



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
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Community Agencies as Good CD Partners

Issue

An agency's provision of individualized services, however respectful and empowering it may be for individuals, does not provide opportunities for people to discover common cause, to support each other, or to work together to make change.

Every program interaction has the seeds of community development within it. Both program structure and staff/client expectations play a key role in shaping what these relationships actually look like, and whether they remain as individual and isolated inter-actions, or open up possibilities for broader engagement and collective activity.

Background

If organizations neglect to link individual skills acquisition to group discussion, learning and action, they are at risk of reinforcing the message that people's challenges can be solved by individual initiative alone.

For example, an employment program that helps new immigrants find jobs but does not connect this activity with opportunities for individuals to compare notes about the systemic barriers they face (e.g. in terms of getting their overseas credentials recognized) sends a particular message to clients.

Without balancing individual and collective opportunities for support, agencies may in fact limit a neighbourhood's overall community development and problem-solving capacity.

Solution

There is no one way to be a good CD partner. The TNC CD-Renewal initiative has categorized the range of community development roles that organizations may take on as "**CD Practitioners**", "**CD Enablers**", and "**CD Brokers**". These are not discreet approaches, and can exist together within any organization or program area.

Agencies that provide a lot of individualized service delivery do not necessarily have to take on additional community development roles, but they need to dedicate some intentional effort to connect their program participants with opportunities for group learning and action. Where program models do not include any opportunities for group discussion and information-sharing, workers can still make their program participants aware of activities being led by other agencies, community groups, local organizing initiatives and broader campaigns.

Results

CD Practitioners provide leadership and direction for CD initiatives. Examples may include engaging groups, facilitating discussions, leading group process, organizing community forums, gathering input for community and public education. This is the most active agency stance, appropriate for some but not all organizations. It requires dedicated staff and specialized group work, facilitation, engagement and leadership-building skills.

CD Enablers position their organization so that resources are available to support groups engaged in local community development efforts such as convening residents, networking, planning and mobilizing for events. Examples of this approach may include supporting leadership in the community; providing meeting space, printing and administrative supports; acting as trustees for unincorporated community groups; and supporting the organizational development of emerging community groups.

CD Brokers connect people to CD-related information and activities and actively link with other social justice groups. Examples may include ensuring that programs and spaces make information available about CD activities and connecting people with campaigns and political/ advocacy discussions. This orientation is all about making connections between program participants and broader activities in the community that are supporting social reform.

Reflections/Conclusions:

Community development is not another service to be designed and delivered “by” staff “to” community members. It is a way of seeing and working collaboratively with community members.

Not all community agencies have the capacity to actively lead formal community development activities themselves. But all community organizations can strive to be good CD partners and pursue their regular activities in ways that enable community members to work together to achieve greater social and economic equality.