

CASE STUDY | Transforming Systems Through Lived Experience

And a Special Testimonial by Lorna Howat

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A unique partnership between the City of New Westminster, BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, and the Community Action Network has resulted in a 'triple win': strengthening the voice, skills, and contribution of people with lived and living experience of poverty; as well as improving city policies and programs, while ensuring the ongoing success of a tested grassroots approach.

OVERVIEW

In 2017, the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition launched the Community Action Network (CAN) Leadership Training, a pilot program for individuals in Metro Vancouver with lived and living experiences of poverty. The program targeted skill building in anti-poverty advocacy, planning, and policy development at both provincial and civic levels. The pilot proved successful and in 2019, the City of New Westminster saw a unique partnership opportunity to improve meaningful engagement of community members and better inform city processes and programs.

The long-standing New Westminster Community Poverty Reduction Committee, a multisectoral table including City representatives and other key partners, played an important role in 'connecting the dots' by creating initial opportunities that brought all groups together to brainstorm and build relationships.

THREE ORGANIZATIONS

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (BCPRC)

A grassroots non-profit comprised of over 100 organizations and community mobilizations that come together to advocate for public policy solutions to end poverty, homelessness, and inequality in BC.

City of New Westminster

Community Planning focuses on individuals and their relationships and includes all aspects of community living including, resilient neighbourhoods, resources for vulnerable, at-risk community members, accessible infrastructure and services, adaptable/affordable housing, citizen engagement and community development.

Community Action Network (CAN)

A community-based collection of people with lived experience of poverty. Participants engage in leadership and advocacy training and action, contributing empowered voices to a variety of initiatives and processes.

THREE ROLES; THREE GOALS

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (BCPRC)

The BCPRC developed the CAN training program and worked closely with other community-based organizations to recruit participants. Training session themes included:

- Poverty reduction foundations - discussion about the root causes of poverty, systemic realities and challenges, the human rights perspective, and upstream versus downstream approaches
- Voices of change – public speaking exercises and training, including related to self-advocacy
- Storytelling to build solidarity – telling personal and community stories as a way of changing attitudes and facilitating social change
- Community organizing – discussion of the spectrum of allies, theory of evoking change, and organizing strategies, tactics, and campaigns

The BCPRC ensured the program followed a low-barriered, participatory, people-centered, experience-led approach. The program provided participants:

- Food (a light hot breakfast, hot lunch), coffee, tea
- Transit tickets
- Financial coverage for off-site childcare including travel time to get to workshops
- Safe supplies and safe space for those who may be engaged in substance-use or survival sex work
- No mandatory reading or writing
- Multi-literacy level targeted language
- Flexibility to participate on 'individual terms'

- Opportunity for program graduates to continue to engage in the network
- Covid supplies and PPE including sanitizer, makers, rapid tests as needed

The BCPRC ensured a focus on equity. Participants included Black and Indigenous residents, precariously housed individuals, single mothers, and those living with disabilities.

BCPRC staff also support program graduates to test their skills and engage in advocacy - for example, public speaking at events or to City Councils, presentations to cabinet and caucus at the legislature, and the like.

The BCPRC liaised with City of New Westminster staff, building relationships, inviting staff to participate in meetings to promote a co-learning environment.

Goal: To empower people with lived experience of poverty, and build a community and network of support, solidarity and strong relationships as CAN graduates and leaders branch out to impact advocacy to end poverty in BC.

City of New Westminster

City of New Westminster Community Planning staff worked with the BCPRC to learn about the program and figure out how best to work together, including potential outcomes. Discussions involved the City's Reconciliation, Social Inclusion and Engagement Task Force, inter-departmental staff liaisons, and engagement of City Council to support decision-making. Staff identified linkages to existing City policy and Council's Strategic Plan.

Building on the success of the CAN Leadership Training Program pilot, the City partnered with the BCPRC to:

- Develop a framework and process for CAN graduates to be part of City advisory committees, task forces, and working groups
- Co-create a CAN Learning Network, in which CAN graduates would be available to inform City resources, train and mentor key City staff, and assist with/or coordinate engagement with underrepresented groups
- Contribute financial resources to CAN training to empower more people with lived experience and replenish the membership of the CAN Learning Network
- Compensate CAN graduates for their time as context or subject matter experts when involved in and/or assisting with City engagement and decision-making processes
- Develop a framework to inform and evaluate City engagement resources, strategies, and training methods, with the objective of facilitating greater engagement by people with lived and living experience (Ethics and Engagement Project)

City staff took time to build relationships and remove barriers. Over time, the program has also undergone rigorous evaluation, with results communicated back to senior staff and Council.

Goal: To ensure that more community residents with lived and living experience of poverty and homelessness are valued, respected, and supported in City of New Westminster engagement process, and that their contributions are reflected in decision-making.

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Community Action Network (CAN)

CAN provides leadership development for people in poverty through a facilitated and structured training series. The program:

- Provides transferable skills to participants
- Promotes resiliency, empowerment, and confidence

- Promotes involvement in anti- poverty advocacy, focusing specifically on public speaking
- Connects personal experiences to structural issues
- Provides ongoing support to provide media commentary, give public presentations, engage in consultation processes with government and other decision makers

CAN provides an opportunity for participants to connect with each other and building a strong sense of community.

Goal: To increase civic engagement for those most disadvantaged or excluded, promoting resiliency through skill development and empowered involvement in anti-poverty advocacy.

TOP OUTCOMES

For the **BC Poverty Reduction Coalition**, the CAN Leadership Training partnership with the City of New Westminister provided a civic ‘champion’ and a modest amount of additional funding, adding capacity to a grassroots initiative.

The partnership also provided participants opportunity for direct action, supporting next steps from training to implementation, connecting people with opportunities to influence policy.

The program has flourished.

For the **City of New Westminister**, outcomes have been significant. The partnership has moved City engagement processes from ‘consult/inform’ to ‘collaborate’, bringing authentic, meaningful engagement and a collaborative voice to decision-making processes.

The process itself has ensured that the relationship between local government and the community is strengthened. Planning staff are better equipped to respond to equity-denied issues as conversations become more honest and transformative, educating staff along the way. Spending time with people with lived experience has enabled staff to better mobilize resources, leverage and apply for funding, and ensure a more timely, effective response to community-based issues. Elected leaders are better able to fulfill their mandate.



The CAN program has been ‘wildly effective’.

People feel the impact of policies. They know what they need and feel strongly about. They need to be treated as really valuable assets.

It matters to have an inclusive space where people feel their voice is important.

*Rowan Burdge, Provincial Manager
BC Poverty Reduction Coalition*



An example of a proactive outcome is the City of New Westminster's ['Sanctuary City' policy](#), that ensures all New West residents and visitors have access to City facilities, programs and services, regardless of immigration status. Policy implementation alongside CAN members also included the [African Voices Project](#) to guide future and ongoing anti-racism training for staff.

The **Community Action Network** has gained a life of its own, with graduates from the program engaging in a multitude of opportunities including the New Westminster policy action teams. The program has expanded training outside of the lower mainland to the Kelowna region.

For CAN participants, the most important outcome is personal empowerment and agency to advocate and effect change. One participant was able to advocate for their son, who was being bullied at school. The group also creates a sense of belonging and community. Lorna's Story, below, exemplifies the CAN journey.

Lorna's Story

For people to understand the effects of poverty and growing up in a dysfunctional family, and how that changes a person's perspective on life, we must go back to the beginning.

I was the youngest of seven children, born to an alcoholic father, and for a time, a co-dependent mother. My father worked in the lumber industry and made a decent wage but when a person drinks every day the resources get eaten up fairly quickly. There was never enough to go around. My mother did her best with what she had to work with, but every day was a challenge, not only for her but for us as well. Hunger, secondhand clothes, used furniture, we even had plastic curtains. The thing is I don't really remember colour in my life. I know that sounds odd, but I really don't. Which may explain why now in adulthood I find all colours amazing.

School was difficult for us too. At the start of each year, we had no new clothes, but I do recall occasionally getting a new pair of shoes which I loved. Thankfully back then the school gave us our supplies so that was one less worry for my mom.

The one thing that sticks out for me though was the back-to-school assignment of "What did you do in the Summer?" I despised it. As other kids would recount their camping trips, vacations to Disneyland, I had to try to make 'going from the front yard to the backyard' sound interesting. As many of us 'poor' kids found out pretty early in life, we were different in so many ways from the others.

The toll growing up in my family of origin, living in poverty, and the abuse I suffered had a terrible effect on my mental health. I was eight years old when I suffered my first panic attack, and I began down the road to a lifetime of depression. I coped as my father did and used alcohol for many years to kill my pain. I was diagnosed with Bi-polar disorder which made everything from school to social interactions incredibly difficult for me. I quit school at fifteen and then began my successions of low paying jobs which I could not seem to handle, I went from one job to another, never fitting in with the rest of the world. A square peg trying to fit in to a round hole. At eighteen I found myself pregnant and alone and so began the whole cycle again, not just for me now but for my son as well, then for my daughter who was born six years later. As a survivor though I just kept pushing through, not always successfully, but I never gave up.

CAN leadership

I graduated in 2015 from Douglas College with a diploma in Community Social service but my first job working with those living with developmental disabilities failed miserably. I felt terrible as I had thought this was my way out to a better life, but my complete lack of proper training led to me being assaulted. So, I floundered as I tried to find the right fit for me. I knew it was in me to help others, but I could not find anyone who could help me achieve my goal. I worked with two employment professionals and had a specialized employment counsellor through WorkBC and nobody seemed able to help me find employment.

In early 2022 my counsellor sent me a link about CAN as she thought I might be interested. I did not really know what it was all about, but I felt it was in line with what I wanted to do in life.

At my very first meeting I felt I had finally found my place in the world. I met similarly minded people who wanted to bring about change in the world. Housing, food security, childcare, Indigenous rights, homelessness, and social justice were all topics I cared about and now I found myself in a position to work with others for change.

The group was caring, kind and diverse, which then gave me an opportunity to grow and learn from others. Being with others who cared about the same issues helped me to feel not so alone and feel like I finally had a voice.

It would seem that finally those of us with 'lived' experiences could share what our lives were like and that we could offer a unique perspective on the varying issues. Unless you have experienced many of the problems that those who have been marginalized have had to deal with then how can you speak with the knowledge of what needs to be done? What helps, for me, is the feeling that I am not alone and so many others feel as I do. Being a part of CAN helps you to be able to engage with your local municipality and to work together to bring about positive outcomes for all. This does not mean that you will not still feel frustrated at times or even at times hopeless, but knowing you have the other CAN members who will listen and support you will give you the strength to carry on, and that to me exemplifies 'community'.

Contributed by Lorna Howat

LESSONS LEARNED

- The New Westminster Community Poverty Reduction Committee was a key catalyst in bringing potential partners together
- Learning happens both ways – for City staff and Council as well as people with lived and living experience
- City staff need to be open to learning as well as prepared to champion equity-based processes
- Need to bring voices of lived experience in at the beginning of processes, not as an after-thought
- Offering a stipend (payment for time), childcare, and shared meals is key
- Hosting CAN meetings at City Hall, having CAN participants present to City Council, inviting Council & staff to CAN workshops for co-learning destigmatizes municipal settings and empowers all
- Authentic learning and engagement take time and flexibility
- Storytelling is at the core
- The power of partnership is effective - building on local assets strengthens systems, programs, and people

CONCLUSION

The Community Action Network partnership offers opportunity for local governments across the country to learn how and when to improve authentic, equity-based community engagement processes. At its core is the capacity to listen and treat people with humanity and respect, and a willingness to collaborate on meaningful change.

TAKE YOUR LEARNING FURTHER

- [BC Poverty Reduction Coalition](#)
- [Community Action Network](#)
- City of New Westminster [Social Planning](#) and [Community Action Network Leadership Training Program](#)
- Webinar | [Getting Equity on the Political Agenda](#)
- GUIDE | [10 – Engaging People with Lived Experience](#)

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