

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN NEW HOUSING CO-OPERATIVES



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Year Created: 2019

THANK YOU

I would like to thank the Community Land Trust and Mitacs for funding this research project, the School of Community and Regional Planning and the Housing Research Collaborative for facilitating my introduction to the Community Land Trust and therefore this project, and all the staff and co-op members who took the time to talk to me and shared in an open and honest way.

Special thanks to my supervisor Tamara White, the Co-op Services department of CHF BC, COHO, and members at Fraserview and Railyard Housing Co-ops for their knowledge and support.

I have a soft spot for housing co-ops, having grown up in them myself, it has been an honour and a privilege to work on this project in support of new housing co-ops. I hope that this report is useful to you and your work.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

As housing affordability issues continue to increase for low- to middle-income residents of Greater Vancouver, co-op housing is experiencing a resurgence. For the general public this resurgence is primarily about the delivery of affordable housing for a wider range of income levels. Although housing that members can afford is one of the core values of co-op housing, there is a lot more that goes into making a co-op community a success. At their best, housing co-ops are supportive, cohesive communities that promote self-governance and individual empowerment. But these communities do not just form overnight. They require patience, effort, and support. This is especially true for co-ops forming today that are trying to serve people from a wider range of incomes, who have less time for community and social endeavors than during the first wave of housing co-op development in the 1970s and 1980s. Given this context it becomes important to turn attention to how those of us working with these new communities can best support them in order to set them up for success moving into the future.

PROJECT

This project was developed by the Community Land Trust, in partnership with the Housing Research Collaborative and Mitacs, with the intention of providing insight into and support for the on-boarding and education process to both members of and staff working with new housing co-operatives. Therefore, there were two main objectives:

1. To further our understanding of how to support community, foster a sense of belonging, and shift away from a tenant mindset in new housing co-operatives
2. The development of tools and actionable items in support of this understanding

Research conducted in support of these objectives included: a literature review of grey and academic literature; tours of a variety of housing co-ops in Vancouver and Toronto; and, key informant interviews and focus groups with members of and staff that work with housing co-ops.

KEY FINDINGS

The primary way to measure the success of community building is to gauge community wellbeing. Community wellbeing is complex and depends on many variables, but it is supported by the three pillars of connectedness, livability, and equity. Best practices for staff facilitation of community wellbeing and connection were identified through the research process according to these three pillars. This report provides best practices for relationship building between staff and members, informational resources, and guidelines for workshop delivery.

Communication is among the most important aspects of relationship building in any context, and this one is no different. Clear and consistent communication right from the outset can help prevent confusion and frustration for members (and staff). It is therefore key to be intentional with how communication occurs between staff and members, this involves both the method of communication and the approach taken when dealing with members. In person communication is always preferable, and where this is not possible use the methods that are readily accessible by members. For staff working directly with co-op communities, it is important to keep the tone positive and celebrate victories, especially during the early growing pains of co-op formation. Further, when formally engaging members, it is important to focus time on the issues that are within their control.

Knowing that these communities are brand new there is a need to both be strategic with how you engage, and to provide ongoing support until they find their legs as communities. This could include a dedicated staff or resident position that facilitates community connection, using a place-based approach with engagement, and ongoing staff training. Remember that the earlier and more thoughtfully members are engaged, the deeper and wider your efforts will go and that the more you allow space for creativity and community expression by members the more invested and engaged they will be in their co-op.

MOVING FORWARD

In order to provide some support for staff working with these new communities, this report contains informational resources either for staff directly, or for staff to provide to co-op members. These include:

- Tools for community feedback, including post-occupancy and annual surveys;
- Factors of community wellbeing and some metrics that can be used;
- Suggestions for changes to the members' handbook to increase accessibility;
- Reference pages to be added to the members' handbook; and,
- A toolkit for members new to housing co-ops, including a menu of community building activities.

A large part of staff interaction with members during the first 12-24 months will be at workshops, orientation sessions, or meetings. Every time we gather is an opportunity to build relationships and facilitate conversations in which people feel heard and valued as members of their community. How these gatherings are set up and facilitated can go a long way to support this.

Also included are special considerations for specific demographics and development types, and further resources for those interested in deepening their understanding of community building, facilitation, or member support.

The intention of this report is for it to be a resource to you as you engage and build relationships with members of new housing co-op communities. However, as you move forward in your journey, you will know what is best for you in your role with these communities. I encourage you to stand confidently in that role.