



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
December 2008

Community Building through Gardening

Issue:

Using community gardens as a strategy for facilitating connections with residents who rarely interact.

Background:

Communities often include a range of people who may not typically come together on their own. Residents come from different countries have dissimilar cultures, and speak a variety of languages. Some residents have low incomes and others have higher incomes, some are young and others are seniors. Social services agencies frequently face challenges of creating connections between diverse community members.

Community agencies are in the position of finding creative ways to bring residents together across these diverse backgrounds. St. Clair West Services found that community gardens were an effective strategy to support connections among senior residents in the former City of York.

Solution:

St. Clair West Services for Seniors designed a community building project called "Planting Seeds for Community Growth". This project was intended to encourage inter-cultural interaction among low-income older adults who were often isolated.

Seniors from three apartment buildings were brought together to garden and beautify their neighbourhood and buildings. Seniors became aware of the project through community meetings and then made a commitment to participate, selecting seven of their peers to volunteer to lead activities in their buildings.

The project was launched with a gardening exhibition. Over the course of the project, participants attended workshops on horticulture, learned how to use gardening equipment and toured a farmer's market.

Local residents, mostly seniors, were involved in designing, planning and implementing the project. Participants decided on three types of gardening: a backyard kitchen garden, rooftop garden, and balcony gardens. In each location seniors met weekly and participated in a range of gardening activities from planting to harvest.

Results:

Social isolation was reduced as seniors were supported to participate in collective gardening activities with other seniors in their building.

Staff learned more about participating seniors and their needs.

Seniors became more engaged in various activities in their local community.

The project established a social network for vulnerable seniors and an effective forum fostering positive inter-cultural interaction.

The initiative enhanced St. Clair West Services for Seniors' partnerships with other agencies and generated a network among agencies involved in community gardening.

Reflections/Conclusions:

"Planting Seeds for Community Growth" provided an opportunity for seniors from diverse backgrounds to work together on various community gardening projects. Through participating in discussions and activities that promote mutual cooperation and understanding, seniors got to know each other and a foundation for social cohesion was established. It is hoped that the close interaction required in gardening could assist in reducing racial and ethnic tensions that divide residents in these buildings.

Seniors expressed keen interest in continuing the project and St. Clair West Services for Seniors will work with Toronto Community Housing to provide minimal support for this initiative for an additional year. A supportive seniors' network will also help to sustain a community garden program in each location where the project was implemented.

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