From the Ground Up

An Organizing Handbook for Healthy Communities

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Introduction

Purpose and Scope

This is a handbook to guide individuals, groups and coalitions that are organizing to make a difference in their communities using a Healthy Community process. It was written by staff and volunteers of the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, based on their knowledge and hands-on experience in developing and organizing Healthy Community initiatives. This handbook is not designed as a definitive, authoritative or comprehensive text. It is only a starting point to assist people to start or continue to organize a Healthy Community initiative.

For the sake of simplicity, it is assumed throughout the handbook that the community is geographic in nature; however, the content can be applied with little adaptation to non-geographical communities, such as those that share similar interests, characteristics or needs. Also, for the sake of preserving an organizational framework, the material is presented as though the organizing process is linear in nature, with a distinct starting point, discrete steps and a final end-point. This is not how it works in the real world; many initiatives start from more than one place, some start and stall several times, many of the elements will be done concurrently or be skipped, and numerous unforeseen factors will both delight you and complicate matters to no end!

Healthy Community Model

While the information contained in this handbook may be useful to a wide range of organizing efforts, it is particularly directed at organizing within a Healthy Community context. The Healthy Community model recognizes that, in addition to our genetic characteristics, lifestyle or access to health or sick care services, our health is also strongly influenced by social, economic and environmental factors. It sees communities as dynamic systems in which everything is connected to everything else. In a healthy community the
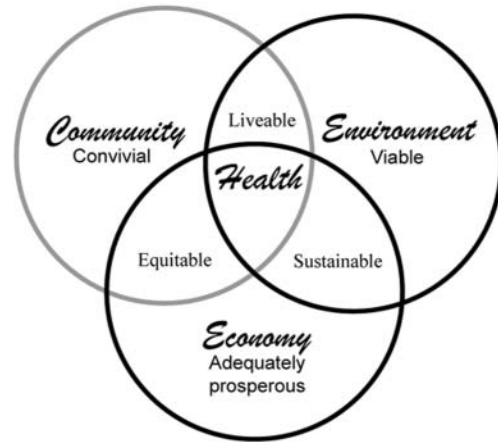
**Healthy Communities
Model**

economic, environmental and social sectors are integrated and work together in harmony to create a high quality of life for all its residents. There are four key elements involved in creating healthy communities:

- wide community participation
- multi-sectoral involvement
- local government commitment
- healthy public policies

The quality of our community life is important because we derive physical, mental, spiritual and emotional sustenance from our involvement with others. A healthy community provides for these basic needs for all its members, and maintains healthy relationships both within and outside of the community.

The Healthy Community approach involves each community deciding for itself what kind of community they want in the future and developing strategies to move them in that direction. Different individuals and groups may take on various tasks and activities. At certain points along the path, it is important to pause and evaluate the success of these various efforts. The community will need to come together at least from time to time to ensure that the goals and

strategies are still relevant, that the whole community is represented in the community plan and that as many as possible are involved. More information about the Healthy Communities model, principles and approach is contained in Appendix 2.

Overview of Content

The main body of this handbook is an introduction to the six main steps involved in developing an organization or coalition to create community change. Chapter Two, "Getting Started", suggests some activities that are beneficial in preparation for organizing and some ideas for connecting with others around your area(s) of interest. Chapter Three "Getting Organized" provides information on how you might go about organizing your group, developing your plans, obtaining needed resources, and establishing governance and decision-making processes. Chapter Four, "Developing Skills", gives some basic instructions and tips on how to be an effective facilitator and communicator. Chapter Five, "Taking Action", explores various initiatives your group may consider undertaking to promote positive community change while Chapter Six "Evaluating Progress" review provides some basic evaluation methods to help you to assess whether your efforts have made really a difference. The final chapter "Sustaining Momentum", looks at ways of maintaining momentum of the group during difficult phases, and also reflects on the winding down phase of group development, after the first project has been completed and the initial excitement wears off. While it is natural that some groups will have a limited life span, there may be ways of building upon and extending the work that has been accomplished.

In preparing this handbook we have tried to present down-to-earth practical information and tips that you will be able to put to work immediately in your community. We have covered only the essential points in the body of the handbook to keep it short and easy to follow. Additional information, resource materials and references have been included in appendices at the back of the handbook so that interested people can expand their knowledge, explore skills areas in more detail, or read more about how others have made a difference.

Our hope is that this handbook will assist you to put your ideas about organizing a Healthy Communities initiative into action, evaluate your success and sustain your momentum to be able to take on future initiatives. Your reactions, comments and observations are important to us. We would like to hear about your experiences using this resource manual and any suggestions you have that would make this manual a more effective resource for communities. Please send your feedback to us at info@healthycommunities.on.ca.

I Getting Started

1.1 Sharing Issues and Concerns

Healthy Communities initiatives have begun in a number of ways, such as:

- identifying a serious problem or issue
- seeing a need for new services or resources within your community (e.g. a walking trail, a community centre or a soccer field)
- wanting to know more about your community (e.g. its history, culture or social programs),
- recognizing a state of discontent among community members
- learning about the Healthy Community model or about a Healthy Communities initiative undertaken in another community

- distributing or receiving planning documents or study reports about the community
- the desire to keep a great community great!

As you talk with your friends, neighbours and co-workers about your thoughts, you may find there are others that have similar ideas or interests. Some may be willing to work with you to explore the possibility of organizing a group to put your ideas into action. You may find that there is already a group established that would welcome your participation.

1.2 Getting To Know Your Community

Whatever your reason for starting your organizing efforts, your initiative will be more successful if you do some background work before discussing it with others outside your group, or close circle of friends, neighbours and family. It is important to become familiar with your community, if you aren't already, in terms of its resources, needs, issues, power structure and decision-making processes.

 At this initial stage you may want to:

- read your local newspaper regularly
- attend community events
- join a community group or local committee
- obtain and read community reports (e.g., health status reports from local health unit, crime reports from police)
- talk to neighbours about how they feel about living in their community.

It is important to get a sense of what the current issues and priorities are, within the various sectors of the community (e.g. the issues identified by the local chamber of commerce are not likely to be the same as those identified by the local anti-poverty organization), and how decisions are made.

It is also critical that you look around your community to see who else is involved in similar activities or has similar interests to yours. You could then contact them to share information and explore the potential for collaboration. The last thing you want to do is try to start something new and then find out that it isn't new at all. Often, by working through an existing group, you can effect change by contributing your ideas and expertise to an existing group and interest them in adopting a Healthy Community approach.

1.3 Coming Together

When you feel you are ready, the next step is to gather a group together to plan a community event that will:

- bring community members together to share their ideas about what a healthy community is
- identify the resources and assets that already exist in your community
- consider a wide range of issues and concerns
- initiate a planning process to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of your community.

Depending on the circumstances, this group may be an unstructured association of individuals, an existing organization, or a coalition of various organizations and individuals. Whatever the case, this organizing body will be referred to as the "group" throughout this handbook.

Creating healthier communities will benefit everyone in a community, and ideally everyone in the community will be involved in helping in some way. Coming together can happen around the kitchen table, on a street corner, or in a public library meeting room. Sometimes a series of informal talk sessions with friends, associates and neighbours turns into a planning committee which then organizes a larger event. It can involve an informal meeting or a formal, publicly-promoted gathering such as a town hall meeting or a community focus group. It is important to discover the range of perspectives, interests and needs within the community and find the areas of common ground. By bringing people together to reflect on where they live, work and play, individuals can become inspired to engage in efforts to improve their situation.

It is also important to continually broaden the base of people that are involved in the process. There should be specific strategies developed for outreach to those not traditionally involved in community planning. When considering particular issues or needs to be addressed, it is important to find out if this is an individual concern or a community concern. When a sizeable group shares a common concern and commits to a course of action, it promotes credibility with the public and the local government.

Usually, the initial community meeting is focused on developing a shared understanding of the major characteristics of the community, a sense of the kind of community that people would like to work towards developing, and some broad strategic directions to get started. The following section describes some types of exercises that are useful in planning, organizing or facilitating this initial community meeting. A list of pertinent resources is listed in Appendix 3 for further reading. Your group must decide which will be most effective for your community and your purposes.

(a) Visioning

Visioning is believed by some to be a critical first step in preparing to create social change. Visioning is a popular performance-enhancing tool. Athletes and business both use it to boost performance, team spirit, creative problem-solving and self-confidence. In a community visioning session community members with diverse characteristics and from different sectors of the community gather to create a collective vision of a "Healthy Community". This vision is usually expressed in pictorial form, using images and symbols to convey their ideal community. Visioning is a creative process that allows us to go beyond current political, economic and social realities and helps people to articulate what they truly want for and from their community. It is important to make every effort to involve as many people/perspectives as possible in your visioning exercise. People feel a greater sense of ownership and commitment to a vision they have helped create. A sample visioning workshop is included in Appendix 2.

(b) *Future Search*

According to the Future Search Network, by using this method "hundreds of communities and organizations have achieved a shared vision and committed action from diverse stakeholders. People worldwide have found common ground in future search despite differences of ability, age, education, ethnicity, function, gender, hierarchy and language". Future Search is a three-day community conference which brings people from all walks of life together to tell stories about their past, present and desired future. Through this process, they discover their common ground. Only when their commonalties are confirmed do they begin to develop concrete action plans. Future Search is based on premises that are complementary to Healthy Communities; e.g. the idea that focusing on a shared future provides more incentive for action than listing problems or conflicts, and having everyone create a joint picture of the world leads to everyone improving the whole in ways they had not thought possible. The meeting design comes from theories and principles tested in many cultures for the past 50 years. Detailed instructions for organizing and facilitating Future Search conferences are available on the Future Search website. (http://www.futuresearch.net)

(c) *Open Space Technology*

Since 1985, this technique is has been used thousands of times on all continents, with corporations, villages in developing countries, religious communities, governmental agencies, and whole towns. Participants come together around a broad theme, such as "How Can We Become a Healthy Community?" and create and manage their own agenda of working sessions, based on the issues are important and meaningful to them. Open space uses the principles of self-organization. Sitting in a circle, participants write topics that they would like to discuss with other on a card. Then, one by one, they come to the centre of the circle, identify their topic and give a brief explanation, and post it on a wall or board. When all the topics are posted, they are arranged in the available time slots and meeting locations. Participants then decide which of the sessions they would like to attend.

There are four basic principles of Open Space

1. Whoever comes are the right people
2. Whenever it starts is the right time (spirit and creativity don't run on the clock)
3. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened (no critique of what should have or could have happened)
4. When it's over, it's over (getting the work done is more important than sticking to an arbitrary schedule).

One of the most unusual features of this style of meeting is "The Law of Two Feet": "If at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and move to some place more to your liking." This serves to make the individual participant responsible for the quality of his or her own experience, and eliminates guilt for moving on. For more information about Open Space technology, visit the Worldwide Open Space website at http://www.openspaceworld.org/english/index.html.

1.4 Assessing Your Community

To further the group's knowledge of the community, and to start the process of involving the wider community, it may be helpful to conduct a community assessment prior to bringing community members together. This can be done by volunteers using relatively informal methods, or the group may wish to partner with an existing organization or seek funding in order to undertake a more in-depth and professional approach.

Informal methods may include asking a small sample of individual residents what they like or dislike about their community, what they would like their community to be like for their children or grandchildren, or to list their needs, goals, skills, knowledge and experience. It may also be useful to collect data about the community from other sources, such as the latest census, social service agencies, environmental conservation organizations or the local economic development office. Reviewing the characteristics of a healthy community (see Appendix 2) may give you some ideas of areas that you will want to learn more about.

More formal methods of community assessment are described below.
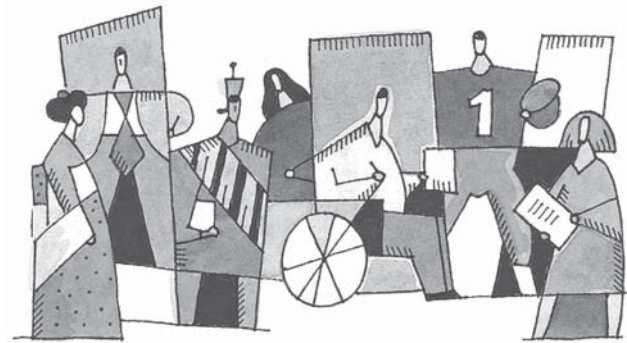
(a) Key Informant Survey

This method involves individual interviews being conducted with community leaders or people that have a broad understanding of the community, using the same schedule of questions for each interview.

(b) Community Survey

Residents are asked a series of questions either in person by volunteers, by telephone, or using a questionnaire that is sent or dropped off at each house. To be effective, expert advice should be sought on the selection of residents to be contacted, the construction of the questionnaire and the analysis of the responses. It is important to consider the best time of day to contact people, whether translation or interpretation will be required, and how to provide sufficient follow-up to ensure an adequate response rate. It is also important to find out what other community surveys have been done in the past and how the results were used. Some communities are over-surveyed and some members may be reluctant to take part in what they see as another futile exercise. Community surveys are time-consuming and labour intensive, but can yield excellent results. It is often very effective to hold a community meeting to review and discuss the results of a community survey, and start to develop a plan to address the issues or needs that were raised.

(c) Asset-Mapping

This method is popular with Healthy Community groups because it is empowering for communities. It focuses on the assets or resources of the community first, before considering its needs or deficits. When we look only at the negative aspects of a community, it tends to lead our thinking in the direction of seeking external resources, often in the form of professional services, to meet the identified needs. However, when we look at assets and resources first, we become aware of the capacity of the community to meet a significant portion of its needs from within the community. Community assets include the human resources (e.g., skills, knowledge, experience), natural resources (e.g. trees, lake, soil), physical assets (e.g., schools, community centres, churches), economic activity (e.g.,businesses, local economic trading systems), social capital (e.g., social networks, trust, good will), cultural expression and spiritual aspects. Community capacity is the connections among all these assets that can be used to meet community needs. By identifying or mapping these assets, community members learn a great deal about their communities and where they go to meet their needs and interests. Asset-mapping can be done in many ways: from simple half-day sessions to complex, long-term undertakings. Resources relating to asset-mapping are listed in Appendix 3.

(d) Focus Group

Reaching less people but providing more in-depth information, a focus group meeting with a few selected residents may be helpful. In a focus group meeting, invited participants are given a few open-ended questions to discuss. The facilitator encourages all to express their opinions and the points that are raised are recorded, either on paper or using a tape recorder. There is no agreement required; it is purely an exploratory exercise to identify opinions, issues, needs, potential solutions and recommendations.