

ORGANIZING

ETHNO-CULTURAL

SENIORS

FOR ACTION:

A “How-To” Resource Guide to Effectively

Empower Multicultural Seniors to Advocate

for Better Community Services*

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For the Rexdale Women’s Centre**

*** This guide is based on the Rexdale *Ethno-Cultural Seniors Advocacy Project* – a community-based project sponsored by the Rexdale Women’s Centre and funded by Canadian Heritage, Multiculturalism Canada.**

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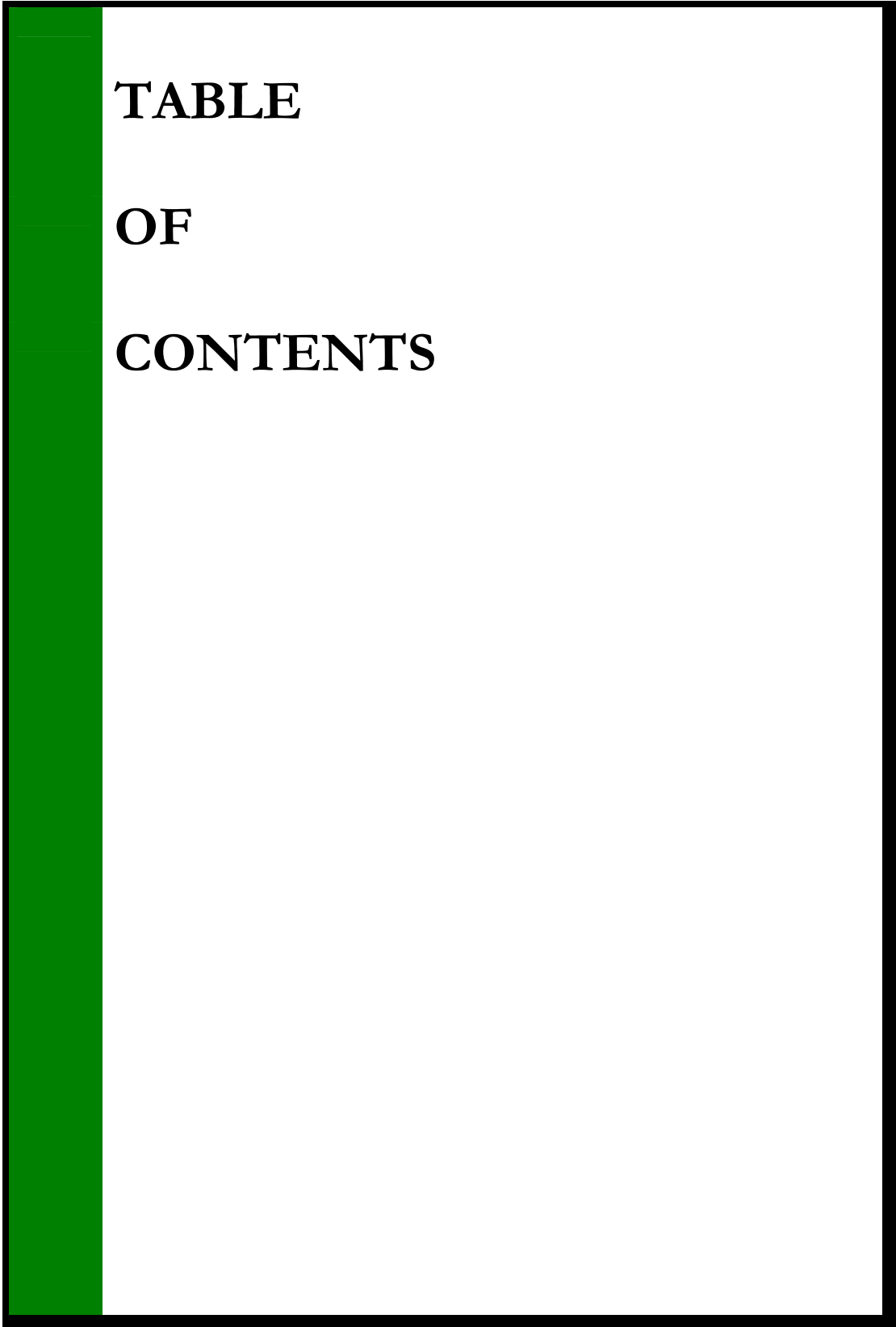
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From the Author

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PREFACE:
*A New Model of
Community Development*

PREFACE: *An Overview of Community Development*

This resource guide is an important first step in assisting agencies and organizations that work with or anticipate working with ethno-cultural seniors in complex urban contexts. It is based on the successes and challenges experienced and faced by the *Ethno-Cultural Seniors Advocacy Project (ECSAP)* operating in Rexdale, Ontario, Canada. The *Project Description* section of this guide provides a background discussion of *ECSAP*.

ECSAP has proven itself to be a timely and vibrant endeavour in community-based advocacy and cross-cultural community development. To this end, it has been an unprecedented community initiative. To date, there has not been a published model of cross-cultural community development techniques, strategies or practices specifically aimed at organizing ethno-cultural seniors in a multicultural context around issues of common social concern(s).

Indeed, there have been many successful community-based seniors advocacy and lobby groups in both the United States and Canada such as the *Gray Panthers* and *Canadian Pensioners Concerned* respectively. However, many of these groups have primarily involved and reflected seniors as homogeneous groups devoid of cultural differences. As such, these groups have not always effectively addressed issues of cross-cultural importance. Moreover, cross-cultural diversity among seniors' populations is an increasing phenomena in major urban centres across North America given the now infamous *baby boomer* cohort. Subsequently, a model of community development that is sensitive to cross-cultural and diversity needs of ethno-cultural seniors is of prime importance in this time and place.

This guide is, in part, based on ideas from existing models of community development by Lee (1999), Mairs (1991) and Rivera & Erlich (1995). However, unlike these existing models of community development, this guide proposes a model specifically geared towards “empowering and enabling ethno-cultural seniors in a complex multicultural urban context to effectively address issues of common social concern(s).”

Lee (1999) offered a generalist model of **pragmatic community organization** as a vital strategy and practice needed to achieve goals of **empowerment** and **social justice**. Lee (1999) presented *empowerment* as the goal to be achieved primarily by individuals and groups at local levels. Lee (1999) demonstrated that *social justice* is a goal that would apply to society-at-large. Mairs (1991) focused on **seniors organizing** as a “dynamic, vibrant part of society.” She illustrated a case example of how a predominantly homogeneous seniors group could effectively organize and lobby for better community services. Rivera & Erlich (1995) offered an **ethno-sensitive** model of community development. They focused on the need for community workers to be sensitive to the **cultural diversity** they face.

ECSAP brought together elements from each of these three models of community development and added its own element of active **cross-cultural dialogue** around issues of **common social concern(s)**. This guide will take community workers, organizers and leaders through the process of *ECSAP*. This guide illustrates how ethno-cultural seniors in diverse urban locales can bridge their multicultural differences and unite to advocate for better community services for all regardless of ethnic background.



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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The *Ethno-Cultural Seniors Advocacy Project (ECSAP)* began in March 1998. It was (and continues to be) sponsored by the Rexdale Women's Centre (a United Way agency) in Rexdale, Ontario, Canada. *ECSAP* is funded by the *Multiculturalism Programme of the Department of Canadian Heritage*. A multi-faceted project, *ECSAP* works with, supports and develops advocacy capabilities of ethno-cultural seniors to improve their access to recreation and preventative health services in Rexdale. The project was divided into three discrete yet connected phases in order meet its primary goals:

- To identify and help eliminate barriers which prevent ethno-cultural seniors from accessing recreation and preventative health services.
- To foster and increase the capacity of ethno-cultural seniors to effect positive changes within their own communities and to become their own advocates.
- To facilitate collaborations between ethno-cultural seniors, service agencies and government agencies in order to effectively redress identified access issues.

In Phase I (April 1998 to March 1999), funding was obtained, a project coordinator hired, and community consultations held to assist ethno-cultural seniors identify barriers to accessing services with the City of Toronto's *Parks and Recreation* and *Public Health* departments respectively. These barriers included lack of access to: culturally sensitive services, public space, community information, and childcare (for grandchildren). Ethno-cultural seniors faced significant language, transportation and financial barriers as well.

During Phase II (April 1999 to March 2000), the project assisted eight ethno-cultural seniors groups to develop advocacy skills in order to address the aforementioned barriers. These groups were (are) seniors from Somali, Ghanaian, Sri Lankan, Italian, Spanish, Punjabi, West Indian and Pakistani descents. The *Ethno-Cultural Seniors Advocacy Project (ECSAP)* - an advocacy group of seniors from these eight cultural communities was formed. From *ECSAP* a smaller working group – *Rexdale Ethno-Cultural Seniors (RECS)* - was established with two representatives from each ethnic group. *RECS* became active members of their community lobbying for better preventative health and recreation services. *RECS* made deputations at Toronto City Hall and participated in local community forums pertaining to recreation health services. *RECS*' good work was acknowledged in September 2000 when the group received the City of Toronto's *Year 2000 Neighbourlies Award*.

During Phase III (September 2000 through August 2001), *ECSAP* continued to work with its participants to further refine their advocacy and leadership skills. These efforts continued to lead toward a strengthened and more effective ethno-cultural seniors advocacy voice. Also, *ECSAP* also began developing a "resource model" based on the experiences of the project that could be used as a guide for other cross-cultural seniors groups and community agencies interested in facilitating advocacy and civic participation amongst ethno-cultural seniors. Finally, *ECSAP* had a formal evaluation completed to offer value-added feedback to the project's stakeholders. It was anticipated this evaluation would provide valuable insights that might contribute to the project's long-term sustainability.

STEP I:

How to Lay a Foundation

STEP I: *How to Lay a Foundation*

There are two main questions that must be answered in developing and implementing any community-based project. First, **what** issues are to be addressed? Second, **how** are they to be addressed? We can restate these questions as follows. First, **community need(s)** must be identified and understood. Second, there must be ample **resources** available to address these needs. Further, it should be understood that resources extend beyond mere money.

Resources also include valued assets such as:

- Knowledge and creativity based on human experience
- Meeting spaces in local malls or apartment buildings
- People with willingness and attitudes to get involved

Of course, financial resources that come from funding sources can make securing other resources much easier.

Community-Needs Analysis

Identifying a need and being able to effectively articulate it is a very difficult task to accomplish. The ability to survey one's environment and recognize "what's wrong" or "what is missing" goes beyond simply "complaining" about the way that things are. Thus, a needs analysis must do several things:

- Identify the problem and provide evidence a need exists
- Think about ways the problem could be best addressed
- Develop (at least tentatively) a realistic, practical solution

Through evidence gathered from clients and staff, the *Rexdale Women's Centre* identified that ethno-cultural seniors were experiencing disproportionate barriers to adequate recreation and preventative health services in their community. A detailed plan was developed aimed at redressing these issues and a funding proposal was prepared.

The Funding Proposal

Securing project funding need not be as difficult as is commonly imagined. To this end, agencies can increase their funding opportunities if they follow three general steps. These are: 1) find and match; 2) focus on outcomes; and, 3) follow-up on contacts.

1) Find and Match

As mentioned above, the first step for any community project is to identify or **find** the need. But what is equally important is to find potential funders who would be willing to commit resources to an agency willing to meet such needs. While there are indeed many needs in our society that are waiting to be met, many funders specialize in which needs they are willing to allocate their resources.

The ability to find a need and **match** it to a potential funder is a skill that separates many successful project proposals from many unsuccessful ones. In the case of *ECSAP*, the *Rexdale Women's Centre* was able to identify the needs in its community pertaining to barriers faced by ethno-cultural seniors. Second, the agency recognized that the government, through *Canadian Heritage, Multiculturalism Canada*, funded projects to address such issues.

2) *Focus on Outcomes*

It is essential to show the funder that the agency submitting the proposal has the capacity and expertise to manage resources well. Here there are two important points:

- First, the agency must be connected to the issue in a way that demonstrates **competence**. While the *Rexdale Women's Centre* did not have specialized services for ethno-cultural seniors, many of its clients were ethno-cultural seniors who were women. In instances where the *Centre* did not have expertise, it developed **partnerships** with community agencies such as *Parks and Recreation, Public Health, and the City of Toronto*.
- Second, when an agency is able to show competence, it can then offer tangible **outcomes** from the project. Such outcomes should be presented in **measurable terms** such as “increases in access” or “decreases in barriers.” This is because funders often require that their contribution will have a deliberate and tangible impact in addressing specified goals and objectives.

3) *Follow-Up on Contacts*

Receiving funding once does not guarantee subsequent funding. It is always important to facilitate a positive working **relationship** between the agency and the funder. Whether funding is granted or not, **follow-up** is a crucial part of the funding process. Follow-up often involves discovering why the project was turned down or what needs to be done to ensure continued funding. Funding officers can assist agencies by clarifying what the funder is looking for in specific project proposals.

STEP II:

How to Make Contact

STEP II: *How to Make Contact*

In this section, we move to Step II or the actual workings of the project itself. Here, there are four general steps to follow. First, **secure project staff** who are sensitive to diversity issues especially pertaining to age and ethnicity. Second, hold **community consultations** with specific ethno-cultural groups in order to discover what is specifically important to them. Likewise, there must consultations with prospective community partner agencies to discover what services they do and do not provide – and why. Third, an analysis of consultation findings must be conducted to discover **issues of common social concern** across ethnicity. Finally, a **cross-cultural community forum** can then take place to bring together members from all ethnic groups as well as potential community partner agencies who may participate in addressing respective community concerns and needs.

The Project Staff

There is one word to best describe successful cross-cultural project staff members – **sensitive** (cf. Rivera & Erlich, 1995). The need for project staff to be sensitive and understanding to diversity issues – especially around ethnicity and age – is crucial. A sensitive project staff is critical to the success or lack thereof of any community-based project.

Community Consultations

One of the first tasks of the project staff is to offer members from various ethnic groups ample opportunities to report on issues important to them. Here, participants must be totally free to express their deepest concerns. The process that *ECSAP* used to complete this task was as follows:

- Flyers were posted in local malls, apartment buildings and recreation centres inviting seniors to share their concerns.
- At the same time, agency staff informed agency clients of the opportunity to participate in the consultations.
- Consultations were offered at different times, days and locations to ensure accessibility and participation.
- Transportation was provided by way of bus tickets or taxi rides to assist seniors to attend the consultations.
- Ethno-specific meetings were held in local apartment meeting rooms and at the Rexdale Women's Centre.
- Community seniors were asked what they felt were their greatest barriers to community services.
- Rexdale Women's Centre staff members provided translation and interpretation services when necessary.
- Refreshments were offered at all consultations such as coffee, tea, fruit and biscuits.
- The Rexdale Women's Centre offered free childcare services when consultations were offered at the agency.
- Consultations were facilitated by the Project Coordinator who meticulously noted all of the seniors' concerns.
- Seniors were each given three "sticky red dots" and were asked to attach their dots to up to three issues most important to them on "issue sheets" hung around the room.

For *ECSAP*, there were about 40 consultations over five months. Each ethnic group had the opportunity to be heard on at least two occasions. The success of these consultations was due to four primary reasons:

- The locations and times were flexible and accessible to the seniors and there was ample notice of the consultations.
- There were key incentives such as transportation, childcare, interpreters and refreshments.
- The seniors themselves were heard and themselves able to identify the issues that were important to them.
- Access and barriers to health and recreation services were issues that the seniors wanted to discuss and address.

Based on the consultation findings, the Project Coordinator met with prospective community partners to bring forward the concerns of the seniors. These prospective partners were offered the opportunity to help resolve issues specified by the seniors. Here two important points are important:

- First, it is important to offer other community agencies the opportunity to participate in addressing community issues. This is how better networks are established between agencies and for community members-at-large.
- Second, there is good faith in offering other agencies the opportunity to share in the process of community development and identify what might be the most feasible and practical ways of addressing key issues.

Identifying Common Issues

While analyzing and sharing information from the community consultations took time, it was vital to understand what the seniors said. It was likewise important to identify what was important to them as key issues across ethnicity.

The main strategy in cross-cultural community development is to bring together people across their diversity and assist them to work together to address social concerns that affect all of them regardless of cultural background. Such issues include barriers to recreation and preventative health care.

The Cross-Cultural Forum

The final contact step is to hold a cross-cultural community forum. Here, an agenda that is thematically arranged around the issues of common concern as identified through the initial ethno-specific community consultations would be the main focus for discussion. There were several reasons why the *ECSAP* cross-cultural forum was successful:

- The same supports offered in the community consultations were offered here such as interpreters and transportation.
- The day, time and location of this event was the most opportune for the seniors based on the consultations phase.
- The agenda was based on the key issues that were predetermined from the consultations phase.
- Seniors were immediately able to recognize the issues they held in common regardless of ethno-cultural background.

- Potential partners from community agencies and organizations also participated in the forum and listened firsthand to the concerns of the ethno-cultural seniors.
- The facilitator ensured that seniors had opportunities to directly address prospective community partners.
- The specific issues previously identified were reported to the forum as a whole.
- Any person who wished to speak (with or without an interpreter) was granted the opportunity.

Other issues that ensured the success of the forum included:

- Allowing seniors to select their own seating arrangement and not necessarily by ethno-cultural group
- Participant introductions and speaking order
- Equal allotted speaking time
- Sensitivity in facilitating and chairing the event
- Staff who had experience and connection with the project

There were three main outcomes from the forum:

- **Trust networks** were established and reinforced by electing representative from each ethnic group thus setting the foundation to work together.
- The project coordinator was recognized as an **effective facilitator** by all participants demonstrating the project would be run in a competent and prudent manner.
- The coordinator recorded a **contact listing** of all people who would be willing to participate in the project.

STEP III:

How to Train and Mobilize

STEP III: *How to Train and Mobilize*

Here the focus is on **empowerment**. In this phase, active **community development** takes place. However, what distinguished *ECSAP* from other community development initiatives was its ability to effectively achieve and facilitate **diversity**. Finally, with education and **training**, group members are effectively enabled to **mobilize** around issues important to them and their local community.

Empowerment and Development

Empowerment is a phenomena that primarily occurs at individual and group levels. Empowerment is a process in which disempowered people and/or people who are vulnerable to societal power differentials are enabled to effectively stand and address such imbalances. For example, both ethnic minorities as well as the elderly continue to be excluded from many aspects in society. When members from these communities secure resources including finances and knowledge to counter such forces – inequality and barriers are diminished. **Community development** is perhaps the best method to both empower community residents.

Organizing Ethno-Cultural Seniors

Community development is both a process and an outcome (cf. Lee, 1999). However, as Mairs (1991) illustrated, seniors are a population who face their own specific challenges as a marginalized group in our society. *Ageism* is a social phenomena that is as offensive as *racism*. Thus, when people are both elderly and come from ethnic *minority* backgrounds they often face multiple levels of discrimination based on such factors as race, ethnicity, language and age.

Achieve and Facilitate Diversity

Cross-cultural sensitivity is the key to effectively achieve and facilitate **diversity** (Rivera & Erlich, 1995). This means that community workers, organizers and facilitators should be respectful and understanding to customs, beliefs and practices of various ethnic groups. In cases where cultural practices and/or beliefs may come into conflict with a community worker's own values and presuppositions, the worker should strive to facilitate an earnest dialogue of understanding to build positive communication channels. In organizing seniors from diverse ethnic backgrounds, project staff should strive to assist members from these groups to better understand one another.

Diversity can be achieved and facilitated in several ways:

- Identify primary ethnic groups in the community
- Consult with specific ethnic groups to identify issues that are most important to their particular communities
- Ensure that each ethnic group will be comfortable meeting with other ethnic groups
- Invite each ethnic group to attend a cross-cultural forum focused on common themes of social concern
- Ensure all participants are given ample opportunities to share their respective concerns
- Enable delegates from each group to form a cross-cultural working group to address the most important issues

Putting Training Into Action

As the expression goes, “knowledge is power.” Yet, it is primarily through **education** and **training** that valued knowledge can be gained. Workshops in *setting a common vision for the community*, in *community leadership*, in the *dynamics of group organizing*, and in *advocacy strategies* can enable project participants to take collective action on issues of common social concern and counter some of the power imbalances in society.

However, it is only through the **application** of such knowledge or training – i.e., “real life experience” – that goals of *empowerment* and *social justice* can occur.

Putting training into action is one of the greatest challenges for any community-based advocacy project. In *ECSAP*, the seniors put their training into action in several ways:

- They made important deputations at Toronto City Hall both in English as well as in their mother tongues
- They lobbied local city councillors and officials through petitions and in face-to-face meetings
- They circulated petitions for enhanced recreation and preventative health services for their own community
- They engaged in municipal and federal election campaigns and took information back to their ethno-cultural peers

Overall results of these activities were greater citizen participation and a decrease in isolation amongst the seniors.

STEP IV:
How to Evaluate Success

STEP IV: *How to Evaluate Success*

One of the most overlooked processes in any community development project is to complete a systematic, objective **evaluation**. An evaluation is very important in providing valuable feedback and can help determine the overall **success** of the project. Evaluation should be an ongoing process to ensure that the project stays on course and continues to run smoothly. Also, internal assessments can help identify and correct problems before they become too large.

The Formal Evaluation

There are four elements to be addressed in an evaluation:

- It should be **outcome-oriented**. It should address *where the project has been* and *where it still needs to go*.
- It should incorporate the feedback of both **internal** and **external stakeholders** of the project to give the most accurate feedback possible.
- It should reflect **ongoing feedback** from the participants as to how they perceive project's progress in relation to the states goals and objectives.
- It should be conducted by an **outside third party** to ensure the anonymity of interviewees to allow stakeholders to candidly respond to evaluation questions without fear of reprisal or marginalization.

A good evaluation should try to answer questions such as:

- What were stakeholder expectations for the project?
- Were these expectations met? If so how, if not why?
- How was diversity achieved and facilitated in the project?
- Were all voices heard and was participation equal?

Project Success and Celebration

The results of a well-conducted evaluation can demonstrate the overall success of the project in meeting its goals and objectives through and at the end of the project.

A good evaluation can demonstrate that the project is making a positive impact in society and should be eligible for **continued funding**. It can demonstrate that while much has been accomplished there is **still much to do**.

Last, the evaluation can be used **to attract further interest** to the project in terms of new funding sources, new community partners and/or subsequent participants.

Finally, the culmination of any successful community development project should incorporate a time to celebrate the project's achievements. In the case of *ECSAP*, some of the members wanted to go to Niagara Falls, some wanted to go to Ottawa to see the Parliament Buildings and some wanted to go to the CN Tower for dinner. The unique challenge of planning a post-project celebration is consistent with many of the steps covered in this guide.



CLOSING REMARKS

CLOSING REMARKS

This guide based on the experiences of the *Ethno-Cultural Seniors Advocacy Project (ECSAP)* has illustrated a new process in community development. The need to empower ethno-cultural seniors to advocate for community services is becoming more important given the substantial cuts to social programs in communities across North America.

While this guide provides an overview of the process used by *ECSAP*, it is only a general guide in how to effectively mobilize ethno-cultural seniors for action. Hence, it attempts to present a series of steps necessary for any successful cross-cultural community development project. It is important to note that the time frame in which such activities occur may vary from project to project. However, as long as the essential steps are followed, the outcome should be one of success and positive social change.

Finally, it is important to understand that each step of needs analysis, proposal writing, holding consultations, training, advocacy and evaluation are activities that can be done as steps unto themselves. The important point is that a practice of sensitivity to diversity is something that should be engaged in any and all these community development activities.

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