campkirk.com/>], Toronto and Kirkfield, Ont.

Camp Kirk is a small, friendly overnight summer camp near Kirkfield for kids with learning disabilities and other exceptionalities. Its fees are heavily subsidized so that the camp experience is available to children whose families couldn't otherwise afford it. The testimonials from parents are great, but the video testimonials from the kids themselves are amazing. "I really love it because if you're different, you feel at home," one boy said. "You don't get teased here. Here, you can act as yourself. You don't have to change yourself. You're perfect the way you are."

**Cornwall Alternative School** [<http://www.cornwallalternativeschool.com/>], Regina

This small, nurturing, family-like school is for children in Grades 7 to 10 who are referred by the regular school system because they're failing. They are identified as having the potential for success if learning is intensive and if they're kept engaged. About 85 per cent are from First Nations, and many are involved in gangs, drugs or prostitution. As one former student said, "Thanks to this school, I can see a brighter future and now believe in myself in everything I do."

**The Hammer Band** [<http://www.thehammerband.com/>], Toronto

Renowned violinist Moshe Hammer founded The Hammer Band as a way to give inner-city kids an alternative to gangs and guns. Its motto is "From Violence to Violins." This intensive program provides free violins and music lessons to 300 students, who learn the value of teamwork, self-discipline and personal responsibility as they acquire musical skills. Lessons begin in Grade 4, and the goal is to stay with the students through secondary school. As Mr. Hammer sees it, more time with the violin means less time on the street.

**Sarnia-Lambton Rebound** [<http://www.reboundonline.com/Home.html>], Sarnia, Ont.

For a young person in trouble, suspension from school can mean being shown the door for good. SLR tries to ensure that doesn't happen. It helps young people who are in trouble with the law, experiencing conflict at home or school, or at risk of substance abuse. Its in-school detention program coaches thousands of students who would otherwise be suspended from class. Over the past 30 years, its tiny staff and strong team of volunteers have helped more than 13,000 adolescents. Among other distinctions, the agency has won a Peter F. Drucker Award for excellence in non-profit management.

**WISH Drop-in Centre Society** [<http://wish-vancouver.net/>], Vancouver

WISH is a lifeline for female sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, more than half of whom are aboriginal. It's one of the few places where they're treated with dignity and respect. Their problems are overwhelming: physical and sexual violence, chronic stress disorder, depression, addiction, HIV, hepatitis C and more. WISH provides emergency services and respite from the streets. After the missing women's inquiry, WISH got a well-deserved funding boost from the provincial government. But it still depends on individual donations to expand its programs.

**Youth Fusion** [<http://www.youthfusionquebec.org/en/>], Montreal

Youth Fusion fights dropout rates (which are very high in Quebec) by teaching kids what they want to learn. The entrepreneurial founder, Gabriel Bran Lopez, develops partnerships with universities and companies to create after-school programs in fashion design, robotics, film production, photography and more. University students act as mentors to the kids, who lap it up. The program now operates in 70 schools across Quebec. The effect on dropout rates appears to be impressive.

**Save the Children Canada** [<http://www.savethechildren.ca/>]

Refugees from the Syrian war and victims of the devastating typhoon in the Philippines should be in everybody's thoughts this year. One way to help is through Save the Children Canada, whose U.S. parent gets top ratings from charity evaluation groups.

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