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**COMMUNITY  
PROFILE**

# **Woburn Local Planning Table**

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Spokesperson & Member



This profile is the product of the efforts and expertise of many contributors.

The profile was written by Leah Yuyitung, Woburn Local Planning Table spokesperson and member. We are thankful for the support of Woburn Local Planning Table members, in particular Phylicia Davis-Wesseling, Louise O'Neill, Nita Goswami, and Nidhi Prajapati, who consented to be interviewed for this profile.

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This profile is part of a seven-part series sharing practices and recommendation to strengthen people-centred approaches to the work of neighbourhood-based agencies in the non-profit sector, led by Toronto Neighbourhood Centres, with support from Maytree.

**About the author:** Leah Yuyitung is a long-time resident of Woburn Scarborough, a designated Neighbourhood Improvement Area. She is a grassroots community leader and wears many hats including Local Champion Network Member, Spokesperson for Woburn Local Planning Table, School Council Chair, Scarborough Health Network Patient Family Advisor, mother and caregiver.

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## COMMUNITY PROFILE

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres' Community Voices for System Change initiative brings TNC's member agencies together to explore how they can better incorporate people-centred civic engagement into their work at all levels. As part of the initiative's two-year mandate, TNC is working with agencies, resident groups, and community organizers to produce a series of community profiles that highlight people-centred projects and activities unfolding across the city, as well as the resources and relationships that make this work possible. With concrete recommendations for frontline workers and senior management, these profiles are intended to serve as resources for community-serving agencies that are looking to incorporate people-centred practices into their work and planning.

### Introduction

The Woburn Local Planning Table (WLPT) is a resident-led group that operates in the Neighbourhood Improvement Area (NIA) of Woburn in southeast Scarborough. With a standing membership of nine to twelve members, the group aims to address the issues facing Woburn residents through resident-led civic engagement with local agencies as well as the City of Toronto. This community profile provides an overview of the WLPT's work and people-centred principles with a special focus on resident engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the profile also offers recommendations for agencies and grassroots groups that want to strengthen their people-centred practice and build capacity among residents to influence the systems that affect their lives.

### History of WLPT

WLPT was formed in June 2019 when the City of Toronto, through its Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 ([TSNS2020](#)), offered \$5000 in funding to each of its 15 Neighbourhood Planning Tables with the aim of supporting more resident engagement in planning and priority-setting. At the time, Woburn was part of the [Southeast Scarborough Planning Table \(SSPT\)](#), which represented stakeholders (i.e. agency representatives, political staff, church leaders, community service representatives, and residents) from four neighbouring NIAs—Scarborough Village, WestHill/KGO, Morningside/Mornelle, and Woburn. Though the City's Community Development Officer (CDO) made every effort to rotate the meetings to a space and time that was central and accessible to residents, there was often a lack of resident voices at these tables. SSPT members therefore decided that the \$5K would be further divided equally among all four NIAs, with each neighbourhood group

receiving \$1250 in barrier-reducing funds for residents to form their own Local Planning Table (LPT).

To access these City funds, the LPTs had to meet certain accountability measures. Each group needed a minimum of three residents, Terms of Reference, a transparent record of all LPT decisions, open membership, and accounting mechanisms. The LPT also had to be resident-led and resident-focused, with the majority of its members being residents of the NIA; in addition, a minimum of two elected members (i.e. chair and treasurer) had to be designated signatories for the funds that would be trusted by a local agency, approved by SSPT.

As a resident leader who had been attending SSPT meetings, I volunteered to lead the formation of the Local Planning Table for Woburn and invited others at the SSPT to join me. I also asked the CDO to put the call out to his networks for other resident leaders of Woburn to connect with me.

With the assistance of the CDO and my own networks, I chaired the first official meeting of the WLPT in June 2019. One of our members who worked for Frontier College secured us the use of their classroom for our first meeting, which was attended by the CDO, our agency host staff, and ten residents. At this meeting, we approved a Terms of Reference document that established WLPT as a working group. For our second and subsequent meetings we needed a more accessible room, for which I approached East Metro Youth Services (now [Strides Toronto](#)), a local agency I knew from a City-funded community event I had organized earlier that year. They generously stepped in to offer us not only their boardroom but also a staff member who could be our host during evening meetings. At first, our host would leave after he had opened up the boardroom, but we would often invite him back in and welcome his valuable input. Now we recognize Strides Toronto as a “supporting member” of WLPT, and that staff member is an official and active voting member of our table.

Some of our original group members have since left due to personal reasons or moved out of the area, but WLPT continues to maintain a membership of nine to twelve members. Six out of ten original members continue to be part of the WLPT.

## Our Structure

In order to meet the City of Toronto's minimum requirements for funding, WLPT needed to formalize its structure, roles, and decision-making policies. As a group, we acknowledged from the beginning that we all arrived at the table as equals, as established or potential resident leaders with different experiences and priorities. We did not want a traditional board structure with its embedded notions of power and so agreed that a "project steering committee" model that acknowledged our diverse sets of expertise was best suited to our community and our vision. We also recognized the value of accountability and transparency with all our communication, not only because they were basic requirements for our funding, but also because they provided checks and balances for our members to stay on track.

Louise O'Neill, one of our original WLPT members, describes the structure and dynamics of our group as follows:

WLPT structure includes defined roles, both for meetings (e.g. minute-taker, Zoom host) and for general proceedings (e.g. treasurer, social media communications). The Chair [and Co-chair] lead the table's activities, with the help and support of the group. Roles are rotated to provide opportunities for all members. We find that defining, assigning, and rotating roles can support leadership, networking, and communications, while also creating capacity-building opportunities for all members. Structure coordinates the work of the group, and leadership guides the collective effort so that it is in line with the group's priorities. Our meetings have a pre-set but flexible agenda. We take minutes at each meeting to document the decisions being made and to identify action items that will require follow-up at the next meeting. For all other documents describing the work and priorities of the group, we use Google drive.

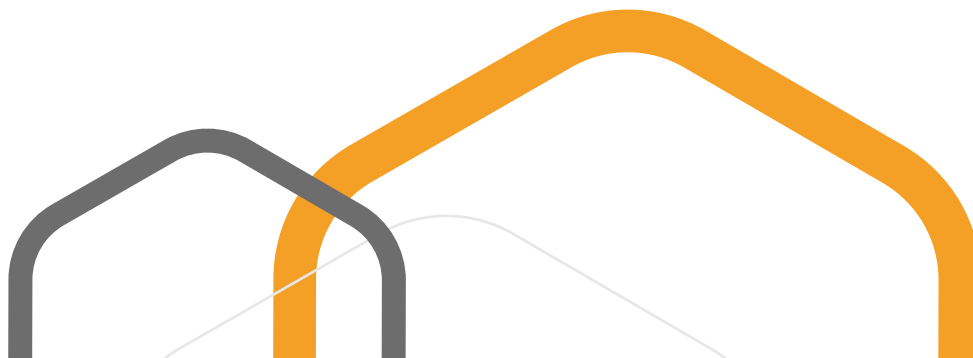
As a grassroots group we are lucky to have members who have the capacity and experience to occupy these formal roles and to keep up with the documentation needed to make progress. The absence of this capacity can easily derail the momentum of a resident volunteer group. At the same time, we also work to share our knowledge and mentor residents who bring their own unique expertise but might not have had any prior experience with community organizing. For instance, our two new members Nita and Nidhi, both of whom joined us during the pandemic, had no previous experience with organizing before their involvement with WLPT.

## Our Relationship with Allies

WLPT also benefits from the presence of formal allies who support our work. Prior to COVID-19 and the suspension of TSNS2020, the CDO fulfilled this role, acting as our conduit and connector to local agencies and resources. Our relationship with the SSPT leveraged resources and funding for WLPT that we would not have had access to otherwise. With this support we implemented initiatives such as a free first-aid-certification training workshop (brought forward by an elementary school principal who was assisting parents gain employment in the Toronto District School Board as lunchroom supervisors), and mental health awareness workshops for youth leaders (brought forward by a Tamil youth group formed when a peer committed suicide the year before).

In general, WLPT enjoys a symbiotic relationship with local agency allies, the cornerstone of which is mutual respect. Our longstanding allies — like the [Scarborough Civic Action Network \(SCAN\)](#), Strides Toronto, and [East Scarborough Storefront](#)—are always respectful of our autonomy and priorities when offering their input. Moreover, these agencies have a clear commitment to people-centred work, with paid members of staff who are able to cultivate this relationship as part of their job description. We have also found that staff members who are allies are passionate about people-centred work and believe in what we can accomplish together.

Another aspect of this relationship is the offer of paid work from agencies for our members/residents. Though this may pose a number of challenges—including possible conflict of interest, loss of autonomy, loss of the resident perspective/objectivity, and confusion with the goals of the agency— if done correctly, it can reap many benefits for all parties, serving to build capacity and reduce barriers to engagement.



For a mutually beneficial arrangement, agencies and residents need shared priorities, mutual respect, clear communication, and good boundaries. For example, during the pandemic, Nita and I were asked to co-present our COVID-19 story as part of SCAN's orientation for its new Stewardship Group. We were also asked to assist SCAN in encouraging Woburn residents to complete the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild (TORR) [survey](#) regarding the impacts of COVID-19, which SCAN in turn compiled and submitted as a group entry for Woburn residents to the City of Toronto. These two experiences came attached with honorariums for Nita and me. We accepted both opportunities with WLPT approval as we fulfilled both projects as representatives of WLPT. It was a win-win project for WLPT and SCAN as we both gained a voice in the TORR survey and Nita and I got an opportunity to hone our presenting skills and showcase our story. Nita and I also donated a percentage of our honorarium to the WLPT for future honorariums and projects.

Nita and I continue to take on occasional part-time work for SCAN as [community engagement workers](#) who assist with outreach and resident engagement in different parts of Scarborough. We do this in conjunction with our volunteer community work and are always careful and transparent with everyone as to which hat we are wearing at any given time. In January 2021, Nita and I worked as paid SCAN staff to reach out to residents and support them to make [deputations](#) to the City regarding housing insecurity. However, I did not get paid for my own deputation as I chose to tell my personal story as a resident and WLPT member and not as a SCAN staff person, something I also cleared with the agency. Nita on the other hand did her deputation as a SCAN staff person and stated this as part of her introduction to the committee. She spoke on behalf of the residents whose stories we had heard during our outreach, and was paid as a SCAN staff member for her deputation. The fact that SCAN's work aligns with WLPT priorities makes this a mutually beneficial relationship and gives us a means to transition to paid work.

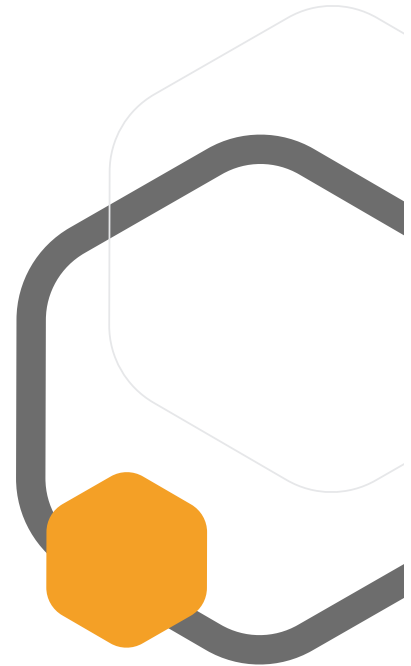
## People Centred Practice & Decision-Making Process

People-centred practice begins with respect for one another, and with recognizing the potential of individuals as leaders and equal partners in co-creating our community. We value diversity and lived experiences. We strive to reflect this in our membership and in our decision-making process, knowing that we only bring our own voices and perspectives to the table and not necessarily those of all our community.

Louise O'Neill describes people-centred practice as “one in which the group recognizes and values the work of each individual who contributes, to whatever degree they can. This recognition includes emotional support, offers of help, celebrations of efforts, and honorariums for particular tasks.”

With this in mind, we are careful not to appropriate another person's voice, and we ask members to check in with their networks regularly to see if our work continues to resonate with the community. By “community” I mean a group of people who are bound together, formally or informally, by a shared element; they could be residents of the same building, parents whose children attend the same school, students who attend the same program, work colleagues, or members of a school council, congregation, or cultural group. The initiatives WLPT supports are always based on issues or needs brought back to the table by our members or by someone else in the community. Using the same steps as the SSPT meetings, we invite everyone at the table to identify a need and present a project proposal they'd like to lead, or else to simply ask for help. Other members can then give suggestions, offer connections and resources, or volunteer to help or mentor the person who raised the issue.

As a group, we make decisions by consensus, with the understanding that if we have to vote, a minimum of 75% of members residing in Woburn have to approve a decision to make it valid. If a member needs funding or resources for a project, we advise them to go to the SSPT or the CDO and present their proposal with the full endorsement of the WLPT. This process not only builds capacity among our members but also builds their relationships and connections with local agencies and their staff. When the SSPT was suspended during the pandemic, we relied on our fellow members, connections, and networks to source funding and resources.





Our open-door policy means that we routinely have guests —both community members and agency allies—who attend our meetings. In the past we have even had residents from other neighbourhoods attend our meetings to observe our work or collaborate with us, and at the start of the pandemic, we had staff members from Toronto Public Health (TPH), the Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities (SCHC), and the East Scarborough Storefront attending our meetings. (The staff persons for TPH and SCHC have since been reassigned but the Storefront’s representative—whose role is dedicated to community knowledge mobilization—has continued to connect with us.) Since August 2020, we have had staff members from MPP Mitzie Hunter’s and Councillor Paul Ainslie’s offices sit in on our meetings regularly. WLPT has also had guests—like Scarborough Civic Action Network (SCAN), the Children’s Book Bank, and the Centre for Active Transportation—who were seeking input from residents or connections to local agencies.

WLPT member Phylicia Davis-Wesseling says that the following practices are critical to our group’s success:

- Communicating respectfully;
- Listening attentively;
- Creating a safe space/culture;
- Welcoming anyone interested in helping with our vision (open-door policy);
- Identifying a common vision while recognizing that our different passions/priorities are equal and valid;
- Recognizing all members as leaders with expertise and strength – shared leadership, mentoring;
- Recognizing and respecting the diversity of our members with deliberate reflection on which voices are at the table and which voices are not heard;

- Reminding members that we are not just at the table to represent our personal needs as residents, but that we are community connectors who bring voices from our networks and our own lived experiences to the table that may resonate with others in our community;
- Ensuring a diverse membership that is representative of the community and its range of lived experiences, i.e. intergenerationally, culturally, socially, and racially diverse, and inclusive of immigrants/newcomers, people living in market-rent housing and social housing as well as homeowners, people from different areas of Woburn, and people who are differently abled; and
- Offering leadership that is supportive and transparent.

## Covid-19 Crisis Response

WLPT's COVID-19 response focused on connecting residents with food, supplies, and information at a time when all normal supports had been suspended. Using our role as connectors between agencies and residents, we were able to mobilize volunteers, advocate for our community with a COVID-19 response report, and create an online space (Woburn Scarborough Community Facebook page) with resources.

### Setting up a mutual-aid system for food and other supplies

When Toronto issued a lockdown order in March, I started calling my family, friends, neighbours, and fellow WLPT members to see how they were faring. This is an important step to a crisis response because it is the only way to capture the personal stories that paint a picture of what is happening in the community. I also reached out to my community networks, calling my contacts at local agencies to see how they were managing, and what services were still available. I wanted to know how I could help. I found out that City staff members were being redeployed, and that our normal WLPT supports—including our CDO, our funding, and all TSNS2020 initiatives—had been suspended until further notice.

One of the agencies I contacted was the local food program, now known as [5N2](#). Its founder, Seema David, had assisted me in previous community events. Since many of the food programs that provided free meals had ceased to operate, Seema was left with 20-30 bags of milk, all recovered from coffee shops that had closed abruptly. She wondered if I knew of anyone in the community who could use them as soon as possible. The bags would have to be picked up and distributed safely.

I contacted Nita Goswami, School Council Chair of Woburn Jr PS, someone I also knew from previous WLPT initiatives and other community projects. Prior to the lockdown, Nita had an established network of 30-40 families, mostly parents from her daughters' classes, who used WhatsApp to communicate about school information and programs. All of them lived in a market-rent building at Tuxedo Court, which is right across the park from where I live. Many of the families in Nita's group were immigrants or newcomers who had spent less than ten years in Canada, and many were underemployed or in precarious employment and housing situations. All of them had young children.

Within ten minutes of my contacting her, Nita was able to send the group a message and receive an affirmative response from many of the parents. I then picked up the crates of milk and dropped them off in front of her building at a time that best suited her families. Nita sent her families a message, and they came down to the front to pick up a bag of milk each; this was done on a first-come first-served basis, and took about an hour. Some families picked up milk for neighbours who had very young children and could not leave their apartments. Throughout it all, Nita communicated with each parent and dealt with any issues that arose, including getting permission from building management.

Eventually, this makeshift distribution system became an almost bi-weekly run. During my drop-offs, Nita would share some of the issues and questions that had been posted in the group or disclosed to her privately. The parents were struggling to deal with their children's behavioural issues, now that the kids were confined to their apartments, and worried about their schooling. There was also concern about unemployment, government benefits, and evictions, as well as a great deal of misinformation about COVID-19.

As the operation grew to include families in the neighbouring buildings, Nita asked her group for parent volunteers to assist in the distribution. We quickly established a good routine. After I picked up the items from the agency and dropped them off on Nita's ground floor balcony, she would sanitize them, sort them into separate shopping bags and label each one. I would then drop off the sorted bags in front of each building where parent volunteers would distribute the bags from door to door. Throughout the process, Nita would keep her WhatsApp group informed as to what was happening, and reinforce health and safety messages. When Nita asked me for advice on how to manage the growing group, I acted as her sounding board, mentor, and connector. Due to the growing needs of her community, I advised her to collate

some basic data on her families and formalize her group, which would in turn make it easier for us to ask for assistance. She created [Woburn Jr Families@Tuxedo Court](mailto:WoburnJrFamilies@TuxedoCourt). By May, she had 110 families in her network with over 200 children under the age of 14 and a team of 20 parent volunteers.

In June, a Toronto Community Housing (TCH) staff member who had heard about our work approached Nita and me about starting up a food distribution program at 50 Tuxedo Court, a building for seniors and adults with high needs. Nita and I both knew that our food distribution program with 5N2 was not sustainable due to the personal demands on our time and the lack of a formal space to sort and distribute. We gladly partnered with TCH under the umbrella of WLPT and encouraged Nita's parent volunteers to work alongside the TCH residents. This volunteer team would assist with food distribution under the aegis of a newly formed Daily Bread emergency pop-up food pantry that was managed by Canadian South Asian Growth and Support Services, [CSAGSS](#), a registered non-profit group started by a resident of Morningside.

Nita helped her parent volunteers in their transition to becoming 50 Tuxedo Court volunteers. In the beginning, she also facilitated any communication between the volunteers and the new management who had a different style of leadership, with less flexibility in volunteer time and more formal rules that needed to be followed as per their contract CSAGSS and Daily Bread. My role was to facilitate any discussion about the partnership on behalf of WLPT, and mentor other parents to take a leadership role in the food program as Nita's schedule did not allow for her to be on site on a regular basis.

Despite the hardships it caused, the lockdown also opened doors and broke down barriers that had existed prior to the pandemic. For the first time, residents in market-rent buildings were invited to access food program alongside TCH tenants.



## Mobilizing relationships with agencies and other stakeholders

On April 6, 2020, WLPT formally reconvened via Zoom to discuss the issues arising in Woburn, particularly at Tuxedo Court, and the barriers to accessing supports. By this time, local service agencies were trying to reconnect with their client base and pivot to virtual operations. We invited community members from SSPT to our meeting and presented them with our [COVID-19 WLPT Crisis Response Report](#) highlighting the issues and needs of Woburn residents. Our agency allies from Strides Toronto, East Scarborough Storefront, Toronto Public Health, and [Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities](#) attended the meeting and agreed to distribute our document to their networks. They felt that the document could not only assist them in helping our community but also serve as a template for both agencies and resident groups. As a result of this report we received donations and assistance that fulfilled our request for information, children’s books and activities, online training, and subsidized computer equipment.

To communicate more effectively with our stakeholders, WLPT also created and launched the [Woburn Scarborough Community](#) Facebook page, which agencies and stakeholders could join to post information that was relevant to our residents. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement as we in turn actively broadcast their information to our networks and brought new participants to their programs. At the request of agencies, we also wrote support letters for funding proposals that would address resident priorities and encouraged residents who participated in agency programs to submit testimonials.

WLPT member Louise O’Neill emphasizes the importance of community resources to our group’s functioning:

Knowledge of community resources and the ability to connect with them is essential. Networking and building friendly relationships is ongoing work, requiring time and effort. WLPT made important connections with local politicians and school board trustees, city staff, [and local service agencies]. Representatives of some community organizations—like East Scarborough Storefront and Strides Toronto—have even become supporting allies of WLPT who attend WLPT meetings regularly.

## Building capacity among members

Throughout our crisis response, WLPT continued to work on building capacity and nurturing leadership among its members and the community at large. Supporting and mentoring other residents has been integral to the success of our pandemic response and the sustainability of our work over the long term.

Nita Goswami, who helped organize our food distribution system, is now a WLPT member. She says that volunteering helped her cope with the trauma of COVID-19 and step into her own leadership skills:

Before COVID-19, I volunteered at the school and it gave me a sense of satisfaction in giving back to the community. It also gave my children a chance to see what I was doing and the benefits that volunteering brought into their lives and the school. When COVID-19 hit, the school was closed and all my usual activities—socializing, volunteering, and working as lunchroom supervisor—had to stop. When you called and offered me the milk, I wanted to divert my mind from all the trauma of the lockdown and think of something else. I never thought of myself as a leader, but you inspired me and mentored me and now I feel that I can lead.

Drawing on her lockdown experience, Nita in turn mentored Nidhi Prajapati, a young woman whose sister and nephews were part of Nita's parent network. Nidhi, who had been studying fashion design at Seneca College before the pandemic, had had to put her career plans on hold due to the lockdown. But COVID-19 gave her an opportunity to use her design skills and rediscover a passion for volunteering.

With Nita's encouragement, Nidhi applied for and won a community-service grant from [#RisingYouth](#), an organization that provides funding for young people to address issues caused by COVID-19 in their communities. For her project, Nidhi and a team of parent volunteers made 650 cloth masks for the children of Woburn Jr Families@Tuxedo Court, 200 of which were given to three neighbouring schools and one drop-in program for youth.

Nidhi says she did not think of herself as a leader prior to taking on the mask project, but that Nita's ongoing support and encouragement helped her develop her own leadership skills. "I would never have thought of doing a project like this because it was during COVID19 and I was working at Walmart full-time. Then Nita convinced

me to do this project and offered me a lot of support. I felt I could do it because I had seen Nita do it before, and I was learning things from her.” With several tenants asking her to make adult-sized masks, Nidhi has gained confidence in her sewing skills and career path. Nita has also noticed that Nidhi now has the confidence to try new things. In November, Nidhi joined the WLPT as our newest member. She has already submitted a budget proposal to the WLPT for her next project: making 200 masks to donate to seniors in the community.

## Challenges

Mutual aid networks are often reactive and built on an immediate and emergent need. But these informal arrangements, which rely on existing relationships and lines of communication, can also pose unexpected challenges.

Operating without ground rules is one major challenge. When Nita and I came together to distribute those bags of milk, we did not have time to establish ground rules or a decision-making structure, or hold a volunteer orientation. We had no idea that it would happen more than once, let alone for four months on a bi-weekly basis. But as word got out and more families asked to be included in the WhatsApp group, Nita had to make difficult decisions, like limiting the network to families in her school and in the market-rent buildings on her street. This not only ensured the privacy and security of group members, but also created a safe and manageable way of distribution that targeted a particular group of residents who were precariously housed and precariously employed, but without any support from the City (unlike residents in Toronto Community Housing). Of course, when we did drop-offs in front of the building on a first-come first-served basis, no one who asked for milk was ever turned away.

Here, the burden of decision-making lies on the shoulders of the initiative’s informal leader. When someone does not get any goods or has a complaint, it falls on the resident leader to resolve the issue and ensure that people feel they are heard and treated fairly. This can strain relationships with neighbours and friends who might expect to be treated a certain way based on their prior “friendship” with the leader. At times they may not understand or be aware of the shift that occurs when you are both a “client” of a service and a “volunteer” or “lead” of an initiative. As grassroots leaders, we have to maintain our reputation, boundaries, and integrity while also balancing our personal needs. To offset this pressure, I became Nita’s mentor in the operation’s initial stages, and later invited her to join WLPT. Through the group,

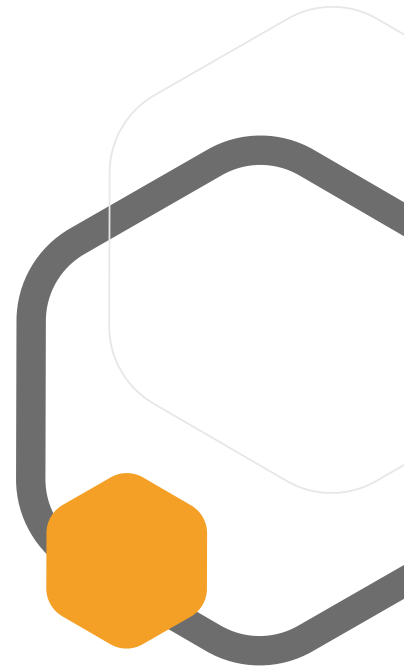
we both gained invaluable support and resources that increased our capacity, accountability, and resiliency as grassroots leaders.

## Learning and Sustainability

The efficacy of WLPT's crisis response comes down to four factors: resiliency, connectedness, stability, and ability to offer help. Without prior relationships and a sense of community, a neighbourhood such as ours, with a large marginalized community, would not have been able to mobilize so quickly.

### Factors that contributed to our ability to respond:

1. Pre-existing relationships with residents based on trust.
2. Pre-existing relationships with agencies and other community stakeholders based on mutual respect and true collaboration.
3. Established lines of communication.
4. Diversity and capacity among group members. COVID-19 highlighted our vulnerability as members of marginalized groups—as seniors, as immigrants and newcomers, as black and racialized folks, as housing-insecure folks, as health-compromised individuals, as youth and families, and as those who are differently abled. But it also made us more aware of our combined strengths and capacity when we supported each other and worked with agency allies.



### Considerations for grassroots organizers during a crisis response:

1. Reach out to your networks to find out how they are doing, using the communication platform they are most familiar with. Ask them to do the same with their networks so that your reach widens like a web. Much like a spider web, a community with these established networks will be able to feel any disturbances that threaten the web and respond immediately.
2. Remain supportive when identifying and resolving the gaps in services as articulated from both agency and resident perspectives.
3. Act as a connector between agencies and residents. Provide information to both parties—after obtaining consent—so that gaps in communication can

be resolved and a more direct pathway created between the service and the residents. Ensuring privacy and confidentiality in these matters is a challenge for both the grassroots leader and the agency; it requires a relationship of trust between the agency and the grassroots leader, as well between the grassroots leader and residents. Betrayals of trust are hard to recover from, especially for grassroots leaders who stand on the strength of their reputations. That's why forming or joining a group of leaders— like WLPT—can offer the necessary support and resources to manage these pressures.

4. Advocate for residents as necessary without taking away their power. You can do this by supporting them in a manner that recognizes their limitations and barriers but emphasizes their strengths and contributions, no matter how small a first step.
5. Assist residents in articulating their own needs to agencies, but make sure they understand the limitations of the services they are accessing. This will pave the way for better relationships.
6. Educate residents on agency funding requirements and support them in completing the documentation in a way that is authentic. For example, testimonials, support letters, thank-you letters, photos, ideas for future projects, and constructive feedback can help agencies secure funding to continue doing their work.
7. Unless you plan to become an agency, don't take on that role permanently. It can be difficult to clarify the precise role and boundaries of a volunteer group, especially during a crisis response, so it's important to establish expectations around what you are able to do. For example, for a while we helped connect residents to coordinators of programs through outreach and by helping residents register online, but soon found that both residents and agencies were beginning to rely on us to do this on an ongoing basis, which took away from our goal of building capacity and connections for both sides to connect directly. With this in mind, it's important that grassroots groups stay alert and be prepared to transition the individuals to an agency program as soon as it becomes operational or is willing to step in.

## What makes a good agency ally:

1. Recognizes the value of resident groups' perspectives and input as equals/ experts by including them in the decision-making process—right from the start of the project's design and planning to its final reporting.
2. Is responsive to community needs and is a visible presence in the community, but does not take the spotlight away from the residents.
3. Acknowledges the contribution of a resident group in a way that supports their work. This could be in the form of providing tools, honorariums, or connections (i.e. lending devices, providing funding supports for materials or internet access, allotting staffing/resources to assist in documenting their stories and initiatives, or offering opportunities for training and capacity building alongside staff).
4. Respects the resident groups' space. If a resident group establishes a Facebook or WhatsApp group, it's important that agency allies respect the group's priorities in that space, instead of taking over with their own agenda. Similarly, if a group wants some time alone at a meeting to discuss their priorities first before inviting an ally to join them, agencies should respect that request.
5. Remains non-judgmental.
6. Can be trusted to advise resident groups even if it is not to the agency's benefit.
7. Keeps communication open and authentic.
8. Cultivates a mutually respectful relationship with grassroots groups.
9. Understands that it must provide honorariums or barrier-reducing funds to support resident groups equitably and embeds these funds in its budget proposals whenever possible.
10. Understands or is willing to learn about a resident group's vision, goals, limitations, and strengths, and support it accordingly.
11. Engages the resident group using their preferred method of communication whenever possible.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that the success of WLPT and its mobilization during the pandemic was based on a relationship and a history with the Woburn community that was many years in the making; it did not happen overnight.



Agencies and governments would do well to remember that capacity building, especially in marginalized communities, needs long-term and ongoing people-centred practice to be sustainable and have long-lasting results.

## Related Links

[Making masks, making community: Two grassroots mask-making initiatives that made a difference in East Scarborough](#)



[neighbourhoodcentres.ca](http://neighbourhoodcentres.ca)