

How CAWI Practices Equity in Partnerships and Relationships

An illustrative story from Tong Zhao-Ansari

January 2016

I am the Community Engagement coordinator for Making Voices Count, a project engaging community, residents and women leaders to effectively engage low-income, multicultural neighbourhoods in the electoral process. My project is a partnership between Coalition of Community Health and Resource Centres of Ottawa (a coalition of 13 community health and resource centres) and City for All Women Initiative (CAWI). Making Voices Count came out of the strategic planning of the 4 major community health centres in Ottawa which identified the need to increase voter turnout and long – term civic engagement of people living on low income. Then there was a group identified, to decide who and how we would like to engage. As a result, a civic engagement table was formed. At this table, we bring together residents and various community partners to talk about our issues and plan actions.

We invited more than 30 community partners to be part of the civic engagement table, along with residents who are part of low-income communities, living the experience. The table meets monthly with the goal to increase people’s interest in civic engagement and voting in elections, to bring issues to the attention of elected officials, to identify the issues of people who are living in poverty and to strategize our actions to influence city decision making. Because of the engagement of people living in poverty we were able to identify four issues that affect peoples’ lives: good food for all, employment, affordable transit and affordable housing.

We were also able to build on the expertise of the organizations that are part of the civic engagement table. For example, they have a lens and are able to provide expertise on addressing poverty, food issues and affordable housing. There are people working with Aboriginal communities. So we are able to work together collaboratively on those issues.

A problem we faced was we wanted to make a plain language tool to take out to communities and engage those residents who are impacted. The residents will often say that the content is good, but the language is not going to reach the communities. So we have made changes to improve the readability for people with literacy issues.



All through the process, we are always making sure we have residents present – we have about 10 present. We are making sure that their voices come first, We are very intentional on building an equitable environment for everyone to participate in the meetings. When we build agendas, we make sure to leave room for residents who often feel their voices are not important to speak and share their lived experience, as otherwise the organizations are the ones talking and dominating. When arranging seating, we make sure residents sit around the table and agencies sit in the background if there is not enough seats at the table. In this way, there is equity and power balance in the process. As a result of our partnership, we were able to leverage and share resources and create the tools in plain language, and all the residents and organizations are able to take the resources out to the communities that they serve.