

INVESTING TO CREATE A NETWORK OF COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENTS | A CASE STUDY ON THE GREATER LEHIGH VALLEY

SYLVIA CHEUY

For more than 100 years, the Lehigh Valley, a metropolitan region in northeastern Pennsylvania, was renowned as an industrial powerhouse, and manufacturers like Bethlehem Steel, Mack Truck and Coplay Portland Cement were its heart. But by the 1980's, these industries had closed, moved out of the region or were downsized due to national and global competition. The urban areas- Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton- went into a sharp economic decline, which lasted for nearly three decades.

A FORWARD LOOKING APPROACH

Of the three urban areas, Allentown, the largest city in the Lehigh Valley was affected the most, as evidenced by blight, unemployment, poverty, health disparities, education standards and other social determinants. By 2014 however, the city was gaining global recognition for its "innovative, forward-looking approach to design and development." The economic renaissance of Allentown is a testament to the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of its ancestors. The establishment of a Neighbourhood Improvement Zone (NIZ) in Allentown's downtown core was the spark that launched the city's economic revitalization, which has included: a 10,000-seat multipurpose arena, several office towers, restaurants, green spaces, restored historic buildings as well as residential and retail spaces. Downtown Allentown is now "a regional centre of excellence for business, culture and metropolitan living." In 2011 only 9,000 people worked downtown but by 2018, that number had grown to 16,000.



United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley, The Rider-Pool Foundation and Penn State Lehigh

The story of this region's economic transformation is impressive. However, it is the groundwork that has been laid to support a social transformation in Allentown that has the potential to be inspirational. [The Rider-Pool Foundation](#) has been the catalyst. This forward-looking community champion recognized that the economic development in the city's NIZ needed to be accompanied by a parallel effort at social development if the positive momentum was to be sustainable. Rider-Pool also recognized that the issues needing attention in the neighbourhoods surrounding the NIZ, were beyond the capability of any one agency or organization to address alone. The issues of the community were complex. The vision was to create a diverse network of community change agents by strategically investing in enhancing the knowledge and capacity of a small number of promising leaders from the health, community, arts, municipal and social sectors.

LEARNING TOGETHER

One of the Rider-Pool signature strategies was to implement a unique curriculum emphasizing collaborative leadership, community engagement and collective impact. In 2014, an initial cohort of seven promising not-for-profit, municipal and community leaders was selected as initial learners. Each of their respective organizations received a small honorarium to release these individuals to participate fully in the nine-month, 180-hour initiative. The curriculum blended a more in-depth understanding of the theory and practice collective impact; the dynamics of community leadership and change as well as practical local knowledge and data.

The learners – known as Collective Impact Fellows – continued to meet monthly as a peer learning group even after the initiative's formal curriculum was completed. This regular connection builds upon the trust and understanding that these community champions began to develop while learning together. Several Fellows have subsequently gone on to co-develop and implement innovative projects addressing identified community needs.

There have been three additional cohorts of Collective Impact Fellows selected and trained since the inception of this initiative. Today a network of close to 50 community change leaders have benefitted from this unique learning experience and they all continue to meet monthly as a peer learning network.

Ron Dendas, Program Officer of The Rider-Pool Foundation shares his enthusiasm for the initiative that his organization has created. "The inspiration behind this initiative is our desire to nurture a culture of innovation and shared leadership across a diversity of health, community and municipal leaders across the community. What makes our initiative particularly unique is the commitment to cultivate a network of community leaders from a diversity of sectors in a very localized way." Ed Meehan, Executive Director of The Rider-Pool Foundation puts it this way: "We honor the legacy of our Founders, Leonard and Dorothy Rider Pool, by being proactive, building problem solving capacity, and investing in place based leadership that ensures the Lehigh Valley's success, now and for decades to come."

The inspiration behind this initiative is our shared desire to nurture a culture of innovation and shared leadership

The strategic effort to cultivate a network of Collective Impact Fellows in the Lehigh Valley is still early in its development so it's too early to attribute any specific outcomes to it. However, given the unique and deliberate investment in building the capacity of a diverse group of individuals with a shared commitment on championing the overall well-being of the community as a whole is absolutely an innovation that has the potential to inspire learning not only in the Lehigh Valley but also in communities across North America and beyond who are wanting to facilitate shared commitment and capacity to advance positive – and sustainable – community change.

FURTHER LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Learn more about [the Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust](#) here
- Find other stories of Collective Impact and Collaborative Leadership at www.tamarackcommunity.ca

ABOUT SYLVIA CHEUY

Sylvia is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Collective Impact Idea Area and also supports Tamarack's Community Engagement Idea Area. She is passionate about community change and what becomes possible when residents and various sector leaders share an aspirational vision for their future. Sylvia believes that when the assets of residents and community are recognized and connected they become powerful drivers of community change. Sylvia is an internationally recognized community-builder and trainer. Over the past five years, much of Sylvia's work has focused on building awareness and capacity in the areas of Collective Impact and Community Engagement throughout North America.



Prior to joining Tamarack, Sylvia was the founding Executive Director to [Headwaters Communities in Action](#) (HCIA), a grassroots citizen initiative that fosters collaborative leadership and action in support of a long-term vision of well-being for Ontario's Headwaters region. This experience gives Sylvia practical knowledge and first-hand experience of what it takes to engage and mobilize positive community change. Her work with HCIA was published as a chapter entitled, *A Citizen-Led Approach to Enhancing Community Well-Being* in the newly published ***Handbook of Community Well-Being Research***.