

"Have A Heart: Good Neighbours Contribute To Better Health"

Think piece for the Citizen Series Webinar - February 17th, 1:30-3:30pm

Why have a heart?

There is often great work being done in community, that never makes the headlines, that is carried out on little or no resources, that directly impacts the lives and health of community members. Whether moved by charitable, religious or political impulses, people contribute to building a strong and healthy fabric in their communities. But we seldom stop to recognize and applaud these selfless acts and actors.



Figure 2: Hazel Spearheads the "Have a Heart For Change" Campaign in Mississauga Ontario, May 2009. Captured in the *Village LMC Community Newsletter* at: http://villagelmc.com/?page_id=19

What is Volunteerism, Advocacy and Activism?

Volunteers carry out work and tasks that are desperately needed, but for which agencies or organizations do not have resources to hire staff. Advocates speak up on behalf of or support others so they can get the services and supports they need. Activists work to see systematic changes happen at broader political levels that will improve communities. All three roles are avenues for "ordinary citizens" to achieve extraordinary things and contribute as good neighbours to their local communities.

Why is citizen involvement on these three levels so important?

We have learned the hard way: if we attempt to make changes in our communities without involving the people most directly affected, we are actually building up a store house of trouble. People who live in a community are the real experts on their neighborhoods and on the issues that affect their families and their daily lives. They are also the ones best positioned to know what solutions and actions are most likely to be successful. Community planners have long understood that arriving in a community or neighbourhood with a completed plan and asking for feedback usually generates only bad feeling and a lot of negative feedback. On the other hand, finding processes that allow citizens to be involved and supported in making meaningful contributions generates commitment and energy into moving collectively created solutions forward. In short: participating as a volunteer, an advocate or an activist is all about participating in democracy. It is at the heart of what being a good neighbour is about!

Volunteers, Advocates and Activists

Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.

Who are they?

Volunteers, Advocates and Activists come in all ages, sizes and levels of education. They come from all walks of life and from all kinds of interests. From arguing for a university or a cancer centre in northern BC, to raising money for issues important to the community, to providing baseball clinics in remote and isolated communities to training community members in health promotion techniques, the common element is the heart, vision and passion of the people involved.

Learning together

What are some of the features that foster successful community work? How do we support and provide useful resources and supports so that community efforts don't fall on deaf ears? Where are the partnerships and allies that can further community efforts and make them more sustainable over the long term? What are the lessons, successful and even not so successful, that volunteer efforts have to tell us about grass roots community work? What are the benefits to be gained when public organizations and levels of government actually listen to the voices of advocates and activists?

Whether you are a volunteer, and advocate, and activist or just a concerned neighbor, this webinar should be an interesting chance to think about the important role each of us plays in the life and health of our communities.

Want to learn more?

Canada has a strong reputation for our volunteer sector and cutting edge activist and advocacy movements. As well, other countries have produced some remarkable resources to support citizen engagement. Some resources of interest are:

The Community Tool Box is a remarkable (and free) resource that *“has many different resource materials for building healthy communities, including step-by-step guidelines, real-life examples, checklists and training materials—all in friendly language. It offers more than 7,000 pages of practical guidance in creating change and improvement.”* It is found at: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/index.aspx>

People & Participation: How to Put Citizens at the Heart of Decision-making (Involve) www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/People-and-Participation.pdf

Policy.ca has a series of articles relevant to Citizen Engagement. Check out: <http://www.policy.ca/policy-directory/Policy-Articles/Citizen-Engagement/>

Canadian Policy Research Networks has a *Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation* at: http://www.sasnet.org/documents/Resources/Handbook%20on%20Citizen%20Engagement_Beyond%20Consultation.pdf

Volunteer Canada has resources for supporting the building of healthy volunteers: <http://volunteer.ca/about-us/vision-mission-values>

Don't ever question the value of volunteers. Noah's Ark was built by volunteers; the Titanic was built by professionals.

