

Community Dispatch

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Greater than the Sum of Our Parts: Community Conversations on Building Sector Awareness

From the Funding Matters conference in 2003 where over 150 people engaged in a dialogue about funding regimes to Chair Savoline's ongoing roundtable on the nonprofit sector, there are a number of exciting current initiatives that are occurring within Halton's voluntary sector. The Voluntary Sector Awareness Project is one recent activity of Imagine Canada to build a vital nonprofit and voluntary sector.

The purpose of this project, of which Community Development Halton is the local partner, is to generate dialogue about a strategy to raise awareness of the sector in three areas:

- 1. Information that members of the Halton community should know about the voluntary and nonprofit sector;*
- 2. Barriers and opportunities to the development of a cohesive message communicating the value and role of the sector;*
- 3. Viability of an awareness strategy that strengthens the perception of the voluntary sector as a whole in Canada.*

CDH convened two local community conversations, held in the fall of 2005, in which members of the sector dialogued about the viability of raising awareness of the sector and about the concept of a united voice for the nonprofit and voluntary sector. This Community Dispatch shares with you the commentary and insights of our colleagues. CDH hopes that this Community Dispatch encourages people to continue the conversation about a united voice for the sector.

- Joey Edwardh

Is it important for the broader public to understand the nature and breadth of the voluntary sector?

Participants believe that it is *very* important for the Canadian public to know more about the nonprofit and voluntary sector. Many explain that the voluntary sector is invisible to most Canadians and that they simply think that if the sector does not provide the service then "someone else" will. Alongside this invisibility is the belief that many people have no idea how the sector is funded. One participant explains, "If people knew how we are funded, they would be shocked. We are not as secure as most people think." Moreover, there is a sense that the general public is not aware of how the sector has been seriously depleted by cutbacks, downloading of services and a chronic lack of resources.

Participants also thought it was crucial for the general public to understand the economic contributions of the voluntary sector. Figures documenting the voluntary sector's contribution of 70.5 billion dollars to the Canadian economy send an important message: Not only does the voluntary sector provide important services to Canada but also it is an important player in our economy. Discussion also focused on what participants believe to be unreasonable accountability measures that are inordinately costly to implement and of questionable value.

Participants comment that there is a stigma associated with working in the voluntary sector. There is a public perception that we work in the sector because we were unsuccessful in the private sector or we do not have the skill-set for the private sector. This stigma makes the sector

unattractive as a viable career option for young people. People can learn many important and relevant skills in this sector and this breadth of experience is not recognized.

Participants believe that it is also important for people throughout the community to understand our sector in order for individuals to volunteer in our organizations. We are so resource constrained that often our own volunteers do not fully understand the sector. If volunteers better understood our sector rather than just the organization in which they are volunteering, they would feel a part of a bigger experience vital to the health of the community.

What are the major barriers to a collective public awareness strategy/campaign?

One of the most salient themes in the community conversations is the lack of resources for community nonprofit and voluntary organizations. There is high workload in the sector, and many people in community organizations do not have the time to think strategically about the overall unity of the sector.

Moreover, one of the major barriers to a public awareness strategy is that the voluntary sector works in silos. One participant explains, "I really do not think that there is such a thing as a voluntary sector. There are just so many silos that divide us even though in a lot of ways we are working together."

The concept of a collective public awareness strategy also was met with caution as an increased awareness of the voluntary sector may translate into an increased demand for services without corresponding financial and human resources to meet this demand. On another note, one participant in the community conversations explains that the public might make the assumption that the voluntary sector has a lot of money if there is a national campaign to raise awareness that appears expensive. In this way, the national strategy could have a negative effect on local fundraising.

Another highlight from the community conversations is that an awareness strategy will not be "the answer" for unity in the voluntary sector. Indeed, many of the participants observe that Halton's nonprofit and voluntary sector "needs more buy-in" that there is a voluntary sector. More cross-silos participation is needed in order to nurture a sense of unity.

Importantly, it is noted that some of the invisibility of the sector is related to the gender composition of the sector. The nonprofit and voluntary sector is comprised predominately of women and that as a group their work is valued less, thus pushing the sector to the margins. This is a systemic issue related to the invisibility of the sector.

A number of solutions are proposed that could mitigate these barriers to a national awareness strategy.

First, in order to relieve the demands of being involved in a national awareness strategy, it is important that local organizations be compensated for our participation. Too often nonprofit agencies are expected to participate in things for free - no other sector would do this.

Secondly, we need to ensure that all agencies are able to participate in this strategy and in further conversations like these. This includes small agencies and new agencies that are not normally in our circles. We can ensure their participation through compensation but also through collaboration among ourselves to ensure that we are all able to participate.

Third, participants in the community conversation note that there is also a general distrust of national organizations. Conversation participants describe experiences when national organizations have launched large scale strategies or campaigns but then the momentum is lost or there is no sustainable funding for the project. As such national organizations must recognize this distrust and overcome it by ensuring that the process of a national strategy/campaign is participatory and that organizations throughout the nonprofit and voluntary sector have meaningful input into the

campaign. This campaign must belong to all organizations in the sector.

Community conversation participants believe that it is very important that there is a strong sense of clarity in this awareness strategy/campaign. The strategy needs to have a strong sense of clarity and a strong sense of the target audience. There is a concern that a blanket campaign will have no impact. Finally, it is very important that the message has a local face.

What are the major opportunities in designing a collective public awareness strategy/campaign?

While there is strong recognition that the culture of silos in the voluntary sector detracts from a sense of unity; there is also a strong sense in the community conversations that there are many common threads that weave through the voluntary sector. For example, nonprofit agencies are directed by a volunteer Board of Directors, attract and retain volunteers and have a philanthropic mission. These common threads create an opportunity to build on, in order to promote a collective voluntary sector.

Many participants in the community conversations observe throughout the conversations that the voluntary sector's role is invisible. One participant states, "People just have no idea what it is that I do all day. And why it is that I am so stressed out." In a sense this invisibility becomes an opportunity because there is a lot that the general public has to learn about the voluntary sector. We could use positive energy of opportunities to ensure that we shape our sense of identity as a sector and build both horizontal and vertical relationships amongst the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

What conditions need to be in place in order to make a public awareness strategy/campaign about the sector most likely to succeed?

While there is interest and support of the concept of a public awareness strategy/campaign about the nonprofit and voluntary sector, it is very important

to conversation participants that certain preconditions be met before local community organizations are involved. These pre-conditions are:

- 1. Resources.** Community organizations are very financially constrained. It would be a burden on organizations in the sector to bear the brunt of additional work to promote an awareness strategy/campaign. Resources are required in order for agencies to participate and also to follow through on a national strategy/campaign.
- 2. Meaningful Participation.** It has been a positive gesture for Imagine Canada to consult with local organizations in the voluntary sector. Imagine Canada, however, is urged to continue to consult with local partners in the further elaboration of an awareness strategy/campaign, most especially if it wants local buy in.
- 3. Local Representation.** While it is recognized that this national strategy/campaign is trying to communicate the common threads that weave through the sector, it is important to recognize that the public often looks for a local face when it comes to campaigns.
- 4. An appropriate message.** It is important that local community organizations be consulted again when it comes to formulating the message to convey to the public, in other words, test the message with us. There is a concern that often messages to the public about the sector often convey a sense of charity. This is not the image that those in the community conversations think is appropriate. Rather, we should be looking at the nonprofit and voluntary sector as a sort of insurance policy where we have to pay in order to receive the benefits from the sector.
- 5. Hearing about initiatives in a timely manner.** If organizations in the sector are expected to participate, it is important that they hear about initiatives in a timely manner in order to give agencies time to respond.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the participants see raising the awareness of the sector as an important stepping stone in understanding the role of social infrastructure in contributing to the economic and social prosperity of communities. The nonprofit and voluntary sector represents how we care for one another in communities. It adds value to the well being of individuals and of communities and as such participants believe that the public must be conscious of the fact that the vitality of this sector is diminishing, the workers of this sector are dissipating, and the skills and insights of the sector are being squandered. This is the sector that Peter Drucker suggests is central to well being in the 21st century. He writes:

The more economy, money, and information become global, the more community will matter, and only the human service sector nonprofit organization performs in the community, exploits its opportunities,

mobilizes its local resources, solves its problems. The leadership, competence, and management of the human services sector nonprofit organization will thus largely determine the values, the vision, the cohesion and performance of the 21st century.

Community Development Halton in conjunction with the Regional Chair's Roundtable on the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector is conducting a labour force study of this sector in Halton. Please assist us in gathering the information essential to understanding and representing our sector as we move to make productive Peter Drucker's words. This study has been sent to Halton human services agencies and can be filled out either on a paper copy or on-line.

Thank you



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