

Community Conversations: Improving Social Well-being & Social Sector Health



RESEARCH BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

The non-profit social sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary plays a significant role in the socio-economic well-being of residents, communities, and the region as a whole. Sustaining non-profits, however, has become increasingly challenging, and is demanding new ways of thinking and working. *The Exploring Characteristics and Capacity of the Non-Profit Social Sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region* research project was designed to explore organizational capacity, collaboration, and innovation within the region's non-profit social sector. This research is a critical first step towards enabling evidence-based decision-making by our regions' colleges, funders, and non-profits in efforts related to strengthening this important sector.

The Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute (RDI) conducted research on social non-profits across our region including a survey of 88 organizations which highlights the characteristics, capacity, and challenges these groups face. Follow up key informant interviews were conducted to explore social innovation, and a series of focus groups solicited ideas to strengthen the social sector and improve social well-being in our communities and region. This Research Brief

provides a summary of the results from the five focus groups conducted. Visit the [non-profit social sector research page](#)¹ for other research results and information related to this project.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was developed and implemented in consultation with the RDI's Social Research Advisory Committee, a group of representatives from the social sector across the Columbia Basin-Boundary region.

Following the survey of social non-profits in spring/summer 2015, advisory committee members reviewed survey results. The advisory committee stressed the importance of sharing survey results with the region, and strongly suggested that RDI provide an opportunity for social non-profits and other community development organizations to discuss the research findings and explore some critical questions related to improving social well-being and the health of the social sector.

RDI hosted five social sector workshops and focus groups in the spring of 2016. Each workshop was structured with the same format, including participant introductions, background information on the RDI's applied research project, a presentation

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP LOCATION, DATE & PARTICIPATION

Focus Group Location	Date	No. of Participants	No. of Organizations Represented	Participants' Home Communities
Trail	April 7, 2016	15	10	Trail, Castlegar, Rossland, Nelson
Cranbrook	April 26, 2016	30	25	Cranbrook, Brisco, Golden, Invermere, Fernie, Creston
Castlegar	May 2, 2016	19	18	Castlegar, Silverton, Nelson, Kaslo, Nakusp, Salmo
Revelstoke	May 25, 2016	17	13	Revelstoke, Golden, Nakusp
Valemount	May 26, 2016	19	9	Valemount, McBride, Dunster
		100	75	

of survey results, an overview of the social determinants of health and the Columbia Basin Trust’s strategic goals related to social well-being, and a demonstration of the social indicators monitored through the RDI’s State of the Basin Initiative.

The emphasis of the workshop was the focus group dialogue. A World Café facilitated process was followed, where participants rotated through three tables where small group discussion occurred on three central questions:

1. What is working well right now in the social sector?
2. What are some new ideas to strengthen the social sector?
3. How can your community work together to improve social well-being?

Participants were encouraged to intermingle with each table rotation, with 12 – 15 minutes of discussion per round. Table hosts facilitated dialogue and took notes on flipchart paper throughout the three rounds of discussion, allowing participants to share new ideas as well as build on comments previously noted. Each table host reported back to the entire group at the end. The report back was audio recorded, and notes taken on flipcharts were typed into a word document and shared with participants within one week of each focus group. Data analysis employed grounded theory to identify common themes across findings from all five focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

As shown in **Table 1**, 100 people participated in the focus groups, representing 75 different organizations, coming from at least 18 different communities. Organizations ranged from provincial and regional societies to community based social service agencies, as well as provincial, local, and aboriginal government representatives, staff from Interior Health, school districts, public libraries, Columbia Basin Trust, and community foundations.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

WHAT IS WORKING WELL RIGHT NOW IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR?

Focus group participants were asked to discuss what is currently working well right now in the social sector, in their community and/or region. Participants were asked to outline what they were currently doing and highlight the successes achieved. Based on the discussions at all five focus group sessions, the following themes emerged with examples shared.

INNOVATION

Innovation was highlighted at three of the focus group sessions as an important aspect of what is working well in the social sector in our region. As noted in the Cranbrook workshop, there is “creative thinking” happening with examples of social enterprise mentioned, and in Revelstoke there is “creativity in program delivery” and “combining

programs as well as administrative structure". There were several remarks at the Castlegar session noting there are "lots of new initiatives to address emerging issues/needs" with the Kootenay Boundary Community Services Co-operative as an example. It was stated that in the West Kootenay people have "new ways of looking at old problems", and there are several "new initiatives that maintain local flavour and priorities". There is also a recognition to address issues from a systemic approach, with poverty being a key example. With an increased knowledge of best practices and improved use of technology, there is an enthusiasm for innovation.

RESILIENCE

The resilience of the sector was another key theme that emerged when discussing what is working well. "Longevity" was mentioned at two sessions, "despite the many challenges" the sector faces. In Trail, it was noted that the sector is "retaining staff effectively despite wages and lack of benefits". In Revelstoke, it was highlighted that "having funding for coordinators is key", such as the Social Development Coordinator, Early Years Coordination, and the youth liaison, which all create "increased capacity and ability to get things done". In Valemount, participants noted the many social service assets that contribute to the vitality of the sector, including "our health care, medical clinic, and emergency services [all] working well". As a small rural and remote community, having doctors who have made Valemount their home contributes to the resilience of the sector as a whole, working together towards the social well-being of the community.

RESPONSIVENESS TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

As noted in Trail, and typical of each community, there is a "mosaic of services" offered by the social sector. This "diversity of organizations" and "lots of groups covering many bases" makes the sector effective. Groups are "serving a lot of people" remarked one participant in Cranbrook, and at the Castlegar session, it was noted that in the West Kootenay and Beaver Valley there has been a great response to seniors' needs in particular. "Men's counseling" was another service highlighted in Cranbrook. Participants in Revelstoke commented on the "increased ability to recognize needs and be more progressive", with the example of the

LGBTQ community feeling more safe to come out. In Valemount, what is working well is that there are "services for all ages and different needs", and local establishments such as the local brewery, bike park, and legion are places where the community comes together helping to "create connections with a wide demographic". In Rossland, the sector is engaging youth. Revelstoke's initiatives are creating opportunities for youth "to contribute and participate from a younger age". In the West Kootenay, there are "regional initiatives specifically designed to target high-need situations", with the SKY (Safe Kids and Youth) Coordinated Response as an example. The social sector across the region is responding to community needs, creating and adapting programs for a range of audiences and across a variety of services. When a group cannot offer a particular service, they "refer people to services" available elsewhere.



NETWORKING

Another aspect of what is working well is that groups are networking. While some communities said it could be better, there are some strong relationships, where people are "learning from each other", and in the West Kootenay in particular, there is an "openness to working together" and a "cross pollination across sectors, especially with volunteers". In Revelstoke, the "social development committee is keeping people informed and connected, which ripples out to organizations". The interagency meetings that occur in the West Kootenay are an important aspect of networking

and relationship building. In Castlegar, there are four interagency meetings per year with about 50 people on the registration list. Revelstoke is fortunate to have significant involvement of the school district, as well as the "RCMP and other emergency services at the table, sharing knowledge". It was noted in Revelstoke, that there is a "decrease in isolation of the social sector itself within the community". Organizations are reaching out for support, which "generates collaboration and information sharing across sectors". In Cranbrook it was recognized that "shared values" and "commonalities" form a strong foundation for networking, coordination, and collaboration.

COORDINATION & COLLABORATION

Coordination and collaboration within the sector were discussed at all five focus groups. In the Greater Trail area a participant noted, "there is good coordination, such as we don't deliver similar services on the same day/time". Participants in Cranbrook noted the relationship with Interior Health which has created "better coordination and involvement at the community level". "Local and regional planning tables" such as the Early Years tables, and "regional conferences related to key issues/populations" were other examples of coordination within and across the region. Having funding for coordinator positions was identified as essential for this level of coordination to be possible.

Other examples of coordination were "sub-contracting of services" with a "commitment to local service delivery where possible versus bringing in the 'big' players from larger centres". Multi-agency planning successes in Greater Trail and the West Kootenay were highlighted. During the Castlegar workshop it was noted that "walls are coming down between organizations, and a more collaborative working environment [has emerged] which is decreasing competition". "Administrators of large family service agencies are working well together" and people are seeing that "municipalities and area directors [are] collaborating more".

The importance of "collaboration across disciplines" was emphasized, with social well-being by nature being cross sectoral. At the Revelstoke workshop it was noted that there is "collaboration with the sector and other sectors" such as Child & Youth Mental Health & Substance Use Collaborative

Local Action Team (CMHSU LAT) and the Golden Co-op that is forming. There is a "proliferation of cooperatives" as noted at the Castlegar focus group. In Cranbrook, it seemed that while there is a "good start" on "collaboration and team work" it "depends on the situation, community, and need", but that there is a "value in aligning more" and "collaborating more". "Cranbrook Clicks" was noted more than once as a positive example of coordination that could be expanded to the East Kootenay and be a template for other areas.

Other examples of collaboration shared were the neighborhood learning centre in Revelstoke, and the "childhood and youth collaborative" and recreation groups working together in Valemount. As noted in Revelstoke, there is "strength in numbers with small groups working together". While collaboration is challenging, there is fortunately some "money being channeled into collaboration itself".

EFFECTIVE USE OF RESOURCES

Closely related to coordination and collaboration was another theme related to the effective use and the sharing resources. In Cranbrook, groups are sharing resources with a co-location hosted by the Community Connections Society while groups typically "don't share funding resources" there was an idea that they "could share a fund developer". It was noted in Cranbrook, as well as in Trail, that groups are "doing a lot with little funding" and "doing more for less". "Imagine what we could do with more funding" said one participant. In the West Kootenay, groups are "sharing tools and resources across agencies across the region" and as in the East Kootenay, are also sharing training. In Revelstoke, having a coordinator helps ensure effective use of resources across agencies as they take a more coordinated approach.

COMMUNICATIONS

A pre-requisite to coordination is communications, which emerged as a theme related to what is currently working well in the sector.

Communications also includes “information sharing amongst agencies” and “passing on info, ideas and contacts”, but also included the “increasing use of social media”. Social media is being used for “dissemination of information, to educate [the] public, and promote programs and services”, and is used as a tool for “recruiting members and volunteers”. Communications amongst organizations and across the wider community are important to the effectiveness of the sector. At the Castlegar session, it was noted that “youth are encouraged to speak out and are actually being heard”. “Technology is a tool” that allows for “increased capacity to share information”. Participants discussed using Facebook as an example to support each other and cross promote, and that this can allow for “universal access beyond income levels”. Communication is critical for the sector to be better understood and for people to understand the benefits of the social services sector to the community.



COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Communication within the community is an important aspect of creating “community buy in and support”. Community support emerged as an aspect of what is working well right now for the sector. The Columbia Basin Trust and their support

was noted several times, as well as the increasing number of community foundations. The support of the RDI was also recognized for helping the sector to “grow more with new info”. In Cranbrook, participants commented on the discounts that businesses offer to non-profits, and the retail and corporate sponsorship, as well as “lots of in-kind support” as important aspects of community support for the sector. In Trail, the “engaged and supportive media” was remarked upon. In both the East and West Kootenay, support from provincial to national and international organizations is creating benefit, and the “social sector profile is growing”. Groups in the West Kootenay are also noticing an “increased connection and commitment with local government”. In Revelstoke, the School District is notable, “making time for involvement in critical matters, having training on pro-D days [and] learning together”. RCMP and other emergency services are also involved and “giving voice” to the social issues in the community. A focus group participant in Valemount noted that as a small town, “we know one another and help one another”, while another mentioned the local events like the Wednesday potluck in the park with parents and kids that helps to build community and community support. Participants in Valemount also noted that “non-profits are filling a lot of the voids – and employ a lot of people in our community” which “adds to the economic development of the community” and furthers the recognition of the need and support of the sector.

DEDICATED & CARING PEOPLE

Another major theme that surfaced from all five focus groups is the dedicated and caring people that work and volunteer in the social sector. In Cranbrook and area, they have “dedicated staff” who are “client/person centered”. In Trail, it was the “dedicated volunteers” that were remarked upon, as well as in Valemount where there is a “strong core of volunteers that keep showing up [with] lots of talent and expertise”. The people engaged in the sector are “passionate about who they serve and what they do”. Castlegar participants noted that the “volunteerism is impressive and growing, [becoming] a cultural norm”. These people are “conscientiousness about doing a good job”, and are highly committed, often doing an “enormous amount of work off the side of the desk because [they] care”.



STRONG LEADERSHIP

Building on the dedicated, caring, and committed people, “strong leadership” was also noted at four of the five sessions. In the West Kootenay it was noted that the “leadership is working well” and that “youth [are] being mentored by those with experience”. A participant at the Valemount focus group noted that there is an “exceptional ED at the Robson Valley Support Services Society” which fosters a strong organization and connectedly, a stronger sector in the area.

WHAT ARE SOME NEW IDEAS TO STRENGTHEN THE SOCIAL SECTOR?

The second question focus group participants were asked to discuss was about new ideas to strengthen the social sector. They were asked to consider new approaches and innovations that could be made. The following themes emerged.

COMMUNICATE & MEET REGULARLY

The importance of regular communication and meetings of social sector representatives was discussed at all five focus groups. We need “better communication amongst service areas” and “better communication regarding issues with family counselling and succession planning” were two comments at the Cranbrook session. In Valemount, the importance of sharing knowledge and ideas was highlighted, as well as “improv[ing] communication across groups”. Similarly, at the Castlegar workshop, participants remarked on the need for “more opportunities to network, share

what each other does, and bring down barriers”, as well as a “more advanced use of technology for networking”.

There were ideas of going to organizations’ Annual General Meetings and a “speed dating” event as ways to stay apprised of each other’s work. In Cranbrook, it was suggested that “a community of practice” be created. Other ideas from Castlegar and Trail included creating a cross sectoral council that would include “municipalities, social sector groups, businesses, vulnerable people” and others to “increase communications and build relations”. It was noted that the Ministry of Child and Family Development used to fund regular networking meetings in the past, and this was very useful and could be restored, with the suggestion that the “Columbia Basin Trust play a role in funding an organization to take the lead and host”. In Trail it was stated that interagency meetings should be “action oriented”. “We need to start doing together”. Comments in Valemount included the importance of meetings to help share mandates and goals and to “look for alignment”, but there was also caution about having too many meetings and that meetings need to be accessible, with good process, such as “good facilitation, minutes, and openness to new ideas”, so that people will come.

Other ideas to bring groups together included an “Executive Director camp”, as well as a gathering for board of directors so people can “share knowledge, experiences, and success stories”. A “social sector conference” was suggested at both the Castlegar and Cranbrook workshops as an event to connect groups from across the region, and which could include “speakers from outside the region to share their ideas”.

BE INCLUSIVE

Building on the theme of regular communications and meetings, is the notion that the sector needs to “be inclusive” by involving “people and groups from [the] broad community”. As stated in Revelstoke, the sector should “connect with people who are not in a sector, such as builders, people with lived experience, business people, seasonal residents, the French language community, and with people outside the community”. Similarly, in Trail, participants discussed bringing “vulnerable people into the collaborative environment” to “include them in community conversations

and communications... [because it] can have a big impact". An idea to strengthen the sector is to "draw new people into the sector" from a cross section of the community. In Revelstoke, participants discussed being "inclusive by creating comfortable spaces, having wider hours of service, and help[ing] with transportation for clients, or delivery service".

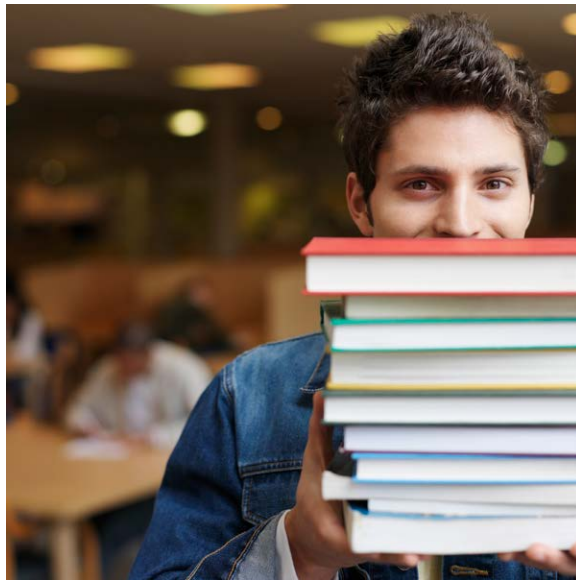
COLLABORATE & PARTNER

Collaboration as a way to strengthen the sector was a theme that emerged from all five focus groups. As stated in Revelstoke, the sector needs to "build a culture of collaboration" and "build a shared vision, across sectors, with an inclusive approach". Similarly, in Castlegar, it was noted that the sector should "work together more" and "create a better understanding of [the] benefits of collaboration and reduce [the] sense of competition". In both Revelstoke and Cranbrook, it was suggested that there may be "too many groups, too many committees", and that the sector needs to "streamline", which may mean creating "opportunities for agencies to amalgamate". There were suggestions of creating co-operatives, such as a child care co-op, as well as fostering partnerships with seniors' homes, recreation centres, local government, school districts, labour groups, libraries and the business community. As one participant noted, these "need to be value based partnerships" where both partners see the value and benefit. Libraries, for example, were noted as a "safe neutral space to offer services, [and] are a centre for most communities, and there is an interest to work more closely with social sector organizations". Likewise, a "win-win" could be achieved with school districts and social service agencies "sharing resources and space". The business community was highlighted because of their close connection to social issues, and in Valemount, it was suggested there could be "more initiatives related to economic development opportunities".

FOCUS

While collaboration was highlighted as a way to strengthen the sector, another theme was focus. In Trail, "poverty reduction" was suggested as a "focal issue that brings people together". In Castlegar, there was discussion of a "project based table" where groups would "have a focus and submit grant

applications together with that focus" in mind. The Cranbrook discussion also included several ideas such as a "social planning table with a strategy and focus, leading to action", as well as a creating "a hub focused on an issue... [such as a] multi sectoral group focused on food security". A Valemount participant suggested the creation of "a community theatre as a shared space [that would] contribute to building a sense of belonging". In Revelstoke, it was suggested that the sector "hire coordinators focused on issues". With an array of services and needs related to social well-being, "regional collaboration with a focus" was a strong suggestion for strengthening the social sector.



EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY

Each focus group included discussion about how the community needs to better understand the sector and its importance, which translated into a suggestion that the sector "educate the public" and to "educate local government". As noted in Cranbrook, "we need an attitudinal change" and "need to help people understand the importance and value of the sector". "We need to build the case of why it's so important to fund and support social services – Why invest? What's the return?". Similar comments were shared in Valemount and Revelstoke in relation to educating the community "about the sector, the services and impact" and "pro[ving] the importance and impact of the sector... so [the community] understand[s] what the sector does". Ideas were to host a community

forum, fun events, and to ensure “coordination of events” within the community. Communications strategies were also discussed with ideas such as “a column in the newspaper on what non-profits are doing”, “create a digital bulletin board”, and “use more social media, such as collaborative messaging and sharing posts with each other to increase reach”.



ENGAGE VOLUNTEERS

Connected to educating the community, another theme that emerged was to engage volunteers in new ways. It was suggested that the sector needs to “mentor and educate our volunteers”, with one idea being to “engage seniors more” by creating experiences for them, [such as] to help other seniors – a peer support program”. Another idea was to “make the sector relevant to young people [by] find[ing] creative ways to reach young people, through schools, work experience, [and to] listen to what they are interested in, [and] be flexible”. It was noted at the Trail focus group that Rossland has “some great programs that are creative and fun” and that “engage youth through meaningful experiences”. A Valemount participant suggested they restore the “community service experiences for children and youth that existed” before, and another proposed that the sector “engage clients in our organizations more as volunteers [which would] break down the ‘us’ versus ‘them’”. In Revelstoke a “volunteer fair” was suggested, that could be held “once per year and when seasonal residents can participate”. At the Castlegar session,

it was recommended that the sector “coordinate volunteers more such as with a Volunteer Centre”. With volunteers being a foundation of many groups, and with “a concern of volunteer burn-out” as “many people volunteer on multiple boards”, there were several creative ideas for how to engage the community in the work of the social sector, as well as “succession planning” for the volunteers who need to move on.

SHARE RESOURCES & STAFF

Another theme related to strengthening the sector is to share resources and staff. “Shared payroll systems and HR systems” were suggested in Cranbrook, as well as a possible group purchase of a “shared client management system”. At both the Cranbrook and Trail focus groups it was suggested that a “hub” or “portal” be created “for sharing resources and information to ensure no duplication” and to share “experiences and lessons learned”. A “hub” could also be a physical space that is shared by multiple groups, as was recommended in Valemount. In Revelstoke it was noted that sharing resources, such as a building space and administrative staff “makes it more client friendly”. Conducting an inventory and “asset mapping of agencies to find efficiencies and share resources” was suggested, so that the skills, resources and resource needs could be identified.

Sharing and combining training, as well as combining part-time jobs across agencies were other ideas. In both Cranbrook and Revelstoke, the importance of a coordinator or ‘navigator’ to support the social sector network was highlighted. At the Castlegar focus group, there were also suggestions related to operations, including to “improve technology and operational systems to increase efficiency and improve operations”, as well as a more general idea to “explore opportunities for improvements on [the] delivery model”.

IMPROVE FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

A final theme that emerged and was discussed at all five focus groups is the need to improve financial support to strengthen the sector. As noted in Revelstoke, the sector should “explore new ways to fund the sector” and not “be afraid to think radically [and try some] innovative fundraising campaigns”. Valemount participants suggested “more local fundraising campaigns” and that groups should “share fundraising ideas across communities”. In Trail, there was discussion about “creat[ing] experiences for donors with social organizations to engage them in [the] work”. The need for funders to review their models was discussed at the Castlegar session, with a note that funders “say they want collaboration yet the processes are all competitive”, with one participant adding that “some groups don’t even apply to CBT anymore because they think it’s too competitive”. There was a suggestion of a “funders table [to] get together to discuss projects and initiatives”. At three of the sessions it was emphasized the sector needs to “advocate for better funding models” including to “lobby government for better than adequate funding”, as well as “consider new messages” in the targeted advocacy work. In both the Castlegar and Cranbrook workshops, it was suggested that an “economic impact study of the social sector” be conducted which would help to advocate for better resourcing.

HOW CAN YOUR COMMUNITY WORK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE SOCIAL WELL-BEING?

The third question that focus group participants were asked to discuss is how their community can work together to improve social well-being. Participants were asked to consider how the community could work across sectors and amongst shareholders, and to consider top community priorities to ensure strong social well-being. The following themes emerged from the five focus group discussions.

INCREASE COMMUNICATIONS & BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Increasing communications and building relationships was a major theme related to improving community social well-being. As noted in Cranbrook, “we need a way of communicating amongst organizations”, and similarly, at the



Castlegar session, “better communication between organizations” was identified. It was also noted in Trail also noted that “there is a communication gap between sectors”, and that the community should “network and get to know each other”, both within the social sector and across sectors. An increase in communication will help organizations share information and “raise awareness about social well-being”.

There was a sentiment in both Valemount and Trail that there needs to be an “increase [in] public education and awareness of social issues”. Increasing the “use of technology” and creating “a community calendar for all groups to access” were ideas offered, as well as “building technology assets, such as video and tele-conferencing capabilities” to help with communications.

The “need [for] open dialogue” was discussed in Revelstoke, including being able to “meet to understand each other’s work”. We “need to create new connections in the network”, “draw in unexpected people and partners”, and “create new ways for people to join the conversation”. Relationship building was identified as a crucial step in being able to work together on such complex community wide issues. We “need to build relationships and trust – then it snowballs and everything gets a bit easier” said one participant. The notion of being inclusive emerged again, and it was suggested that “Welcome Wagon” be formed to greet new arrivals to familiarize them with the

community. “Parties”, “potlucks”, and “forums for sharing” were other ideas to foster relationship building. The idea of interagency meetings arose again, and the need to develop “healthy partnerships”. The idea of “Table Conversations” was suggested at the Cranbrook session, with the intention of determining how groups can best work together, leveraging their unique skills and assets.



TAKE A MULTI-SECTORAL & INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH

Improving social well-being depends on people working across sectors and ages. “Social well-being includes everyone” said one participant in Cranbrook, and as noted in Trail, “do[es] not depend 100% on [the] social sector to solve complex issues”. Improving social well-being requires a “broad spectrum of thinking” with the “full community”. In Revelstoke, it was suggested that people “need to stop thinking of sectors as independent”, and there needs to be “more collaboration”, as noted in Valemount. Bringing the “diverse parties to the table together” and “encouraging collaboration” was recommended at the Cranbrook focus group. In Castlegar, there was discussion of exploring new partnerships, such as with libraries and family physicians. It was also noted that the social sector has not “tapped into or recognized [the] contributions of [the] business sector”. “We need to engage businesses beyond making donations” and “educate the community about the contributions that businesses make to social well-being”.

While a cross sectoral approach was underscored, an intergenerational approach was also discussed at four of the five focus groups. “Intergenerational projects”, “cross generational groups could be working together”, and “create intergenerational opportunities” were three of the comments, with an example of seniors working with junior volunteers. Trail commented on “engaging youth around social issues, such as mental health and violence”, and in Valemount one participant, stressed the importance of including youth, particularly because “they have a lot of energy” that could be contributed.

CREATE A VISION & PLAN

Another theme that developed relating to improving social well-being is to create a community vision accompanied with a plan. As stated in Revelstoke, we need to “create a vision for a smart and caring community”. Creating a vision and plan involves “identify[ing] priorities as a community”, as was discussed at four of the five focus groups. “Communities [should] come together to choose a focus/priority [and] come up with a plan of what to work together on”. As noted in Valemount, “community groups, businesses, [the regional district], and Village all need the same overall goal”. A Castlegar focus group participant commented that “we need to move away from working in our silos”, again stressing the importance of increased communication and relationship building. As noted in Cranbrook, groups need to “meet, network, build relationships, identify priorities together, [and then] strategically plan for the community”.

Social planning was recommended at four of the five workshops, including establishing a “social planning council” with broad and diverse representation, with “all sectors on board to address common goals”. “Transparency” and “avoid[ing] duplication of services” were highlighted as part of the planning process, as well as “understanding gaps” in services and supports, and identifying “barriers and limitations”. One participant in Castlegar suggested “re-examining the boundaries of services”. A social planning council can “collaborate, take action, [and] advocate”, “sharing ownership of the issues, actions, and successes”.

NEED LEADERSHIP & BETTER RESOURCING

Creating a vision and planning for improved social well-being requires leadership and resources. “It is a challenge of resources (coordination, capacity, action)” said a Revelstoke focus group participant. In Cranbrook, it was noted that the “scarcity of resources is a real challenge”, with competition between groups, particularly for contracts. We “need to understand our collective assets” and it “must be a bottom up approach” were further comments. At the Castlegar session, it was noted that “we must bring the whole community together – but must have a vehicle (purpose), mechanism (way of communicating), and leadership (that is resourced).”

There were suggestions of who could take leadership, such as a non-profit, Chamber of Commerce, or local government, but it was clear that “someone has to take the lead and make it a priority”. In Revelstoke it was suggested to “leverage the funded role of the social development coordinator”, and in Cranbrook participants felt strongly about “creat[ing] a ‘navigator’ position to coordinate the sector and social planning”. Resources are needed for coordination, however as one participant articulated, “we need to all put some skin in the game”. It was suggested that groups could “explore economies of scale”, such as pooling together on food purchases, as well as “increase capacity overall” through shared training and messaging, for example. A participant in Revelstoke remarked, that no matter how you approach it, “we have an ethical obligation to support residents and well-being”.

CREATE A COMMUNITY HUB

A final theme that emerged from four of the five focus groups was the idea of creating a community hub. “Create a hub space” was suggested in Valemount, as well as Castlegar where “a hub model” could be an “administrative umbrella”, “making better use of resources by exploring possible ways to merge groups and programs”. As remarked in Revelstoke, “there is a lot to be said for co-location”, not only because of the efficiencies and opportunities for collaboration by the delivery partners, but as a great way to serve clients, creating a “one stop shop” by “bringing groups under one roof”. There are models of co-location in Cranbrook, and there were suggestions of other opportunities to extend beyond the social service agencies, to include economic development organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Community Futures. Community hubs can be broadly inclusive, crossing government, public and private sectors, where multiple services are offered in a single location, sometimes virtually, with the aim of serving multiple needs.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

1. <http://www.cbrdi.ca/research-areas/applied-research/non-profit-social-sector/>

The Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute, at Selkirk College, is a regional research centre with a mandate to support informed decision-making by Columbia Basin-Boundary communities through the provision of information, applied research and related outreach and extension support.