



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
December 2008

Partnering with Community Organizers

Issue:

How can community agencies work effectively with community organizing groups to advance social change?

Background Information:

In many instances effective and lasting changes can only be achieved by carrying out a range of complementary strategies and approaches and finding ways to link community convening and information-sharing with proposals for policy reform, and with bottom-up mobilizing and collective actions that empower community members affected by the issues (e.g. rallies, press conferences, marches, demonstrations).

Typically, community agencies that provide services are not always suited to lead organizing and direct action strategies. However, through partnering with community organizing groups, local community centres can play effective roles in connecting interested residents with these opportunities for collective action.

Organizations can also work together to advance a common change objectives, so that the lobbying and advocacy efforts of community agencies complement grass-roots campaigns for related reforms.

Solution:

Partnering can include intensive collaborations to mount joint events and campaigns, or more modest sharing of resources, such as making community meeting space available to an organizing group, or promoting local organizing events and issues that are relevant to issues facing program participants and encouraging them to get involved.

To address employment issues facing immigrant and racialized community members, Jane-Finch Community and Family Centre partnered with the Workers' Action Centre to mount a community forum and discussion on issues of precarious employment.

As an organizing group, Workers Action Centre brings the capacity to follow up after the forum and support community members to mobilize and take action together. Jane-Finch Community and Family Centre brings the capacity to make people in their neighbourhood aware of these opportunities, and to join in lobbying efforts urging the province government to enforce labour standards that would eliminate exploitive practices.

Results:

Partnering is an effective way to draw diverse organizational expertise and relationships together to advance common social change goals.

Linking with social justice campaigns, local organizing efforts, and the leaders and groups supporting these initiatives can bring energy and new perspectives into an organization.

While all community agencies may wish to integrate a level of CD work into their activities, not all agencies have the capacity, expertise or strategic interest in leading community mobilization efforts. Agencies may be more or less suited to specific strategies depending upon their political stance, their analysis of how social change happens, and their funding models or constraints.

Reflections/Conclusions:

Successful collaborations between community service/community development and community organizing groups require a high degree of trust among the partners. Unfortunately, differing assumptions and strategies can also lead to misunderstandings that thwart collaboration.

Service-providing agencies may be viewed by organizing groups as overly-cautious gate-keepers. Conversely direct action strategies used by some organizers may be viewed by agencies as manipulative, or too risky if they expose community members to un-welcomed media or police attention.

Differences of strategy and assumptions need to be identified and talked through in any partnership. In many instances it is the community itself that loses when organizations cannot align their efforts to tackle systemic issues together.

Contacts:

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Also see Workers' Action Centre at <http://www.workersactioncentre.org>