

# Open Door Centre

## Building Community Assets Toronto

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### **ASSET MAPPING:**

#### **Working with homeless and marginally housed individuals**

#### **Background**

In 2002, the Open Door Centre in Toronto launched a project designed to identify or 'map' the individual assets and skills of the 300+ users of their drop-in centre, and to use this knowledge as a base for new community economic development initiatives. Known as the Asset Mapping Research Project (Phase I), start-up funding was obtained from the Government of Canada through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), administered by the City of Toronto.

The research project is a rare instance in Canada in which US based John McKnight and John Kretzmann's asset based community development theories have been put into practice. It is a direct response to "needs assessments" which focus on weaknesses and problems, and can demoralize individuals and neighbourhoods. Instead, in the Toronto research project, shelter residents and other marginally housed people, are asked to describe their assets to others in similar circumstances in their community. The premise is that all people, including those who are marginalized, homeless, with low or no income, or dealing with addictions, mental or physical health issues, have assets. These assets include skills, talents, gifts, abilities, interests, experiences, knowledge and dreams, and are the starting point for ideas for community development and capacity building.

Community development that stems from an analysis of assets places people's futures in their own hands by mapping and mobilizing their strengths. Asset based community development theories are supported by social capital theory which states that building and rebuilding mutually beneficial relationships between people creates trust. The Asset Mapping Research Project is action research which brings participants together locally to share their assets and other resources in order to build individual and community capacity. Managed by the Open Door Centre, the project is supported by a partnership with the Toronto Christian Resource Centre.

#### **Goals**

The specific goals of the Asset Mapping Research Project are to:

- Help people discover their sense of worth and activate their innate ability to improve their quality of life;
- Encourage participation and individual pride in the Downtown East Toronto community;
- Create local economic development by bringing together the assets of individuals, associations and institutions;
- Identify and share resources within the community;
- Build a healthy community; and



- Create partnerships within the community to develop realistic and long-term community economic development solutions to the challenge of homelessness.

## Methodology

The research process during Phase I work consisted of:

- Selecting and training *Asset Researchers* who would conduct the outreach and asset mapping within the community of shelter and drop-in users;
- Working with the Asset Researchers to develop the *capacity inventory*, the tool for conducting interviews;
- Conducting hour long one-on-one interviews with drop-in users and residents of local shelters;
- Creating a data base and inputting results;
- Identifying community economic development opportunities;
- Working with participants to assist them to create economic opportunities;
- Identifying additional research opportunities through partnerships; and
- Working with agency partners and prospective employers to tap into local community assets and develop economic opportunities for participants.

The team of *Asset Researchers* was drawn from the community of drop in users and homeless individuals in Toronto. This approach departs from traditional institutional or agency driven programs where one professional assesses the skills of ‘clients’ while another looks for employment opportunities. Instead, the focus is on building local community expertise and ensuring individuals experiencing homelessness are driving the data collection and the direction of the research. The project itself becomes an economic opportunity for the volunteer Asset Researchers, who receive an honorarium for their work. They are trained to locate community members with particular assets, training needs, and resources to share, and to recruit them as participants in the project. The Asset Researchers are also trained to maintain a database of the capacity inventories.

The *capacity inventory* was developed in close consultation with the Asset Researchers. It provides a framework for the individual interviews conducted with other individuals living in a shelter or using a drop-in. The capacity inventory is used to assess participants and screen for those who:

- are living in extreme poverty;
- are determined to use their employable skills;
- are experienced communicators and demonstrating conversational and social skills;
- have proven to be dependable; and
- are motivated to help her/himself and others.

In analyzing the data generated from the capacity inventories, the goal is to use the results to support the development of new community businesses or social purpose enterprises with the aim to continue the skills development, supplementary income, and employment opportunities of project participants.

Other components of the project include:

- Delivering employment related information, workshops and services to shelter residents and other marginally housed people; and
- Matching program participants to mentoring and skills development opportunities, community economic development initiatives, transitional employment opportunities, job readiness programs and job support services provided by project partners.



The Asset Mapping Project is guided by a steering committee, comprised of Asset Researchers, project partners, and community economic development consultants. The role of the steering committee is to develop, monitor, and evaluate policies and practices throughout the research project.

## Results

Phase I of the Asset Mapping Research Project resulted in 159 interviews with shelter residents, many of whom were recruited for the project due to their serious interest in finding work. Among those interviewed, many were highly skilled, employed by temporary employment agencies and earning minimum wages. Some were experiencing poor working conditions or exploitation on the job. Participants in the asset mapping research reported significant improvements to their self-image and confidence as a result of their involvement with the project.

An ongoing goal of the project is to match the individuals who were interviewed with training or employment opportunities. While the overall experience is that it is difficult to connect with employers, some success has been achieved.

- A national grocery store chain participated in regular recruitment sessions and job fairs which so far have resulted in permanent part time employment for eight participants (in 2004).
- A painting contract with Street Health, a local non-profit organization in 2003 resulted in temporary employment for 15 participants.
- A contract in 2004 with the South East Downtown Economic Redevelopment Initiative to conduct local labour market research allowed the team of Asset Researchers to re-unite and undertake questionnaire development and extensive interviewing. (See side bar: 'Phase II': Labour Market Research).

Phase I of the Open Door Centre's Asset Mapping Research Project has also resulted in collaborations with over 30 agencies since 2002. As a member agency of the Downtown East Community Development Collective, the organization is helping to develop pilot 'transition to work' projects and co-hosted the 2003 Asset Mapping and CED Conference, funded by SCPI and the V. Atkinson Charitable Foundation.

## Lessons Learned

Organizations interested in undertaking asset mapping in their own community may want to consider the following pointers.

1. A guiding principle is that people from the community you want to work with are the ones who know the community the best.
2. Start working with the group you want to reach early in the process. Information forums can be a useful starting point to discuss project goals, outcomes, and how the results will be used.
3. Invite individuals from your target community to help develop the inventory tool and conduct the interviews. Allow time for the interview tool to go through several drafts. A key to successful

### Phase II: Labour Market Research

Using the asset mapping approach, a phase II project began in 2004 as a result of a contract with a downtown economic development initiative. The Open Door Centre's team of Asset Researchers will undertake 125 interviews encompassing: shelter residents, community employment services, and community leaders. The goal is to identify segments of employers operating in the study area, determine their attitudes about hiring youth and shelter residents, and connect them with local employment services who are working with homeless and at-risk populations.



interviews is trust between the Asset Researcher and the interviewee, which can be nurtured if both know each other or share lived experiences.

4. Work with members of the community you want to reach to clarify the language to be used in the questions. Remember, the interviewers will encounter individuals with different levels of education. Only ask questions that the research project can use for data collection purposes or for matching individual skills to employment opportunities. Know that an employer will ask other types of questions prior to hiring.

5. Include some questions in the interview which allow individuals with mental or physical health issues to speak about their personal challenges. Avoid setting people up to fail.

### **A Final Word**

As a research methodology, asset mapping with homeless and marginally housed individuals is a challenging undertaking. The project becomes more complex with the commitment to use the knowledge gained to foster community economic development and connect project participants with economic opportunities which capitalize on their strengths and interests. For staff and volunteers in the organization sponsoring the research, the experience of getting to know the Asset Researchers and working closely with them is full of rewards. Through the project you come to understand what is important to homeless individuals and see first hand how aspects of the work you are doing, in partnership with them, has an impact on their lives.

For more information on *Open Door Centre: Building Community Assets Toronto*, email: [assetmapping@look.ca](mailto:assetmapping@look.ca)

