

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

BY TSERING DOLKAR AND MIU CHUNG YAN

Funded by SSHRC (Grant No.: 435-2012-1276), 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 investigates whether or not neighbourhood houses contribute to the capacity development of their clients in the communities. The following responses were gathered through narrative accounts from neighbourhood house staff, community partners, and service users.

Capacity Development Programs

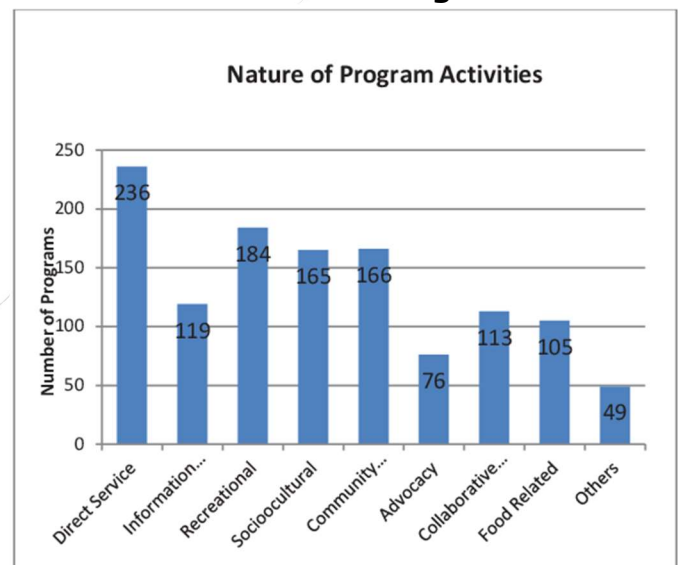
Neighbourhood houses offer a variety of services that are educational in nature and revolve around practical needs and skills development for their service users. Some of these services include childcare, community kitchens, tutorial groups for students, English language teaching, sex education for high-risk youths, and banking and employment counselling. A significant number of programs are targeted towards vulnerable groups, including youths, immigrants, seniors, and aboriginal families, helping them to overcome barriers to social integration. The variety of programs, as well as the diverse backgrounds of participants, enables people from a range of cultural and social backgrounds to mingle and work together as a group.

Aside from practical skills and training workshops, NHs also help to provide an avenue through which community members can engage in cultural activities, such as arts and music, as well as form mutual help/interest groups that connect people with similar interests and needs.

Key Findings

In 2013, NHs in Metro Vancouver provided a total of 444 programs/activities and 208,664 participants (in frequency) took part in these activities.

Table 1. Nature of NH Program Activities



Due to the nature of NHs' place-based structure, service users' connections are not only tied amongst themselves and with the staff at NHs; they are also affiliated with the physicality of the space that is the neighborhood house. This sense of belonging to the space is enduring, retaining volunteers and staff members who work and contribute to the development of their community. NHs also connect local residents with other community service organizations. By inviting staff from these organizations to deliver services, such as immigrant and employment services and educational workshops, NHs provide a communal space within the community and an easier point of

entry through which local residents can access services.

Community Capacity Oriented Measures

A more strategic capacity building initiative adopted by NHs is through community capacity oriented measures. Using this approach, NHs recruit staff members within their communities and seek out people who understand NHs' work and are supportive of the NH's agenda. In 2013, over 65% of staff members working at NHs were either current or former residents and over 60% were either active or former service users. This approach to the recruitment practice is explained as being based not on the specific requirements of a program but on the overall principles of community assets and capacity building. Community partners view such practices as a positive measure:

"A strength of the neighbourhood houses: They are able to integrate services and create community at the same time... They are able to hire people from the neighbourhood and provide opportunities for various people from different age groups and cultural backgrounds."

NHs' strategy of hiring within their community is viewed by interviewees as being responsive to ongoing community needs. Furthermore, interviewees also mention how NHs are able to portray themselves as valuable economic assets to the community in terms of their ability to offer employment opportunities, supporting other businesses in the community, and bringing in funding and collaborative partnerships for the neighbourhood's benefit. NHs' volunteer programs are also seen as a helpful way for newcomers to familiarize themselves with Canadian society and workplace culture.

Impact of NHs' Capacity Building Strategies

Service users and other stakeholders consistently pointed out that NHs create

possibilities for growth opportunities by providing services either free of charge or at a very low rate. This makes them accessible and inclusive for all in the community. A common consensus amongst respondents was that charging for services automatically creates a boundary and becomes exclusionary, which goes against the notion of community. Moreover, supporting the accessibility of services also democratizes information flow and helps those who are otherwise unable to afford or access reliable information sources.

We also found that NHs see the accessibility of services and space as a way to maintain beneficial reciprocal relationships with marginalized groups of people. Community partners credit such groups with generating innovative ideas in the community:

"It's really important to always have a space for people who are considered too vulnerable or marginalised to engage; that's where new ideas come from often, innovation."

Service users are also unanimously appreciative of programs provided by NHs and view them as critical for their ability to function in society. As one of the service users acknowledged:

"This [NH] pretty much gives you all the tools you need to pursue what you want; they help you get a fulfilling life, basically."

Overall, the narratives of service users and community partners indicate that they are appreciative of the capacity building programs and measures put in place by NHs. They view capacity building as a key role that NHs play in the community, which has a positive impact on the community and helps nurture and strengthen the community in an inclusive, compassionate, and holistic manner.