CASE STUDY | BECOMING AN ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CITY

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Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a methodology that looks at the gifts and assets of people that exist within a neighbourhood allowing them to respond to, and create local opportunities. ABCD's emphasis is on strengths, connections, citizen leadership, and the recognition that individual gifts become powerful when they are connected. This case study outlines the collaboration between neighbours and the City of Edmonton in the development of an Asset-Based Community Development initiative.

OVERVIEW

In 2013, the City of Edmonton established a partnership with John McKnight and Peter Block, two leaders in ABCD. The journey of Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) began, with the intent to create more connections among neighbours through shared activities and interests. These connections would in turn increase relational networks, grow the neighbourhood's sense of community and increase neighbours' ability to work together towards common goals. The initiative would allow residents to recognize the power of neighbouring and experience the richness of sharing their gifts, knowledge, skills and abilities to improve their neighbourhood.

An Abundant Community initiative proposal was presented to City of Edmonton officials with a funding request to support the implementation within one Edmonton neighbourhood. The City granted $15,000 in initial funding to support a pilot project.

> **City of Edmonton**
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> The City of Edmonton is located in the province of Alberta. Edmonton is a growing city with over 932,000 (2016) residents making it the second largest city in Alberta. The North Saskatchewan River runs through the city showcasing the largest urban park, our river valley, within a city in North America.

> *ACE is a neighbourhood engagement and community organizing approach that provides tools for neighbours to get to know each other on a block level.*

This resulted in the development of a growing partnership between citizens, neighbourhood leaders and municipal officials. The City provided administrative and organizational support, and became a dedicated partner, championing the initiative to ensure that it grew in a sustainable way. The initial pilot started in one neighbourhood, then expanded to three, and is now active or starting in 106 of Edmonton's 260 residential neighbourhoods. As evidence of its success, in 2018 Edmonton City Council funded 3.5 staff solely dedicated to supporting the ACE initiative.

Staff and citizens have shared their ACE experience, tools and resources openly and have encouraged and supported organizations across Canada, the US and the UK to initiate their own versions of ACE.

STRUCTURE

Role of City

The City of Edmonton employs Neighbourhood Resource Coordinators, Revitalization Coordinators, and the ACE Team who work in neighbourhoods across the city. As dedicated place-based and asset-based community development staff, their goals are to work with citizens and groups to build strong, connected vibrant communities. The ACE Support Team helps citizens to activate the initiative by working with Neighbourhood Connectors to create stronger block-level relationships and uncover hidden strengths, skills and assets in communities.

The City of Edmonton has used Abundant Community principles to identify four key roles necessary in supporting neighbours to create a culture of care and connection.


Role of Neighbourhood Leadership

Leadership can come from any individual or neighbourhood group that is looking to strengthen the connections where they live. Within Edmonton, community leagues are generally the group that provides the formal leadership in these efforts to build community.

Role of the Support Team

The Support Team often originates with the early adopters of the initiative. They meet to talk about building community where they live and support the Neighbourhood Connector.

Role of Neighbourhood Connectors

A Neighbourhood Connector is someone from the neighbourhood who takes on the lead role in identifying, mobilizing, and supporting Block Connectors. They do this in partnership with the neighbourhood leadership and have help and guidance from the Support Team.

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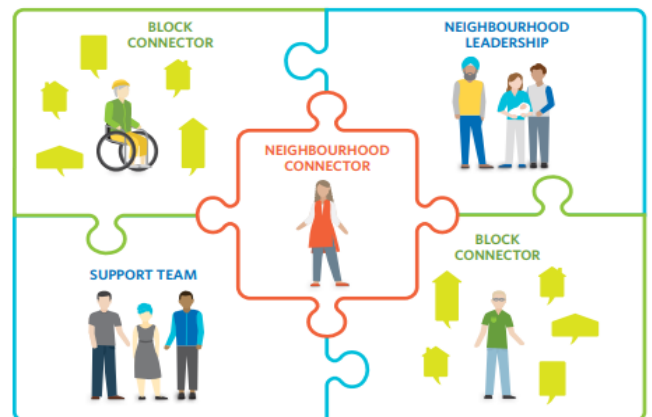
Block Connectors

Block Connectors connect with the neighbours that live around them – they have three key roles: Point Person, Party Person and Listener. They are the go-to people on their block, they initiate (but don't always lead) block socials and they want to hear from their neighbours, gathering the gifts and skills that individuals might like to share.

HOW CITIES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS CAN UTLIZE GIFTS AND ASSETS

How does the City support the neighbourhoods?

The City's Neighbourhood Resource Coordinators (and Revitalization Coordinators in selected neighbourhoods) are asset-based, place-based community development specialists who support community partners to enhance capacity, undertake strategic planning, connect them to resources and enhance liveability. They provide direct support to the community leadership, inspiring them to join the ACE movement and providing information and connections to the ACE Team including presentations and access to resources. The City also hosts regular Community of Practice sessions for Neighbourhood Connectors and Block Connectors to share experiences, ideas, questions and encouragement.

Who decided what happens at the neighbourhood level?

The City believes citizens know their neighbourhoods best. From an ABCD perspective, ACE is citizen-led and comes to life differently in each neighbourhood. As community development specialists, city staff work with citizens to support and maximize neighbourhoods who are leading the activity and decision making.

> **It is our collective vision to build vibrant and sustainable communities and a stronger city – together.**
>
> -Mayor Don Iveson

How does the City use gifts and assets?

Healthy Cities are created when neighbourhoods are engaged, well connected and animated. Block Connectors gather information on the gifts and assets people have on each block. In turn, the Neighbourhood Leadership and Connectors use this knowledge to help citizens create groups that are resident led to support building a vibrant, connected community. The City benefits from this work as connected blocks can increase safety and care for each other and civic engagement grows. As ACE grows and becomes more solidified, the social/recreational desires of citizens can help to inform City programs and service planning.

How do various City departments connect with ACE?

Responsibility for ACE lies within the Citizen Services department but the City as a whole places a high value on citizen engagement. This creates the foundation for innovative connections with several departments within the city's Administration. One example is the collaboration between selected capital renewal projects and Neighbourhood Revitalization. In these projects when roads, sidewalks, lighting and other infrastructure are being renewed, engineers, project managers, Neighbourhood Resource coordinators and Revitalization Coordinators work together with citizens to seek ways to create social uplift through urban design and citizen identified opportunities.

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Another example is the collaboration between ACE neighbourhoods and emergency services. In the event of a major disaster, neighbours helping neighbours is crucial until formal emergency services arrive and in the weeks and months following a disaster. The ACE team is actively working to enhance relationships and grow these connections.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ACE must be a grassroots, citizen-led initiative, it is not a linear process and there is more than one way to create a connected neighbourhood.

- The support of elected officials and senior administration is instrumental to success.

- As a performance driven municipality, the City accrue tremendous benefit through block-level neighbourhood engagement.

- A team of connectors can share the load in a neighbourhood. Making connections in a neighbourhood is just as important as leadership.

- Citizens have busy lives and are sometimes hesitant to volunteer, but when they are invited into a relationship with neighbours, neighbourhood activities and vibrancy increase organically.

- Uncovering, encouraging and assisting neighbourhood leadership is key in areas that do not have neighbourhood associations.

Block Social

- Community of Practice meetings are a vital educational tool where Connectors can share ideas, stories about neighbouring and providing peer support.

- Everyone has gifts. Creating a way of uncovering skills, gifts and people's experiences can provide richer connection on the block and in the neighbourhood.

- Originally, ABCD practitioners worked in what they referred to as 'troubled neighbourhoods'. In Edmonton, we have learned that ABCD principles work in all neighbourhoods as everyone benefits from being connected and gift focused.

- Combining ABCD with a place-based (neighbourhood) approach is an excellent way to increase inclusion. Everyone belongs simply because they live in the neighbourhood. This includes people living in care homes, institutions or who are experiencing homelessness.

- Keep it simple. The vision is connected and caring neighbours, the mission is block leadership, the values are inclusion, sharing of gifts, leadership and block socials for everyone!

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RECOMMENDATIONS

There are so many benefits for cities utilizing the principles of ABCD to build healthy communities. Building communities that bring residents together creates a necessary foundation for positive community change; contributes to community resilience; and positively impacts individual health and well-being. After having implemented ACE for five years in 106 neighbourhoods, here are some recommendations to cities on how to get started:

- Start by having block socials! Relationships are the foundation of ABCD.

- Human scale neighbourhoods are key – they must be reasonably sized, so community can be built.

- Supportive leadership is needed at all levels – the block level, in City administration, and from elected officials.

- Invest in creating and nurturing neighbourhood leadership. This can be found in areas other than neighbourhood associations but must be place-based rather than issue-based or affinity-based. Neighbours just want to neighbour – it feels safe!

Simple Saturday Morning Coffee

- Schools are frequently interested in involving their students.

- Hire asset-based community development specialists to support and help citizens drive the initiative.

- In a performance-driven municipality, make space for citizens and neighbours to lead the initiative and drive the decisions in their neighbourhoods. The city's role is to listen, learn and lead from behind.

CONCLUSION

Over the past three decades there has been a shift in how we connect with one another. Evidence shows that our actual experiences of being involved in a community has been steadily declining since the 1960s. While municipalities have traditionally focused on the physical components of a neighbourhood – paving, sidewalks, roads, parks and infrastructure – cities are now realizing that they need to do more. Cities need to support the residents who live, work and play in the neighbourhoods to create a sense of belonging and connection that will lead to happier, healthier and more engaged community.

The City of Edmonton places a high value on healthy neighbourhoods. We have seen the potential for neighbourly relationships to support the physical, social and mental health of Edmontonians and the flourishing of our city as a whole. Edmonton has embraced Abundant Community principles, turned it into action and demonstrated success. As the initiative grows we hope to see and measure the benefits of

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connecting and building supportive, inclusive neighbourhoods through – increased safety, neighbour/senior care, civic engagement, mental/physical wellness and economic growth. Connect your block and join the neighbouring movement!

RESOURCECS

- Learn more about ABCD
- Check out the Abundant Community Edmonton Website
- Read the Asset-Based Neighbourhood Organizing Paper

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