

A History of the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria

The Community Council had its origins in early 1936 and was created by agencies, which were delivering social services in the community. At the time, the Great Depression was in its seventh year and many agencies were concerned with ongoing poverty. This group called itself the Council of Social Agencies and had two main goals: the establishment of a Community Chest and the reduction of overlapping services. This was not a unique model, as there were many Community Chests and Councils of Social Agencies throughout North America. The Council of Social Agencies in Victoria started the first Community Chest fundraising drive in 1937 and worked closely with the Community Chest to distribute the funds raised to the organizations working with the poor. The Community Chest evolved into today's United Way of Greater Victoria.

In 1947 the name of the Council of Social Agencies was changed to the Community Welfare Council. The President of the Community Welfare Council said at the time of the name change, "Finally, The Community Welfare Council, as its name implies, belongs to every citizen of Greater Victoria. It is one of the organizations which knows no municipal boundaries, no parties and no denominations. If it receives the backing of all citizens whose community sense is keen, it can show that democracy is able to ensure that life shall be full and happy for everyone at every age. To thus ensure the welfare of all by the co-operation of all is the only, and the certain way, to end all fear of atomic warfare. Humanity can never afford to forget that peace is not the absence of war nor is it a state of apathy. The peace we desire might be better termed Harmony, and it ends the moment that minds cease to strive for it. But minds that work in harmony constantly increase the degree of harmony."

By 1949 the Community Welfare Council consisted of 45 agencies and groups, of which 19 received funding from the Community Chest. At the time the structure was that community organizations sent representatives to sit on the Community Welfare Council and the Council appointed 9 representatives to sit on the Community Chest Board. Twenty percent of the Council membership consisted of "citizens of proven ability and interest in social services work".

One of the major concerns of the Community Welfare Council throughout the 1940's and 1950's was housing, particularly the need for better housing for Seniors. In a 1950 report, the Community Welfare Council stated that, "Existing high rates of rent have increased the housing problem for the aged to the extent that many couples are not only forced to exist in one room but depend on the public bathroom for water for all housekeeping purposes, which bathroom serves from 3 to 12 persons. Such rooms may be heated or have an electric plate for cooking but often contain a stove to heat the room and for which coal and wood have to be carried up two flights of stairs – a heavy load for many aged people."

The Community Welfare Council undertook the 1950 housing survey with direction by Dr. Leonard Marsh, of the University of British Columbia, who had recently completed a similar survey for the Strathcona area of Vancouver. The Victoria survey was concerned mainly with the financial nature of the housing problem. The report stated: "in our survey we have made little of the physical inadequacies of housing in the Victoria district. We have not brought in the many cases where people are crowded together in unhealthy surroundings. The picture is bad enough without that. The chief concern is that people are being forced to pay rents that are too high, and as a consequence are not obtaining the essential food, clothing, and recreation."

The main recommendation of the report was that Victoria establish a Victoria Housing Authority, similar to the one in Vancouver, to build subsidized housing and to take over the administration of houses built by Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation after the war. It was not until 1982 that the Capital Regional District established a Housing Corporation.

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, the focus of the Community Welfare Council was to facilitate cooperation among agencies in the community, to eliminate overlapping of services, to create informed public opinion to effect social reforms and to promote cooperation rather than competition between agencies. During this time the name was changed to the Community Council of Greater Victoria.

In November 1973, the President of the Community Council, John Di Castri, told the Victoria Colonist that the Community Council was closing its doors after 37 years as a coordinating and planning agency for social services. He explained, "The council's board of directors and membership have decided the council is no longer needed now that the Capital Region Board is taking over responsibility for social service planning in the Victoria area." The then Executive Director of the Community Council, Garth Homer, was hired as the first social planner in the Capital Region District. Unfortunately he died suddenly and no replacement was ever hired to fill the vacancy.

Meanwhile, the Community Council found itself without funding, as the CRD had taken over responsibility for social planning. However, the Community Council had a dedicated Board, which met annually to keep the society alive, albeit dormant. In 1983, funding was acquired to advise the United Way and the Ministry of Human Resources on grants for family serving agencies. This led to the formation of the Association of Family Serving Agencies (AFSA). The Community Council also conducted research and issued reports on housing and rent controls. Gradually, the Community Council attracted contracts to coordinate AFSA, the Youth at Risk Network, Child and Youth Advocacy and to incubate new initiatives such as Bridges for Women and the Human Exchange. By the late 1980's, the Community Council had a full-time Executive Director, several other full time staff and a number of consultants.

In the early 1990's the name was changed to the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria reflecting a broader vision to serve local governments and funders as well as social service agencies. In 1993, provincial funding was cut for coordinating and social infrastructure services, and all staff were laid off. This required a new strategic plan and direction: the new focus became multi-sector collaboration and research to address critical community issues. In 1994 the Community Council held the Creative Chaos forum to initiate thinking around collaboration and research, and by 1999 we had initiated the Downtown CRUNCH, CR-Fair and the Housing Affordability Partnership (HAP). In 1999, the Quality of Life indicators provided the solid research which led to the formation of the Quality of Life Challenge.

Many of its initiatives, like the Christmas Bureau and Community Chest are now separate societies. Many of the problems that led to the creation of the Community Council are still with us. However, the Community Council continues to play an important role in bringing the community together to collaborate on social issues, undertake professional and impartial research into these issues and to communicate the results of its research and collaborative actions.

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