



Association of Neighbourhood Houses of Greater Vancouver



# *NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES: PAST & PRESENT*

*A report on the history and the role of neighbourhood houses, and background information on  
the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of Greater Vancouver*

## THE HISTORY OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES

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Neighbourhood Houses (NHs) trace their origin in the Settlement Movement that emerged in the late 1800. The Settlement Movement rose as a response to the dehumanizing conditions and the enormous increase in urban poverty created by the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of capitalism and urbanization deepened the gap between the rich and the poor, and worsened the living standards of the poor; squalid housing, illnesses, high crime, child labour, and unemployment were only some of the issues the poor faced at that time (Majewski, 1986; toynbeehall.org).

In London of 1884, Samuel Barnett and his wife, Henrietta, rejected the option of a parish in an affluent area and came to St. Jude's in the East End of London, "the worst parish... inhabited mainly by a criminal population" (toynbeehall.org). The Barnetts' new approach for helping the poor was to create change in the impoverished neighbourhoods by bringing the most privileged, the future elite, to live there. Joining the Barnetts, students and associates from Oxford University and the Church of England created the first settlement, intending to learn from the poor as much as to teach them, to receive as much as to give. The settlers' goal was to eliminate class differences and to improve the quality of life of the poor; therefore the relation between the settlers and the residents was one of equality. The settlement provided opportunities for the independently wealthy to learn about the true nature of working class life and to translate intellectual ideas and distant philanthropy into immediate action. At the same time, settlements enabled lower-class neighbours to experience the benefits of culture, education and civilization in the midst of their poverty.

This first settlement house was named after one of Samuel Barnett's friends, Arnold Toynbee, who also moved into the slums but was not healthy and strong enough to survive living there. **Toynbee Hall** became a powerhouse of social reform and a training ground for young civil servants who later became key figures in the making of the welfare state such as, Clement Atlee, William Beveridge, and Kenneth Lindsay. As the first settlers came to learn more about the causes and effects of poverty, they became the pioneers of offering services such as literacy courses, legal advice, health clinics,

translation services, youth and senior services, and more. Settlement houses sat the model for a comprehensive and integrated service delivery approach (Chaskin, Joseph & Chipenda-Dansokho, 1997), which recognizes the need to address a whole range of issues and circumstances affecting communities.

## **THE SPREAD OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES IN NORTH AMERICA**

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Three years after the establishment of Toynbee Hall, a young American woman visited the house: Jane Addams, who later went on to become the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. What she saw inspired her to return home and tackle the social problems of Chicago. The resulting settlement Hull House, like Toynbee, quickly became a powerhouse of practical social reform. It was the centre on providing social and educational services, often for immigrants and refugees. The concept of settlement houses proved so appealing to the public, that they rapidly grew throughout Great Britain and North America. By 1920 there were 60 settlement houses in Britain, over 400 in the United States, and 12 in Canada. The majority of NHs in Canada developed in Montreal and Toronto.

## **THE ESSENCE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES**

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From 1800s until the mid-1900s, settlement houses staff resided in the same buildings in which neighbourhood residents participated in programs and activities. Living in close proximity, settlement staff regarded the people who used the settlement as “neighbours” rather than “clients”. Over time, the number of settlement workers who actually resided in the settlement house became limited. However, all local centres remained committed to providing neighbourhood services with as much local control and staff as possible. The shared sense of community still exists between settlement staff and the people who participate in settlement programs, and the tradition of referring to the latter as “neighbours” continues (unhny.org).

The Settlement Houses Movement pioneered the development of public recreation, day nurseries and adult education. The movement not only started what is now

known as Neighbourhood Houses but also founded the basis for the profession of social work. By 1925, settlement houses were one of the few organizations able to offer practice opportunities for social work students.

From the very early days in the history of settlement houses, the services, programs, and functions of the houses varied considerably according to local circumstance, individual character and religious and social orientation. To these days, NHs are shaped by local needs, characters, and structure of the community in which it is located. All the houses offer programs and services for children and youth, families and single adults, seniors and members of ethnic minorities. They are today a multi-purpose neighbourhood-based organizations that people can use and get involved in (Smith, 2002) and that provide services and activities designed to identify and reinforce the strengths of individuals, families, and communities. A list of common programs and services offered includes: immigrant settlement, referral and support services, literacy, children's after-school and summer camp programs, parent and child drop-ins, seniors services, language training (ESL), youth services, drop-ins for socially isolated adults, health promotion, community economic development, skills training and employment and recreation activities.

One of the founders of settlement houses in New York, Mary Simkhovitch, described neighbourhood houses as places that “bring about a new kind of community life...”; she noted that “it is in the community or neighbourhood that people seek and fight for solutions to their concrete, daily; local and immediate problems. Although the community remains the focus of the settlement's attention, it is through the personalized and direct involvement with the individual, in the context of the family – often throughout a lifetime – that the settlement fosters and supports the values of fellowship and mutual support” (unhny.org).

NHs are unique in the sense that they add the dimension of volunteerism, a mandate with a component of social action, a commitment to neighbourhood improvement, and community organization. They engage neighbours in the planning and design of their programs, and they provide assistance and space to individuals and groups in efforts to solve community problems. NHs have traditionally brought people together to build and strengthen their communities, to develop friendships and support networks,

and to access services and programs that are geared to enhancing their welfare and wellbeing.

NHs differ from Community Centres in their focus on social services as opposed to recreation; their non-institutionalized and fee-based program structuring; emphasis of volunteerism, and neighbours participation in program design.

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES IN VANCOUVER BC**

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Neighbourhood Houses in Vancouver trace their origins to a Women's and Children's Hospital constructed in 1891 at 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Pine Street. Three years later, the hospital was converted to an orphanage, and finally to Vancouver's first Neighbourhood House in 1938: the Alexandra NH. The decision to turn the Alexandra building into a NH was made based on the advice of the three of the first graduates of the first Canadian school of social work in the East. With plans already made to visit Edmonton for a review of Child Welfare, the three ladies extended their journey and came to Vancouver to assess Alexandra's social work potential. Being quite familiar with the settlement movement back east, they recommended that the house be used as a settlement to reach out to the families of the surrounding neighbourhood. During the first years of operation, the program of the first neighbourhood house in Vancouver was largely recreational. However, once the University of BC opened a school of social work in 1944, a series of social work students were assigned to the neighbourhood house for field work, and programs expanded to include social services as well as recreation activities.

Three years after the opening of the orphanage house, the Alexandra Community Activities Society, now known as the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of Greater Vancouver (ANH) was incorporated. With an incorporation number of 36, ANH is one of the oldest, continuously serving corporations in the Province of BC. Today, ANH is an umbrella organization comprised of seven NHs and outdoor centres in various communities throughout Greater Vancouver. These include Cedar Cottage, Crescent Beach Community Services, Frog Hollow, Gordon House, Kitsilano House, Mount Pleasant, Sasamat Outdoor Centre, and South Vancouver NH.

## **VOLUNTEERISM**

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Volunteers play an integral role in neighbourhood services. Each of the Association's Houses/Units has a Board of Management comprised of volunteers who live or work in the neighbourhood. The Association as a whole is directed by a Board of Governors made up of 15 members, one representative from each House/Unit Board of Management and other members from the community at large. Currently, there are over 7,000 volunteers who work with staff to provide the programs and services offered in each house.

## **FUNDING**

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Canadian Settlement Houses have a long history of being financially supported by United Way, historically known as Community Chest. ANH continues to receive an annual allocation from the United Way of the Lower Mainland, as well as from the City of Vancouver and funds for special projects from the federal and provincial governments. Fund raising events conducted by boards and members and fees charges on sliding scale augment these sources.

## REFERENCES

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