

Episode 2: Government and Grassroots Connections

This second episode of the Signal Boost: CCPD podcast series focuses on the impact of large institutional decisions on pandemic responses in marginalized communities. Janet Fitzsimmons, Manager of Grassroots Strategies at the Centre for Connected Communities (C3), is featured on this episode to shed light on the ways in which institutions helped or hindered community-building efforts during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.




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Years before the pandemic, the City of Toronto created the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy (TSNS) in order to address alarming trends of marginalization, poverty and racialization in specific Toronto neighbourhoods.


A key strategy of TSNS was the creation and activation of “Local Planning Tables”: collaborations between City staff, organizations and grassroots leaders that focused on creating and enacting local action plans to address systemic issues at a community level. While the Planning Tables had their challenges, they provided an opportunity for grassroots leaders to connect more deeply with other community actors. Through the Planning Tables, grassroots leaders felt able to build relationships, gather and share information, and influence local organizations and larger systems; in this way, the Planning Tables enabled grassroots leaders to act as a bridge between their local communities and the larger social sector. However, at the start of the pandemic, these Tables were closed as City and organization staff and resources were refocused on immediate pandemic response.






In our interviews with grassroots leaders, the closing of the Planning Tables was the most cited example of how grassroots leaders felt unsupported by governments and institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic, the City and United Way developed a new table structure that was focused on formal service provision in broader geographic regions. These new cluster tables included institutions, local organizations and the City, but not grassroots leaders. Grassroots leaders that were interviewed expressed frustration that they were excluded from these cluster tables, and did not understand why their experiences with grassroots organizing were not included or valued.

The CCPD interviews with grassroots leaders highlighted frustrations that they had with larger institutions. One specific frustration was that the City changed focus from collective community-centred planning to top-down emergency response. With the shift to the cluster table model, many grassroots leaders felt as though they were left behind and ignored by the City's pandemic approach. There was a sense of not understanding why their expertise and knowledge about deep community assets, needs and networks were not included in part of the pandemic response plan. Furthermore, grassroots leaders shared that they had ideas on how to leverage these existing resources to support their communities in specific ways and wanted to collaborate with the City, but there was little or no opportunity for grassroots leaders to connect directly with the City.



The knowledge that grassroots leaders hold includes a deep understanding of how to work with community members and networks, and how to utilize their own assets to focus support in the places and in ways that make the most sense in that community. Grassroots leaders are excellent networkers, connecting people to resources and information through formal and informal means (such as phone trees, messaging apps, mail, door-to-door visits and more). Most of this information comes top-down, from institutions that are able to do research (e.g health institutions such as hospitals and universities), or have real time information about resources available (City departments) but it is people at the grassroots who can effectively disperse it into neighbourhoods. Through the CCPD research, grassroots leaders reiterated that there is a disconnect between what residents on-the-ground in communities need access to, and what institutions provide to them.

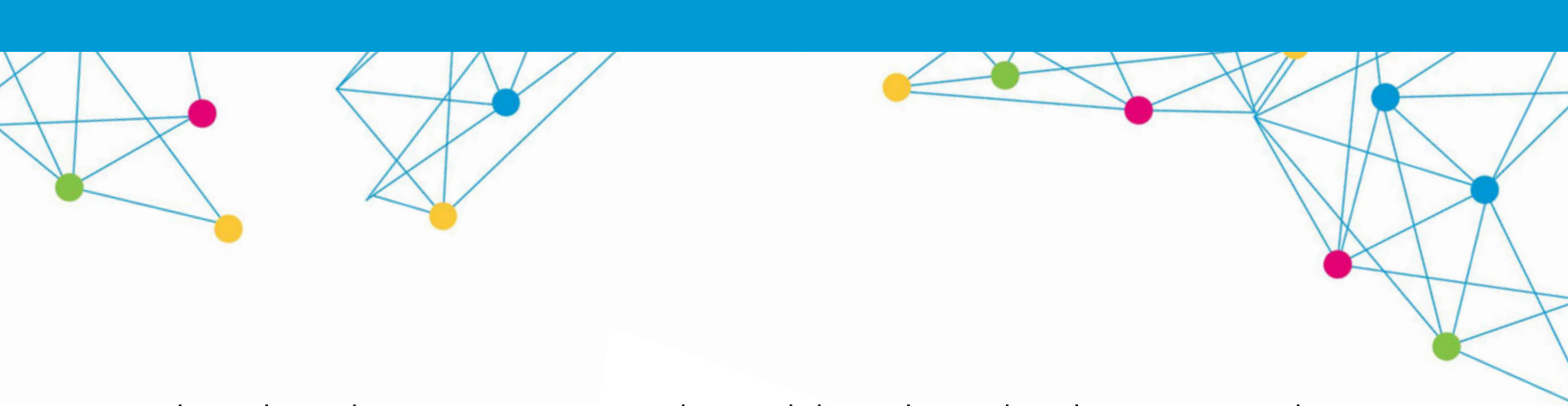
Institutions and grassroots leaders each have critical roles to play in a crisis. Governments have a broad mandate to ensure public health and safety as they have large scale reach, research capacity, authority and resources to enact the measures to keep everyone safe during a crisis. The government response creates much needed order and structure. Their size and internal bureaucracy, however, makes them slow to react and prone to one size fits all interventions.



The size and structures of governments and institutions makes it difficult for information to flow in ways that make sense on the ground. Janet explains this dynamic as she states:

When institutions interact with communities, oftentimes communities don't know about siloing or they don't know about various departments, and they're not aware that communication doesn't travel and flow throughout the institution. So they may talk to one department and have like some really great conversation and a really great interaction and good ideas. And you know, share a bunch of stuff that's really critical and go away thinking, Well, I've told the institution that now. Right. But that information because of siloing doesn't flow to other places in the institution.

Grassroots leaders and groups, on the other hand, are nimble and able to adapt to changing circumstances quickly. They are fluid and have flexible structures which make them particularly effective at meeting people where they are in communities. This differences in organizational culture and structure makes it hard for grassroots leaders and institutions to communicate with each other and this lack of understanding often creates frustrations-- grassroots leaders often do not understand why their conversations with institutional staff are positive in the moment, but do not result in change, or their ideas are not heard in other departments. Grassroots leaders deal with providing responses to acute challenges within their communities, and become increasingly frustrated when they don't see changes happening fast enough in their communities. Without critical two way communication, institutions miss out on the nuanced understanding of what is happening in communities: who is being reached, who is not, and what institutional interventions or support might be most effective.



Throughout the CCPD project, we learned that relationships between people in formal institutions and those on the ground are key to an equitable post-pandemic recovery. As Janet states, “there is no relationship between grassroots leaders and institutions, there are relationships between individuals and community, and individual staff who work for institutions, and that's important”. In order for those relationships to be effective, there needs to be two-way communication both prior to and during a shock like the COVID-19 pandemic. For governments and institutions, learning from grassroots players on the ground can make their response more effective and relevant in local communities. Grassroots leaders understand the people, the cultures and the assets on the ground. Without effective communication, the government and grassroots responses operate in parallel, each missing the critical knowledge and assets held by the other.

Government response is critical in the preparation, response and recovery from a crisis. Governments not only support communities with their immediate needs, but also contribute to changing systems-level interventions to ensure communities are able to “bounce forward” to a new, more equitable reality. If we are going to truly become a more equitable city, grassroots leaders are clear: their voices need to be heard and understood by institutions.

[You can listen to the second episode of the Signal Boost: CCPD podcast, Government and Grassroots Connections, here.](#)