

CASE STUDY | BUILDING HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE COMMUNITIES

Rebuilding community to build forward

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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, also known by its Indigenous name as Turtle Island, housing co-operatives continue to play a crucial role in the housing sector, offering an alternative to traditional homeownership or rental arrangements. They promote a sense of community, affordability, and sustainability by pooling resources and collectively managing the housing.

A housing co-operative is a unique form of tenure where residents collectively own and govern the property, often organized as a non-profit organization. Members actively participate in the decision-making processes, which fosters a strong sense of community and shared responsibility.

This case study focuses on four housing co-operatives in three places: the Winnipeg, Manitoba; Kitchener Ontario; and Toronto, Ontario. It showcases their journey to rebuild and strengthen their communities after the COVID-19 pandemic, while also highlighting their co-operative principles, community engagement strategies, and the lessons learned from their collaborative efforts. By examining the experiences, challenges, and successes of these communities, we aim to understand how housing co-operatives can contribute to fostering vibrant and inclusive communities in the Canadian context.

Project Background

[CHF Canada](#) is a vital advocate and support system for housing co-operatives, emphasizing affordable, sustainable, and community-oriented housing solutions. With a



The first modern housing co-operative in Canada was established in Saskatchewan in the 1930s, with the co-op movement being traced back to the 1840s in Rochdale, England.

nationwide network, it facilitates knowledge sharing, provides resources, and advocates for policies that prioritize co-operative housing's growth and stability.



Established in 1968, The Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada as a central body representing the co-operative housing sector across the country.



In 2022, CHF Canada sponsored 4 trailblazing housing co-operatives to join Tamarack's [Communities Building Belonging membership program](#) to learn how to rebuild the sense of community that had been impacted by the public health restrictions that were seen across Canada during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this community development project was to have each housing co-operative go through a learning journey to reconnect members, build their capacity to engage members and to develop processes and strategies to sustain the community development work into the foreseeable future.

International Housing Co-operative Principles



Education, training & information



Co-operation among coops



Democratic member control



Economic participation



Concern for community



Voluntary & open membership



Autonomy & independence

Introducing four trailblazing cooperatives

Old Grace Co-op, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Old Grace Housing Co-operative (OGHC) is a housing co-op in the heart of Winnipeg's Wolseley neighbourhood. This co-op resides on Treaty 1, which is the traditional territories of the Anishinabe (Ojibway), Ininew (Cree), Oji-Cree, Dene, and Dakota Peoples, and is the Birthplace of the Métis Nation and the Heart of the Métis Nation Homeland. OGHC consists of a 60-suite complex on the site of the original Grace Hospital at Preston Avenue and Arlington Street in Winnipeg's Wolseley neighbourhood and four townhouses on the northwest corner of Evanson Street and Preston Avenue.

Westboine Co-op, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Westboine Park Housing Co-op is located on 17 acres in Charleswood with trees and open green space, along the Assiniboine River. This co-op also resides on Treaty 1, which is the traditional territories of the Anishinabe (Ojibway), Ininew (Cree), Oji-Cree, Dene, and Dakota Peoples, and is the Birthplace of the Métis Nation and the Heart of the Métis Nation Homeland. The co-op has a total of 188 units composed of 153 town homes and 35 apartments.

Bain Housing Co-op, Toronto, Ontario

Bain Housing Co-op is a 5-acre property, with 26 buildings on the east of Toronto, often described as a village in a city. They are proud to share they are one of the first co-ops in Canada. Bain Housing Co-operative resides on Treaty 13. This land is the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat Peoples. The co-op is comprised of a combination of 1,2-,3- and 4-bedroom units that are connected by a series of shared courtyards.

Shalom Housing Co-op, Kitchener, Ontario

Shalom Housing Co-operative is a small but mighty townhouse style complex with 40 units of housing in Kitchener, Ontario. This co-op is of the Haldimand Tract within the territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee people.

The Stories of Four Trailblazing Housing Co-operatives

Old Grace Co-op, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Out of the four participating co-ops, Old Grace was the youngest co-op in age, built only a few years prior to the pandemic. Due to its age, there was only a short while for relationships between members to be established. Old Grace began rebuilding their community by putting together an action team, named the Deepening Community team. The team resulted in six retired members with the acting president of the board to

develop a strategy on how to reconnect members in the coop.

The Deepening Community Team had a wealth of knowledge and experience that was harnessed to create a plan of action. It was decided as a group that they would revisit the Mission and Vision statement that had been created only a few years earlier. They felt the statements did not reflect the people currently living at the co-op, which had been created before the building was completed. As a group, it was important that as many members were engaged as possible. They were considerate of those who did not feel safe leaving their unit and those who were unable to leave their unit and met them where they were comfortable to meet.

Rather than do a traditional survey, they decided on taking a more relational approach that would allow the Deepening Community Team to develop relationships with their members. They decided to collect members' responses to the question "What do you love about Old Grace Co-op?". They leveraged their own networks, did some door knocking to begin capturing stories. These stories were then posted online for everyone in the co-op to see and celebrate. After some rounds of storytelling were captured, they noticed youth were missing. This resulted in an event dedicated to youth engagement to ensure their perspectives were captured.

Old Grace was strategic about how they held the youth event. They made sure to meet youth where they were by posting a flyer on the inside of the toy box and connecting with key **members with strong existing relationships** with the co-op's youth. To engage and welcome the young people, food and dessert (pizza and ice-cream) were provided. Rather than capturing stories, they created a graffiti wall and provided youth with window markers and paint. They asked the young participants to draw what they love about their co-op. While the youth were being engaged, their parents were on the other side of the window sharing their stories.

The collection took almost half a year to complete, but yielded an impressive 36 stories. The fall of 2022 was spent reading the transcribed stories and conducting a thematic analysis. Each member spent time reviewing the stories and extracting values that were present throughout. After everyone finished their individual analysis, the Deepening Community Team came together to validate their findings and come to consensus on the values that would be used to inform their mission and vision statement.



Between the 36 stories collected and 37 individuals engaged across the 5 round table series, it is estimated that the participation rate is 70% across both activities.





There is so much information. It's not like you must recreate the wheel. There is so much information on co-operative living, community development, and more. There is also so much information from the members that can help you make decisions. They want to be involved.

Tara Torchia, Board President, Old Grace Co-op

Before they finalized the report to the board, it was important to check back with the community to ensure what they were proposing reflected what members wanted. In addition, the team wanted to check-in with the co-op to understand what actions they wanted to see, to compliment the new mission and vision statements. They hosted a series of five in-person round table meetings that were facilitated by an external facilitator to help capture the differences. 36 co-op members showed up to this meeting, seven values were identified, and over 50 actions were identified for the board to explore, with actions being divided under each value.

The Deepening Community Team concluded their project by drafting a report for the board which summarized the year of community development, and put together a list of recommendations, including a revision of the vision and mission statement.



Vision: A world where high quality, affordable and democratically run housing is available to all.

Mission: To provide Old Grace Housing Co-operative members with safe, secure, well maintained, accessible, and affordable homes in a diverse, democratic, and sustainable community.

Old Grace Co-operative Housing

Westboine Co-op, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The board of Westboine Co-op had a reputation for doing everything. In addition to their legal and fiduciary responsibilities, members also expected the board to run social

events among other responsibilities. While this was acknowledged by the board themselves, it was nevertheless challenging to shift everyone's thinking. First, members of Westboine became content with having social events planned for them, so they rarely planned any of their own. They became comfortable waiting for the board to plan the next event. Simultaneously, the board grew accustomed to being the "doers" and struggled to find ways to shift power and allow members to take the lead on the events, given their limited capacity. It was easier to just plan the events than it was to develop a process to empower members.

Fortunately though, the board took interest in [Asset-Based Community Development \(ABCD\)](#). Focusing on gifts rather than deficits resonated with the board, as all too often, it was the mistakes and actions labelled as problematic that typically got the community's attention—as opposed to strengths and wins.

It took time to help everyone on the board learn about ABCD, and even longer to come to consensus on how to move forward. However, after several months of learning and building their capacity thanks to Tamarack's program and resources, the board decided to reimagine their event planning process. They developed a checklist that was accessible in different formats (online and paper) to help support members plan events versus plan events for them.

The first community project at Westboine after their epiphany was the formation of a community garden group, with gardening skills being identified from an existing onboarding survey. This group consists of seven members who took care of the flowers in the common grounds of the co-op.

There are many plans underway for Westboine as they continue their momentum into the new year. One that they are most excited about is the construction of a co-op wide art project where a paper tree will be built in the office of the co-op and then members can attach leaves with their gifts and contact information. They also plan to host regularly scheduled community conversations that are outside of the boardroom, to have members share their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. This will happen one week before the board meeting to help inform the agenda.



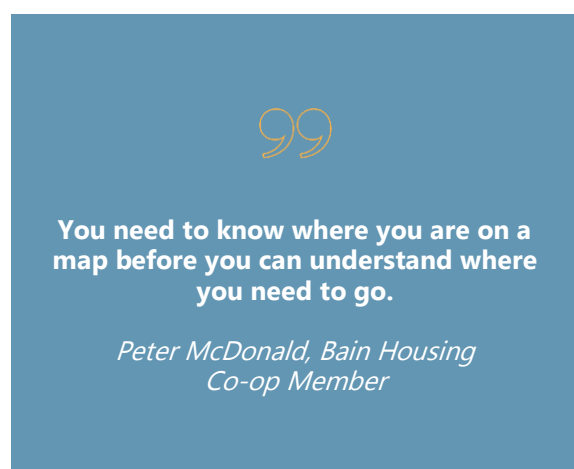
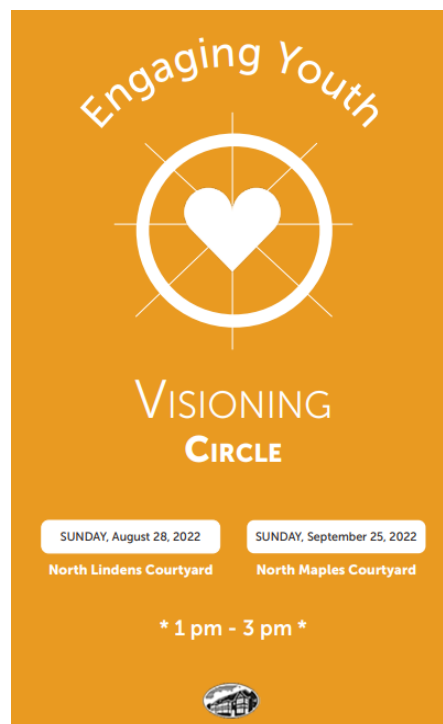
Change can take time, especially when it's about evolving mindsets, or doing tasks *for* people versus supporting them to do the tasks *on their own*. When capacity, time and resources are low, it is easy to stick to the regularly scheduled programming. Shifts, especially in mindsets, can take time. It's important to allow for this time to build capacity and confidence.

Bain Housing Co-op, Toronto, Ontario

Bain Housing Co-operative was created in 1947, making it one of the oldest co-ops in Ontario. It was originally built as Toronto's first social housing project. Their co-op was unable to find common ground and thus unable to move forward on important things such as their upcoming mortgage negotiation. Before they could move forward and rebuild their co-operative community, the co-op had to first build trust amongst each other.

To establish trust, the convenors of the project established vision circles. These events, drawing heavily from the Indigenous talking circle methodology, involved everyone coming to one space, sitting in a circle, and passing around a sacred object. Only the individual who has the sacred object can speak. Before each circle began, a topic was selected and then everyone would go around the circle talking about the topic.

To bring awareness of the visioning circles, posters were hung up around the co-op: in the management office and on the community board in the centre of the co-op, for example. To date, there have been four visioning circles, with attendance ranging from five to just under 20 individuals. The convenors quickly realized that youth were missing from the circle. As youth were understood as the future of the co-op, two visioning circles specifically on engaging youth were planned.



The visioning circle was an important space for members of the co-op to feel heard. It was outside of the settings from which feedback is traditionally solicited, such as a town hall or general meetings. The circles showed that not everyone feels comfortable speaking, and thus different spaces and settings are needed to ensure everyone can feel comfortable with sharing their thoughts. This was evident, as the visioning circles brought out members who do not usually leave their units. Finally, it showed the importance of creating space for people to be heard.

Shalom Housing Co-op, Kitchener, Ontario

Shalom Housing Co-operative is a small but mighty housing co-operative who also found challenges with getting members to participate in activities, especially youth and their parents.

Like in Westboine, Winnipeg, the convenors at Shalom were known as the “doers” which had created the perception that it was the board’s responsibility to do everything. The first milestone that Shalom accomplished was recruiting a team of members to join a subcommittee of the social committee. This team quickly found its name, after a small typo got the group

into hysterics. The “Leadersheep” team was formed of the two convenors who sat on the board and then four co-op members.



The poster features the text "Shalom Co-op" in a bold, white font with green stars on either side, and "Olympics" in a white script font below it. A soccer ball is depicted in the center, surrounded by a white dashed circle. At the bottom, the date "Aug 27th 2022" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font. To the left of the date, the time "1PM" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below the time, there is a block of small white text providing event details.

1PM

Come one and all to the first annual Shalom Co-op Olympics starting at 1 pm, [rain or shine](#). Meet at the [Shed Area](#). Invite your friends and family to join or cheer you on. Games and prizes to be won. [Ages 3+ can participate](#). Children needing assistance must be accompanied by an adult. Snacks will be served and [free](#).



A housing co-operative is about community; it is about people coming together for shared goals and trying to do the best they can within the community they have.

Emily McDonald Board President, Shalom Housing Co-op

From the beginning of their journey, Shalom was passionate about increasing youth engagement. The “Leadersheep” team also shared this sentiment. With the summer coming to an end and back to school on the way, the team wanted to ensure that every youth in the co-op had a fun experience to share with their friends at school. Within the span of three weeks, the “Leadersheep” team was quickly mobilized to host Shalom Co-op’s first Youth Olympics.

Over 20 local young people participated in the event, with activities like flag painting, tug of war, a pinata, a water balloon fight and more. Both the young participants and their parents gave positive feedback about the event. Shalom’s Olympic event signified the importance of coming together and having fun. Rebuilding a sense of community does not have to be a formal process, it can be small, incremental events that revolve around something that everyone will enjoy – having fun.

LESSONS LEARNED

Despite a housing co-operative's unique structure of governance, these communities face challenges like any other. Below is a list of some of the challenges experienced by these communities (some unique to housing co-operatives, some are ubiquitous) and what was learned from them.

- **Board Buy-in is critical** → Despite the board's role in initiating the relationship with Tamarack, some housing co-operatives struggled to have their boards participate in the process, putting additional burden on participating co-op members. Having boards be a part of the process, like involving key stakeholders in any community engagement process, is key for this work to move forward and to be resourced.
- **Meet people where they are at** → By meeting people where they are at and communicating with people in ways they communicate, this greatly increases the likelihood of your message being heard.
- **Good enough is good enough to move forward** → It is easier to come to consensus on what the problem is than what the solution to the problem is. Find the common ground rooted in the problem and build from there. Not every problem can be resolved to make everyone happy. It's important to work together to find a solution that is good enough for everyone at the table.
- **Pizza to draw them in, ice cream to keep them to the end** → Food brings people together. Make sure to have some type of refreshments at your engagements. Depending on the time of day and the length of engagement, you may want to offer more substantial refreshments.
- **"Focus on what's strong, not what's wrong"** → To build upon Cormac Russel's guidance, it is easy to focus on what is not present, or things that need to be improved. However, that is not a productive starting point. Rather, start with what is present in the co-operative, the gifts (skills, passions, and knowledge) of co-operative members and build up from there. You will be surprised on what is present in your co-op and what you can do with all the gifts you will discover!
- **Incorporate Relationship Building Wherever You Can** → At the heart of any community development project is relationship building. When you begin a meeting, do an icebreaker to have people in the room get to know each other better. Instead of just doing surveys, host focus groups, or a visioning circle where people can interact and learn from one another. This will help build trust and build the social capital of all members while accomplishing your engagement goals.



In addition to this case-study, a digital story has been prepared to ensure the stories of each trailblazing housing co-operative is accessible to as many audiences as possible.

The digital story is a great way to meet the individuals participating in this project and to hear firsthand their experiences with rebuilding community in their co-ops.

[Watch the digital story](#)



CONCLUSION

Throughout this case study, we've highlighted the international housing co-operative principles in action as these housing co-operatives engage with their members and discover the profound impact of their collective efforts on the people and neighbourhoods they call home. As we dive into their stories, we gain a deeper understanding of how these housing co-operatives contribute to creating vibrant and inclusive communities in the Canadian landscape. These communities revolve around shared ownership and governance, fostering a strong sense of unity and responsibility among members.

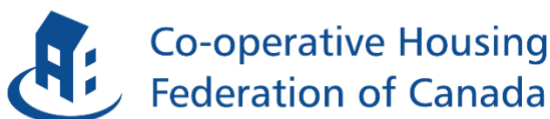
The experiences of four trailblazing co-operatives: Old Grace in Winnipeg, Westboine in Winnipeg, Bain in Toronto, and Shalom in Kitchener, showcase diverse strategies and approaches to rebuild and strengthen their communities. From fostering deep connections through storytelling, to empowering members to take the lead in event planning and developing a shared vision, through innovative methods like visioning circles, these co-operatives have proven that community development is achievable, even in challenging circumstances.

The lessons learned emphasize the importance of board involvement, meeting members where they are, resolving existing conflicts through finding common ground, and the unifying power of food and a focus on strengths. This case study underlines the potential for housing co-operatives to not only provide affordable and sustainable housing but also to become catalysts for building vibrant, connected, and resilient communities across Canada.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

[Tamarack's Communities Building Belonging](#) team would like to thank each of the trailblazing co-operatives for their bravery as they navigated through the unknown to rebuild their sense of community. We would also like to thank the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada for their support in the pilot project and for being strong partners throughout the pilot project.

A new cohort of housing co-operatives, one in British Columbia and three in Ontario are currently working to rebuild a sense of community in their co-operatives. Their efforts and strategies are being built upon the hard work and lessons learned from the four initial housing co-operatives in the 2022 cohort: Bain Housing Co-operative in Toronto, Shalom Housing Co-operative in Kitchener, Westboine Housing Co-operative in Winnipeg, and Old Grace Housing Co-operative in Winnipeg.



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