

## Signal Boost - CCPD Episode Transcript

Episode: 4 - Grassroots Support Networks

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**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.

**In this season, we're working in partnership with the University of Toronto Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Together, to bring 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.**

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**SARAH**

Welcome to Signal Boost. In this episode, we're exploring the ways that grassroots leaders and their networks came together to support each other during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic through mutual aid and support efforts.

In the previous episode, we talked about some of the ways that grassroots leaders perceive their relationships with agencies and organizations and how they can better work together when they focus on their unique strengths. We also talked about why grassroots leaders often feel the need to fill in the gaps of formal systems to support their communities. This episode is about the specific ways that grassroots leaders support their communities and each other.

**SARAH**

When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic began impacting residents in Toronto, it became clear that some neighbourhoods were affected differently from others. Neighbourhoods that have been historically underinvested were essentially hit harder by the pandemic's ground-level impacts. In communities where services were already limited due to a history of under investment, this

stretched existing resources to their limit.

In these communities, grassroots leaders have histories of building strong networks and relationships with each other out of necessity, due to decades of limited resources.

An example of mutual aid can be found in St James Town, one of the neighbourhoods in our study. In this community, grassroots leaders told us that they felt that their community had been neglected or passed over for city investment for years. In response, many grassroots leaders started local, community-led interventions and networks to support each other in the absence of those services. One example is LIFT, Low-Income Families Together. LIFT is a grassroots network, started in 1986 by single mothers to advocate for social assistance reforms. Since then LIFT has been collaborating with other organizations in St James Town to provide support to their neighbours.

This example of the practice of mutual aid demonstrates how people can work together with a focus on solidarity, *not charity*. Mutual aid is a collective way for community members to support each other by sharing and allocating their resources, like material goods, emotional support and information to benefit others. There is a focus on reciprocity and maintaining basic needs for everyone.

There is a common notion that during times of crisis people will divert to focusing on their own individual needs first and this will lead to fighting over limited resources. To ensure that people were able to meet these basic needs, the Canadian government instituted CERB, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit. This was a limited-time payment benefit that was available to most Canadians during the early stages of the pandemic in the year 2020. This was an individual-focused resource that was leveraged by some mutual aid groups for the betterment of communities at large. In many cases, we heard that having a consistent income allowed people to provide for their own needs, and use their surplus time or funds to support grassroots initiatives and mutual aid efforts. This challenges the narrative by illustrating that in times of crisis people can and will work together instead.

As we explored in our last podcast, mutual aid can also work together *with and is supported by* agencies and organizations. However, mutual aid is at its most effective when it retains autonomous decision making.

Nash Paul is a member of the mutual aid group in the Parkdale neighbourhood. He spoke with me about his experience with the PARC mutual aid group, and how this introduced him to new relationships and networks:

## **NASH PAUL**

So my name is Nash, I live in Parkdale in Toronto, I moved to Canada five years ago, Parkdale is all I know of Toronto and it's all I know of Canada, and I've really grown to, to feel that at home over here and really enjoy the neighborhood. Before COVID struck as it were.

I work as a community artist in PARC which is the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Center, and around Parkdale in a couple of places, and I teach yoga. Both these jobs shut down when, when COVID hit, and with CERB it allowed me to not worry about my rent and look to how I could then give as much as I was receiving from the government. And at that point, I got an email from the Parkdale People's Economy, and they were looking for pod leaders, so basically it's a mutual aid network, in which strongly emphasized about solidarity not charity, but each person takes and receives as much as they need without any judgment. I found myself signing up to be a pod leader for my street. Even though I've only recently got to really know my neighbors. So I reached out to my neighbors, seeing if anybody needed help or anybody wanted to support other neighbors, on the street. And we had 11 households sign up to give support and no one ready who wanted support.

Anyway, this, this, this process started of me getting to know the neighbors who I didn't know on my street, and also getting to know the other coordinators from around Parkdale. And so we started supporting, our street started supporting an apartment building close And that's when I got to go to see a different kind of living, It was good for me to see that not everybody is, even in a developed economy like a Canada, not everybody has the same living conditions, you know, and I started empathizing a lot more with, with my neighbors, And it's interesting because I've really found myself empathizing, seeing more accurately the view of how my neighbours are, and seeing the inequality in the whole system. But even though it's just like a block apart, but what was really interesting is...our goal was always to build connection, more than anything else, just kind of make anyone, irrespective of their background, or, or any anything, make them feel included and welcome and their views as welcome as anyone.

One of my neighbors was struggling with tenancy rights. I started talking to her more regularly and just being there and listening to her while she was telling me her struggles and sometimes crying and sometimes just needing to be heard, and I really didn't have any advice to give aside of just to listen and I saw the value. I felt the value in just being there, allowing her to cry into the phone, you know, and just, just not even say anything back in return, but just allowing that to happen. And it's interesting because the moment you listen, consciously listen and are there for someone that issue suddenly becomes a lot more real for you. And I found myself going for socially distanced protests and rallies for tenancy rights in Toronto, something I would never imagine myself doing. It was not, it was

*not real to me until I met my neighbors who are actually struggling with being evicted during COVID. And so, and it's really becoming full circle because the same neighbor who I'm talking about is now become the pod leader, she's feeling empowered to actually lead other people in her in her building, you know, and looking out for her neighbours, seeing what needs they have, and seeing how we as mutual aid Parkdale can help, you know, in whatever way in whatever way. The only reason that I could do this because of my precarious employment was because of CERB.*

*And even if there is no material way in which we can help. It just, it just I think it would help and assist to know that there's somebody on the other side of the phone who would listen to you, and would try whatever they can to see, to join the dots and get you some help, but it may not actually happen but I think it's good to know that there's actually a village that supports you you know you're not alone, not alone in this place you know, at this time.*

## **SARAH**

The grassroots-led response to pandemic support is definitely impressive, and important. But it's important not to romanticize mutual aid. There is a critical perspective to this.

In a lot of literature and approaches to pandemic responses, there is a heavy emphasis on resilience, or the ability to snap back to the state before a crisis event. In other words, the ability to return to normal. For many marginalized communities, a return to normal is unacceptable. Instead, there has to be a bouncing forward to a better post-pandemic reality with a focus on equity.

In some cases, resilience framing can be used to justify a downloading of responsibility from institutions onto individual communities to take care of themselves in times of crisis. The thinking goes that if communities have been able to come up with solutions on their own in the past, they should be able to do it again, and again. This translates into “communities don't need support because they'll figure it out without help or resources.” This perpetuates the idea that communities can do more with less—not because they want to, but because they have to. What then happens is that funding is decreased and the responsibility and brunt of support is placed on mutual aid groups and community members to help each other. Institutions and agencies that have the resources and tools are alleviated of their responsibility. Grassroots leaders once again, are expected to do more with less.

Our research points to the need for *community-centred* resilience. In community-centred resilience, grassroots responses and mutual aid efforts receive the support, recognition and resources they need

Mutual aid groups and grassroots-led support networks can be incredibly effective for a number of reasons: residents that aren't comfortable with approaching agencies can reach out to their neighbours instead, whom they already have trusted relationships with, and get the support they need. Agencies, organizations and institutions can leverage their resources and networks to ensure that supports like food, training and tools are shared appropriately. Instead of using their time and funds to reach out, they are able to partner with mutual aid and refocus on how to do the greatest good.

In the Parkdale neighbourhood, Beryl-Ann is a grassroots leader who has been involved with the local mutual aid group since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here she is, sharing on how the connections between residents and agencies can build on each other:

### **BERYL-ANN**

*I live in the Parkdale community. I live in a community that where you meet people from all walks of life, and it's a very interesting community. The beginning of the pandemic when the government were encouraging people to stay home I was an ambassador at Parkdale Activity Recreation Center and the staff there, some of the staff at Parkdale People's Economy, they collaborated with the residents in the community to start a Mutual Aid Network, we brainstorm and call the mutual aid network MAP: Mutual Aid Parkdale. I become a pod member and a pod leader. Pod members, we partner with the Toronto Bike Brigade. And the Toronto Bike Brigade would go out and buy the groceries and deliver it for the residents.*

*So one of the things that they do the pod leaders know if people need it... So one of the things we did, we realized that there are people in the community who wouldn't be able to get out because there are COVID-19 positive, or they were elderly or just families who were struggling to, you know, put meals in the home for the families. We decided that we're going to help these people in our community. So the partners would get information from the pod members on the grocery item that they need. And they would put it on a spreadsheet which Parkdale People's Economy created. People were posting on social media about the mutual aid network in their communities. So that's where the staff at Parkdale People's Economy get the idea. You know, why not start it right here in our community to help our residents because Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre it's a space for people who have mental health issues, or who are homeless to go have a meal or have a shower or see one of the workers there, whether you want to seek employment, or do you want to see, you know, a therapist or social worker. Um, and so they provide three meals a day you could have breakfast, lunch and dinner. With the pandemic there were giving people who are homeless space to have a meal, so they could eat in dignity, and people would at home they would hand them the food so they could take to their residence to eat. So, it was amazing that Parkdale People's Economy, staff, you know, it came up with the idea to start a mutual aid network, and to reach*

out to residents in the community, you know, through emails or phone calls to ask them if they could become a pod leader to, you know, to help with the mutual aid network. And so the pod leaders reach out to the residents in a building or on the street or people they know to ask them to become a part of the, to become pod members,

I can tell you many people in our community were truly grateful for the groceries that were delivered to their homes. We have resources already in our community. So, whether people want to share their skills or they want to share certain items that they have, we could put that in their information and share it with our partners as well as our pod members. And, you know, and we can share what... we'll be able to share what we have. And I remember one of the families I went out to buy groceries for, she was a bit hesitant, uneasy, because she felt uncomfortable that she had to ask for help to buy groceries for her family, and I was truly grateful that I was the one that actually had to communicate with her because I let her know, not only did I know her so it was, that was a good connection there, she didn't have to feel, you know, you know not deserving of the groceries for her family, because, you know, the funds were there.

Initially we had applied to the city for a grant and so we bought groceries for the families, and people had COVID-19 positive, and then eventually we started a GoFundMe to raise funds for people to buy their, to buy the groceries or medicine for people in the community. And, and, like I said you know many people were truly grateful that they able to get food, you know, once a week or once every two weeks, Even one of the workers at Parkdale Intercultural Association, she informed me that, because we become close friends because usually a group and I, some friends and I would be at the library, Parkdale library before the pandemic we meet up there and, you know, socialize or, you know, access books and stuff like that at the library. And so one of the staff I, I, become good friends with her, and she informed me that the library were giving away hotspots. And I was able to bring back that information to my pod leaders group. And so they were able to share that information with our members so they were thanking me yesterday, for sharing that information, and they were let me know what people were, they were able to get the hotspots. So I'm just when... I think of, you know, MAP, I'm truly grateful that it existed in our community and there are wonderful people who decide to create mutual aid network to help residents in our community during the pandemic.

## **SARAH**

It's really important to challenge the idea that in times of crisis, people will turn inwards to provide for only themselves. We have seen that in communities where grassroots leaders and community members have taken the time to learn about each other, and form relationships, that they are able to better weather crisis events. When these grassroots efforts and mutual aid networks are supported by agencies and organizations, they are able to provide support that is targeted,

efficient, effective and appropriate. Grassroots leaders are incredible networkers and community supporters, especially in times when resources are limited and people really need help.

In the next episode, we're going to hear from grassroots leaders about how it is so important to have strong connections and networks and how these relationships can put community-led support into practice. Stay tuned!

**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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