

Episode 3: The Role of Agencies in Pandemic Response

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 Fltzsimmons, 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.



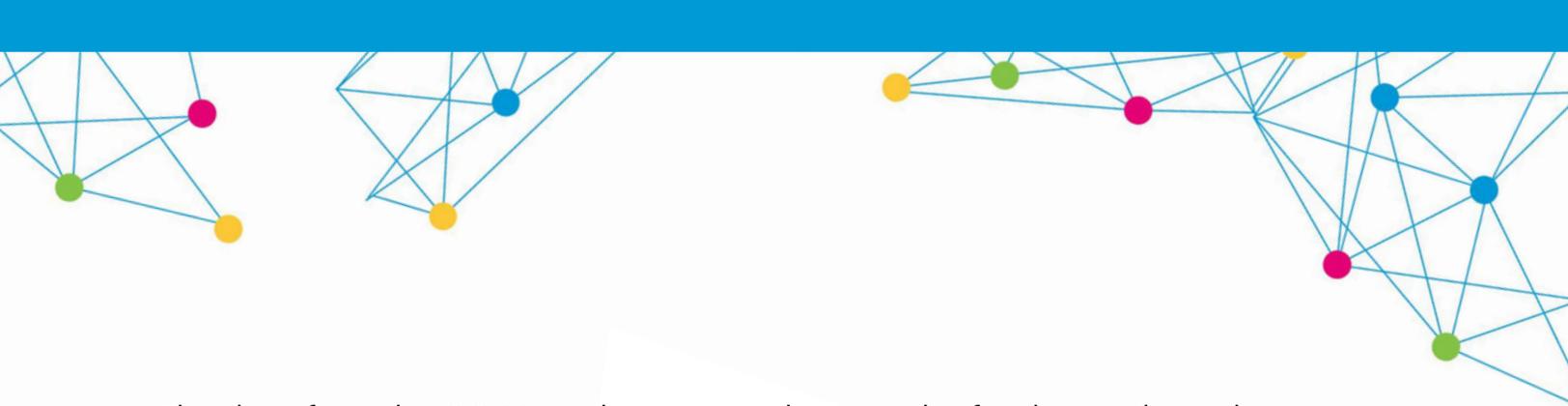
The relationships between grassroots leaders and the agencies in their communities are varied and complex. Community-based agencies vary widely in purpose, approach, context, mission and way of doing things. It is helpful to emphasize the distinction between two types of community-based organizations: those whose primary purpose is to provide social services and those who focus on community development. Service providers are agencies that help residents access individually-focused services to meet personal needs, and community development-focused organizations support collective community-led responses to ongoing stresses and acute shocks. (more on that difference can be found here: [Relationships Matter: Community Development/Service Delivery Partnership in Connected Communities](#)). Both approaches are important but serve quite different purposes.





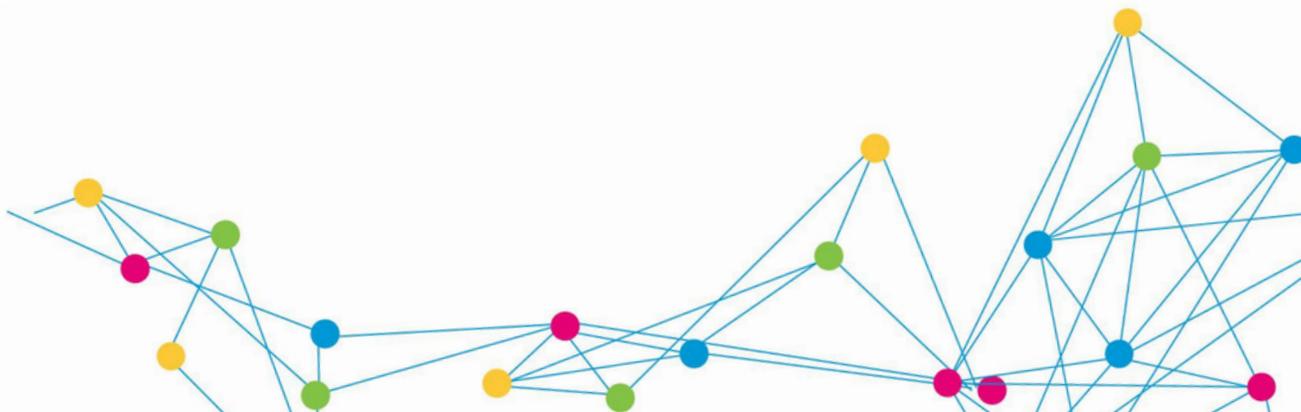
The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis event for grassroots leaders and agencies to navigate, but brought to light, and in some cases worsened, many pre-existing challenges for grassroots leaders navigating the social infrastructure of their communities and response efforts. In our conversations, we heard from grassroots leaders that many felt a sense of distrust when it came to many formalized interventions, especially from a government level based on past experiences and histories. (For more on how this may happen, see CCPD Episode 2: Government and Grassroots Connections).

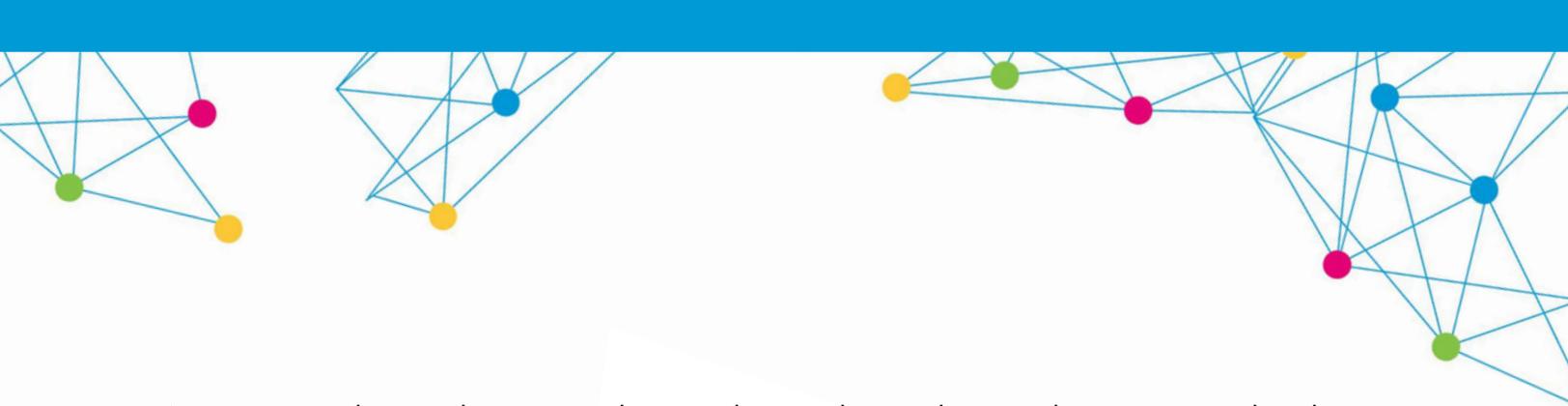
However, our research found that agencies with mandates for developing and strengthening relationship networks with local grassroots leaders, a key feature of the community development approach, were able to better support community-based grassroots action during the pandemic. Grassroots leaders emphasized that they were able to work most effectively with agencies when they acted in ways that facilitated and strengthened connections between grassroots leaders, residents and institutions to prioritize equity and collaboration in accessing and distributing resources. The following roles were identified by grassroots leaders as the most helpful for agency partners: coordinator and supporter of grassroots leaders, bottom-up connector, weaver of grassroots networks, coordinator of service providers, and facilitator of resident engagement. These roles are examples of the important social infrastructure that agencies provide, not only in terms of providing physical space, but also the bridging between on-the-ground residents and grassroots leaders that have perspective, ideas and assets to support their communities, and the institutions that are able to provide funding and resources to them.



The data from the CCPD study suggests that in order for these roles to be constructive and helpful, there needs to be strong pre-existing relationships that are based on understanding the community's collective goals and what resources they need to achieve these goals. We learned that community members who had pre-existing relationships with agency staff were able to leverage social infrastructure, such as access to resources and trained staff, and relationships with partner agencies and institutions so that they could not only continue their community-building efforts, but also tap into these systems to access the supports needed for their specific community-based needs. For example, unlike other crisis situations where a central location could be set up for residents to gather, collect and distribute resources, the COVID-19 pandemic required physical isolation, and this resulted in the closure of many physical spaces of service provision (i.e, food banks). Additionally, some agencies were able to adapt their programming to an online format to meet resident needs, and distribute information digitally through established resident information networks. This on-the-ground knowledge of what communities needed to stay safe during the pandemic, coupled with access to the infrastructure provided by agencies, meant that the flow of resources to where they needed to go could happen very quickly and effectively.

In the communities we connected with, grassroots leaders stated that residents' levels of trust in agency mandates and the resulting capacity of staff to enact these initiatives is varied. However, having pre-existing relationships between residents, grassroots leaders and agency staff encouraged flows of information that made it easier to access services, especially during the pandemic's initial impacts.





Agencies with mandates to cultivate deep relationships with community leaders are able to dedicate resources and staff to connecting residents to social infrastructure that acts in the following ways: a) providing physical space for community-building initiatives (i.e. social interaction, food storage, a central meeting location) b) developing and providing services and c) facilitating the community-led processes that allow people to be agents of their own change. We learned that during the pandemic, agencies were also identified as a supportive partner of grassroots leaders by prioritizing community connection, and as a result, residents and grassroots leaders did not feel forgotten or alone. In the CCPD study, grassroots leaders cited that they were appreciative of agencies that were able to adapt their programming and services to an online format.

Communities are complex and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting them through acute shocks and emergencies, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic. In our research, and findings on the CCPD project, we learned that effective grassroots-level pandemic response can be supported by strong, pre-existing relationships between local agencies and the grassroots leaders they partner and collaborate with, and that these relationships are key for sharing relevant information via two-way feedback mechanisms between agencies and institutions.

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