



Toronto Neighbourhood Centres
Community Development Renewal Initiative

Transferable Strategies & Case Studies
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Using needs assessments to support community mobilization and action

Issue:

Community research and assessment processes used by agencies to inform their planning can be powerful strategies to engage community leaders and groups, and can be used as a catalyst to make new connections, map community assets, and identify common issues. The information gathered in these processes can then seed new collaborative forums and structures to sustain community development work.

Example:

Thornccliffe Neighbourhood Office (TNO) conducted a two-year Needs Assessment process (supported with Trillium Foundation funding) using a community engagement process.

Key community groups and individual leaders were identified in the neighbourhood and surrounding communities, including service providers, resident groups and local leaders active in a range of areas. All of these individuals and groups were interviewed and asked to identify key community assets and challenges. They also then identified others in the community who should be a part of this review. In this fashion, the assessment of community “needs” created the framework for a very broad engagement process.

Once TNO turned to establishing strategic directions based on this assessment, the agency could also draw upon connections with local groups addressing these key issues, and could mobilize community energy and existing leadership around them.

In one area these connections enabled TNO to convene youth leaders to help shape the development of a new youth centre (a key area of support identified as a priority in the needs assessment by community members).

These links also provided the initial connections for TNO to convene a new community structure – the Thornccliffe “Community Cabinet”. This is a forum

where representatives from community groups, the local tenants association, the mosque, and other organizations meet together to discuss shared approaches to addressing community concerns. TNO committed some limited funds and the executive director's time to initiate the Community Cabinet, and to provide some basic secretariat supports to sustain its development.

Results:

The leadership of the Community Cabinet has actively pursued a number of joint initiatives (e.g. organizing community-based citizenship ceremonies) and is in the process of formalizing decision-making and representation structures with support from a United Way Community Development Planning Grant.

TNO's Community Cabinet forum has helped to broaden the discussion of community issues, connect initiatives across groups, and create a foundation where local leaders can support shared advocacy and policy work over time.

Reflections/Conclusions:

Weaving connections between leaders and groups in communities can be achieved as part of conducting a needs assessment, if such an aim is built into the objectives and design of the assessment process.

Over the past five years a number of agencies have turned to Asset Mapping, and Community Based Research as two other approaches that seek to integrate community research, analysis and engagement into a single initiative.

The relationships and knowledge generated by these processes can strengthen a community's capacity for community development. To sustain lasting impact, some process of convening community stakeholders on an ongoing basis needs to be intentionally supported and resourced.

Contact/ Other Resources:

Jehad Aliweiwi, TNO Executive Director
TNO Needs Assessment document