

# Holding space in challenging times

Insights for dealing with change in community development and innovation work

## About this series:

In the midst of the unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis, the Caring Community Challenge was launched, asking the question: how can we look after each other better in the places where we are? This 4-part Social R&D Learning Series will offer insights on key learning moments on the journey. The Caring Community Challenge was facilitated using the UpSocial lab methodology developed in Barcelona, Spain.

## Process in brief

In March 2020, the Caring Community Challenge was launched, a collaboration between Balsam Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Unison Health and Community Services, UpSocial and UpSocial Canada: a MakeWay Foundation program.

The Challenge followed a 6-phase methodology that involves:

- convening stakeholders around an issue of interest
- developing a Key Research Question
- searching the world for innovations that have answered that question
- selecting the best placed innovations for testing in the local community
- piloting the chosen innovations
- looking to scale the outcomes if successful.

In June 2021, our Caring Community Cohort selected [Post Bellum](#) and [Link Generations](#) for testing in the community of Bathurst and Finch. Read more about our outcomes in the Challenge Report. Visit [OurNeighboursStories.ca](https://www.ourneighboursstories.ca) or email [gcahill@upsocial.org](mailto:gcahill@upsocial.org)

## Background

The Caring Community Challenge faced a number of unpredictable hurdles in its quest to realize its goals. As a reminder, the partners had set out to address the growing rates of social isolation in Toronto by looking for ways local communities could look after each other better in the places where they live, work and play. From the outset, the pandemic was easily the largest hurdle we faced, and it would force adaptation of our programming every step of the way.

## COVID-19 Strikes Toronto

UpSocial Canada and Balsam Foundation initiated the Request to Participate (RTP) in March 2020, just as the pandemic reached the city. Programs and community engagement activities were suspended everywhere. Unison and other community service organizations shifted their focus to crisis response. Given the global health emergency, after UpSocial closed the RTP and confirmed the partnership with Unison's "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" program, Balsam and UpSocial were asked to wait four months before onboarding the team and getting started.

The lockdowns, social distancing rules and other public health measures created a considerable barrier to community engagement in the ways we were familiar with and which have proven to be effective in the past: hosting in-person meetings, community festivals, sharing food, knocking on doors; these outreach strategies felt like a dream belonging to another era. The need to connect and care for one another, on the other hand, was greater than ever.

We had to reinvent ourselves and become more familiar with the world of digital connection. It wasn't easy and required flexibility, openness and the ability to pivot. Fortunately, residents involved in "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" were already using Zoom and showed tremendous resiliency in learning and adapting to the new routine.

A second challenge Unison faced was the suspension of funding for "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" program. This announcement was made in January 2021, just six months after the Challenge began in earnest, and it meant the planned 18-month engagement with UpSocial Canada would be dramatically curtailed.

Adding to the shock factor, the funder only gave the Hub four months to wrap their community engagement programming; very little time to close thoughtfully. Thankfully in April 2021, the funder granted an extension until the end of October 2021, allowing more time to solidify program goals and objectives and move them forward.

## Our response

### Mindset Shift!

We met change and made it our companion throughout the process; learning to always expect the unexpected. Our cohort's shift to Zoom was quite remarkable as many of our resident leaders are seniors over 70 years old. Online working sessions using Jam Board and other methods were quite fun and successful.

### Get creative!

We accepted our limitations and became creative when looking for solutions. When Unison's community engagement funding decision came down, we were able to reallocate resources previously earmarked for travel and in-person meetings, to hire a volunteer coordinator who worked with local partners to support the pilot rollout. This enabled Challenge continuity. Despite the funding decision, all partners maintained a relationship with Unison as the project co-host and we continue to look for ways to engage each other despite their reduced capacity.

### Accentuate the positive!

We flipped the script on our engagement hurdles, leveraging them wherever possible. One positive outcome in hosting online sessions was that it gave us the ability to invite partners and participants from other Canadian cities and from Europe into our meetings. We just had to ensure the timing worked for everyone's time zone.

### Keep talking!

UpSocial Canada met with the "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" project lead regularly to discuss progress. Each partner continued to keep the Challenge cohort (respectively agency partners and residents/local partners) in the loop. We always kept engaging partners in many different ways, ensuring they felt valued and involved.

The thing that was most surprising was how engaged and committed all the community members were throughout the process. There were some very long Zoom sessions that would have been easy to skip or be disengaged in, but all cohort members brought a lot of energy, fascinating questions, and a strong commitment to the project.  
- Balsam Foundation

## Our learning

### Engagement takes time

Fostering new community-based projects is like a slow brewing tea. It takes time but when it's ready, the results are outstanding. With intention and attention, everything comes together and creates that beautiful aromatic mixture. It takes time to build relationships, create a shared vision, get everyone on board, find and select the projects, engage partners, and implement the pilots. Yet, all indications are that the project methodology and approach was successful in maintaining engagement with the cohort and facilitating their participation in the outcomes.

### Go with the flow

Staying calm when things didn't go our way or took longer than anticipated was an important lesson to learn. We had to pause several times: waiting for Unison to put out COVID fires; for participants to respond to our invitation; to find pilot partners, and more. Sometimes it was stressful, but we learned that when we plant the right seeds in fertile soil, things grow in their own time.

## What surprised us?

Despite tremendous challenges, our community cohort and pilot partners remained committed to the process, injecting the Challenge with passion and enthusiasm, helping us continue to move forward. As COVID forced us all online, there was some concern that the process would suffer from disengagement. Rates of Zoom fatigue and anxiety were high. Yet, through every online workshop and in the space in-between, where a lot of feedback was requested, we maintained the full participation of the cohort.

## Mission Critical

### Community engagement investment is a priority

Due to Unison's dedicated community engagement programming, they enjoyed many long-term partnerships in the neighbourhood. These relationships helped us identify cohort participants, pilot partners and other resources. Frankly, it would be impossible to run this Challenge or like-project with this level of resident involvement without the funding dedicated to Community Engagement. It was disappointing to see that funding end when the need to interact with residents, particularly in times of crisis, is so clear.

### Process provided anchor in rough seas

Our anchor was UpSocial Canada, who kept the project on track. They ensured a diversity of invited cohort participants, they searched every avenue for pilot and scaling partners, and they hired and managed a volunteer coordinator for the pilots. These were all critical components of the project's success.

We also strongly relied on the impeccable research structure and support from UpSocial in Barcelona. The variety and richness of the programs they found globally were incredible. Their expertise, guidance, and assistance at various project stages, including facilitating planning sessions and other stakeholder engagements, was very useful.

# About the authors

## Mandana Attar Zadeh

Mandana Attar Zadeh is a community development expert, empowerment coach and social justice advocate. She is the founder of Flourishing Women Global. For over a decade, Mandana worked at Unison leading community engagement and neighbourhood improvement in the Bathurst-Finch region; initially designated a Priority Neighbourhood by the City of Toronto, it was later upgraded to an Emerging Neighbourhood. In her community development work, Mandana has been instrumental in fostering numerous community-building initiatives, including establishing and coordinating mixed resident/Agency networks. She has facilitated and supported the establishment of various resident-led groups and associations as well. More at: [www.thefourishingwomen.com](http://www.thefourishingwomen.com)

## Geraldine Cahill

Geraldine Cahill is Director of UpSocial Canada, facilitating multi-stakeholder, action-oriented social projects designed to address complex problems. Prior to launching UpSocial Canada, Geraldine was deeply immersed in the Canadian social innovation community, supporting the development of programs, policies and an enabling environment for enterprises and initiatives with Social Innovation Generation. In 2017 she co-authored Social Innovation Generation: Fostering a Canadian Ecosystem for Systems Change. Geraldine currently serves on the Advisory Board of Liisbeth MX and on the Jane's Walk Steering Committee. More at: [www.geraldinecahill.com](http://www.geraldinecahill.com)