

PLACE-BASED FUNCTIONS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES: IN THE EYES OF SERVICE USERS

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The NHIMV project explores the contributions of neighbourhood houses to local communities. Neighbourhood houses have a long history of operation in Vancouver, dating back to 1938. They began as part of the Settlement House Movement made famous in North America by Jane Addams and her work at Hull House. While time and distance have created differences to that early model, the houses remain neighbourhood-based, locally governed, multi-service, community development oriented organizations. Visit www.nhvproject.ca for more information.

This research brief examines the relationship between neighbourhood houses, the community, and the government in Metro Vancouver, exploring the funding relationship as well as the tensions this relationship can create for neighbourhood houses regarding their twin roles as social service providers and community advocates. Our findings are based on semi-structured interviews with the directors of 10 neighbourhood houses located in Metro Vancouver, as well as with representatives from the Vancouver and Burnaby municipal governments, and from the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of BC.

During the 2012-2013 fiscal year, over 200,000 people took part in the 444 programs provided by the 14 neighbourhood houses in Metro Vancouver. While meeting the needs of different age groups, these programs also perform a community building function that helps people connect and develop their leadership skills. To better understand how service users experience and perceive the functions of NHs, 54 service users were recruited from all NHs to participate in nine focus groups, in order to share their ideas.

Key Findings

NHs are a welcoming space providing services to meet diverse needs, nurture connections, combating isolation and build personal and community capacities.

A lack of funding has hampered NHs' capacities and indirectly jeopardizes the wellbeing of local residents.

Meeting Diverse Needs in the Community

NHs provide diverse services, including information referrals, employment support, daycare, afterschool care, senior day activities, parent groups, recreational programs, sociocultural events, youth leadership, and many others, in order to meet the different needs of different people in the neighbourhood. As a service user from

Burnaby NH notes: *"If somebody is with a child looking for daycare, I would say, 'go to the NH, go to the drop in program so your child starts to speak English and feel more comfortable.' If somebody needs to do their tax return, I would also tell them to go to the NH. Maybe not for myself because I already know what to do now, but for somebody who is new to the community, I would refer them to the NH first".*

Meeting the needs of local residents is also a way to build a sense of belonging among service users. For instance, as a young mother at **Northshore NH** noted: *"The NH is what put me through school, because they provided the daycare and stuff, so if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have been able to do it... At Christmas [they were] able to get a bunch of stuff to help us out around Christmas and other things too – little hampers here and there, those kinds of things. It's been amazing; it's one of the main reasons that I haven't left the north shore yet – it's because of the program; it's just amazing. I couldn't go without it right now to be honest".*

Building Connections and Combating Isolation

NHs are not just places where people can ask for help; they are also places where people are connected. First and foremost, NHs are praised as being welcoming places. As a **Burnaby NH** service user summarized: *"It's a trusting place, so you can come here and*

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feel safe. It's like home. It's a warm feeling when you walk in the door; people are lost and you give them directions. It's just very comforting to know that you can come somewhere and your kids can hang out together and meet new people in the NH". The neighbourhood house is a welcoming place for local residents, particularly those who are vulnerable and/or isolated, helping them to connect with people comfortably within the community. NHs *"involve people of different physical and mental capabilities and it brings the community together"*, a **Northshore NH** service user said. A **Frog Hollow NH** service user noted: *"I guess for seniors... you're used to working all your life and you have your network with people at work and then you leave that, so you can be alone. So I guess that's the help that the neighbourhood house provides. You've lost your old network. You can make a new one"*. NHs break isolation.

A service user from **Marpole NH** reflected on how her NH helps her combat loneliness: *"I was feeling a little lonely... Three years ago when I heard they were having a barbeque, that was the first time I went. That was it, the start of that, you know; I was meeting people and I made some good friends"*.

Building Personal and Community Capacities

For many service users, NHs are places of immense opportunity, where anyone who is looking to build their individual capacity will be supported to do so. Neighbourhood houses give you *"all the tools you need to pursue what you want. They help you [have] a fulfilling life"*, said a service user from **Burnaby NH**. Building personal capacity can be beneficial to the community. A service user from **Little Mountain NH** observed: *"[An NH is] also a place where you can build or gain experience, like G (another service user) is in high school and he's building those leadership skills and, in return, he can help or train other people"*. Indeed, NHs are places rich in human assets. In 2012-2013, over 3670 people registered as volunteers in NHs in Metro Vancouver. Many of them were also service users. A service user from **Kitsilano NH**

summarized how NHs have *"provided me with an opportunity to bond here, to help out"*.

Lack of Funding: A Shared Concern

Many service users who participated in the focus groups are fully aware of the funding shortage faced by NHs and expressed their concern regarding the negative impacts of this on the wellbeing of local residents. A service user from **Frog Hollow NH** said: *"Sometimes they cannot offer more... The space and the money, I guess. It's that those are two big things..."*. A service user from **Alexandra NH** also observed the way in which the NH staff members are always struggling, which interrupts their focus: *"My impression over a number of years is that funding for an NH is so important and I think they look for anything that is going to generate revenue... That's their primary focus and I think other things like doing the community stuff has become secondary because the funding to keep it running is the main thing"*.

In summary, from what we learned from the 54 service users, it has become apparent that neighbourhood houses are integral to the wellbeing of the community through the diverse services and welcoming spaces, and the opportunities to nurture connections and build capacities that they provide. With more expansive and sustainable funding, neighbourhood houses would have the opportunity to be even more effective in meeting the needs of local residents and supporting a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood.