



**LEVEL**  
YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM



# Empowering Communities in East Vancouver

**LINDSAY GRANT**

## CONTENTS

3	About the LEVEL Initiative
4	Biography
5	Executive Summary
6	Background <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Context</li><li>Community Empowerment</li></ul>
9	Recommendation and Next Steps <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Board Diversification</li><li>Neighbourhood Councils</li><li>Participatory Budgeting</li><li>Community Resource Boards</li></ul>
13	Conclusion
14	Bibliography
16	About Vancouver Foundation

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), & səliilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

## ABOUT THE LEVEL INITIATIVE

LEVEL is a youth-engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth population in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL CONSISTS OF  
THREE PILLARS OF  
WORK TO ADVANCE  
RACIAL EQUITY:



### ABOUT THE LEVEL YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies and are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the sn̓íchim-speaking Skwx\_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1 <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>



LINDSAY  
GRANT

Lindsay Grant is a member of the NunatuKavut Southern Inuit currently living on unceded Coast Salish territories. She has worked in various roles in grassroots community development and leadership in East Vancouver.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is frequently referred to as "Canada's poorest area code." The community is home to the largest population of people experiencing poverty and homelessness in Vancouver. A number of government initiatives and strategies are targeted to address social challenges in the Downtown Eastside, most notably the "Downtown Eastside Local Area Plan," approved by the City of Vancouver in 2014. In addition, the neighbourhood is home to an enormous concentration of non-profit organizations, social services, and housing providers working to address the needs of local residents. From health services to arts and culture organizations, these agencies are enormously important to the continuing resilience of the Downtown Eastside community.

The purpose of this report is to consider options to encourage greater engagement of local residents in community governance and service provision in the Downtown Eastside. Specifically, mechanisms whereby community leadership might improve the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability of policymaking, and social services are studied. An additional consideration is the intrinsic value of investing in civic engagement among traditionally underrepresented populations. Research and evaluation of policy options was conducted with reference to the goals of facilitating participation in direct democracy among residents in the Downtown Eastside, enabling partnership between local residents, businesses, organizations, and service providers, and directing accountability of non-profit agencies to the populations and communities they serve. Given the neighbourhood's location on unceded Coast Salish territories and a large Indigenous community, recognition of the rights of the local First Nations and engagement of the diverse urban Indigenous population are also key goals.

Research for this report consisted of informal interviews with East Vancouver residents, community organizers, and non-profit staff and directors, as well as attendance at community forums, meetings, and events. Relevant literature on the Downtown Eastside community and community leadership strategies was also reviewed. Finally four broad policy models were investigated and evaluated for feasibility and potential impacts and challenges. The four policy models elaborated include Board Diversification, Neighbourhood Councils, Resource Boards, and Participatory Budgeting. Specific examples referenced include the Let's Speak Up Initiative (Vancouver), the OnBoard Canada Project, Office of the Neighbourhood Model (Vancouver Washington, Portland), Community Resource Boards (British Columbia), Participatory Budgeting New York City Council (PBNYC), (New York), Participatory Budgeting in Scotland (PB Scotland), (Scotland), and Empower LA (Los Angeles).

# BACKGROUND

## CONTEXT

The Downtown Eastside is located on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations in Vancouver British Columbia. The borders of the Downtown Eastside community are variously conceived by different levels of government, ministries, and communities. The northern boundary is defined by the waterfront and the Port of Vancouver. To the east and west, the Downtown Eastside is sandwiched by the Grandview Woodland neighbourhood and Gastown, with the boundaries often set at Clark Drive and Carrall Street. The southern boundary is most often indicated at Keefer or Prior Streets. Community hubs include the Carnegie Community Centre, Ray Cam Community Centre, the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, the Gathering Place, the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, and Oppenheimer Park. The community is also referred to as "East Van Rez" by some Indigenous residents in reference to the large community of urban Indigenous people in the neighbourhood.

The Downtown Eastside community is notable for its activism. The impacts of residents' groups like the Downtown Eastside Resident's Association (DERA) and the Militant Mothers of Raymur are obvious in the community even today in the form of social housing and the Ray Cam Cooperative Centre. Groups like the Carnegie Community Action Project, Downtown Eastside SRO Collaborative, and Chinatown Action Group continue to mobilize diverse community members to demand important local issues be addressed. There is a clear local appetite to decide the future of the neighbourhood, and to determine how residents are supported, in addition to an enormous diversity of residents with a wealth of personal experience, knowledge, and insight into the community. The commitment of the Downtown Eastside community to supporting one another is also abundantly evident. One recent example of this is the operation of pop-up safe injection sites in the wake of the fentanyl crisis, but equally relevant examples include the Downtown Eastside Street Market, the Butterflies in Spirit dance group, and West Coast Family Night. These and countless other formal and informal initiatives are developed and led by the community with or without the support of government and local non-profits.

It is worth pointing out that many social service agencies and housing providers now operating in the Downtown Eastside are a result or evolution of grassroots community advocacy. In the 1960s and 70s a concurrent rise in grassroots activism and government policy shift towards devolution of social service provision to non-profit organizations created conditions for the professionalization of community advocacy groups into service providing agencies. In the Downtown Eastside, many grassroots groups began accepting government resources to provide the very community supports they were advocating for. Naturally, emerging service providers increasingly began to take on the role of community advocacy. There are benefits to this dual role arising from the unique situation of non-governmental organizations as independent entities between government and community, as well as limitations due to the dependence of most non-profits on government for the greater part of their funding, in a dense and competitive non-profit industry<sup>2</sup>.

Social service agencies have proliferated in the Downtown Eastside, making it the most densely populated non-profit market in Vancouver. A 2015 report by the *Vancouver Sun* counts 259 agencies, including arts and culture organizations, drop-in centres, family services, community organizations, legal assistance, community safety agencies, religious organizations, and food, health, employment supports and over 100 housing buildings, shelters, and societies. The report estimated \$360 million was spent on service provision in the Downtown Eastside in the year 2013—almost \$1 million a day. The majority of funding for service provision in the Downtown Eastside flows to non-profits from government sources, but organizations are most often encouraged to leverage funds from other sources like charitable foundations, individual donors, and private partnerships to maximize resources.

Service providers have taken a variety of approaches to navigate uncertain and piecemeal funding cycles, while advocating in behalf of the best interests of their community, for example through the development of non-profit coalitions like the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council and Our Place Vancouver<sup>3</sup>. However, the common practice of funding through competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) processes and grant applications can create competition among non-profits and discourage cooperation and coalition building. In addition, there are real or perceived material disincentives to be labeled as "activist organizations" as opposed to service providers or to be too overtly critical of potential funders. In a very real sense, the priorities goals and service delivery of non-profits are shaped by the priorities and goals of funders, however well or poorly they align with the priorities and goals of the communities served. Further, a notable preference among funders to support pilot projects on a temporary and short-term basis is cited by non-profit staff and directors as a challenge to delivering the sorts of stable and sustainable core services that are the most effective and the most needed. This is further exacerbated by the susceptibility of funding to emerging non-profit industry trends and government regime changes.

Larger organizations are often more resilient to funding cycles and are able to improve their stability through securing ongoing government contracts and maintaining their own fundraising databases of individual and corporate donors. However, they are also much less likely to have grassroots community representation among their board members or senior staff. Many of the largest non-profits in the Downtown Eastside are housing providers and there are definite challenges to taking on the role of both advocate and landlord. Similar challenges arise from the role of service providers to conduct assessments and investigations of families and individuals that have impacts on the custody of children, on the ability to live freely and independently, and in the eligibility for supports. In addition, some community members cite concerns over the ability of larger national and international non-profits to outcompete and squeeze out smaller grassroots organizations in a given service area when larger funding pools become available and then move on if they dry up, leaving service vacuums.

2 For more on this see Weinschenker (2009), Roe (2010)

3 More information: [www.mvaec.ca](http://www.mvaec.ca), [www.ourplace-vancouver.ca](http://www.ourplace-vancouver.ca)



## RECOMMENDATION AND NEXT STEPS

### COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) defines a five-point spectrum of public participation ranked by public impact on final decision-making<sup>4</sup>. At the minimal end of the participation spectrum is public information, whereby the public is informed of a problem, opportunity, alternative, or solution. Escalating levels of participation include consultation, obtaining public feedback; involvement, working with the public on a direct and ongoing basis to ensure their input is reflected; collaboration, partnering with the public in all aspects of decision-making including alternative development and preferred solution selection; and finally empowerment, to place final decision-making power in the hands of the public. Community empowerment in the context of community governance and service provision in the Downtown Eastside entails creating venues for the grassroots community to develop and implement community policy and direct the allocation of community resources. This participation goal can be understood to hold for all of the policy options considered below for the purposes of this report.

Another aspect of community empowerment is defining and engaging the community to be empowered. Relative to the population of Vancouver as a whole, residents of the Downtown Eastside are less likely to vote in municipal elections, and evidence suggests that engagement in local politics is correlated with higher incomes and home ownership<sup>5</sup>. The notion of any sort of residents' councils or local decision-making is associated with "Not in My Backyard-ism" or NIMBYism for many. However, it is precisely low-income residents who access the multitude of services in the Downtown Eastside and who are the most critical to engage. For the purposes of this report, the representation of the diversity of the Downtown Eastside community can be taken as a common goal in all of the policy options considered. Representative diversity includes age, race, gender identity, immigration status, disability, Indigenous identity, household size, and income. Respectful inclusion of low-income residents entails supports for costs related to participation like transportation and childcare and compensation for time and work.

<sup>4</sup> IAP2 Participation Spectrum Table: [https://www.iap2.org.au/Tenant/C0000004/00000001/files/IAP2\\_Public\\_Participation\\_Spectrum.pdf](https://www.iap2.org.au/Tenant/C0000004/00000001/files/IAP2_Public_Participation_Spectrum.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Tyee report: <https://thetyee.ca/News/2018/06/27/Housing-Screwed-People-No-Vote/>

### BOARD DIVERSIFICATION

#### How it Works

Board diversification involves ensuring that diverse identities are represented in Board governance. Most board diversification strategies surveyed involved the voluntary participation of non-profit and public-sector leadership, most often in combination with recruitment and training of diverse community members and capacity development training and resources for organizations. Other mechanisms included platforms for "board matching" candidates to open positions and analysis and advocacy addressing legal and policy barriers that prevent inclusive participation. Additional policy options to promote board diversification include funding incentives and the publication of board diversity information on public databases maintained by the Canada Revenue Agency and the BC Societies Registry.

#### Examples

- Let's Speak Up! Inclusive Board Governance Project (Vancouver)
- onBoard Canada

#### Challenges

- Provisions against conflict of interest in the BC Societies Act are commonly interpreted to exclude board members who may materially benefit from services provided by a given organization, and to prohibit compensation from being provided to board members who may require supports to participate.
- People who have declared bankruptcy or committed certain criminal offenses are legally prohibited from sitting on boards.
- People under the age of 18 (or 16 given society bylaws) are prohibited from sitting on boards.
- Society bylaws may prohibit remuneration of board members and exclude people from eligibility.
- Candidate evaluation may remain based on educational backgrounds and professional resumes rather than lived experience or standing and connections in underrepresented communities in a way that disproportionately excludes lower-income populations.
- Board diversification does not entail a structural change to the way societies operate. There is a potential that impacts will be merely superficial.

#### Benefits

- Relative ease of implementation
- Development and promotion of diverse leaders
- Potential positive impacts on non-profit and public sector governance, policies, and operations

## NEIGHBOURHOOD COUNCILS

### How it Works

All the neighbourhood council models surveyed operated under some version of a mandate to connect grassroots voices to local government and advocate for the interests and priorities identified by their local community. Council membership can include local residents, businesses, non-profits, civil society groups, and faith groups. Council leadership is elected by the membership and resourced with dedicated staff and a budget to support operations and administrative functions. Neighbourhood councils may also be permitted to collect membership dues and donations, as well as to apply for grants or contracts to fund council activities.

Neighbourhood councils are generally afforded advanced notice of decisions impacting their area and some level of official standing to be heard by local government on municipal issues and budget priorities. Many neighbourhood councils also take on community capacity development and information sharing roles. Some examples of additional functions of neighbourhood councils include coordinating community safety initiatives (e.g. block watch), neighbourhood beautification and maintenance, and hosting community events and workshops. In some cases, duties of the municipal government are devolved to neighbourhood councils (e.g. liquor licensing, noise-complaint investigation).

In the Downtown Eastside context, a neighbourhood council could also be given some level of standing in negotiation of local community benefit agreements on private development projects and the drafting and award of RFPs and government grants for social services in the Downtown Eastside.

### Examples

- Empower LA Neighbourhood Councils (Los Angeles)
- Portland Office of Community and Civic Life (Portland)
- Vancouver Office of Neighbourhoods (Vancouver, Washington)
- Edmonton Community Leagues (Edmonton)
- Honolulu Neighbourhood Boards (Honolulu)
- Washington DC Advisory Neighbourhoods Commission (Washington, District of Columbia)

### Challenges

- Securing funding to support staff wages, operations budget(s), and compensation for low-income leadership.
- Ensuring engagement and representation of diverse community members and addressing actual or perceived NIMBYism.
- Establishing support from municipal government.
- Achieving ongoing participation from underrepresented communities.
- Preserving funding and mandate across government cycles.

### Benefits

- Provides a natural venue for alliances to develop among local businesses, service providers, advocates, and community members.
- Provides an accessible entry point to municipal politics and community leadership.
- Provides a (more or less) independent neighbourhood advocacy body.

## PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

### How it Works

A portion of a public budget is allocated to a participatory budgeting process. The budget allocated may or may not be earmarked to specific public benefit areas or goals. A period of community engagement is held to solicit project ideas from the community. This process frequently involves targeted outreach to underrepresented communities, particularly young people and low-income people. After an outreach period, popular ideas are considered by a participatory budgeting committee usually consisting of community volunteers or elected representatives. The committee works with dedicated staff and consulting experts to develop community ideas into more detailed budget proposals. Completed budget proposals are released to the public and voted on by eligible community members to determine a winning project. Certain participatory budgeting processes use algorithms to translate vote share to proportional budget allocation across multiple project proposals.

In the Downtown Eastside, participatory budgeting could be used as a mechanism for community members to direct a portion incoming social spending to priorities and projects that they feel are most relevant and needed.

### Examples

- PBNYC (New York City)
- Porto Alegre Participatory Budget (Porto Alegre)
- Chicago Menu Money (Chicago)
- Cambridge Participatory Budget (Cambridge, Massachusetts)

### Challenges

- Ensuring engagement and representation of diverse community members and addressing actual or perceived NIMBYism.
- Establishing support from municipal government.
- Achieving ongoing participation from underrepresented communities.

### Benefits

- Provides an accessible entry point to municipal politics and community leadership.
- Provides a straightforward mechanism for community input into allocation of public funds.

## COMMUNITY RESOURCE BOARDS

### How it Works

Community resource boards were operational in Vancouver for a short period of time in the 1970s. Established by the (then) Minister of Human Resources, community resource boards were offices that sought to decentralize, integrate, and increase public participation in the delivery of human services under the mandate of the provincial government. Decentralization was achieved through the establishment of local resource boards to oversee human service provision in defined communities, while integration was achieved by tasking these local chapters with overseeing and coordinating the delivery of a broad variety of wraparound services including housing, family services, addictions and mental health services, and services for people with developmental disabilities. Finally, public participation was achieved by public election of resource board members from the local community and further encouraged by hosting regular public resource board hearings, which functioned as forums for community issues and service complaints.

In Vancouver the community resource board project involved establishing the Vancouver Resource Board to oversee, administer, and direct the provision of a variety of statutory and non-statutory services in Vancouver with delegated authority, staff, and funding from the Ministry of Human Resources. The Vancouver Resource Board in turn oversaw multiple community resource boards (including Grandview, Woodland, and Strathcona), which were empowered to oversee the delivery of services in their local communities and allocate funds to the provision of human services.

Local community resource boards were made up of 10-15 elected members from the local community, and the central Vancouver Resource Board consisted of both representatives from each local community board and ministry staff, social service representatives, local government representatives, and advocacy groups. Resource Boards were able to hire staff, allocate funding to community projects and initiatives, conduct needs analysis and make policy recommendations to the minister, and determine how policy was implemented at the local level through the arbitration of service complaints and response to community concerns.

### Examples

- The Vancouver Resource Board

### Challenges

- Ensuring engagement and representation of diverse community members and addressing actual or perceived NIMBYism.
- Establishing support from the provincial government.
- Achieving ongoing participation from underrepresented communities.
- Preserving funding and mandate across government cycles.
- There can be complexity and difficulty of implementation.

### Benefits

- This is a mechanism for local communities to direct provincial funding.
- The accountability of service provision can be directed to local communities.
- It maximizes local community input into community service provision.
- It is a natural venue to build alliances between grassroots community, community service providers, activists, and multiple levels of government.

## CONCLUSION

A community like the Downtown Eastside is ideally equipped to define its own needs, goals, and aspirations and to evaluate current and potential mechanisms to meet them. The ongoing investment and engagement of the grassroots community is itself a measure of success and value for any community amenity, service, agency, or institution. That same community investment and engagement is also a key driver of sustainability across changing governments, funding cycles, and policy environments. The genuine engagement of the diversity of the grassroots community in local governance and service provision is critical to the continuing resilience of the Downtown Eastside.

This report outlines four models of community empowerment that go beyond traditional community consultation practices. While each has challenges and benefits, they also have the potential to allow policy choices and resource allocations to be meaningfully influenced by the same people who will be primarily impacted by those decisions at the community level. The challenge is to avoid tokenizing half measures and the rigidity of broader power structures that allow paternalistic models of governance and service provision to simply replicate themselves in more palatable forms.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- DTES Local Area Plan, City of Vancouver (2014).  
<https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/profile-dtes-local-area-2013.pdf>
- Reforming Human Services: the experience of the community resource boards in BC  
Michael Clague, et al., UBC Press (1984).
- Fixed in Place: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the Community of Clients  
GW Roe *BC Studies* no 164 (Winter 2009/10).
- onBoard Canada  
[onboardcanada.ca](http://onboardcanada.ca)
- Lets Speak Up!  
[http://dteshouse.ca/?page\\_id=2087](http://dteshouse.ca/?page_id=2087)
- Community Resource Board Act  
<http://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/93consol17/93consol17/79058#section14>
- A Case Study of Non Profit Organizations in the Downtown Eastside (Masters thesis)  
Allan Weinschenker *University of Manitoba* (2009).
- Office of Neighbourhoods  
<http://www.cityofvancouver.us/cmo/page/office-neighborhoods>
- Empower LA Neighbourhood Councils  
[Empowerla.org](http://empowerla.org)
- Office of Community Engagement and Civic Life  
<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/civic/>
- Edmonton Community Leagues  
[efcl.org](http://efcl.org)
- Honolulu Neighbourhood Boards  
<https://www.honolulu.gov/nco/boards.html>
- Washington DC Advisory Neighbourhoods Commission  
[anc.dc.gov](http://anc.dc.gov)
- PB NYC  
<https://pbnyc2019.d21.me>  
<https://council.nyc.gov/pb/>
- Porto Alegre: Participatory Budgeting and the Challenge of Sustaining Transformative Change.  
Rebecca Abers, et al., *World Resource Institute* (2018).
- PB Scotland  
[pbscotland.scot](http://pbscotland.scot)
- Downtown Eastside: 260 agencies, housing sites crowd Downtown Eastside. Lori Culbert and Peter McMartin *The Vancouver Sun* 01.15.2015

## EVENTS

- Our Place Our Voice Our Path  
Community Governance Forum  
May 4, 2018
- Our Place Developing a Model for Community Governance Forum  
Jun 13, 2019
- Vancouver City Planning Commission  
Inclusive Communities Forum  
September 19, 2018
- Inclusive Governance in the Non Profit and Charitable Sector Panel  
November 20, 2017
- Inclusive Governance in the Charitable and Non Profit Sector in the Downtown Eastside  
February 7, 2019

## ABOUT VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.



**LEVEL**

AN INITIATIVE OF **vancouver**  
foundation

200-475 W. Georgia Street,  
Vancouver, BC, V6B 4M9  
604.688.2204

[level@vancouverfoundation.ca](mailto:level@vancouverfoundation.ca)  
[www.levelvf.ca](http://www.levelvf.ca)

 @LEVELVF

 @LEVEL\_VF

 @LEVEL\_VF