Neighbourhood associations build strong connections for Cambridge residents

“We all want to see the community connect and thrive.”

Residents of Cambridge know how important neighbourhood associations are for building community, but few realize just how connected those organizations are to each other.

Cambridge Neighbourhood Organizations (CNO) is a collaborative network of independent neighbourhood associations in the city that have been working together for more than 25 years. They provide mutual support, share information and resources and act as a collective voice for neighbourhood concerns. It’s an innovative group of staff and volunteers who care deeply about serving the needs of Cambridge residents.

“Over the past few years, we have shifted to a strategic community development model,” says Emily Jaarsma, executive director of Greenway-Chaplin Community Centre, “We really focus on creating community-wide impact by engaging broadly to understand residents’ needs and perspectives, and involving them directly in finding solutions and addressing issues.”

One way that neighbourhood organizations fulfill a community need is by providing safe and affordable programming for children and youth. In 2021, CNO members safely connected with more than 3,000 youth while adhering to COVID-19 protocols, through in-person camps, virtual programs, curbside kits, pop-up playgrounds, after school clubs, neighbourhood walks and much more. Camps also connected 142 youth with opportunities to volunteer and develop leadership skills while giving back to their community. Adapting to online and outdoor programs was particularly important for helping older youth stay connected during a challenging year.
Community is the “how and why” of CNO’s work. Neighbourhood organizations are responding at a grassroots community level to create strong, responsive and connected communities. By meeting weekly, CNO’s members are able to reduce duplication and draw on the expertise and experience of colleagues more effectively than they could on their own. Over the years, membership has grown and changed along with the city. Currently, there are eight member agencies located throughout Cambridge. Each is an independent not-for-profit organization with its own board of directors -- and every organization is unique, just like the neighbourhood it serves.

“Our uniqueness is something to be celebrated,” says Samantha Esmeralda, executive director of the Alison Neighbourhood Community Centre, “By working together, we create a web of connection and we can be nimble, scaling our approaches to create something that is tailored to what each neighbourhood needs.”

“We are here to serve the community,” echoes Jaarsma, “Everyone is welcome.”

The City of Cambridge provides annual core operating funding to neighbourhood associations, which the organizations are then able to leverage to generate other sources of funding. Jaarsma explains that the City’s support is essential for the neighbourhood organizations’ success, because other funders often require applicants to show that they have stable and sustainable funding in order to receive grants. The connection to City staff is also important, particularly as the neighbourhood groups worked to navigate policy changes, regulations and access to space during the pandemic.

Working at the grassroots level, neighbourhood associations aren’t just connected to each other – they’re connected with other community resources, too. “Anyone can come to us with a problem or an idea,” Esmeralda says, “And we will walk alongside that person to help make sure their needs are met, to address their concerns, or to help them mobilize their ideas.”

Over the past year, this means things like partnering with other agencies to coordinate Mobile Food Market locations, provide backpacks and school supplies to those who needed them, plant community gardens, support access to technology, and give 97 free haircuts to youth heading back to school last fall. Cambridge’s neighbourhood organizations are always working to connect residents with each other and with the resources they need.

“The CNO shares a common goal,” says Esmeralda. “We all want to see the community connect and thrive.”