Neighbourhood Houses in Metro Vancouver www.nhvproject.ca

FUNDING AND IMPLICATIONS ON THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE
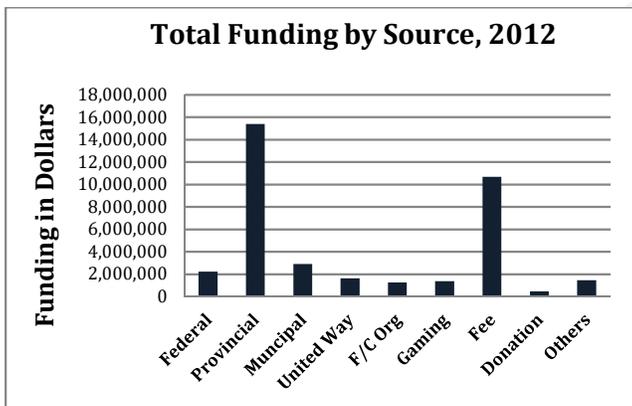
BY TSERING DOLKA & MIU CHUNG YAN

This research brief examines neighbourhood houses' funding sources and the relationships between neighbourhood houses, the community, and the government in Metro Vancouver, exploring the funding relationship as well as the tensions this relationship can create for neighbourhood houses regarding their twin roles as social service providers and as community advocates. Our findings are based on semi-structured interviews with directors of 10 neighbourhood houses located in Metro Vancouver, as well as with representatives from the Vancouver and Burnaby municipal governments, and from the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of BC.

Funding Sources

Neighbourhood houses in the Metro Vancouver area are heavily reliant on government funding for their ongoing operations, although they also draw upon other sources of funding.

Total Funding by Source, 2012

Interviewees noted that, over the years, government funding has continued to dwindle, causing many NHs to struggle to survive. As an executive director of a neighbourhood house observed:

"There is no doubt that the overall pot of funding is shrinking... As it shrinks, a number of organizations are desperately trying to stay afloat. That number doesn't necessary change; a few drop off, but not necessarily. So people are trying to do more and more with less and less."

Furthermore, while the number of organizations applying for funding has remained the same, the funding pool has continued to shrink, leading to heightened competition amongst NHs. Consequently, many interviewees noted that a significant amount of NH staff members' time and resources are channelled into applying for short-term government contracts and grants, as well as meeting the increased accountability mechanisms attached to government funding. Yet, despite NHs' being in a 'survival mode' situation due to funding inadequacies, interviewees mentioned that organizations make attempts to work together and altruistically discuss the best fit for a particular initiative, rather than angling funding grant opportunities for one's own organization.

> ### Key Findings
>
> *NHs' dependence and lack of government funding was frequently cited as a major constraint. Other challenges related to funding are: rigorous application processes, short-term funding sources, and increasing competition.*

Certain NH interviewees also noted how the process of applying for grants, as well as funding (re)application, documentation, and reporting processes, invariably places pressure on limited administrative capacities of their organizations, cutting into staff time that could otherwise be dedicated to other activities. Funding insecurity is seen as the biggest threat undermining NHs' ability to meet the needs of their communities and service users.

Funding & Impact on NH Activities

A common theme we noted in the interviews was how the short-term nature of government funding makes it difficult for NHs to engage in long-term planning. As one of the interviewees noted:

"It's extremely hard to get traction on anything when you're reapplying every year for funding... In a year, we'll evaluate what you want to change, but you're halfway (through) the year and you're looking for more money."

Interviewees also raised concerns about the nature of funding and its affect on programs, as well as its relationship with communities. They stated that there is no "core funding"; it is instead based on "program funding". Consequently, even programs that are seen as essential are terminated once the funding period ends, limiting NHs' ability to serve the needs of the community. Such issues contribute to community members'

perception of NHs as being passive and unresponsive to the needs of the community. Furthermore, many service users noted that access to programs, as well as the quality of the services offered by NHs, are affected by funding setbacks.

Funding Impacts on NH Capacity

Funding shortages and competition also affects the NH's capacity to retain experienced and qualified staff. Interviewees noted that, due to funding constraints, maintaining fair wages and enough staff members to manage the workload is a pressing issue, leading to high burnout and staff turnover rates. These issues were often mentioned as barriers to NHs being able to provide quality services. One of the interviewees succinctly described these themes:

"People are trying to do more and more with less and less. I think there are vicious cycles that start to occur. People are not getting the same quality of service, not because staff aren't great, but because they're seeing too many people."

Others mentioned that staff members must be fairly compensated, so they have the incentive to stay and continue to do good work. The high turnover rates and loss of experienced staff members fractures NHs' capacity to nurture communal ties and networks, affecting their efficacy. However, one of the interviewees also mentioned that a positive side effect of funding constraints has been that it has pushed NHs to be more creative in developing programs and coming up with solutions to meet the ongoing needs of the community. Amongst NH service users too, the lack of funding and its impact on services is a theme that was often brought up. While being appreciative of the work NHs

do in terms of providing space and day care programs, service users noted that the quality of programs, as well as the focus on community activities, have been challenged due to funding concerns and priorities. As one service user pointed out:

"My impression over a number of years is that funding is so important… They look for anything that is going to generate revenue, such as day care and renting out the cottages or facilities here to groups. That's their primary focus and I think other things, like doing the community stuff, have become secondary because the funding to keep it running is the main thing."

Ultimately, our interviews with both service users and key informants reveal that funding and its related issues form a key challenge to NHs' survival, as well as to their ability to meet and represent the needs of the communities they serve.