CASE STUDY | INVESTING IN SOCIAL CAPITAL PAYS OFF DURING A CRISIS

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Did you know that during an emergency your neighbours will likely be your first responders? When COVID-19 forced communities into lockdown, many were unprepared. But the City of St. Albert's efforts to cultivate social capital in the years leading up to the pandemic yielded dividends when the crisis hit. Neighbours stepped up to take care of one another and make sure no one was left behind. Research has shown that connected communities like St. Albert are more resilient and can respond more quickly during emergencies.

OVERVIEW

Building a "*sense of community and connectedness*" is an important goal for the City of St. Albert and is one of the five key values identified in their Social Master Plan. The City recognizes that "*residents who live in a connected neighbourhood have an overall sense of belonging which leads to feelings of safety, security and better health*."

As a result of the Social Master Plan, the City of St. Albert has as a thriving Neighbourhood Connection program. The program supports a wide variety of initiatives aimed to build connection among residents, including block parties, little free libraries, Neighbourhood Connection kits, and a Neighbourhood Connectors program.

**City of St. Albert:
Cultivating a Community for All**

In 2013, the City of St. Albert adopted a Social Master Plan that would serve as a road map for building a caring, connected, inclusive and safe community.

St. Albert's Neighbourhood Connection program is putting this road map into action by connecting residents at the neighbourhood level.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, community members from across St. Albert have stepped up to take care of one another. Residents are taking it upon themselves to form deeper connections with their neighbours to make sure no one is left behind.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Connected neighbourhoods are more resilient and able to respond more quickly during emergencies. Cultivating social capital prior to emergencies is a critical strategy to ensure there are strong community networks to draw on when a crisis emerges.

- When a disaster strikes, neighbours are most often the first responders. Cities should recognize the grassroots efforts of citizens during emergencies and find ways to support them.

- Programs that build social connection can be modified, rather than canceled. We need social connection more than ever during the pandemic. St. Albert's modified Block Party program is a good example of how to modify a pre-existing initiative.

- Cities can support and amplify resident-led solutions. When a local Neighbourhood Connector decided to create a Facebook group to connect residents during the pandemic, the City supported the idea and promoted the group via its Neighbourhood News newsletter.

CULTIVATING NEIGHBOURHOOD CONNECTIONS

St. Albert has as a thriving Neighbourhood Connection program that supports a wide variety of initiatives aimed at building connections among residents, including block parties, little free libraries, Neighbourhood Connection kits, and a Neighbourhood Connectors program.

- St. Albert's **Neighbourhood Connectors** are part of a larger effort to build a sense of community and connectedness on every street, apartment and condominium complex in St. Albert. There are currently 73 Neighbourhood Connectors.

- The **Path to Neighbourhood Connection** is a tool the City developed to help neighbours connect with one another by providing tips and ideas. No matter where someone is on the path to neighbourhood connection, they will find suggestions to get started and stay on track.

- The City has also developed **Neighbourhood Connection Kits**, which encourage residents to better connect with their neighbours while exploring St. Albert. There is a walking kit, bird watching kit, a plant kit and more.

- The City has a proud **Block Party** tradition. Since 2008, over half of their streets have participated in the initiative, and many have made their block party an annual tradition.

- St. Albert's **Little Free Libraries** are neighbourhood gathering places, where neighbours can meet and get to know one another. The Little Free Libraries provide a way for people

to give to their community, while promoting reading and literacy. There are 39 Little Free Libraries throughout the community!

MOBILIZING SOCIAL CAPITAL DURING THE PANDEMIC

St. Albert's Social Master Plan highlights how *"communities are strengthened when residents are actively involved and feel that they have an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the community and to be involved in decisions that impact their lives. All residents have a role to play in addressing the issues that we face as a community. Residents need to be informed of the many ways in which they can get involved in building a vibrant community."*

Soon after the pandemic forced communities into lockdown, stories emerged of people running errands and shopping for neighbours who were under quarantine or at risk. There were stories of people bringing joy to others through neighbourhood activities like window decorating or coordinating a birthday drive-by. There were stories of friendly phone calls and weekly check-ins with neighbours. While the lockdown created difficulties for many, citizens across St. Albert willingly stepped up to help one another manage and cope. Neighbours lifted the spirits of other neighbours with positive messages on sidewalks and even organized socially distanced scavenger hunts for kids, neighbourhood Zoom game nights and happy hours.

> **"These have been difficult times for many, but what's been absolutely heartwarming has been the response of neighbours. Neighbours across St. Albert stepped up to help one another manage and cope almost immediately."**

One Neighbourhood Connector started a Facebook group called the Connectors' Corner to share resources, inspiration and good news stories about good neighbouring in St. Albert. The group strives to build connections between neighbours, neighbourhoods, and bring awareness of community resources to residents. The City helped promote the group through their regular newsletter and there are now over 150 members.

Modified Block Parties

When safe to do so, the City promoted their Block Party program during the pandemic, with a few modifications to ensure physical distancing. They encouraged smaller block parties hosted on a driveway, street, apartment/condo balcony, parking lot or neighbourhood green space, where neighbours could visit and reconnect while ensuring physical distancing, and not sharing food or drinks. They strongly encouraged Block Party organizers to follow Alberta Public Health Orders for gatherings and provided tips for how to plan a safe block party.

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Good Neighbour Day

The City hosted its first-ever Good Neighbour Day as a way of bringing people together to celebrate the kindness that neighbours have shown each other since the onset of COVID-19. The day was about recognizing and celebrating how the community is getting through the pandemic together. Residents were invited to enjoy a physically distanced dinner party with their neighbours or to celebrate in other physically distanced ways. The day was an opportunity to take the time to show kindness to a neighbour, thank a neighbour for their help, or meet a neighbour they didn't yet know.

Good Neighbour Recognition Program

St. Albert's Good Neighbour Recognition Program provided residents with the opportunity to recognize a neighbour who had helped them in a time of need or had taken initiative to make their neighbourhood safe, connected and friendly. They could request a formal recognition through the Mayor's Office and the neighbour was eligible to receive a "Good Neighbour Recognition" certificate.

Neighbours could be recognized for actions such as helping someone in need, organizing a neighbourhood social activity or developing a neighbourhood fundraiser for a local charity. Since launching the program over 50 people have been recognized by their neighbours for a whole host of kind acts.

Neighbours helped by:

- Picking up groceries and running errands for those under quarantine

- Checking in with neighbours regularly to offer help

- Bringing joy and happiness to neighbours by organizing outdoor physically distanced street concerts, dance parties, block parties and car parades

- Brightening a neighbour's day with surprise gifts such as baking, garden veggies, soup, plants and children's artwork

- Showing kindness through simple greetings, acts and gestures

These kind acts, though seemingly simple, have a big impact:

- One couple was brought to tears when neighbours they barely knew offered to pick up groceries or run errands after they had just returned from Mexico and were in quarantine.

- A mother was touched by the kindness of her neighbours who were especially welcoming to her 3-year-old son with disabilities, when they invited him to learn about their backyard garden. This was a welcomed opportunity for her son to practice his social skills when so many other opportunities were unavailable due to COVID-19.

- A man whose medical condition prevented him from getting necessities was grateful for his neighbours who recognized his challenge and provided unsolicited assistance of meals, encouraging words and children's artwork that lifted his spirits and gave him strength, while reminding him that he was not alone.

CONCLUSION

St. Albert's Social Master Plan highlights how "*the goal of any social program is not simply to respond to immediate needs but also to build the skills and strengths that an individual will need to better manage any future crisis. By building capacity within our community through residents, service providers and community groups, we build a social safety net that is strengthened over time. In doing so, we build a community where residents feel supported, know where to turn for help and are able to offer support to their neighbours and fellow community members*".

It is clear that St. Albert's investment in social capital prior to COVID-19 paved the way for a strong citizen-led response when the pandemic hit. A strongly connected neighbourhood not only fosters a sense of belonging but ensures health and safety when emergency strikes.

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