

Under One Umbrella Speak

City workshop for community based solutions to connecting with the homeless

Plaza 500 - July 8th, 2009

Hello everyone, welcome and thank you for attending this workshop on organizing community activities for the homeless. My name is Damian Murphy and I will be speaking today on behalf of the Under One Umbrella Society, a grassroots group of volunteer community organizers and activists in the Grandview Woodland neighbourhood in East Vancouver.

You may have heard about our work previously as the Grandview Woodlands Drug and Alcohol Coalition but I am very happy to announce here publicly for the first time that we have recently changed our name to the Under One Umbrella Society. The group felt that the new name better reflects the accessibility and inclusiveness we promote as well as being more recognizable as the group responsible for the Under One Umbrella homeless connect event we have organized for the last couple of years.

As I speak today a slide show will be showing photographs from the first Under One Umbrella held at the end of Homelessness Action Week in October 2007 and from our most recent event held in January 2009. There are also images from our annual planning days and other community gatherings and celebrations we have held over the past five or six years.

The idea of Under One Umbrella was modeled after the Homeless Connect events that were being organized in San Francisco around the same time several years ago. These events were unlike traditional service fairs in that people attending were not just given referral information and pamphlets that let them know about services that were available in the city but were more hands-on direct action oriented events where people could receive ID, get placed in housing or employment or even registered to receive income assistance on the spot. The services were offered right then and there.

In the same way our neighbourhood coalition envisioned Under One Umbrella as a one stop service fair for people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness in our community. The event was planned around food and fun with the goal of providing direct help to those that needed it the most.

The first Under One Umbrella was held in October 2007. That year we also saw the first regional HAW events taking place and we timed our event for the end of the week long region wide efforts.

Under One Umbrella 2007 received some funding from Coastal Health, the City and our partners in the social services. In all we had less than five thousand dollars to work with. The volunteers who make up the Coalition's membership provided the rest of the needed resources through sweat equity.

In the summer before the event, volunteers from the Coalition went out to Grandview Park to conduct some public outreach. We timed our outreach for the same day as the chili wagon where one evening every week some dedicated members of the community go out to the park and serve chili to the homeless who gather there. Our volunteer crew brought ice cream and clipboards. We spoke with

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people in the park about our planned event and asked them what they would like to see there. You see we knew we didn't have all the answers and wanted to hear first-hand what aspects of this kind of fair would be considered most important to those that would likely be attending.

Some of the responses were unsurprising. Food was at the top of the list, followed by housing and employment. Medical services for both physical and mental illnesses were also high on the list of things people would like to see at such a fair.

After this outreach effort and with the help of our ever dedicated Community Developer a meeting was arranged among various service providers and other social service agencies operating in the community.

The goal was to let them know of our planned event, get them to sign on early and help us to make it a success. The meeting was attended by people from Coastal Health, area mental health teams, staff from community policing centres, business improvement association representatives, addictions services and workers from local drop ins where the homeless often go for respite.

This meeting proved invaluable in securing the cooperation of all these groups way before the planned date of Under One Umbrella and laid the groundwork for the event's initial success.

The outreach work that we had undertaken that summer and the relationships the Coalition had nurtured with members of marginalized groups (the homeless, the addicted, the mentally ill) this network created by the previous years' work became the guiding force for all of our planning.

A group from the local Latin American community kitchen volunteered to do all the cooking and provided a fabulous meal for attendees at our inaugural event. The Aboriginal Friendship Centre, the venue for our first Under One Umbrella allowed us the use of their facilities at a deeply discounted rate. And a number of local businesses provided donations for giveaways and draw prizes.

Unfortunately, for all our planning we couldn't do much about the weather and it was a typical Saturday in October, Vancouver downpour.

If you had come to the first Under One Umbrella you would have seen as you approached the Friendship Centre through the driving rain a tented area where volunteer vets from the SPCA examined and treated our guests' animal companions and gave away bags and bags of pet food donated from the City Pound.

You would have seen an area where shopping carts were valet parked for the day and people's backpacks and other stuff was kept safe and secure. Bicycle and cart repairs were performed by volunteer bike mechanics on hand throughout the event.

As you entered the centre you would have seen the gymnasium crowded with people and tables for eating in the centre of the space with the periphery lined with tables from local social service agencies.

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Tenants rights groups and housing advocates shared the space with community policing representatives, addictions services and support groups, community service groups and mental health workers.

A stage area was set up at one end where the Traditional Aboriginal Grandmothers dance group performed an opening ceremony and a local guitarist strummed away in the afternoon.

In the Chief Simon Bakker room, an octagonal shaped room at the heart of the centre, you would have seen the local nurse from the Kettle Clinic giving foot soaks and wound care to tired and sore feet and the street nurses distributing condoms and talking to people about health.

And then, in total contrast with the hustle and bustle of the main floor, if you went downstairs you would have found a quiet room where practitioners of holistic medicine gave guests massage, acupuncture and other healing treatments to those with chronic pain.

Down the hall, showers were available throughout the day and dry socks and underwear distributed.

All in all, the event was staffed by about twenty or so social service agencies and other community groups, about fifty volunteers and was attended by about three hundred people.

During the day survey takers distributed basic hygiene kits and asked basic questions of our guests in exchange for giveaways like rain ponchos and other outdoor gear. Of the data that was analyzed many positive comments were recorded about the usefulness of the services offered and the safe, comfortable, friendly and inclusive environment that the organizers created.

One overarching theme emerged that the people who came were very satisfied with the concept and wanted to see it happen again.

The Coalition was also happy with the success of the event and immediately started planning for a second one the following year.

There was much that we learned from holding the first Under One Umbrella.

From developing better logistical details to increasing the level of services provided we knew we could improve.

Above all we learned the importance of advance planning and the inclusion of peers (and by peers I mean including in the organizational process the very same people we hoped to help). Some of the organizations that were instrumental in connecting us with these peers includes the Crossroads Project (run out of the Calvary Baptist Church, Peer2Peer (an outreach and support group of current and former drug users) and the Kettle Friendship Society (a drop in centre and housing provider for mental health consumers).

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We learned a lot about not just recruiting a large number of volunteers but the importance of providing those who give their time meaningful roles.

We also realized that if we wanted to make the next event even better we would need to do more fundraising.

The second UOU was planned for January 2009. We were thinking of holding Under One Umbrella during HAW again but the January date gave us more time for planning and we recognized the importance of holding this service fair in the winter months when life on the streets can be at its toughest.

This time around the City gave us \$5,000.00 to hire a Coordinator to work for three months prior to the event date. I was fortunate enough to be the successful candidate for the job and learned so much in the process that I am very grateful for.

Some funds also became available through the metro Vancouver Homelessness Secretariat to get us started.

The plans for the second UOU included a wider scope of the services we wanted to offer, the food we would serve and numbers of people we wanted to reach.

We broke down our planning activities into a few distinct areas;

Outreach- getting the word out to people on the streets that the event was happening

Service Providers- to offer even more services

Fundraising- finding the money so it could happen

Volunteers- the people that would be making it happen

I'd like to pause for a moment here in the story to acknowledge again that all of the work I have described to you so far was achieved in the voluntary free time of the Coalition's membership. Our group operates without core funding of any kind and we feel this really makes us a true grassroots organization. Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that we would never have made it this far without the in kind support of our VCH community developers, first Devon Macfarlane and then Katie Hume who picked up where Devon's work left off and kept things going.

At a recent planning meeting the group likened itself to a bus that travels on a set route with riders hopping on and off along the way. The driver of that bus has been and always remains our community developer and the membership the riders who give the purpose of the bus meaning. In the juggle of home/work life it can be difficult to keep motivated as a volunteer. The many hours of hard work and

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cutting of red tape by the vital position of community developer ensures that this bus never breaks down.

And so, through intense networking among the agencies we had built relationships with, and through the cultivation of new relationships in combination with a wide public outreach effort, our second homeless connect event, Under One Umbrella 2009 was launched.

This time around, if you had been at the event, you would have seen as you approached the Maritime Labour Centre (this year's site) near the bottle depot at the bottom of Victoria drive, a tented area, this time to shelter people from the sun (thank goodness) leading to the entrance of the well known auditorium.

Volunteer greeters guided the overwhelming turnout of over six hundred people to a row of seats in the entrance lobby. Nearby a coffee and tea station staffed by volunteers kept the warm beverages flowing to the crowd that gathered early in the day.

Volunteer evaluators (about ten at a time) asked a few quick questions (basic demographic stuff) and helped identify key priorities for our guests.

Volunteer guides then led the guests into the main auditorium for some breakfast of fresh fruit and pancakes.

From there people were free to sit and eat and talk or roam the main auditorium packed with tables of service providers and community groups covering health, addictions, youth and family services. On the main stage two sitar players provided live background music before lunch.

Nearby, bike mechanics worked on gears and brakes and volunteers from homeless nation recorded stories.

In one semi-private corner over one hundred guests signed up for haircuts from volunteer hairdressers and dozens soaked their feet, got wound care and talked to the street nurses about their health concerns.

Many followed the signs down the hall to the Under One Umbrella boutique (a new addition of clothing distribution run by the amazing organization Gather and Give) and picked out some clothes from the near ton that were provided.

In the same area housing and employment counsellors conducted direct intakes using the wireless network system and outreach workers were on hand to talk to people about disabilities and mental health.

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In just one of the many examples of great things that happened here a fellow was able to get a bed in detox the very same day and was brought there by Saferide who also attended.

Upstairs one could find once again the dedicated volunteer practitioners of the healing arts. Massage, reiki, acupuncture and other alternative treatments were offered continuously throughout the day. One volunteer guide who spent the entire day by the elevator upstairs so guests would know how to get to the healing room said she couldn't get over the sense of peace and well being that emanated from where masseuses and other alternative energy healers worked their magic.

By noon the lunch feast was served by our volunteer crew of over twenty students from a local international school. This group deserves special mention for the heart and soul they poured into the preparation of a delicious meal for the hundreds of people in attendance, from toddlers to seniors.

A silence descended on the crowded hall as the Aboriginal Grandmother's Dance group performed their traditional song and dance.

The afternoon was spent drawing prizes like safeway gift cards, bus tickets, a couple of bikes and a full desktop computer that was won by a young man who dreamed of having one but could not afford it.

It was incredible.

Let me just give you some of the numbers for the day.

Based on our surveys between six and six hundred and fifty guests attended.

Forty two social service agencies, health practitioners and community organizations attended with their outreach workers.

Nearly one hundred volunteers stepped up from the community with the coordinator having to turn away volunteers who were calling up until the night before the event. Many of our volunteers commented on how thankful they were that they came and admitted that despite some reservations based on their stereotypes of the homeless found these biases changed forever.

We gave away a ton of clothes.

Breakfast and lunch for hundreds.

And who could forget the child minders who made sure the kids that were there had fun activities and draw prizes too!

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By the end of the day there were no clothes left to give away. The donated food we received in addition to breakfast and lunch (over one hundred pounds of fruit, 500 litres of juice, a thousand granola bars, it was all gone.

Our volunteer evaluators asked guests to answer a few more questions as part of our exit survey. The responses told us that the event was well received and guests commented on how much they enjoyed the day, in a friendly place, eating and talking to other members of the community.

Of course everyone wanted to know when the next Under One Umbrella would be held (and many wondering if we would also be serving dinner!).

There is of course a long history that lead up to our group's decision to hold this event and a detailed timeline of how we got to the position where we were able to pull it off but it looks like my time here today is too short to go into it all. We do have a website where archives of our group's work over the past five years can be found at www.gwdac.org. I encourage everyone to check it out.

The work of the Under One Umbrella Society is a testament to the kind of positive change that can be achieved when a dedicated group of like-minded volunteers from a community work together for a common purpose. Nearly all of our guests commented over and over again how amazed they were at how we were able to create such a safe and respectful atmosphere and although we have had discreet security arrangements, there has never been an issue around people's safety for themselves or their possessions.

We are already planning the next Under One Umbrella for January 2010 and we hope that others will be inspired to continue the same kind of work in other neighbourhoods, not just during HAW but throughout the year.

I'd like to take a moment here at the end to thank the City of Vancouver for organizing this workshop and for their on-going support of community based initiatives meant to reach out to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in our city. The support of the mayor and council and everyone at city hall is invaluable and city wide events like this and those that take place during Homelessness Action Week would not be possible without their support.

Thank you very much.