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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](http://www.nhvproject.ca) for more information.

This research brief examines whether or not neighbourhood houses contribute to civic and community engagement amongst individuals who use their services and participate in their programs and activities. Here, civic and community engagement refers to people's participation in local events and organizations, and their political engagement. The findings below are based on narrative interviews and workshops with NHs and their service users, as well as their community partners.

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### **Neighbourhood Houses and Community Engagement**

Neighbourhood houses (NHs) are seen as having a significant impact on the fostering of community engagement. This theme appeared in various findings during our interviews with key informants, service users, and community partners. Many respondents stated that, as service users, they initially connected with NHs to enrol in training programs or services. However, over time, they realized their own potential and became actively involved in helping with larger community projects and initiatives. Respondents viewed this evolution as a transformative change that happened as a result of their work with NHs. A service user reflected on her community engagement journey:

*"Through the NH, I met incredible people and, through that involvement, I've been able to put together a concert that brought together the community with their talents, and I have been able to help people outside of our circle."*

NHs' flexibility and relationships with other organizations and groups are seen as positive attributes that help create a good support network, instilling a sense of

confidence amongst individuals in regard to engaging in community initiatives. Another service user spoke of how NHs' assistance with resources helped realize her goal of engaging communities in a healthy eating initiative:

*"I always wanted to be an organiser... I got the small grant for a 'go green' project - I wanted families to be able to come together to garden with their kids in summertime. I wanted them to have herbs and tomatoes for their pasta or just to grow crops and have some healthy meals. So that's what we did with our money, just in our complex."*

We also found that civic engagements are not only bound to the local context but also take on global responsibility and citizenship. For example, NH service users described how, during the natural disaster event in the Philippines, they mobilized as a group and conducted fundraising events to help those affected by the catastrophe. Such engagements show that NHs' activities instill a sense of civic engagement and citizenship amongst its members, leading to larger positive ripple effects in other communities.

### **Approaches to Community Engagement**

## Neighbourhood Houses in Metro Vancouver [www.nhvproject.ca](http://www.nhvproject.ca)

Findings from our interviews with community partners and service users reveal how volunteers aid in NHs' collective goal of strengthening and building communities. Volunteering is seen as a way to promote engagement with community initiatives amongst various groups and demographics. For example, it was noted quite often that youths become involved in NH activities through volunteering:

*"We have hundreds of youths who volunteer and they are incredible. We do really neat programs as well. We have a few different activities that go on... They do tap into every area because they volunteer for the out of school care, they'll help us run our carnival, they support our programs, and we do some intergenerational programming, so the youths and the seniors come together."*

**Table 1. NH Volunteers' Engagement**

<b>Total registered volunteers across NHs</b>	<b>&gt;3,672 people</b>
Average no. of volunteers per NH	250 people
Gender	70% female 30% male
Average volunteer service hours per year at each NH	15,000 hours
<b>Volunteer Demographics</b>	
Children	0.6%
Youths	22%
Adults	55%
Seniors	22%

Individual volunteers at NHs adopt various roles and are motivated by different reasons. Indeed, NHs, as a locally governed organization, have boards of directors consisting of volunteers who are either living or working in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, there are many volunteers involved in direct service delivery and/or acting as bridges to external resources. For example, some families may be involved in other volunteering initiatives, thereby providing

helpful information and suggestions for ways to bridge these services.

### **Key Findings**

*NHs' various programs and services and their support of individuals help empower people to find ways in which they can contribute to the community.*

*Many volunteers and staff members traced their contributions to community development projects and their engagement to their early experiences of being supported by NHs.*

### **NHs' Engagement with Various Organizations**

Depending on the needs of the service user groups and their backgrounds, NHs engage with a wide spectrum of organizations.

These include schools and school boards, LGBTQ advocacy groups, aboriginal health and family support services, senior services, youth programs, immigrant and settlement service groups, and religious and multicultural organizations. Interviewees described how these engagements are strategic and determined by what resources the external organizations can provide for service users in ways that are not provided by NHs. When NHs need assistance to link service users from distinct groups or ethno-cultural backgrounds, they connect with their affiliated groups or help with integration issues.

Overall, NHs strive to encourage civic participation and consciousness amongst its users, who go on to engage in various activities that help strengthen their communities. While individuals' scope of engagement varies depending on their social location and resource network, they nonetheless all contribute in their own way to alleviating social concerns and partaking in responsible citizenship.