

CASE STUDY | A PLACE TO CALL HOME: CULTIVATING BELONGING IN HOUSING CO- OPERATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

With the growing sense of loneliness and polarization happening in communities and the decrease in civic engagement, belonging is critical towards building more just and caring futures. Through an asset-based community development (ABCD) lens and a collective impact framework, Tamarack designed a Community Development Program to engage with four housing co-operatives in strengthening their collaboration and community engagement skills to cultivate belonging and contribute towards building more vibrant communities. This case study sheds light on the insights from this one-year program. Specifically, it introduces the cohort members, provides reflections on lessons learned, and identifies potential future directions for cohort members as part of Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada's network (CHF Canada).

CONTEXT

At a time of disconnection, co-operative housing communities are examples of places where individuals and families are coming together. Known as 'co-ops' in short, these hubs are vital for place-based collaboration, collective ownership and community care. Housing co-operatives have existed in Canada [since the early 70s](#), with the first units being built to house students. [Within two decades](#) (1970s to 1990s), family unit housing co-ops grew in quantity, with the support of

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**"We believe belonging means
to accept each other's
differences"**

-Co-op resident



CHF Canada is committed in its purpose to support and advance the co-operative housing movement across Canada to ensure that people and communities have access to affordable and dignified communal living. It does this by offering resources, training, and advocacy on behalf of housing co-operatives.



federal and provincial funding. In the most recent federal budget, the government of Canada [announced its intention](#) to “ensure that eligible housing providers can access funding to maintain housing affordability for low-income tenants and co-op members” through the Federal Community Housing Initiative.

At Tamarack, we believe in the power of places to build belonging and address the crises of polarization and social isolation. Through its [Communities Building Belonging \(CBB\)](#) network, Tamarack is [mobilizing all of society](#) to end loneliness. CBB is rooted in an ABCD lens and a collective impact framework to ignite action in communities. The network supports communities to gain applicable tools and knowledge that will

equip them to [implement strategies](#) for belonging.

[CHF Canada](#) collaborated with CBB to launch the Community Development Program. The goal of this program is to support four of CHF Canada’s member housing co-ops to engage in a year-long community development project. This program is aligned with CHF Canada’s efforts to increase resilience and co-operative identity of its membership and sector. The Community Development Program is an iteration of the [2022 pilot project](#) through which CHF Canada sponsored four housing co-operatives to join Tamarack’s CBB membership to learn how to rebuild the sense of community that had been impacted by public health guidelines during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2023-2024 Community Development Program included workshops, specialized coaching, and networking opportunities for housing co-op members to learn about success stories in community building. As part of this 2023-2024 collaboration, CHF Canada will host a workshop panel with selected program participants during their [Annual Meeting](#) in June 2024 to share insights from their participation with the broader CHF Canada network and deepen the impact of this program.

INTRODUCING THE 2023-2024 COHORT

Four housing co-ops participated in this edition of the Community Development Program. These communities faced different structural challenges based on their own unique histories, geographic and sociocultural contexts. What they share is a common understanding of the importance of embedding community engagement into their communities and the need to engage diverse resident voices to foster cohesion and longer-term participation.

FALSE CREEK

Located on the land of the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, False

Creek Co-operative Housing Association (FCCHA) has been operational since 1974. Its motto “People Helping People” is the bedrock that strengthens and sustains the relationships among False Creek co-op residents. False Creek co-op nurtures a thriving community by fostering friendly interactions and dedicated governance. Since its inception, the co-op has upheld the principle that it is not merely affordable housing, but a service dedicated to its members' well-being.

FRED DOWLING

Beginning in 1980, Fred Dowling co-op has been offering affordable housing in the Frankel-Lambert neighbourhood of Toronto, which is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The co-op comprises 72 units, row townhouses in blocks on 3 different streets, and the co-op units are clustered in groups within a mix of privately owned homes and social housing. Rooted in principles of labour unionizing, collaboration,



community engagement, and stewardship of shared spaces, the Fred Dowling co-operative embodies inclusion and collective responsibility. With a commitment to fostering a vibrant community, members collaborate towards shared goals.

OAK STREET

Oak Street co-op opened its doors in 1985 in downtown Toronto, close to the vibrant Regent Park neighbourhood. They have 149 units, made up of apartments as well as townhouses. In the spirit of collective action and community engagement, members of the organization contribute in diverse capacities, from volunteering on co-operative committees to engaging in special projects that enrich shared spaces. Whether supervising children at play, cultivating vibrant gardens, or diligently tidying up litter, members embody the ethos of being good neighbors, showcasing their unwavering dedication to fostering thriving communities.

COOPERATIVE DES JARDINS

Cooperative Des Jardins is a 90-unit 10 Storey building with a diverse community of 97 members on the land of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation, colonially known as Ottawa. This co-op is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024. It was originally envisioned as a Francophone community of seniors but over time it has changed to a community of all backgrounds operating mainly in English. The building was designed to promote community with an extensive 10th floor common space that includes a commercial kitchen, a lounge area, and a dining room that opens out on a large patio. This design has led to an active social life and member participation. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on social activities and community life. This co-op has also experienced a demographic shift with younger residents calling Des Jardins home.

HIGHLIGHTS ON THE WORK OF EACH HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE



“Having a social worker inside co-operatives is a huge game changer.”

-Co-op Social Worker

The four housing co-operatives represent a group dedicated to strengthening community engagement and fostering belonging among its members.

False Creek Co-op planned a series of engagement activities, which focused on strengthening relationships among members and creating opportunities for creative conversations and input into determining the values that will help meet the challenges ahead,

including underrepresented voices from the community. The co-op has also been engaged in broader advocacy conversations to ensure that the co-op’s presence is acknowledged and celebrated in the municipal housing context, especially during the current housing affordability crisis. **Fred Dowling** is a passionate community that is focused on making lasting connections within the tightly knit block of privately owned units and social housing units. Co-op members and social housing tenants and homeowners work side by side in developing engagement activities centered on food to bring people together and celebrate diversity. The team has been able to leverage existing assets to promote accessibility and collaboration despite having to navigate through the challenges of reconnecting in a post-pandemic context.

Oak Street has an active governance team that works hard to bring residents together and ensure clear and easy-to-access communications platforms. The team has focused on ensuring that everyone is included in the development of the vision and mission for community change, especially as the co-op prepares to celebrate its anniversary. **Des Jardins** has been navigating through the opportunities and challenges that arise when housing co-operatives experience renovations. Des Jardins has demonstrated that local leadership is critical in advancing community engagement processes and agreeing on a shared vision for their co-op.

LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout this one-year program, housing co-operative members engaged in coaching calls and group sessions that helped identify the following important lessons:

- Establishing **clear roles and responsibilities** within a co-operative housing setting is vital. This practice prevents ambiguity, assists in managing limited capacity, and ensures that boundaries are respected among members. This can include hiring external supports, ranging from in-house social workers, group counsellors, art therapists, etc.
- In the context of co-op housing, it's important to recognize that the **process of collaboration is as significant as the outcomes it produces**. While mission and vision statements are valuable results of the co-operative's work, the true impact often lies in the process of building relationships among members as they co-ideate and co-create.
- **Food, music and storytelling** can serve as powerful tools for fostering connection within co-operatives. By sharing meals and diverse cultural experiences, members can strengthen bonds, learn about one another, and cultivate a sense of belonging.
- Co-operative housing staff and managers can play a pivotal role in nurturing community cohesion. **Effective and relational management** can facilitate positive interactions and contribute to a thriving communal atmosphere. In a context where conflict is present and/or prevalent, we also heard that considering independent and impartial mediation processes can be a significant step toward repairing and rebuilding trust.
- **Developing relationships outside of the co-operative** can be beneficial, but it also presents challenges. For instance, efforts by one of the co-ops to engage politically to secure their land lease renewal came with its fair share of bureaucratic processes,

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“[Conflict] has been a big concern in every co-op I've ever known about. Conflict is inevitable but with mediation and supports I have seen some excellent results.”

-Co-op resident

disagreements, and governance challenges. While external relationships can yield support and resources, they may also introduce complexities and conflicts—proactively mitigating these is crucial.

- **While technology can be a useful tool** in co-op management, it's important to recognize its **limitations in building trust** among members. While it may enhance efficiency, the benefits gained from utilizing technology may not always translate into meaningful trust-building within the community.

The lessons here represent a mosaic of perspectives and showcase the importance of belonging and community engagement in cultivating strong relationships. The following section builds upon these reflections to provide potential future directions for this work.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In a recent focus group within this community development project, participants highlighted the challenge of bridging divides within their co-operatives. Drawing on their experiences in community engagement, they stressed the importance of incorporating diverse cultures and sub-groups through barrier-free socio-cultural events. By combining music, food sharing, and storytelling, some co-ops enhanced community engagement while addressing food insecurity. Participants also emphasized the need for inclusive spaces where residents feel comfortable participating without stigma.

These gatherings will play a significant role in strengthening the social fabric from the neighborhood to the national level. With growing concerns about social isolation, housing affordability issues, and [increasing gentrification](#), communities are innovating on ways to foster social connections. Amid uncertainties of displacement and changing environments, people are seeking ways to maintain their sense of belonging and 'home'. One of the co-op residents, for example, reiterated the value of establishing a 'buddy system' within co-op buildings and stated, *"Humans do better ... when they know someone is interested in what they have to say."*



Over the past year, collaborating with these four co-ops—False Creek, Fred Dowling, Oak Street and Des Jardins—we have witnessed [Priya Parker's](#) words come alive: "Gatherings that are fueled by a shared purpose have the power to transform individuals and communities."



Through the insights shared by community leaders, what we are taking away is a powerful reminder of the value of intentional community engagement and place-based collaboration in bridging divides, reducing barriers to connection, deepening belonging, and transforming people, places and policies “one coffee at a time”.

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DIVE DEEPER

Explore the following resources to learn more about key topics related to this case study, including belonging, co-operative housing, community engagement, social infrastructure, and asset-based community development.

- [About co-op housing](#) and [Co-op housing education & resources](#) CHF Canada [webpage]
- [Co-operative Housing Guide](#) compiled and published by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) [webpage]
- [Participatory City Illustrated Guide](#) by Participatory City Foundation [digital flipbook]
- [Weaving Cohesion Through Inclusive Social Infrastructure](#) by Inda Intiar [blog article]
- [Viral Justice](#): How we grow the world we want, with Ruha Benjamin and Clint Smith [video]
- [Fact Sheet](#) about Housing co-operatives by Edmonton Social Planning Council [webpage]
- [Priya Parker](#): The Art of Gathering [TED Talk]
- [Wheel of Engagement](#) by Tamarack Institute [Online PDF]
- [Index of Community Engagement](#) Tools by Tamarack Institute [Online PDF]
- [Asset Based Community Development](#) (ABCD) Canada [Webpage]
- [Building Better Relationships: A Reconciliation Toolkit](#) [Online PDF]