



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres  
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies  
December 2008

## Understanding Members as “Constituents”

### Issue:

How can agencies rethink the role of program participants as members and “constituents”?

### Background:

Parkdale Activity Recreational Centre (PARC) operates from a member-based perspective where local residents who use and benefit from the services and programs at PARC are called ‘members’ and are actively supported to be involved at most levels of the organization from frontline work to the Board of Directors.

Fifty-percent of members on the Board of Directors are required to be local community members who are psychiatric or mental health survivors and marginally housed. Members actively support the operation of various functions at PARC such as the kitchen, reception, and maintenance activities. They also receive a small honorarium for this involvement.

### Promising Practices:

PARC provides a number of ways for members to participate community development work. Two current examples include leadership training and housing advocacy.

PARC created a leadership training program for the PARC members and local residents called Knowledge is Power. These training modules have been used to great effect by a number of drop-in programs in Toronto. PARC is now exploring ways to build on the individual skills and confidence participants gained from this training, and can become actively engaged in processes that affect them.

One example of this more active engagement is PARC’s innovative Ambassadors Program which aimed to educate the wider community about a local building that will be redeveloped as affordable housing. PARC members were supported in going door-to-door and initiating conversations with their neighbours about the development. This process is in stark contrast to most

housing development work that seeks to avoid community consultations for fear of escalating already significant levels of resistance to low-income housing developments. Through the Ambassador's program PARC created new opportunities for discussion and understanding in the community, and supported members to act on their own behalf to dispelled fears held by the local residents' association and their other neighbours.

### **Results:**

Community members feel empowered to participate in change and hopeful that they can have influence on issues that affect their lives.

Community members who participate in programs or use services have the opportunity to actively lead and mobilize for change in their community.

Community members participate in designing, implementing and benefiting from solutions to community issues.

Community members can enhance, develop their capacities and skills and leverage their resources and networks.

### **Analysis:**

Member-based community development positions community members as leaders who play the central role in community development. For this to happen, the relationship between agency staff and community members must shift from a traditional client-staff, or doctor-patient approach, to one where the community member is a *client* to a situation where members are *community leaders*. The role of staff then becomes one of facilitating members' active engagement in processes of change.

### **Resources:**

- Knowledge is Power and the Ambassadors Program. Parkdale Activity Recreational Centre, (PARC).
- "Community Development: Beginnings in Social Work Enabling" pp. 59-94. Samuel Taylor and Robert Roberts. "Theory and Practice of Community Social Work." Columbia University Press, New York. 1985.
- "From Clients to Citizens: Asset-Based Community Development as a Strategy For Community-Driven Development". Mathie, Alison and Gord Cunningham. The Coady International Institute, St. Francis Xavier University. January 2002.

### **Contact:**

Tanya Gulliver