

Public Policy Summit on Volunteering, Civic Engagement and Social Inclusion – Summary
Jointly sponsored by Volunteer Canada, Deloitte Canada and
University of Ottawa’s Centre on Governance
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Public Policy and Placemaking

Dr. Katherine Loflin opened the day by exploring how public policy can promote placemaking. She suggested that a fundamental transformation occurs in communities when people feel connected to a place; in her words, “loved places just do better.” According to her research, community attachment leads to local economic growth, but what fuels this attachment is more than just jobs and finances. The three main factors that drive community attachment are social offerings, aesthetics and openness. These factors can help encourage community turnaround and civic engagement. Too often, approaches to engagement are deficit-based; meanwhile, placemaking is an asset-based approach, which aims to start from a place of strength.

One of the interesting highlights of Dr. Loflin’s research, and a theme that was revisited throughout the day, is the role of “young talent.” Her research found that this group was often considered the least welcoming in communities. Furthermore, the way young people consider the idea of “place” has changed over the years. It seems they no longer only consider the need to be in large metropolises or certain cities; rather, what is most important to them is the opportunity to take a leadership role in their community. Tapping into the needs and strengths of this demographic will be key to driving civic engagement in the future.

Dr. Loflin also highlighted that while all sectors have a role to play in creating loved spaces, there is a particular role for government leadership in this area. This was the introduction of another key theme running throughout the day: the importance of involving stakeholders outside of the non-profit sector – businesses, government and individuals – in civic engagement initiatives, especially when trying to influence the public policy process.

Multi-Jurisdictional Public Policy

A panel discussion on multi-jurisdictional public policy highlighted a number of examples and initiatives from different levels of government across the country, and was followed by roundtable discussions amongst smaller groups of attendees.

- Lee Ann Snedden, Manager of Neighborhood Sustainability, Planning & Growth Management with the City of Ottawa discussed the Neighborhood Connection Office, an initiative designed to help community groups and individuals to become more actively involved in collaborative projects to improve their neighborhoods. Piloting of projects is underway, with the full application process to be rolled out in 2013. More information on the project can be found at http://ottawa.ca/en/city_hall/improveneighbourhood/connection/index.htm.
- Shannon Marchand, Assistant Deputy Minister for Human Services with the Government of Alberta, discussed a social policy framework exercise designed to help guide the future of the province’s social policies and programs. Citizen engagement and input has been a critical component of this exercise and sought through multiple media including

blogs, wikis, online surveys, community conversations and online collaboration. More information on the project is available at www.socialpolicy.alberta.ca.

- Jeffrey Conrad, Assistant Deputy Minister of Labour and Advanced Education with the Government of Nova Scotia, shared stories of changes in the provincial approach to social policy since the election of a new NDP government in 2009. The three main concerns of this Ministry are:
 - (1) How should government work with the non-profit sector?
 - (2) How can the government help the sector to build its own capacity? And
 - (3) How can the two sectors interface?

The Ministry is undertaking a number of initiatives to address these questions including the “Jobs Here” initiative, the www.goodns.ca online resources as well as studies and seminars on human resources challenges in the sector.

- Susan Tolton from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada presented a federal perspective and highlighted a number of initiatives the Canadian government is using to support the voluntary sector and facilitate the involvement of vulnerable populations in their communities. In line with the 2010 throne speech, which highlighted “social partnerships” as a government priority, HRSDC is taking numerous steps towards that goal including projects around community and private sector partnerships, social finance and work with vulnerable populations. More information is available at http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/community_partnerships/index.shtml.

These diverse examples illustrated how all levels of government recognize the importance of the voluntary sector. A key theme from all speakers was the importance for government to solicit community input throughout both the planning and implementation processes, to ensure buy-in and that the initiatives genuinely meet community needs.

How to Encourage Civic Engagement in Making Public Policy

Stephen Carter, campaign strategist for Calgary mayor Naheed Nenshi and Alberta premier Allison Redford, offered a provocative discussion on how to increase civic engagement. Carter suggests that there are three types of people: the hyperengaged, the less engaged and the unengaged. While everyone is hyperengaged with some cause, the key is to appeal to the second group of less engaged people and get them engaged in *your* cause. This is particularly difficult in an age of information overload, so focusing on social networks (not just social media) is a key strategy. In particular, Carter suggests that it’s important to focus on women, who tend to control social networks, and to engage them by telling stories that appeal to them. Most importantly, it’s critical to get involved with government and policy makers early. You need to influence people and “tell your story” when they are creating policy initiatives, not after they have won the election and everyone is clamoring for a meeting.

Multi-Sectoral Shared Governance

A second panel on multi-sectoral shared governance broadened the perspective to include local, national and international examples, and was again followed by roundtable discussions.

- Leila Fenc, Director of Corporate Responsibility at Deloitte & Touche LLP, discussed their national strategy on corporate involvement and various initiatives to directly and indirectly promote engaged citizenship (more information at http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_CA/ca/about-Deloitte/corporate-responsibility/index.htm). She also highlighted the importance of collaboration with the private sector, as private organizations may be perceived as more non-partisan, neutral actors.
- Mitch Kutney from Citizen’s Academy talked about social finance, social enterprise and the Citizens Academy’s initiatives to help improve civic literacy and engagement in democracy. More information on the project is online at www.citizensacademy.ca/.
- Danny Pelletier, Programs and Partnerships Director for CUSO International, talked about facilitating engagement of Canadians in international initiatives, recognizing social inclusion as an aim that should be integrated in development programming and the concept of “360 degree” volunteer involvement. More information is available at <http://www.cusointernational.org/>.

Conclusions

As Karen Lynch highlighted in her opening remarks, “natural resources in Canada aren’t just what’s under the ground – it’s our people.” Looking at new and creative ways to engage citizens in thoughtful social change and moving beyond traditional notions of volunteering to look at ideas of civic engagement and social inclusion will be key in driving public policy forward in future.

Next Steps:

1. Establish Citizen Engagement Public Policy Exchange platform
2. Host regional policy summits in other parts of Canada
3. Convene online dialogues that identify and promote public policy options that strengthen citizen engagement, social inclusion, and community resiliency

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