

Signal Boost - CCPD Episode Transcript

Episode: Grassroots Networks and the Flow of Information

Guests:

Maddy Macnab, Coordinator of Community Knowledge Mobilization, East Scarborough Storefront

Desrene Cole, Local Champions Network, and community advocate of the KGO (West Hill) Neighbourhood

SARAH

Welcome to SIGNAL BOOST, a podcast brought to you by the Centre for Connected Communities. The Centre for Connected Communities is a community development strategy organization that supports people, organizations and institutions to unlock the potential of connected communities everywhere!

Communities are the building blocks of cities. But communities can't exist without people. In each episode of SIGNAL BOOST, you'll hear from people on the ground about how grassroots solutions are leading local change.

On this season, we're working in partnership with the University of Toronto Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Together, we are bringing you the Connected Communities in a Time of Physical Distancing project in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this research, we're taking a deep dive into the community-level impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through conversations with community leaders, we are learning more about how networks of grassroots leaders, partners and institutions impact each other.

SARAH

Hello, welcome to the fourth episode of the Signal Boost mini-season. We're taking a deep dive into understanding community resilience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto. Over the past year, we've been working on a project with the University of Toronto Dalla Lana School of Public Health to understand how communities have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether or not the systems in place helped or hindered them.

In this episode, we're going to talk more about how grassroots networks support community-led resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we're going to talk about how relationships between grassroots leaders and residents lead to better community support.

In 1973, Mark Granovetter published a study called "The Strength of Weak Ties." In this paper, he argued that someone's outside circle of networks, their acquaintances, has access to different resources and information than their closer inner circle and this can actually be beneficial.

When it comes to community networks and mutual support groups, it follows that networks of closely connected people will have access to the same information via a community organization, agency or other. So connecting with other networks via a different connection will yield different resources and information. When these informal networks are connected together, not only is access to information diversified, but so is where the information goes--it spreads throughout networks of networks and reaches more people than if it was just spread within a smaller group. This diversity leads to a more robust pandemic response because it is diverse, spread out, and decentralized.

I've invited Maddy and Desrene to chat more about the importance of knowledge mobilization and community-led supports. Maddy Macnab is the Coordinator of Community Knowledge Mobilization at the East Scarborough Storefront. Desrene Cole is a member of the Local Champions Network and a grassroots leader in the Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park neighbourhood of East Scarborough.

DESRENE

My name is Desrene Cole and I'm a resident leader in the Kingston-Galloway-Orton Park community

MADDY

My name is Maddy McNab, and I work at the East Scarborough Storefront. I am the Coordinator of Community Knowledge Mobilization in our Community Wide Strategies circle.

DESRENE

Right now I'm finding that through the pandemic, you'll find out the resilience of the community leaders, right, and to their resilience, they have also encourage other people will see the work that they're doing,

and they're also stepping out right to help out in the community will in a relationship with each other is very important, right, because then become a trust factor with each person. Right. And through these residents were able to connect with other residents of our own community that have been in the community for so long, and all the residents, most of the residents are used to that. Right, so I'm able at this time to get connection to a lot of these residents through true those, right, and build a new relationship with them now we're finding that they're calling me. Right, they're finding out other information that's going on within the community, and you're sending me an initiative that's going on that day find out you're letting me know about it, and in turn I share that information with Maddie, right, to see if it's something that we could now share on a wider scale true from a geopolitics. Right. So learning how to build a relationship with resident is very important, right, keep the connection going, so we have a background flow of information going back and forth.

MADDY

Desrene wears, you know many hats, including not only a grassroots leader in KGO but also staff at the Storefront. And so Desrene and I, she and I share information, a lot quite dynamically, both information that we know in our capacity as Storebrand staff but also a lot of information and relationships that Desrene has as a grassroots leader.

DESRENE

I think it's one of the most important things to have that pre existing relationship, right, because you create that you put it like that comfort zone with them. So, for example, when I, when they have certain survey that's going on on the that they asked you to do right. It's easier for me to call a certain amount of residents, and I can ask certain question and they have no, you know, oh, I'm not gonna answer that question, they freely will talk to me, because they have that type of relationship and comfort so with me, right compared to if it's somebody that I'm just meeting for the first time, the amount of residents that I used to reach the capacity has increased over the pandemic, right, because I'll build so many new relationship with different residents, right, and it just continued to increase.

MADDY

I agree that pre existing relationships are completely vital and trust is a huge piece of that and something that I think is sort of a practice in relationship building, amongst Storefront staff, right at the beginning of

pandemic, a priority for all staff organizationally was to just reach out and check in with anyone we held relationships with, just to check in and see how people were doing and say hi, no agenda no ask nothing specific. And I think that speaks volumes is reaching out, when you don't have something you need from residents or, or when you have an agenda that it is very vital to building trust. And so, as Desrene says when you, when, when the time came that we did reach out with more specific things like maybe a check in survey or an opportunity to work together with residents with knowledge mobilization, it wasn't out of the blue, it wasn't the only time we had connected with residents for our own organizational benefit, it was just part of an ongoing relationship.

So I think yeah for me reaching out to the resident leaders I knew, and even like agency partners at the beginning of the pandemic just to be like, Hey, how's it going, I think that was a really important foundation, specifically during the pandemic continuing to kind of work together, remotely call each other email throughout the pandemic and get things done and build trust of working together in the, in the crisis. For example, so, before the pandemic there was the Neighborhood Improvement area table convened by the city for Southeast Scarborough for four neighborhoods and what was really, I think a positive thing about that table was added included both grassroots leaders and agencies and other players in the community so grassroots leaders had a platform to connect city staff, and vice versa so there was sort of potentially a two way communication there, but I personally and I think other people that table personally took those meetings as an opportunity to build relationships and connections personally so I had relationships in correspondence with with the grassroots leaders and other agency staff who attended that table, you know of my own accord. And when the pandemic happened, and vice versa like grassroots leaders had built their own relationships a the table as well. And when the pandemic happened, and the city shifted to their emergency response priorities. These NIA tables were no longer priority, and the people, the city staff convening them were reassigned and so the official structure being convened by the city was no longer available for those grassroots leaders and agencies to have support, official support to work together but I was so glad that I had those relationships outside of the sort of city structure of the table and so I did follow up with those people anyway and, and we did, grassroots leaders and agency, contacts and we've continued to

work together informally through the pandemic. Yeah and so I think that was potentially a missed opportunity but at least for the city but in our neighborhood we, because we had those relationships outside of the city structures we were able to keep those relationships as a vital part of the community pandemic response

DESRENE

And also Maddie, what I find is that with you having different connections and the whole team working together, everybody having their different connections what I find happening is that you're passing information to share who in turn pass information to you right, and also being a Local Champion, we have also a Whatsapp group, where there is a lot information that flows down to each other through that group, right. And I also find that doing this, especially through the pandemic what I have learned is about connections. Overall, that we can't keep doing things we do in one way, right, because we find that through the flow of information we were able to reach out to more and people or connect to more resources that was helped you know, to help our community right. I spoke to Shakhlo, she was all the way down at Thorncliffe, but she was still willing to share some of her resources with us here. Originally I would not have reached out to anyone beyond a certain limit, right. But we were taught that. No, it's a different ballgame. Right. And that interconnectedness with each person has created so much more relationship. And going forward, we know that, you know what, we have all these people that we have reached out for that, should, you know, something arise again, they're they're. one of the things that I think we should do is go out there to meet the residents without having a reason to do. Right, we shouldn't wait until or, you know what, we have a program coming up or we want to get people to be involved right, and if we build that relationship When you do have a reason to call on those residents they'll be there. We're not saying we can do it or we're limited but we're still trying to make sure that the community know that we're here and we care. Instead, and whatever we can do we're gonna do it. We don't do it by ourselves. We have a team of people who's right here behind us, who was willing to step out, not being afraid, not that you're not afraid of the pandemic. But to say you know what this is our community and during this time, we see the needs of our community. Right, and this is what we're willing to do regardless.

Why do you want to become a leader? The question is, why not, right. Too many people stand back and go oh yeah we know there is a need, but

we keep putting that but there right. If you're not willing to take action and go out there, put yourself out there, let people know that you care. Right, because I think one of the greatest things about community work, is caring, and showing people respect. Now that we're doing the food distribution, I'm having residents who are coming to me and going oh you know what this resident need help and that resident need help. Before I didn't know of these residents. Right, and I've built up so many relationships with these residents. It shows you that if you just sit back within your community. Right, you don't know, half the stuff going on. But when you actually get involved, starting to interact, you learn a lot more about them. Learn more about your needs, they will share with you. You know what, we will eat this or we don't like that. If you have this, then this is what we will take, you know, do you know anybody else at the food bank, so it's all about, caring right, and always knowing that your community comes first for you. There's a lot of people within the community who wants to do the work, but just doesn't know how to. you form a group and you'll find that a lot of people start following, and you're building a step at a time.

I remember when I told Maddy, let's go out there, let's meet. She was willing to do it, and instead she's going oh D thank you because from going out there, people speak to me. People know me, you know. But these are some of the information that are flowing from other residents who know that you know what, there is a need within our community. So they step up. Right, and sometimes they're the lead, we just follow in their footsteps.

MADDY

And I've seen so many ways that you and I have been able to compliment each other's work with the food, because you have a lot of on the ground, information and knowledge about not just oh there's a need, but, like you mentioned the specific nature of people's -the resources they're looking for the kinds of food resources that don't work well for them and the ones that do some of the gaps around, okay well yeah there's the food paper and get canned goods but people are really struggling to find culturally appropriate food or fresh food or. So identify those specific gaps and then what I can do organizationally is is tried to build a comprehensive map of what resources are out there in the neighborhood and outside of the neighborhood and so a small

knowledge mobilization thing I've been doing for storybrand is keeping a list of food access resources that's public and that's always being updated and Desrene and I kind of go back and forth about resources on the list, connecting them to residents, and if it's you know, if, if doesn't cause a phone number and own answers or it's not a good resource, then we can change it or, or if I have a relationship with the person who runs it and they're not answering their phone but I can email them and get through then like, work it that way. So that's been important and then I think something that we're looking toward in the future for, For that has to do with knowledge mobilization specifically around food security, food sovereignty, the food system in our neighborhood is making sure all that information and and expertise from residents about what they want to see in their food system and food resources is getting to other food players in the community, the food banks, the food security organizations, the gardens and trying to kind of make sure that community wisdom is influencing food resources that people have and Desrene, and other grassroots leaders are doing the like vital work, and relationship building and trust building that will make that possible

DESRENE

For me what I would say where Storefront is concerned, where, you know, with residents they have always build their model around giving residents that voice, right. So, a resident has a voice to speak to perform to do a certain type of work, and they're the backbone behind them right so if the resident is doing something they know that they have Storefront that they can lean on if they should need help, being on the phone with residents we're still trying to learn how to do it. Right. But as I said to them, it's the relationship we had before all this pandemic hit. Right, so all we did was just continue on with the same work just in a different form.

SARAH

There are many systematic challenges to community building. For example, we've heard from grassroots leaders that they've had ideas to support their communities blocked or shelved indefinitely by institutions or agencies, with no updates. While we recognize that there are policies and safety considerations for institutions when taking on projects, the main concern is a lack of communication and follow-up. In many cases communities know how to support each other because they have a real-time perspective on what each other needs in their communities It can be extremely frustrating to know exactly what will work, and then not have those solutions shelved or unavailable.

These community-led voices are the ones that need to be brought into the conversation about rebuilding and resilience post-pandemic. Otherwise, resources are not being spent in the most appropriate ways. And in some cases, in ways that can be harmful. One example is when it comes to food banks, although donated food is always appreciated and needed, and welcome and helpful. In many cases, it doesn't necessarily reflect specific dietary needs, or religious diets. Additionally, immediate solutions like food banks and other services are yes, incredibly helpful needed in the moment, and a great way of supporting people in immediate needs and immediate times of crisis, but they tend to act as Band Aid solutions, they don't address the systemic challenges that caused these problems to happen in the first place, and to keep happening.

I connected with a resident in St James Town, a community with incredibly high density and limited access to resources. He told me about his unique challenges with the pandemic, but also how he found hope in his community:

Anonymous

I am a resident of St James town which is a community here in Toronto, the downtown Toronto core. And it probably, or it's said to have the highest population density in North America. So prior to COVID I found my, well I found myself, because I'm on disability, low income, and disability doesn't even --barely covers my rent. So I have to rely upon food banks to make ends meet. I don't have the luxury of a computer or cable or anything to that effect. In recent weeks there's a community center that is running and functioning here in St James town that has been of great help and assistance. They call themselves The Corner, and what they do, or have, had been doing was providing a very large box of food that included things like flour and canned food and even pet food and actually my building management put me on to this. There's a community newsletter that circulates through St James Town and they have a number of resources and this is one.

One of the main issues right now I'm finding is that the food banks that have restarted, they have very little to offer. And that's because everyone has been affected by COVID. And they're facing the same situation that low income people are. It's very difficult. This has hurt everyone, and we're

all in this together and we all need to look after each other. And it's really great to see that St James town, rather than it being a Me, me, me, me and all for myself--take has turned into a community effort, where people are reaching out and they're trying to help each other. And, you know, this is has turned into a community effort, where people are reaching out and they're trying to help each other.

And, you know, this is, this current situation, this pandemic is something that affects everyone, and not necessarily equally. If you're not eating healthy or you don't have shelter you're going to certainly be impacted far more deeply than someone who is still employed or has unemployment benefits or has a savings account, had a job that pays good money to know these things do, in the end, they make a big difference. So as much as we're in it together. Some of us are in this deeper than others.

It's lonely. It's frustrating. And, you know, when you have to make a choice between paying a bill or eating it becomes a very difficult situation. So there's much more that needs to be done, we are, we're being failed. And it's it's it's horrible. And I really don't want to see it go back to what happened in the spring where we had thousands of people dying. It's it's unacceptable.

So I want people to know what things are like here in a low income, high density community, how people are trying to come together and they're trying to help each other. It's heartwarming. Because really, you do feel like you're in isolation. And what I mean. Yes, we are. We are literally in isolation, but we are living in a large city but we feel that you know the poor six blocks that we encompass, we feel even more isolated because we're low income, and I think we all need to look within ourselves and look around us and and realize what we what we truly need and what we don't need, and start prioritizing what's important in our lives--people connecting with people being with people making them feel like they're important and like they count. And not that they're a burden. That's important.

My Church gives me faith, they give me community. That gives me a sense of belonging. This pandemic has brought a lot of people together--a lot of people who wouldn't have come together. And I'm

hoping that these connections will will build and will exist after the pandemic is over. And this is where we need people to band together, and to stop thinking in a me me me mentality and start about a community and start thinking about, we and us. You can make it through things alone. And I think people are starting to feel the loneliness. Being alone, being isolated. This is what it's like. And I really miss my community center, because I could go into that library and I could, I could take out, movies, and I would go weekly, and I would take out a dozen movies, and they kept me entertained, because I don't have cable I don't have TV to make me not feel so isolated, to be out around other people. We like to be part of society. We don't want to be on the fringes. You know, it's nice to have a next door neighbor, someone that's nice, and you know, get on an elevator and to be able to talk to the person next to you, to be able to connect, or to walk down the street, have someone smile or wave. I'm grateful for the things that we have here in Canada, grateful for the Canadian government. Right. But there is more that they can do and I really do I truly hope that they step up to the plate. I have a lot of hope. I haven't lost my hope yet.

SARAH

The COVID-19 pandemic has had deep, lasting impacts on communities across Toronto. Community builders and grassroots leaders have filled in many of the gaps of supporting each other during this time. We can't underestimate the vital importance of existing relationships when it comes to community building. Where relationships have existed previously, before crisis or shock events, reaching out, supporting and connecting with each other is so much more impactful.

SARAH

This has been SIGNAL BOOST, amplifying the voices of community builders on the ground and at the grassroots. SIGNAL BOOST is produced by the Centre for Connected Communities.

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