

Chapter 5

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Community Building

A community-building process gives people opportunities to participate in resolving issues and making decisions that affect their lives. The goal is to bring neighbours together to work collectively for the benefit of everyone. Community building is founded on the belief that people have the resources and abilities they need to resolve problems without relying on experts to do it for them.

Here are several questions to ask before your organization launches a community building process:

- What are you trying to achieve? For example, are you interested in community building because it will make the Board feel it is doing something worthwhile, or because it will make your management systems work more effectively for people? If the Board is acting out of self-interest, it's unlikely the process will be successful. However, if you want to share control so the people you work with also have more control, people will be interested in taking part.
- How much power and control are you willing to share?
- Who do you include when you consider community building?

Your organization can encourage a strong sense of community to develop in the way you gather information, how you communicate with residents, what your relations with the larger community are like, and how you hire and deal with staff. Community building involves developing positive relationships, creating change, acting on resident concerns, and improving the quality of life in your neighbourhood.

Residents, volunteers and staff need to understand the guidelines and constraints of your operating agreement, the *Residential Tenancy Act* and the *Co-operative Association Act*, so they have realistic expectations.

a) CREATE AN INVENTORY OF SKILLS

All residents have skills and knowledge they could contribute to community building. To discover the abilities people bring to the community, create an inventory. Ask each person to write down their skills, hobbies and interests. List the responses in categories such as computer and childcare skills, and use the inventory as a reference when needed. For example, if a poster is needed for an event and the inventory lists someone with graphic design skills, you have a match.



For more information on the potential uses of an inventory, see *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, by John McKnight and John Kretzmann. To order a copy, contact ACTA Publications at 4848 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL, 60640, or 1-800-397-2282.

Consider setting up a volunteer program to draw on residents' skills. Volunteer programs often include:

- A volunteer recruitment campaign, advertising and/or directly asking people to get involved.
- Orientation and training for volunteers.
- Rotating jobs among volunteers.
- Mentoring between more and less skilled volunteers.
- Recognizing and celebrating volunteers.

Find ways to avoid excessive reliance on key volunteers. For example, if the loss or burn out of one person would shut down an initiative, responsibilities should be more widely distributed.

b) EXAMINE COMMUNITY VALUES

Community members can begin to explore the values that shape their beliefs and affect their social relationships, through a simple group exercise:

- 1) Each person gets three strips of paper. Ask people to write three answers to the question: What values are important to your sense of community? Values are qualities or characteristics that are important to us, not material objects. For example, three values might be respect, equality and cooperation.
- 2) Participants take turns taping their values up on the wall, and briefly explain why these values are important to them.
- 3) People group similar values together to build collective values and discuss questions such as: What are the similarities and differences? Are any values missing that could be added? How can we build on our similarities? How can we accommodate our differences? How do we incorporate these values into the work we do together?



c) PLAN ACTIVITIES

Hold a planning session to identify appropriate activities for the community. Find meaningful opportunities for all ages to participate to ensure the activities are inclusive. For example, an informal focus group with youth who are hanging out at a development can be a great way to get their input. Ask the following questions:

- What kind of event or activity would appeal to residents?
- What date, time and location would be suitable?
- What tasks would be involved? Who would do them?
- What resources would be required?

(See page 66 for information on different planning techniques.)

d) COMMUNITY BUILDING TOOLS

There are a variety of ways to share information about activities, events and issues, including:

- *Flyers/Newsletters* ~ Put flyers in mailboxes or under doors to get your message out. Larger type is easier for seniors to read, while colourful graphics will attract kids' attention. If youth are your audience, try having them create the design.
- *Community Bulletin Boards* ~ Post newsletters, flyers and other notices about meetings and events on a bulletin board, placed in a high pedestrian traffic area for maximum visibility.
- *Suggestion Box* ~ Place a bright, accessible and securely locked suggestion box in a common area, and take suggestions to meetings for discussion and planning.
- *Scrawl Wall* ~ Hang a white board with erasable markers where people can write their concerns and interests. Ask for input on a different topic each month or on specific subjects the community wants feedback on, such as housing needs or community services.
- *Soap Box Night* ~ Create an opportunity for residents to speak their minds on important issues, at a monthly soap box night combined with a potluck meal. Set ground rules before you meet such as no interrupting and no put downs of others.
- *Phone Trees* ~ Phone trees are effective for quickly getting people to a special meeting or event. Start with a core group of two to five names and give each person a list of numbers to call, with a prepared script about the activity. Each person called should also have a list of numbers, and so on.
- *Creative Meetings* ~ Make meetings fun so more people will want to participate. Have potlucks. Use paints, collage or other creative materials to design community spaces, or to encourage people who prefer visual expression or have language challenges.



Use your inventory to find people with skills to help develop your community building tools.

e) COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Organize activities to connect people and develop a sense of belonging to the community. Tailor events to the mix of people you'd like to participate. For example, a simple tea and coffee party may attract seniors, while a pizza and video night would more likely attract a mixed age group. Also consider which time of day and month will work best for people.

- *Potlucks/Theme Events* ~ Hold potluck breakfasts, lunches or dinners without a meeting attached so residents have an opportunity to socialize and share music, recipes and customs with their neighbours. Make the events multicultural, if your community is culturally diverse. Link celebrations to holidays such as Canada Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and days that are special for the cultural groups in your community. Consider inviting a community leader or politician to these holiday celebrations.
- *Community Gardens* ~ Create a community garden where residents of all ages can communally grow food, flowers and herbs. Gardens give people a healthy food supply and beautify the development. More experienced gardeners may be willing to share tips, plants and seeds with others.
- *Barter Board* ~ Hang a bulletin board where residents can post notices about products or services they want to barter, such as desktop publishing, babysitting, crafts or music lessons. People can also arrange to share communal equipment such as a lawnmower or carpet cleaner.
- *Community Kitchens* ~ If residents can arrange access to a large kitchen, buying groceries and cooking in bulk once a week or month can save money and time, and create a fun social gathering.
- *Community Art Projects* ~ Many groups have created successful community art projects to beautify their surroundings, such as painting designs or murals on fences, or community garden sculptures. Art projects can transcend language barriers and bring people with different cultural backgrounds together.
- *Yard Sales* ~ Hold an annual yard sale or swap meet.
- *Neighbourhood Watch/Safety Patrols* ~ Coordinate activities that promote safety. BC Housing surveys show safety is a top priority for residents.
- *Workshops* ~ Invite speakers on topics of interest to residents. Organize workshops on household maintenance, container gardening, etc. Use your skills inventory to find speakers or facilitators within the community.



- *Adopt a Block* ~ Organize adults and kids in the community to pick up litter on a regular basis to develop a sense of community pride. Ensure you first provide safety training on handling hazardous garbage such as condoms and needles. Host a pancake breakfast to launch the activity and increase participation.

To arrange training in community development, call the BC Non-Profit Housing Association at 604-527-8859 or 1-800-494-8859, and the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC at 604-879-5111 or 1-866-879-5111. Your Property Portfolio Manager can also be a good source of information.

Resident Involvement

Co-op members jointly own housing co-ops, participate in decision-making and share responsibility for running the development. Expectations for participation are explained when people apply to live in a co-op.

This section is primarily for non-profit societies to use to promote resident involvement, although some information is generic enough to apply to co-ops as well.

a) BENEFITS OF RESIDENT PARTICIPATION

Resident participation gives people a feeling of control over their home and community life, and can lead to better management, new services, strong communities, personal growth for residents, greater job satisfaction for staff, and stronger neighbourhood connections.

Better Management

Residents can provide information to augment the knowledge and expertise of staff and directors. People living in the development can:

- Help keep you informed about maintenance requirements and safety issues.
- Offer an insider's perspective on different social, ethnic and economic concerns of residents.

Board decisions will meet residents' needs more effectively and receive greater support when a resident perspective is included. When residents know they can influence decisions, they feel responsible for the quality of life at the development.



New Services

Residents can often organize inexpensive social and recreational services for one another, services that may fall outside your mandate or budget, such as:

- Parent/child drop-in programs.
- Neighbourhood Watch.
- Food distribution for residents experiencing financial difficulties.
- Recycling programs (clothing, books, furniture).
- Breakfast clubs, potlucks, parties, bingo games and seasonal events.
- Community garden plots.
- Meals for seniors, new parents and sick residents.
- A buddy system so seniors and people with disabilities living alone can support one another.
- Speakers from community agencies.
- Security patrols.
- Team sports for youth.
- Fitness classes.
- Residents' newsletter.

Sometimes seed money or fundraising drives will be required to initiate or sustain new services. Your Property Portfolio Manager can advise you how to apply for funding to support resident activities and programs.

Strong Communities

People learn to bridge differences, recognize common concerns, develop relationships and support networks, and build trust and a sense of community by working together. Residents will often look out for each other, sharing shopping and childcare, lending a hand when a neighbour needs help.

Personal Growth for Residents

Residents can develop new skills by organizing events, taking part in meetings, fundraising and negotiating with staff. Some people shift from feeling powerless to feeling competent and independent.

Greater Job Satisfaction for Staff

When residents work toward solutions with staff rather than criticizing, staff experience less stress, enjoy their relationships with residents more, and as a result, morale improves. With a resident organization, people will focus their concerns as a group, which can streamline staff time.



Stronger Neighbourhood Connections

Some resident organizations develop successful programs neighbours in the surrounding community want to join. In other instances, residents join existing organizations to work on common community issues.

b) WAYS TO INVOLVE RESIDENTS

Directors and staff must be willing to share knowledge and decision-making power with residents to build an inclusive community based on trust, respect and acceptance of differences.

Still, getting residents involved can be a slow process. For some people in non-profit developments, it's a new approach and takes time to build new attitudes, skills, and structures. Your Board can begin by:

- Inviting everyone to a meeting to hear resident concerns and ideas for addressing issues.
- Inviting speakers to share advice and information on the benefits and challenges of resident organizing.
- Asking for volunteers to begin developing a structure.
- Agreeing to focus on at least one task or issue from the meeting.
- Supporting resident activities with seed money.
- Sharing meeting space, office services, supplies, information, and fundraising ideas.

Here are several sample models you can use to encourage resident participation in managing the development. You don't have to be limited to one model, and may want to combine approaches – for example, by bringing residents onto the board, helping to set up a residents' association, and creating job opportunities for residents. Keep people informed by putting up posters, distributing flyers, and holding meetings.

Residents as Members

Residents in non-profit developments do not have to be society members. However, residents can belong to the society's membership, sit on the Board of Directors, and participate on management committees that report to the Board. Non-profit participation is voluntary, but membership is open to anyone who wants to get involved. As members, residents help elect directors. As directors, residents vote on policy decisions. And as committee members, residents help with research and recommendations that lead to policy positions. Ensure people receive adequate orientation and have opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge.

This approach reflects the model of management used by housing co-ops, where all residents are co-op members and share decision-making and responsibility for running a co-op.



When considering this approach, remember that the *Residential Tenancy Act* does not apply to members, which means residents will lose the rights and protections of the RTA. However, residents can be appointed or elected as directors without being society members.

Residents on the Board

Residents on a non-profit Board participate directly in management decisions on budgets, policies, staffing, planning and maintenance. The Board's perspective is broadened to include some of the people it serves.

As with non-resident Board members, resident directors should bring skills and experience to the Board. To ensure resident directors represent residents as a whole, they should be democratically selected by their peers. Some options include:

- Residents in the development elect candidates.
- Residents from various buildings in your portfolio elect residents to represent a development or client group.
- Your society forms a membership that residents and non-residents can join, and members elect the Board.
- The resident association elects resident directors.
- Ask for volunteers.

Make sure people understand what the Board does and how the selection process works.

Refer to page 23 for information on conflict of interest for resident directors.

Resident Associations

A resident association is an organization run by and for residents, and incorporated under the *Society Act*. Your Board or staff may help residents get an association started and provide some funding to the group, but ultimately, the association sets its own agenda.

Membership will be defined in the association's bylaws. People do not have to become members, but all residents should be able to apply for membership and elect officers.

Large non-profit organizations with several developments may elect a Resident Council, with representatives from each resident association to work on common issues and interests.



Resident associations often initiate new resident programs and services. Associations also organize regular meetings, take resident concerns to the Board, and can act as an advisory group to the Board to provide a resident perspective. Your Board will have to decide how to involve the association in the decision-making process, for example:

- Scheduling regular meetings between staff and association members.
- Scheduling an association presentation as a regular Board agenda item.
- Making staff or directors available to attend association meetings.

Advisory Committees

Some housing providers establish advisory committees with residents, directors, and staff members to discuss programs, building and maintenance issues, resident interests and concerns, and possible courses of action. Residents should make up the majority of committee members—for example, your committee might have six residents, two directors, and one staff person. In some instances, short-term groups are formed to address particular issues. These committees act in an advisory capacity, making recommendations to the Board without having direct decision-making power.

Decide how you will select residents for the committee. If you invite specific individuals to participate, make sure you're asking people who represent the mix of residents in the development. Alternatively, you can ask for volunteers or arrange an election. Be willing to accept volunteers, even if you appoint people or hold elections. These volunteers can work on sub-committees to do research and make recommendations to the main group.

Community Meetings

You can hold monthly or quarterly community meetings open to all residents, staff and directors to discuss day-to-day building management issues and make decisions collectively. The large group develops policies and forms committees to deal with particular or ongoing management issues. Although the Board retains veto power, you must respect community decisions in most instances for this approach to be successful.

In addition, residents must be educated about the legal and budgetary agreements that govern decisions, so decisions fit within your contractual obligations.



Employing Residents

Affordable, secure housing can give people a sense of stability, and employment can help build skills, self-esteem, and independence. That's why some organizations hire and, in some instances, train residents to do:

- Grounds maintenance.
- Renovations and repairs.
- Administrative and clerical tasks.
- Painting.
- Recreational and social programs.
- Janitorial work.
- Relief work for property managers.
- Cleaning windows and carpets.

Refer to chapter four on page 35 for more information on human resources.

Refer to the Administration section in the *Operations Guide* for information on the legal requirements of the *Employment Standards Act* and Workers' Compensation Board.

You can also encourage and support residents to develop new businesses with advice on getting started, referrals to economic development and other community agencies, seed money, space to operate and skills training.

Challenges

Some common obstacles societies encounter when starting a resident participation process include:

Not many residents participate ~ Find out why residents aren't getting involved. Ask them directly. Some people may not participate because they already have lots to do, or don't know what the benefits will be. You may create more interest by communicating the payoffs. Others may be afraid of eviction if they take a stand on issues and need to be reassured they won't lose their housing for voicing opinions. If people are unsure they have something worthwhile to offer, explain concrete ways they can contribute. Sometimes the meeting time is inconvenient or people need childcare to attend meetings.



Staff and the Board resist having residents involved ~ People may fear loss of authority, criticism from residents or more work. Residents, staff and the Board can hold separate brainstorming sessions to list the ten major issues facing the organization, then compare notes. You'll probably discover people have identified common issues you can use as an agenda. Or have a facilitator help you develop a process for sharing responsibility. Develop a policy to affirm resident involvement. Change job descriptions so people have time to work with residents.

The people participating do not reflect the mix of residents ~ Encourage bilingual residents to translate for others if people are not participating because of language barriers. Translate written materials. Multicultural agencies may be able to provide translation services and help groups work together to bridge differences. The Co-operative Housing Federation of BC offers a workshop to build cross-cultural sensitivity called *Living With Diversity*. Hold international potluck dinners where residents can learn about one another's culture.

A resident leader misuses power ~ If someone uses power to intimidate or control others, written job descriptions for positions such as Chair, President, and Secretary can help define roles. If inappropriate behaviour occurs at a meeting, call for a break and take the person aside to suggest more appropriate actions. Assign a project to focus this individual's energy. Provide training to help people develop meeting, communication and conflict resolution skills. Bring in a mediator to help work through the conflict.

The BC Non-Profit Housing Association provides training in Community Building, and can connect you with other non-profits where residents participate in management. Call the association at 604-527-8859 or 1-800-494-8859.

The Co-operative Housing Federation of BC offers Community Development services and workshops. Call the organization at 604-879-5111 or 1-866-879-5111.
