

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

BRANDON NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS (BNRC)

www.bnrc.ca

PARTNERSHIPS

Pursuing renewal of whole communities is such a complex undertaking with so many different facets, that one organization simply cannot achieve it on its own, nor should it even attempt to. Partnerships avoid duplication and competition, coordinate strategies and actions, build on strengths, harness different capacities and perspectives, bring people and organizations together, and achieve more through collaboration than would be possible through organizational individualism. This is what makes effective partnership development such a crucial practice in creating more effective approaches to community development and working towards social justice.

Getting Started

Brandon, similar to many smaller communities, benefits from a great deal of interpersonal integration across multiple initiatives. People wear many hats at any given time, and likely are involved in more than one organization or initiative. And as is the case in most NRC communities, the environment in Brandon includes many social services and community development initiatives covering a relatively small area. In this context, NRCs are uniquely placed to facilitate partnerships and play a catalyst role, as they take a holistic geographical approach that enables them to see and

build innovative connections across multiple sectors and issues.

Partnership can mean many different things and take many forms. In Brandon, there are several key partnerships and networks that BNRC takes part in, including the Community Advisory Board (CAB) for Homelessness, the Cultural Awareness Network and the Brandon Community Garden Network. However, if we take a broad view, they also partner with the federal, provincial and municipal governments and local partners to deliver programs like the RRAP Program, which offers financial grants to low-income homeowners needing housing repair.

Established organizations like the BNRC make the most of partnerships as a way to develop trust in the community and between organizations, but most importantly as a way to improve the lives of the people in the communities that they serve – knowing that they need to work together with others to achieve this goal. But partnerships are not just for established organizations. New organizations also need to build effective partnerships in order to pool limited resources to achieve local objectives, as well as to build trust and credibility with existing organizations already involved in the community. However, while partnerships are ex-

tremely valuable and effective, they can also be difficult for a whole range of reasons.

Learning Lessons

When forging new partnerships, establish a clear purpose, and be patient. Know what you want to accomplish, but understand that relationships take time to mature. Based on BNRC's experience, some initial points to bear in mind when trying to form partnerships are:

1) *Get involved everywhere you can.* You never know who you will meet, and this is a good way to find out what is already happening and who is doing what in your community. Pitching in will show others that you are there to help out, building trust and respect for your organization.

2) *Develop personal relationships.* Organizations are made up of people, so in order to get organizations to partner you need people who trust and work well together.

3) *Always consider opportunities to match people or organizations that have similar ideas, even if it may initially appear to be an unlikely match.* Many of the groups involved in community gardening in Brandon have little in common other than believing gardens are a method to achieve their disparate goals, but have worked together to create a network of over 500 plots.

Also, recognize that partnership structures can vary to suit different situations. Community Advisory Board for Homelessness (CAB) was started as a requirement of the federal funding for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. The CAB has an established Terms of Reference and guidelines for avoiding conflict of interest, due to the financial nature of the decisions they make and the requirements tied to the funding. Other partnerships occur through a natural 'coming-together' of interested people and organizations around an issue that matters to them like the Brandon Cultural Awareness Network (BCAN). BCAN is relatively informal, is comprised of a core group that meets regularly to seek opportunities and plan events, while other participants will join in periodically to help deliver the programming or organize specific events. How partnerships are established, and their format will always be context

specific, and needs to be tailored to best fit the people and collective purpose of the various partners.

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict happens. It has the potential to divide communities and get in the way of achieving missions. However, conflict can also strengthen partnerships when viewed as a transformative process or an opportunity to build trust, clarify communication, distinguish and validate organizational roles, develop a common vision, solidify partnerships, and move forward in a stronger and more effective manner. One of the partnerships that BNRC is involved in, along with many other organizations had at one point experienced tension among members that caused it to be ineffective. This can happen in partnerships due to personality clashes, conflicts over differing organizational roles, mandates or geographic area, anxiety about competition for funding or resources, or a lack of clear purpose and objectives for the partnership. However, there are some tips for avoiding and dealing with tension in partnerships that BNRC has learned through experience.

In this example, BNRC was able to provide some leadership in their role as a convening organization, realizing that the potential benefits of the partnership outweighed the hard work of forging the partnership. The conflict had to do with two organizations feeling their purposes for participating were very different. This sense of self-interest created a dangerous dynamic of invalidating each other's work. Recognizing this, BNRC strategically chose to build consensus around a broader vision for the partnership and identified a larger-scale goal that all parties could agree to, which helped shift focus from differences to commonalities and move the partnership beyond that initial conflict.

Ryan Graves, Community Development Coordinator for BNRC, says that giving people room to voice their concerns one-on-one and within the group, then responding verbally and with actions that demonstrate authentic commitment to building the partnership allays these kinds of concerns. In this case, there was an opportunity for BNRC to

play an administrative role, which eased the tensions over time by creating a more neutral voice in the partnership, enhancing the capacity of the collective partnership, and helping the group accomplish their identified goals. Ryan adds that when a partnership is based on specific seasons or programs that have down times, you can work to establish trust outside of those busy times, when tensions and stresses are lower. Crucially, avoid or overcome conflict by keeping the needs or goals of clients, community members or targeted populations at the heart of all your planning and discussing – at the end of the day, serving the people you work for is most important.

Why we Partner

When partnerships work, they can leverage support and resources for important goals. They can also increase community leadership and democratic decision-making. Partnerships can make programming more effective, scalable and transferable, and can prevent duplication of services. Like most relationships, they aren't always easy, demand lots of patience and sensitivity, but can make your work incredibly rewarding and contribute to a greater sense of solidarity.

Canadian CED Network | Manitoba

**FIND THE OTHER 14 PROFILES AT:
WWW.CCEDNET-RCDEC.CA/MANITOBA/NRCFILES**