

Making Change Happen: Principles of the Community Action Program

Source: The Stop Community Food Centre

This document looks at the core principles and values of the Community Action Program overall, and discusses how these fit into the different program components (e.g. the community action training, advocacy office, and social justice clubs).

PRINCIPLE 1: MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY'RE AT

The Community Advocacy Office is based on the idea that social change must be rooted in people's everyday struggles to live in dignity and provide for their families. The one-on-one work that the advocates do every day with their neighbours highlights the injustices happening in our community and directs our efforts to make change.

The Advocacy Office



Advocates Kerri and Paquita in the advocacy office (Spring 2008).

Four days per week, The Stop's community advocates work out of a tiny office next to the food bank providing referrals, information and advocacy to community members. In the past three years the advocates have helped their neighbours on over 5,500 occasions, and have provided ongoing support to over 600 community members. The diversity of the issues we work on has led to the Advocacy Office acquiring the slogan 'You name it, we do it!'

The most frequent issues for which community members seek support have consistently been tenants' rights and accessing social assistance benefits. The advocates have helped community members access over one million dollars' worth of benefits and entitlements. This is money that has gone into our community to pay the rent and feed the kids.

The New Satellite Offices

The Stop's Advocacy Office has been so successful that we have opened one satellite office in Toronto and are in the process of opening a second. The first is a partnership with the Wychwood Open Door Drop-in, which is located in the same neighbourhood as The Stop's Green Barn. This drop-in primarily

services men experiencing long-term homelessness. Thus, our advocates, who run the satellite site one day per week, have been providing a lot of intensive support. The second satellite is going to be located at the Pelham Park Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) building. This is an exciting accomplishment for the advocates, as several of them live in Pelham Park and have long advocated for this under-served building. TCHC is currently renovating a room on the ground floor of the building for us, and we plan to have this satellite running by February 2012. In addition, Advocacy Offices have been created in the new Community Food Centres in both Perth and Stratford Ontario.

PRINCIPLE 2: BEING AN ACTIVIST SHOULD MAKE YOUR LIFE BETTER



Community Action Training program graduates (November 2011).

Beyond rooting our activism in our community's lived experiences, we believe that participating in social movements should make our lives better. That is, being part of a social justice project like this should have added value in terms of increasing capacity, access to resources and creating a sense of community. Otherwise, what's the point? How can we motivate others to join our cause if we aren't demonstrating that fighting for justice enriches our lives?

Our Community Action Training program gives participants knowledge about how to stand up for their own rights while also developing an understanding of political theory and gaining tangible community organizing skills. To date, 45 community members have completed this training and 25 of them have gone on to become advocates, interns and even Stop staff. Both advocates and interns receive an honorarium for their work and, on average, this has increased each person's monthly income by 25%. This translates to more stable housing and more healthy food to eat. About half of the original advocates have gone onto other employment. In fact, a number of other agencies have created positions titled 'Community Advocate' and hired our advocates for these positions.

PRINCIPLE 3: DISRUPT THE STATUS QUO, IDENTIFY PRESSURE POINTS, BE STRATEGIC

In spring 2011, with a provincial election on the horizon, we launched a campaign to make sure that poverty and food security were issues on the table. Called the Bread & Bricks/Wychwood Action Group, teams of community members attended all-candidates' meetings as 'vote mobs' and wore t-shirts that read "Poverty makes me sick—and I'm voting!". The Action Group also canvassed door-to-door in the

community, talking with low-income neighbours about the importance of voting, and asking them to sign pledges promising to vote for the candidate that would best represent the interests of poor people in the riding.

Another strategic initiative that we started is our Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Access Project. Nearly half of the people who come to The Stop's food bank identify as having a disability, but only 25% are currently receiving ODSP benefits, largely due to lack of access to doctors and specialists and because of the lengthy and difficult application process. In a time when the political

will to raise social assistance rates is lacking, helping community members transfer from Ontario Works to ODSP is a tangible way to get more money in people's pockets. In the past nine months, we've supported 25 community members to apply for ODSP. If all of these applications win, this would mean that these individuals and their families will receive in total an additional \$150,000 each year. In the New Year we plan to expand the outreach of this campaign to help more community members apply.



Wychwood/Bread & Bricks vote mob (September 2011).

PRINCIPLE 4: BUILD ALTERNATIVES

Activists are often good at defining what they are against, but doing sustainable community organizing means we must also define what we're for. At the local level we need to take initiative to make our community more autonomous and resilient.

Over the past few years we've established a number of creative community projects. The Good Food Market that runs every Tuesday, and allows community members to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at subsidized prices. This has made a big difference for folks given that the Davenport West neighbourhood is a food desert without a grocery store nearby. We've also been organizing 'Free Stores' where people can pick up and/or trade needed items like kitchen items, books, clothes, blankets and toys.



Inoka and Cheryl work on a bike at Bike Pirates (June 2010).

Our Bike Project continues to fix up old bikes and lend them to community members for free so they can use them to get to appointments, visit friends and buy food. We partnered with the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre over the past two years on an initiative to promote riding and teach basic bicycle mechanic skills. Recently, this project was awarded The Bhayana

Family Foundation Community Award.

Each year The Stop hosts a Good Food for All Festival as part of the harvest season. This festival brings people together to celebrate, listen to music and eat great food. This year, we kicked off the festival with a *Good Food March* that was led by a marching band and a bunch of kids. We did it to have fun, make some noise, and show our neighbours that we are still committed to fighting against poverty and for healthy food for all.



Elizabeth—our carrot mascot for a day—marches with Stop staff, volunteers and community members during our first Good Food for All Festival March (September 2011).

PRINCIPLE 5: BREAK THE ISOLATION OF POVERTY, SHARE IDEAS, CONNECT

“If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk with friends.”

– Proverb from Burkina Faso



Members of the Fair Fare Coalition at the Free Transit to Cool Places event. Summer 2011.

Poverty isolates individuals within communities and isolates poor communities from each other. Low-income activists often don't have the same opportunities as other activists to travel, attend conferences and/or obtain post-secondary education. Many of the community members we work with don't have internet access or even a phone. So a lot of the work of the Community Action Program is to make sure that community members have access to information about social change happening elsewhere. We look for opportunities to connect with groups across the city, province and country that have similar goals. We also keep our ear to the ground regarding tactics and strategies that have been effective elsewhere so that we can potentially adapt these to speed along change here.

Over the past three years the Advocacy Project has partnered with countless groups on a wide range of issues affecting our community. These have ranged from co-hosting a forum on migrant farm workers' rights to partnering with the Redwood Women's Shelter to raise awareness about violence against women and cook food for people coming to the December 6th Montreal Massacre Memorial from across



the city. We also make efforts to travel from Davenport as a contingent to demonstrations happening downtown on issues affecting us.

We are also active in a number of coalitions where we have ongoing long-term partnerships. These include being a founding member of *Put Food in the Budget*, a provincial campaign demanding an immediate increase in social assistance rates through a \$100 healthy food allowance, as well as ultimately ensuring that rates reflect the cost of living and are tied to inflation. We also belong to the *ODSP Action Coalition* and play an active role in the *Fair Fare Coalition*. The unaffordability of public transit in Toronto is both a food security and health issue for our community members, and this latter group is advocating towards a low-income subsidized TTC pass as well as for TTC to be free on cold and heat alert days.

PRINCIPLE 6: BE READY FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

It's hard for even the best political economists and global activists to predict when change is going to come. Moments of mass uprising and/or policy change don't happen as spontaneously as they may seem, but rather are usually built up through years of community building and awareness-raising so that communities were primed to take action when the time came.

Three and a half years ago we couldn't have predicted the way that communities in Toronto would be affected the global recession, changes in representation at the federal, provincial and municipal levels or the city cuts we are currently facing. Nor could we predict how movements like the Arab Spring or the Occupy Movement would impact the landscape for activists.

It's easy for low-income communities to feel isolated from these trends, but it's our job as community organizers to keep our community informed and politically conscious and to nourish the belief that change is possible. Part of nourishing the belief is finding time to celebrate small-scale wins. Even when we've received discouraging news—like the recent announcement of the 1% increase to social assistance rates—we can still celebrate the small wins we have with community members to prevent an eviction or access ODSP. Similarly, we celebrated our recent accomplishment to increase voter turn-out during the provincial elections and defend libraries against city cuts.

Our Community Action Training (CAT), Bread & Bricks meetings and monthly community meetings provide an ongoing platform for community members to learn, debate and connect on the issues that affect them. When the Egyptian uprising began we had a young Egyptian activist come to speak to our Bread & Bricks Social Justice Group. We've also recently had speakers from the Workers' Action Centre, Stop the Cuts and Occupy Toronto. These opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange help us stay inspired and continue to generate innovative solutions for bettering our neighbourhood.