



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
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Using Community “Sweeps”

Issue:

What are ways community agencies can mobilize staff, volunteers and placement students to connect with community members around systemic issues?

Background Information:

For the last ten years St. Christopher House (SCH), has been conducting a community sweep in Toronto’s West End. Ralph Thornton Centre (RTC) recently adopted this process in the eastern part of downtown Toronto as a method to actively connect with the neighbourhoods they serve.

Community sweeps enable agencies to connect with community members in a personal way that helps to build mutual knowledge and understanding among volunteers, staff, board members and local residents. It provides agencies with a grassroots perspective on what’s going on in a community, and helps clarify effective roles that an agency might play, including creating new programs and supporting resident initiatives.

Solution:

The community sweep is a community outreach process that aims to increase awareness and connectedness between agencies and local residents.

SCH and RTCC use the community sweep to connect with residents who live in neighbourhoods within their catchment areas. The community sweep involves multilingual teams of volunteers conducting door-to-door interviews.

Volunteers participate in an orientation to the community sweep process which includes an overview of the agency, distributing information packages and describing the sweep process, guidelines and purpose. Volunteers, who include program members/participants, other residents and staff, are then paired or grouped and introduced to the locations they will canvass.

There is an attempt to create teams or groups that are multilingual and have a range of knowledge of the agency. Teams are encouraged to conduct informal interviews by engaging people in ‘friendly’ conversations.

SCH and RTC follow guidelines to ensure that the community sweep process is productive and comfortable for all who participate. For effectiveness, each team of volunteers involves one (or more) person whose language capacity matches the locations they will target and a person who is very knowledgeable of the agency. To ensure that all who participate are safe and comfortable, volunteers are encouraged to engage in a friendly conversational manner, use caution when entering or approaching buildings, and refer residents who have concerns to coordinator or manager if someone becomes too demanding.

Results:

The sweep is an effective way of recruiting volunteers, identifying emerging needs and current concerns in the community, and connecting people to services and supports. It also provides an effective forum for program members and participants, staff and board to expand their knowledge and increase their connections to the agency and to community residents. Key impacts include:

- Heightened awareness and profile of agency in the community.
- Increased knowledge about what residents appreciate about living in the neighbourhood as well as their concerns.
- Learning about what community programming and services residents feel are necessary to respond to concerns and needs.
- A deeper spatial understanding of community demographics: groups that use or are highly represented in different spaces and their access to services.
- Team building among staff, volunteers and participants where they get to learn about programs and people they are not connected to on a regular basis.

Reflections/Conclusions:

A community sweep is a valuable way to engage with local residents. It is effective in providing staff and board members the opportunity to connect with community members in ways that are different than their regular program or volunteer roles. Through a community sweep agencies gain a snapshot of concerns from a sample of local residents and are able to see how their activities could better support or respond to local concerns.

Contact:

Rick Eagan, Community Development Coordinator, St. Christopher House

Joanne Fisher, Coordinator, Riverdale Community Development Institute, Ralph Thornton Community Centre