

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

NORTH END COMMUNITY RENEWAL CORPORATION (NECRC)

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BUILDING CONSTRUCTION MAINTENANCE PROGRAM (BCMP)

Sometimes neighbourhood renewal work is all about the stars aligning. To be sure, hard work, innovative thinking, and community planning are also important factors. But Rob Neufeld, Executive Director of NECRC, claims that it took a bit of luck to establish the Building Construction Maintenance Program (BCMP). The stars aligning in this instance included an NRC mandate to create employment opportunities and improve the housing quality in the North End, a provincial government needing to do renovations on Manitoba Housing properties, local residents and youth in need of training opportunities, and a model that addressed all those needs at once. However, BCMP demonstrates that having a strong and effective organization guided by a clear mandate from the community provides the capacity to pursue opportunities when they present themselves.

The Program

BCMP started out as a summer program at the Boys and Girls Club of Winnipeg to teach kids basic carpentry skills. Many of the youth that are encouraged to join BCMP have a low level of confidence, in part due to their lack of previous meaningful job experience. The initial project aimed to create opportunities for students in the summer months, and was led by two instructors from RB Russell High School. The emphasis was an contin-

ues to be recruiting young people in the North End who have multiple barriers to employment.

However, in 2006 some key people from the Province of Manitoba learned about the program at a job fair and recognized its potential for growth. After reviewing various options, these provincial employees helped transition the program to NECRC. When it transitioned to NECRC in 2006/7, participants in BCMP built fences and maintained sidewalks for Manitoba Housing properties in the Gilbert Park neighbourhood. Like many successful programs, BCMP began on a small scale, and then added new goals and activities as the purpose and strategies evolved and the initiative gained capacity. However, in order to focus the work as it grows, the program purpose has been clarified as aiming to create “employment with a difference.”

Since that first year at NECRC, the program has expanded to include a variety of maintenance and renovation work on three different Manitoba Housing sites. Work continued to include fence construction, but also complete apartment renovations, landscaping, cabinetry, drywall repairs, and more.

This model has integrated supports for people that are new to the labour market. The BCMP is able to provide technical skills training in construc-

tion techniques and employment for 40 employees at any given time. Importantly, participants are also able to access cultural, social, and personal supports. Providing the immediate benefit of a job with the additional supports helps prepare participants for future employment in a holistic way that takes account of their various personal challenges. Both short and long term job retention is much higher when effective supports are in place for the individuals that need them.

Alongside the partnership with Manitoba Housing, BCMP's ongoing relationship with RB Russell High School has been an important factor in the success of this program. Many of the participants are students, or former students of the high school, and several program employees have subsequently served as BCMP trainers. Instead of entering the workforce with low self-esteem after graduation, participants are being connected to resources and skills that build confidence, team work, discipline and accountability that will serve them well as they move into longer term employment.

In addition to the significant human impact of BCMP, there are also significant economic and infrastructure outcomes. In 2011, the BCMP employees renovated 50 Manitoba Housing properties, which translated to \$1.5 million in salaries for North End residents. Most of that income will be spent locally in the North End, meaning that the economic impact is substantial.

Shifting Roles and Relationships

While in some respects the BCMP is very similar to other community economic development programs, one important difference has allowed NECRC to shift its relationship with the provincial government. Most organizations are recipients of government funding through contribution agreements. However, in the case of BCMP, NECRC is more like a contractor with Manitoba Housing. As a result, the relationship is similar to private industry doing work for the government, meaning there is less micro-management and administration than in traditional program-funding situations.

While NECRC does the recruitment, human resources management and social support work involved in this kind of employment development program, the Province of Manitoba - through its Housing Authority - supplies a Site Manager and pays for materials and wages.

Community Decides the Future of BCMP

With proven results, it is easy to see that this program could have a huge impact for many years. NECRC is constantly evaluating how their programs fit into the role that the community has defined for them through many years of consultation and planning processes. They strive to be a facilitator, organizer, and communicator for all stakeholders in the North End. Taking this approach recognizes that there are often other groups in the community that are doing work related to the five-year community plan that NECRC can support or help facilitate, but it does not necessarily need to lead or implement themselves. Consultation, transparent community relationships, and good communication can also help NECRC identify other areas where there is a service gap or need that the NRC can fill.

In the case of BCMP, it made sense for NECRC to take on the administrative role given their strong links to local employee recruitment agencies, and their capacity to handle the large volume of business and employees. However, while NECRC currently administers the program, they would be glad to see another local organization with the required capacity and a related mission take it over. This approach allows NECRC to develop programming when it makes sense to do so, but also supports and facilitates growth in other local community organizations so that NECRC can continue to grow and take advantage of opportunities.

A Program with Potential

While the success of the BCMP is partially due to luck - the right people being in the right place at the right time - there is great potential for this program to be replicated in other communities. Manitoba Housing - or similar government organizations in other provinces - has a lot of work that

needs to be done, and it makes sense for government to collaborate with community organizations to accomplish the necessary projects in a way that also improves the lives of people facing significant challenges with employment, poverty, and social inclusion.

A replicated model could look very similar to the BCMP program in other communities where there are large numbers of Manitoba Housing properties. However, other institutions (hospitals, schools, municipalities, etc.) may also have work that could provide great training opportunities for people facing barriers to employment. Public institutions are particularly well suited to consider social goals when finding employees, as they are also mandated to achieve positive social and community outcomes.

Conclusion

The community economic development principles that NECRC strives to uphold guide these kinds of programming decisions. These include merging economic and social goals to empower people, and having a strong strategic plan and community mandate so that effective decisions can be made that fit within the organization's goals. Importantly, NECRC also strives to work holistically through multi-functional approaches that build capacity, further community renewal, and ultimately improve the lives of individuals. Using this kind of model allows an organization to continually take advantage of opportunities where several of their overall goals are achieved simultaneously.

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