

Right people, right information, right time: Peer outreach, the Connected Community way

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SUMMARY: More and more attention is being paid to the importance of peer-to-peer outreach in communities. While this approach may look simple, it requires deep investment and relationship building. East Scarborough Storefront uses the ground-breaking Connected Community Approach to affect systems change. In using this approach for workforce development, The Storefront set out to intentionally learn, from grassroots leaders themselves, what is needed for peer-to-peer outreach to be authentic, meaningful and effective. This blog describes that learning in the context of local workforce development and articulates five keys to success:

- *Prioritizing power sharing and equity*
- *Letting values lead*
- *Working at multiple scales*
- *Building on everyone's strengths*
- *Learning together*

Shawn approaches a building in his community, looking a little unsure about whether he is in the right place for the information session. Just then, he notices Fatima at the registration desk-- this must be the place. She smiles and waves at Shawn and calls him over. Fatima is Shawn's neighbour. She's a tenant rep in his building and knows a lot about what's going on in the neighbourhood. They chat sometimes. Fatima knows that Shawn works odd jobs for contractors and that he's looking for more work these days. She is the one who told him about this local construction job opportunity when he saw her in the lobby a few weeks ago: "This is the real deal," she said, "big investment coming to the neighbourhood, training, full-time work, and careers in construction." Shawn and Fatima chat a bit at the registration table. He signs in, grabs a nametag, and heads into the packed room to listen to the presentation. Once he's inside, he sees another familiar face: Parm, an Employment Coach at The Storefront who he spoke to last week, welcomes him into the room, and points out to him who the LiUNA trades union reps are, as well as the local employer rep from the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (UTSC). Last week, when Shawn spoke with Fatima, she had taken down his contact information. A couple of days later, he got a call from Parm to set up a time to come into The Storefront and learn a bit more. Now he knows the basics from Parm, including the support he can get from a local network of organizations, with skills upgrading, transportation, and course fees if he decides to go for it, and he's even more interested. He's here to listen to the union and employer reps directly and ask them questions about what the union is all about, and how soon these local construction jobs are coming. He knows that after this session, he can reconnect with Parm to figure out next steps if he likes what he hears.

Right people, right information, right time. Shawn's story of how he found out about this local pathway to employment and how he was able to act on that information is the story of a carefully designed peer outreach strategy. It's the story of local grassroots leaders like Fatima with the networks and expertise to spread information to the right people deep in the community. And it's the story of working together at multiple scales, from local residents right up to senior executives at anchor institutions, to make sure local residents have good, timely, and actionable information to work with.

In February 2020, at Progress Church, just down the road from The Storefront, 60 community members like Shawn came to learn more about the first local construction pathway coordinated by The Storefront and involving dozens of local players who designed the pathway as part of the East Scarborough Works (ESW) initiative. ESW is designed to connect marginalized East Scarborough job seekers to local jobs created as a result of major public investment. This construction pathway was designed to connect local job seekers to University of Toronto Scarborough's 500 million dollar campus expansion, and to careers with LiUNA construction trades union.

Though it may look like it at first glance, East Scarborough Works is not an employment program. Rather, East Scarborough Works is a workforce development network that combines a detailed understanding of what local employers are looking for in job candidates, with a deep understanding of the people and networks in the local community, and then uses all available resources to create effective workforce development pathways between local people and local jobs.

East Scarborough Works is predicated on four years of research which revealed that private sector employers, anchor institutions, and those responsible for public infrastructure projects are inspired to hire locally, but there's a disconnect between the jobs that they create and the employment supports intended to prepare people for the job market.

People like Shawn have often felt unable to apply for and secure decent work because of this disconnect. It has been unclear to him and to others what actual jobs were being created and how he could possibly prepare for them in time. Many people in East Scarborough are marginalized from the labour market due to chronic under-investment in their community and disconnected support systems. ESW uses the Connected Community Approach to create new processes and pathways that leverage existing employment programs, essential skills training, and social supports so that local people are as prepared as possible to take full advantage of the jobs being created in their own community.

One of the key success factors to East Scarborough Works is a carefully-designed peer outreach strategy.

In practicing the Connected Community Approach (CCA), we ground ourselves in 10 keys to unlocking the power of connected communities. Looking back now on this first construction pathway, we've reflected on how we applied CCA to the more general practice of peer outreach that is gaining traction as an integral part of meaningful community engagement.

The following 5 keys laid the foundation to effectively unlock the potential of peer outreach for authentic and equitable collaboration with grassroots leaders like Fatima, and to reach local residents like Shawn.

1. Prioritize Power Sharing and Equity

At The Storefront, we prioritize building relationships with a range of local grassroots leaders to support them in their own community work. Grassroots leaders are local residents who proactively and voluntarily design and implement projects and activities to make their communities more liveable. For Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities in East Scarborough navigating the impacts of systemic racism-- such as chronic underinvestment in their neighbourhoods, barriers to accessing supports and services, and marginalization from decision-making processes-- grassroots leaders are vital advocates and community-builders whose work all too often goes unrecognized. In our relationship-building with grassroots leaders in East Scarborough, it has been crucial to recognize this history of marginalization and design projects and decision-making processes that don't repeat that history, but rather intentionally disrupt power relations to centre community voice and expertise. So, when we at The Storefront need grassroots leaders' expertise to contribute to making our work the best it can be for the community, we pay grassroots leaders for that expertise. The ESW resident outreach process was no different. We contracted six grassroots leaders to co-design and execute the outreach strategy for the project. Our success was rooted in not just instructing grassroots leaders in tasks we had set, but in engaging them in the co-design from the very beginning of the process all the way through to co-running the information session described at the beginning of this blog, and compensating them for their time and expertise.

The strategy design process was an important precursor to the outreach itself. Residents had space to raise challenges from past outreach experiences. For example, they shared that the stakes are very high when they are asked to do outreach on behalf of organizations. Their relationships are on the line: when community members have follow up questions, if anything is unclear, or if the opportunity doesn't work out, they will come to grassroots leaders first. We were able to talk through this and other challenges together. We used this insight to inform our recommendations for how this peer outreach process could address these realities to better support grassroots leaders. Some examples of outreach design elements that emerged through this co-design process include: taking extra steps to make sure resident leaders had full, detailed information about the opportunity in the form of an outreach script (discussed in

further detail below); establishing up-front a specific Storefront staff person to hold relationships with any resident interested in the opportunity, and designing a clear set of follow-up steps; and committing to strong, continuous communication and collaboration between resident leaders and key Storefront staff throughout and after the outreach process.

2. Let values lead

It was important to lay the groundwork for shared understanding before the outreach began, so that everyone around the table understood the East Scarborough Works approach: not just the *what*, but the *how* and *why* also. Staff made sure residents were in the know about the workforce development challenges ESW was trying to address, our systems-change approach, how these local jobs were real and tangible, and the crucial role that grassroots leadership played. Grassroots leaders had a chance to share their own analysis, ask questions and address concerns. This allowed everyone to come to a common understanding of the project. From there, it was important to make space for each participating grassroots leader and staff member to articulate why they personally were motivated to be involved, and where the shared values of the project resonated with them. This cultivated an increased shared ownership of the project and belief in its value for the community, and was also an important foundation for how resident leaders would talk about the project to their friends and neighbours during outreach.

3. Work at multiple scales

A key recommendation from grassroots leaders was to ensure that any resident doing peer outreach had as full, clear and transparent information as possible about the opportunity to communicate to the community about it in real, tangible ways. So, we created a detailed outreach script. More of a “cheat sheet” than a script, it contained all the information we had that we collectively decided any community member would need to make an informed decision about pursuing this opportunity: what the job would look like, eligibility, the aptitudes the employer wanted to see, timelines to local jobs, career options, available supports, and more. Getting all this information from players at every point along the pathway with enough lead time to use it for a robust community outreach process was no small feat. Unlocking the power of grassroots outreach depended on simultaneous work at multiple scales (from institutional policy, to training entry requirements, to social service availability) to make sure grassroots leaders had real and tangible information at the right time, providing job seekers a clear line of sight from where they are now to the opportunities ahead.

With the script, grassroots leaders felt well-equipped with good, trustworthy information for their community.

4. Build on everyone’s strengths

Grassroots leaders in communities have networks and social capital that they have created in their work as local community organizers and leaders. The grassroots leaders we engaged in

peer outreach for ESW were eager to build on the strength of these networks to help people to get jobs. In order to ensure that it would be effective for grassroots leaders to leverage their networks for this purpose, we learned that it was important to be as specific as possible *who* in the community would be a good fit for the particular opportunity we were promoting; setting grassroots leaders -- and us-- up for success.

Trusting grassroots leaders' knowledge of how to work their networks to get the word out, we also gave resident outreach ambassadors flexibility with specific outreach tactics. At the same time, they shared that they appreciated the support we gave that made the flexibility meaningful: a dedicated staff point person, a solid orientation and training, clear parameters, simple and achievable deliverables, and check-ins to coordinate and troubleshoot together.

Lastly, we designed outreach messaging that built on community members' strengths: we provided enough information to allow resident outreach ambassadors to help community members decide not just, "Is this a good opportunity," but rather, "Is this opportunity a good fit for *me*?" The construction trades jobs outreach ambassadors were promoting are certainly not for everyone, but they are a great fit for some. We have found this aptitude-based outreach approach to be unique and well-received by the community, as it gives residents more agency to make an informed decision and builds on their strengths.

5. Learn together

It was an important "aha" moment near the beginning of our process when one resident leader said: "I get asked to do outreach for The Storefront casually sometimes, or I get a contract to do it...and I don't know how to do it! I'm not good at talking to strangers!" This sparked a great conversation about how outreach is actually a skill set: it's not an inherent personality trait, and it is something you can learn and improve (and should be valued as such!). So, we learned together: before the outreach began, we practiced having conversations about the opportunity with friends and with strangers, and brainstormed ways to approach it depending on our personalities and conversation styles. At the end of the whole process, the person who initially said they weren't good at outreach shared that they felt they had a chance to work on those skills and improve through this process, which they saw as valuable to their work in the community.

We also learned together through check-ins along the way for updates and troubleshooting, and multiple debrief sessions after the work was completed to capture everyone's reflections on the process. Reflections from resident leaders and supporting staff have informed this summary of critical success factors and learnings from the process.

As the momentum for East Scarborough Works grows and we design and implement more local workforce development pathways, we are staying grounded in these key learnings about the value of a strong, well-supported, grassroots peer outreach process, and the critical contributions of grassroots leaders in this space. We are using these learnings to tweak and strengthen our CCA approach to peer outreach so it can become an ever-more powerful tool for our collective community-building work. We hope others doing community engagement work find resonance in these learnings and reflections for the unique peer outreach processes you are building in your own communities, and we look forward to hearing your learnings too.