

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

SPENCE NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION (SNA)

www.spenceneighbourhood.com

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations are tasked with creating community renewal based on community leadership and engagement. The central tenant of these organizations is that the community knows best what is needed, and the organization's role is to parse out those needs and coordinate resources to meet goals that the community has defined. Although many of the NRC communities have similar demographics, and similar challenges, each is still unique. They are made up of specific, but changing groups of people, so maintain community leadership means engagement must be regular and consistent. Because of this structure and philosophy, the initiatives, programs, and objectives will differ between neighbourhoods, but in the end, all of the work is about creating better places and quality of life for the people who live there.

If the mission of an NRC is all about engaging people to drive neighbourhood renewal, empowering communities to make change, and coordinating resources, then it makes sense that creating, maintaining, and growing healthy relationships is a core piece of work shared by all the NRCs. Jamil Mahmood at SNA suggests that relationship building is a necessary core competency for all staff, as well as the underlying goal for all of their programming.

Staffing for Relationship Building

SNA began as a small resident-led housing renewal agency. Keeping this focus on local leadership, staff are hired from the community whenever possible, and priority is given to people who have great relationship skills and a passion for the community and getting people involved. Jamil says, "you can't create passion, and you can't create that sensitivity and skills for cultivating communication."

SNA's relatively large staff and diverse programming makes it easier to engage and consult the community, but without ensuring that they all bring this perspective to their work you could still be very disconnected from the people around you. Regardless of the scale and scope of activities, any organization can approach their work with relationship building at the front of mind.

This is why SNA takes the community engagement process seriously, and weaves this work into the very fabric of everything they do. To ensure local leadership by people who live in the neighbourhood, SNA has also organized their board structure around resident representation by geographic area in order to engage people from every corner of their mandated region. SNA staff report not only to the resident board of directors, but

also to the different committees made up of community members around specific areas of interest such as housing, safety, and CED.

Programming with Multifaceted Purpose

Before SNA became active, there was little programming and few community organizations in the Spence neighbourhood. As a result, SNA runs several programs that engage youth and adults in various activities. Each of these areas of work accomplishes multiple objectives that always include both specific project outcomes along with capacity building and relational goals.

For example, the sports teams and other youth programs being operated by SNA fill the gap around recreation programming in inner-city Winnipeg. These programs help kids get more active, and get them involved in a supportive and constructive environment. However, playing on an SNA sports team is more than bouncing or kicking a ball. These activities build capacity, leadership, and facilitate teamwork as well as bridging gaps between the kids, SNA, and local schools. They get youth involved, build relationships, and keep them off the streets and in school. Belonging to one of these teams takes responsibility, as kids have to be in school and must also commit to volunteer in the homework club.

SNA has also built youth leadership into the structure of the NRC. Youth sit on the Youth Committee, which Jamil believes will help youth become more involved in their community and begin to take responsibility for their neighbourhood. Not only do they set direction, they roll up their sleeves to make things happen. For example, when one group of kids really wanted a particular program to happen, they put together their own funding proposal with support from SNA to ensure that it would become a reality.

Events that Work Overtime

Community events should also be seen as accomplishing a number of objectives at the same time. Events bring community members together, facilitate casual and natural interaction, and increase

visibility in the community in addition to the specific objective of the event such as planning, celebration, or sports.

A good example of this is the annual Community Clean Up, a staple for many neighbourhood associations. Not only are these events well-attended, but they also make the neighbourhood safer and more attractive. This touches on the greening, and safety related parts of their 5 Year Plan. This is a relatively easy way to engage people and potentially find connections or volunteers for other events while working towards several related goals.

SNA connects people and improves relationships for the sake of safety through a number of events. Block BBQ's are when neighbours invite everyone on their block, while SNA provides food and is present to give information about safety issues. SNA's experience is that the resident-led model of neighbour engagement is more effective than when they as an organization send out the invites. These events also provide a safe and positive way to engage police or other authorities so that they become familiar with and build relationships with community people over food in someone's back yard.

SNA also hosts Safety Audits, where neighbours work together by walking through their community and identifying safety concerns. For SNA, it has been more difficult to generate interest in this event, but they found that once people were engaged, it has been a powerful method for bringing people together to collectively identify things they want to change in the community.

SNA's best attended event is their volunteer appreciation night. This event is a tool for maintaining engagement once people are involved. It is also a great way to celebrate the skills and capacity that already exists in the community. This increases the likelihood that residents will stay engaged and perhaps deepen their involvement in the community renewal work while simply celebrating the people, the hard work being done throughout the year, and the tremendous contri-

bution of the community to improving their neighbourhood.

Know What People Want

An important lesson to be learned from SNA is that whatever tool is used, you must be flexible and plan with the interests of community members in mind. You must be genuinely engaged with people in order to understand their interests and priorities. For example, while SNA does great work with youth, they struggled to engage the parents of the youth in their programs. After holding unsuccessful events aimed at engaging the parents, SNA started talking to them to generate feedback. The staff learned that the food served and prizes given out were not what the parents wanted. The youth committee has learned to become adaptable to changes in membership, as well as flexible in order to address whatever issue is most prevalent at any given time.

Conclusion

Early on at SNA, much of the community engagement work happened because personable, engaged staff went door-to-door, asking for opinions and making face-to-face contact with individuals. Today, despite more programming in place that facilitates relationship building, it is still important to ensure that staff members are in positions where they are engaged and excited. SNA also ensures that staff members are people who are able to facilitate the personal connections that are crucial for maintaining community engagement. Developing an engaged and connected community takes a certain patience, passion, and willingness to be creative, persistent, and resourceful. A huge part of doing this well is maintaining a focus on people and thinking about all your activities through the lens of creating and maintaining positive relationships.

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