



Brief on Community Hubs

Submitted to the Ontario Advisory Group on Community Hubs

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Introduction

This brief provides some context and thinking about community hubs drawn from the experience of a network of existing community service organizations in Toronto. Our comments are based on the experience we have with one specific form of "hub", the multi-service organization. We do not wish to suggest that there is a simple "one model fits all" approach to hub development. Indeed, hubs will look different in each neighbourhood if they are established from the ground up, with the active participation of community residents in their formation, and in response to the unique assets and challenges that are present in a given neighbourhood.

As your Advisory Group has noted in the definition of hubs, today there are many forms of organization that may be labelled in this way. From small organizations using a shared back-office platform to support diverse community development efforts, co-location models where many organizations come together to provide more connected/holistic services and realize synergies, spaces that are operated as community meeting places and as a resource for other groups and organizations to use, and organizations that seek to integrate a number of these characteristics in a single organization, and that may operate multiple sites within a number of geographic neighbourhoods.

These and other forms of organization may be variously adapted to pursue the overall goal of providing publicly accessible space where multiple players can engage in diverse and interacting activities that build mutuality, strengthen the wellbeing of local residents, and support collaborative efforts to improve community conditions.

We do not feel that a single organization can achieve all of the service delivery and community-building activities that are needed for healthy neighbourhoods to flourish. In our experience it takes a fuller ecology of community groups and organizations, working collaboratively, to build community inclusion, vitality and shared opportunity. In this regard we think it will be important for the Advisory Group to begin to distinguish diverse models and approaches, how each of these are effective at achieving specific functions in communities, and the policy frameworks that would enable more effective levels of coordination within and between local neighbourhoods.

The Historical Legacy of Hubs in Ontario

The multi-service community hub model emerged in Ontario as part of the Settlement House movement at the beginning of the 20th century. These "settlement houses" were sites combining community programs, civic participation, and community-building in one setting, located in working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods. The first Settlement House was Toynbee Hall in London England. This model spread through Europe and North America as social work practitioners experimented with various approaches to addressing the challenges of growing poverty and exclusion in urban settings. Today, our oldest hubs in Ontario are University Settlement, Central Neighbourhood House and West Neighbourhood House (established in 1910, 1911 and 1912 respectively).

Active Hub Associations Today

Toronto's three original settlement house organizations, along with 30 other neighbourhood centres, are a part of a 30-year-old incorporated inter-agency network called Toronto Neighbourhood Centres (TNC). The TNC in turn participates in national and international associations that promote the value of the hub model - as a place-based, integrated and effective approach to support both local development, and broader social reforms (the Canadian Association of Neighbourhood Services, and the International Federation of Settlement and Neighbourhood Centres).

Hubs as Part of a Community System

TNC and its members have been lobbying for the propagation of the multi-service hub model for many years, and in some cases, through United Way Toronto, leading them. The place-based approach, as signified by 'community hubs', is a central tool for strengthening community and one lever government can use to complement strong public services.

TNC frames this system context in its shared values statement as follows: "TNC promotes the model of universal access multi-service Neighbourhood Centres ("hubs") as one part of our social infrastructure, complementing strong public services and organizations supporting specific communities and sectors."

Key Characteristics of Hubs

We view a "**Community Hub**" as an organizational nexus that anchors the following capacities within a given neighbourhood:

- Publicly accessible physical spaces for community programs and events (both indoor and out);
- Mechanisms to develop and operate community programs, including community health, education, employment, social supports, recreation, arts, settlement, and community development initiatives;

- A structure that enables and supports community engagement, volunteerism and capacity building;
- A capacity to link resources across sectors – drawing upon government and private funding, local business, institutions, faith communities, government services and local residents’ groups to identify and carry out shared community-building initiatives.

These broad capacities can be entrenched in a neighbourhood in various forms. The community hub concept does not have to pre-determine any specific model of community centre or facility. But in our experience there are a few organizational characteristics that are necessary to successfully anchor these capacities over time:

Community Directed: Local community stewardship is integral to any community hub model. In particular, a community-based volunteer Board of Directors should be responsible for shaping the development and implementation of all programs and community building initiatives.

Baseline Functions: ideally each community hub should have adequate funding to support the functions of:

- **Community Development and Leadership Supports** (community education, building diverse dialogues, town hall meetings, supporting civic engagement, building shared action plans);
- **Community Asset Mapping & Resident Coordination** (identify, mobilize, connect and support residents' capacities to support shared initiatives);
- **Resource Development** (nurturing effective governance that builds upon local leadership, guiding strategic planning and shaping funding proposals and partnerships in order to assemble resources to achieve local program objectives);
- **Financial and Human Resources Management;**
- **Space Use and Access** (clerical and reception, facilities management, space rental costs, scheduling community use of space);
- **Information and Technology Systems Support** (e.g. database, reporting, computer costs, MIS, networking)

Effective Funding Practices for Supporting Community Hubs

Stable Funding for Baseline Functions:

The central functions of community hubs must be supported with adequate and stable funding. These include functions of human resource management, financial management, governance, facilities maintenance, and administrative systems. Such funding should be provided by governments, and should be structured in a way that maximizes the likelihood of funding stability and adequacy over time (e.g. may need to be supported by more than one level of government or department to guard against political volatility; should have cost of living increases integrated with the funding formula).

Given the prevalence of project funding models for government contracts today, the most likely way to sustain the funding for central hub functions would be to ensure that administrative proportions of project grants routinely include an allowance of 20% of overall project implementation costs. If this practice were widespread and standardized among government Ministries, organizations could assemble adequate funding to sustain their core functions while delivering programs over time. An alternate approach is to have one Ministry take the lead in supporting these core expenses. Such a model has been used successfully with Ontario's Community Health Centres.

Characteristics of a good hub funder:

- driven by a Community Development model that encompasses the wide variety of service domains such as health, settlement, employment, social recreation, civic engagement, community arts, community social services, etc.
- able to support multi-stakeholder agreements that allow for easy collaboration of multiple partners to access and manage shared community spaces
- fully funding core infrastructure including compensation (salaries, benefits and pension contributions) for key staff positions, including those associated with service coordination/planning, communication and resident engagement functions required to sustain hubs
- not imposing restrictive or unified financial or MIS systems
- open to cost-sharing expenses with other funders, including staff and space
- where appropriate, identify lead ministry/department contacts to steward umbrella agreements across multiple departments within a given level of government
- harmonize financial reports/audit requirements across funders
- allow capital expenditures, including for space purchase/renovation, building maintenance, and IT and other systems/equipment

Characteristics of good infrastructure funding:

- minimal or no requirement for matching dollars
- structured in such a way to as to support the development of non-profit multi-purpose community hubs in all neighbourhoods across our Province
- includes renovation and possible physical expansion of existing hubs
- includes funds for ongoing capital maintenance (many existing community hubs suffer from hard and intense use, and do not have access to such funds)

Where to Develop New Hubs

Priorities for hub development should be established through analysis of populations and neighbourhoods experiencing particular hardship, diminished opportunities, and experiencing specific barriers related to class, race and other domains of exclusion affecting equity in our society.

These communities could then be grouped according to the level of existing infrastructure, with attention to the following assets:

- neighbourhoods that already have an existing agency or agencies that anchor some of all functions of a “community hub”
- neighbourhoods that have organizations poised to play a hub role but that have no associated physical program space or core funding
- neighbourhoods that have neither of these capacities currently – but may have a rich diversity of more or less stable community groups, informal social support networks, residents, tenants and local business groups mobilizing around particular issues – all of which can be tapped into to support the development of a new community hub

Articulating Some Hub Values and Approaches

The statement below is not intended as an exhaustive set of values applying to community hubs. We offer this as one example, representing the values that inform multi-service neighbourhood centres. This statement was adapted by TNC from the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres' Helsinki Statement.

TNC members believe that well-being is a social achievement and not exclusively an individual one, and that every community needs a range of supports to flourish, including:

- government policies and programs that ensure equality of opportunity, income security, affordable housing, childcare, employment equity and human rights
- well-funded public education, healthcare and social services
- opportunities for civic engagement, celebration, expression, mutual support and democratic participation
- thriving local and regional economies
- sustainable relationships with the environment

As one part of this fabric, TNC promotes the model of universal access multi-service Neighbourhood Centres, complementing strong public services and organizations supporting specific communities and sectors.

Neighbourhood Centres are dedicated to empowering neighbours to work together to meet local challenges and create shared approaches to building community. They provide a crucial focus and support for community development, and address the needs of their area by integrating services, capacity building and social reform.

Inspired by the tradition of innovation within the Settlement House movement, today's neighbourhood centres take many forms as they generate local solutions to global challenges. Together and separately TNC members seek to catalyze change by:

- Developing relationships of trust and mutuality among people from different backgrounds and experience, as individuals, families and groups
- Bridging between those who are affected by decisions and those who make them
- Providing open and safe space for people to meet, organize, celebrate and participate actively in community life
- Building on people's potential and gifts rather than focusing on their problems
- Releasing the potential of communities as places of creativity and enterprise
- Strengthening the voice of people normally left out or ignored
- Cherishing our independence in order to remain flexible and responsive to opportunity
- Pioneering innovative approaches and solutions to neighbourhood issues
- Investing and reinvesting in community assets to build local sustainability

TNC members contribute to a world in which the “international community” is shaped by people working together from their local communities, a power and legitimacy from the base of society.

TNC Members Welcome Further Discussion

Toronto Neighbourhood Centre members would welcome the opportunity to share our learning and insights with the Hub Advisory Group members as you develop a provincial framework for community hubs.

We would be happy to provide on-site tours profiling a diverse range of hub models in operation, and could convene current hub leaders for detailed discussions about effective policy measures that would support existing hub models and prospective ones. Please contact our network's Executive Director, Rob Howarth, at robinhowarth@gmail.com at your earliest convenience to make such arrangements.

We believe that this efficient and impactful model of community building has a lot to offer Ontarians, and look forward to working with you to find ways to ensure this approach can be championed and sustained in all communities across Ontario.