



Submission to the Premier's Community Hub Framework Advisory Group

June 26, 2015

Dear Advisory Group Members:

ONN was pleased by the announcement of the Premier's Community Hubs initiative earlier this spring. Over the past two months, we have enjoyed collaborating with your team to deliver a survey of nonprofits as part of your process to develop a framework to support community hubs across Ontario. As you will have seen from the survey responses, there is a great deal of interest in this initiative, and there are many existing community hubs in the nonprofit sector that are flourishing. It is important to learn from these examples in building a strategy that will support the resilience of existing hubs and allow new ones to develop. To this end, we would like to share a set of recommendations for the development, support, and success of community hubs that we hope will provide guidance for your work.

Before outlining our proposed recommendations, we would like to emphasize the importance of community hubs to the achievement of many of the province's stated objectives. Community hubs have the potential to improve access to services for Ontarians because they provide a mechanism for streamlining and integrating provincially- federally- and locally-funded service delivery in communities. Far from being a new idea, community hubs have a long history in this province- operated by newcomer settlement organizations, public libraries, recreation and health centres, and many others- and have enjoyed great support from the public where they have existed. And while some hub initiatives have been provincial initiatives (focused on young children), most successful community hubs to date have been driven by local community groups, at times with municipal assistance.

While communities have benefited from these local hub initiatives, attempts to scale up or adapt these models have been inconsistent in their results. Their experience highlights the areas where provincial leadership is most needed to:

- Provide an enabling framework to organizations working to coordinate and co-locate services;
- Provide financial and other resources in support of hubs;
- Promote community ownership and governance of community assets; and
- Work with community organizations on the development of indicators of success.

The benefits to Ontarians of a successful hub strategy are clear: a community-level single-window entry point to a wide variety of programs and services, including referrals to off-site services. A network of hubs would go a long way to providing more seamless, integrated, and client-centred service across a range of sectors (health, social services, recreation, literacy, arts, etc.) for people in the communities where they live. Furthermore, the vibrancy of communities themselves would be enhanced by the presence of hubs that support community involvement, formal and informal meeting places, collaborative efforts toward community

development, and the cross-pollination of innovative ideas that inevitably occurs when organizations work together across sectoral and other boundaries.

Concept and purpose of a community hub

A “hub” is a connecting place, a centre that holds a wheel in motion, and a mechanism for channeling energy. This idea of a stable core that acts as a focal point for activity and provides forward motion captures the essence of what a *community hub* must be: a critical piece of community infrastructure that connects people and services while supporting dynamic and responsive programming. Most importantly, a community hub’s overall direction must be determined by the community itself. There are many kinds of community hubs: health and social services, arts-focused, sports and recreation, population based (e.g. youth, newcomers), and more broadly focused place-based hubs. Each hub’s purpose and design cannot be imposed top-down, but should instead emerge from the needs and priorities identified by local communities and remain adaptable over time.

A key element of community hubs is service integration for the community at large: they are created not just from co-located nonprofits, but specifically from *integrated service providers who coordinate their programs to serve the public benefit*. While some hubs may rely on a shared single space, it is important to note that community hubs are thus distinct from arrangements in which independent businesses and organizations are simply co-located.

In this spirit, we propose a broad definition of community hubs: a set of publicly-accessible services, spaces, resources, and activities that are co-located, integrated, and responsive to identified community needs, delivered by and for local communities under nonprofit community-based governance.

Community hubs can improve access to integrated services, promote social cohesion, and respond to changing community needs over time. Given the potential support that community hubs can provide to community well-being, it is in the province’s best interests to ensure that they are created and operated under a sound policy framework that promotes their success and sustainability.

Summary of recommendations to the Advisory Group

1. Recognize that each hub’s purpose and design should emerge from the needs and priorities identified by local communities and remain adaptable over time.
2. Any government savings achieved from the establishment of community hubs and coordination of services should be reinvested directly into service delivery.
3. A community hubs framework should address the need for predictable and sustainable capital investment to support community assets.
4. Expand eligibility for the Infrastructure Ontario Loans Program to community hubs of all kinds.
5. Expand the surplus public lands registry (operated by ONN for nonprofits) to include surplus lands from the broader public sector, including school boards.
6. Institute a conveyance program to transfer heritage properties to community nonprofits.
7. Support school boards, municipalities, and the community nonprofit sector to communicate and work together on long-term planning for the use of school space.
8. Provide adequate, predictable, sustainable operating funding (including staffing and administrative costs) for the operation of hubs as community capital assets.

9. Provide capital funding for the purchase, maintenance, renovation, and adaptation of community hub space.
10. Implement an integrated umbrella agreement for hubs that receive more than one provincial funding stream.
11. Work with municipalities to create mechanisms for cost-sharing hub funding.
12. Facilitate multi-stakeholder agreements for organizations seeking to operate hubs as partnerships.
13. Integrate learnings from the Joint Funding Reform Forum and the Transfer Payment Administrative Modernization project.
14. Support the sharing of best practices across hubs.
15. Work with communities to develop outcome-focused indicators of success, taking into account the diversity of models, focuses, and objectives that apply to community hubs.
16. Co-create the hub initiative “with” our sector, rather than doing it “to” our sector!

Integrated services for communities

We suggest several key elements of high-quality service provision that a community hub should feature. Within the scope of the hub’s population or sector focus, the hub should be a single-window access point, where community members can access a variety of programs/services and receive referrals to other services located off-site. It should serve as a mechanism for the integration of service delivery and cross-pollination of innovation across programs. It should include community engagement as a central component of its governance and operations. And it should be responsive and adaptive to identified community needs.

Hub governance

Some community hubs have one board of directors while others are governed collaboratively by multiple boards. Each hub should be designed with a structure that supports community governance, engagement, capacity building, and responsible stewardship of community resources. Community hubs should be able to demonstrate their rootedness and involvement in the community (as distinct from satellite operations which are governed from afar). Whether it has a unitary or composite governance structure, community representation on the hub’s governing board and how they engage with the broader community is what matters. Often when services are co-located in a hub, there is an opportunity for back-office efficiencies, such as shared financial, human resource, and facilities management, group purchasing, and IT systems. These shared services are a positive way for organizations to operate efficiently and focus their resources on service delivery. We strongly recommend that any government savings achieved from the establishment of community hubs and the coordination of services should be reinvested directly into service delivery.

Above all, community hubs need an enabling framework and resources to operate as such, rather than a service provider finding the time and resources to manage the hub’s facilities, finances, and service integration “on the side of one’s desk.” A provincial framework for a community hub will help stakeholders to think through the challenges of funding, community governance, and the ownership, maintenance, and use of community assets.

Community assets

It goes without saying that community hubs require space- for service provision, for community meetings, for informal activities, for coordinating broader service networks, and for other needs identified by the community. A key factor for the success of community hubs is therefore access to capital for the purchase, renovation, and ongoing maintenance of real property. On this front, there are several specific measures that government could take to support community assets:

- Community hub operators need access to capital funding for buildings, renovations (including for accessibility and for re-purposing of existing space), and facilities maintenance. They also need to invest in technology and equipment. Few provincial funding streams permit organizations to spend money on capital maintenance and repairs. Even programs that do allow for capital investment contain restrictive rules or provide only last-minute year-end funds that must be spent in the same fiscal year. A community hubs framework should address the need for predictable and sustainable capital investment to support community assets.
- The provincial government can support community assets by facilitating loans for the nonprofit sector. Lending institutions are often reluctant to loan to nonprofits but Infrastructure Ontario (IO) already provides a [loans program](#) for which organizations in certain nonprofit sectors may qualify. Eligible sectors include narrowly-defined community health/social service hubs and arts training organizations, but many other sectors are excluded. We encourage the provincial government to expand eligibility to community hubs of all kinds. Loan guarantees from a local school board or municipality would further facilitate IO loans for community hubs. ONN has worked with Infrastructure Ontario on expanding access to IO loans and this work could be built upon for community hubs. (Please see the attached briefing note: Nonprofit Access to Priority Purchase of Publicly Owned Lands for Sale.)
- Community hubs can be created by repurposing surplus Crown lands and other property sold by school boards and other parts of the broader public sector. These properties often hold high value for their communities and should remain in community hands wherever possible. A community value assessment should be required before disposing of a public asset. ONN maintains a [surplus public lands registry](#) on behalf of the Government of Ontario so that eligible nonprofits can access a list of available provincially-owned properties before they are listed for public sale. This registry should be expanded to include surplus lands from the broader public sector, including municipalities, universities, colleges, and- above all- school boards. These community assets should remain in community hands wherever possible, and a lands registry is the best way to give community organizations priority when they are available for purchase. In cases where surplus properties have heritage designations, a conveyance program would facilitate these buildings being transferred to interested nonprofits, where feasible (as is currently the case in parts of the United States and the United Kingdom). (Please see “Heritage Considerations for Community Hubs” attached.) With their mandate to serve the public benefit, community nonprofits are well-positioned to ensure that surplus public heritage buildings remain accessible and part of the local community.
- Surplus school properties are particularly relevant for developing community hubs, as they are often well-situated and suitable for multi-service operations. ONN is encouraged by the Ministry of Education’s new guidelines for school boards on the use and sale of surplus school space. Specifically, we are pleased to see changes to the

Pupil Accommodation Review Group process, to the effect that school boards are now required to work with municipalities and other community partners on an ongoing basis to collaborate on planning for the use of school space. This kind of cross-sectoral planning and management of physical facilities should be communicated across the sector and encouraged across the broader public sector, including with respect to timelines for budget planning and implementation.

- Provincial support for community hubs must include adequate, predictable, sustainable operating funding for community capital assets. Since investment mechanisms are critical to the success of community hubs, recommendations for government investment have been outlined below.

How can government investment streams be re-designed to support community hubs?

Adequate and sustainable provincial investment in hub operations is a critical factor for hub success. We propose the following ways in which provincial investments can support a thriving network of community hubs:

- Capital funding is critical. As noted above, capital (space purchase/renovation, building maintenance, and IT and other systems/equipment) and operating funding will be critical for the sustainability of community hubs.
- Operational funding should include compensation (salaries, benefits and pension contributions) for hub staff functions, such as service planning and coordination, facilities management, communications, and community engagement. At present, some provincial funding streams do not support administrative costs such as rent and utilities, and others specify that funds may be used to pay rent but not for mortgage payments. These kinds of barriers must be eliminated to support the operation of community hubs.
- Community hubs that receive funding from multiple provincial ministries should have an integrated umbrella agreement with a lead Ministry that covers hub operating costs as well as program delivery costs. More generally, it would ease the administrative burden for hubs if functions such as reception and facilities management were covered under hub funding rather than asking multiple organizations to estimate their use of these and divide the costs accordingly.
- The Ontario government should be open to cost-sharing arrangements with other funders, including municipalities, for shared hub functions. We recommend that the province engage with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and local governments concerning partnership-based hub funding opportunities.
- New hubs should have access to seed funding for start-up costs and to build local capacity.
- Hub funding should support a broad range of service delivery areas, including health, social services, employment and training, sport and recreation, civic engagement, newcomer settlement, the arts, etc.
- Hub funding should facilitate multi-stakeholder agreements working under collaborative community-based governance models that allow for multiple organizations to manage shared community space in partnership.
- Lessons learned from the government-nonprofit sector Joint Funding Reform Forum and the Transfer Payment Administrative Modernization project, including the importance of

budget flexibility and streamlined/integrated financial reporting and audit requirements, should be applied to the community hub initiative.

Above all, we ask that the Ontario government co-creates this hub initiative “with” our sector, and not “to” our sector. Community nonprofits are eager partners and would like a significant voice in how hubs are supported, funded, evaluated, and sustained.


Indicators of success

It would be premature to suggest indicators of success for the community hub framework, but we would encourage the Government of Ontario to take into account the diversity of models, focuses, and objectives that apply to community hubs. There is no one-size-fits-all approach and hubs should be measured against their ability to engage the local community, integrate service provision, and remain responsive to locally-identified needs. In keeping with the Ontario government’s own policy objectives, hubs should be measured only against agreed-upon outcomes and not on the basis of process or output measures such as administrative cost ratios or persons served. We look forward to working with the nonprofit sector and the Advisory Group on the development of suitable indicators.

Community nonprofits would benefit from a mechanism to access best practices and other supports for community hubs. The Ontario government could play a supporting role in sharing lessons learned across the hub network and aspiring hub builders.

We encourage the Government of Ontario to consider the long-term benefits of supporting community hubs, namely improved accessibility and integration of provincially-funded and other programs and services. If cost-savings are generated (and they could well be), they can be reinvested to improve service quality and accessibility. The recommendations we have provided are intended to guide the Ontario government as it develops a community hubs strategy. There are many questions that will be discussed as this process unfolds, and we would be pleased to convene the voices of the nonprofit sector to advance the discussion. We wish you well in your deliberations and we look forward to your framework to support the establishment and flourishing of community hubs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cathy Taylor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Cathy" being more prominent than the last name "Taylor".

Cathy Taylor, Executive Director
Ontario Nonprofit Network