

CASE STUDY: Mutual Aid Network | TEA & Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre

Learning from community-based responses during a crisis

One of the key partners in TEA's Low-Carbon Community Hubs project is the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC), a community hub in Parkdale. During the pandemic, while climate-focused activities continued, PARC shifted its priorities significantly to meet community needs.

Drawing from a community-based approach used in Massachusetts, Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC) supported the launch of a mutual aid network. In March, Parkdale People's Economy, a community network supported by PARC, quickly proposed to the local planning table the idea of building on residents' knowledge and leadership and worked with community members and local agencies to create Mutual Aid Parkdale.

OBJECTIVES

- Leverage existing relationships and networks to respond quickly and effectively to meet community needs during a time of social or economic crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or future climate impacts like extreme weather.
- Reduce social isolation and share resources, understanding that many vulnerable people are disproportionately impacted in a time of crisis, due to housing insecurity, mental health, poverty, precarious work, and food insecurity.

“Mutual Aid is a practice and politics that emphasizes solidarity rather than charity. By that we mean people coming together to meet each other's needs through material and social support, and recognizing that our survival, health, and wellbeing is dependent on one another. It means building relationships with your neighbors based on trust and common interest and collectively deciding how to share and pool resources with another. Mutual Aid is also an opportunity for political education, where we build the relationships and analysis to understand why we are in the conditions that we're in and to prepare ourselves for potential future crises.” (From Parkdale Mutual Aid Network)

THE BLUEPRINT

Create a structure

- Neighbourhood Pods are hyperlocal networks of residents communicating over text message groups or phone trees of neighbours. This kind of social infrastructure is a critical part of emergency response systems and can be activated in future health and climate shocks.
- Pod Leaders sign up to reach out to neighbours over the phone or online, check-in on emerging and existing needs, coordinate and moderate a neighbourhood group chat or phone tree, and stay in touch with other pod leaders for resource pooling and sharing.

Community dialogue

- Collective weekly discussions have been an impactful element of neighbourhood pods.
- For example, these conversations discussed issues like Anti-Black racism and police brutality. These meetings helped to provide a better understanding of ideas like community safety which should include healthy housing and secure tenure. The discussion really shifted from the idea of safety from “well-policed” to well-housed.



Photo Courtesy of PARC

OUTCOMES

- The mutual aid network has over twenty neighbourhood pods in buildings, along streets, and within ethnolinguistic communities across Parkdale. The pods that have formed (i.e. a group of residents in a building, street, or a non-geographic group like ethnic, linguistic, etc.) have effectively used phone and online platforms to connect with, and support, their neighbours during the pandemic.
- Technology equity has emerged as a key concern. As more communication takes place virtually, lack of access to devices, wifi, and knowledge of digital tools creates a barrier to accessing important information and community connection. PARC is considering solutions like community wifi sharing.
- Equity and inclusivity has remained a key principle; it was more important than ever to be mindful of how to include people at every point.

Resource: *Community Hubs and Community-Based Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Lessons for building a more equitable, resilient, and climate-safe Toronto.*

Hubs have been a lifeline in Toronto during the pandemic. Their exceptional ability to aid their communities should be recognized, supported, and celebrated. To prepare for future climate shocks, it is important to support hubs in the important role they play in building strong, resilient, and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Download the report:

www.torontoenvironment.org/hub_report



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Learn more about the *Accelerating Climate Action Through Community Hubs* project

www.torontoenvironment.org/community_hubs