

Setting the table

Creating the conditions for constructive collaboration

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 or email gcahill@upsocial.org

The UpSocial Caring Community Challenge was launched by the Balsam Foundation in early 2020. Given the Foundation's interest in community well-being, establishing a challenge focused on how to leverage community assets to foster greater social connection was appealing. The publication of the 2018 Toronto Social Capital Survey by The Toronto Foundation also provided inspiration and instruction.

Toronto is not alone in confronting the complex challenges of a growing city. Quality of life factors compete with business interests. Failing infrastructure competes with critical care services. The need to meet urgent priorities jockeys for position with the long term changes needed to ensure prosperity. These pressures have only been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of this unprecedented crisis, the Caring Community Challenge was launched, asking the question: how can we look after each other better in the places where we live, work and play?



TEN KEYS

 to Unlock the Potential of a Connected Community

UpSocial Canada is a social lab practice deploying a methodology developed by the Barcelona-based UpSocial team more than decade ago. The process begins with a call to participate; this call is intentionally broad, inviting stakeholders across sectors and disciplines to a shared table to explore an issue of interest.

Our question was co-created by a small group of collaborators involved in Toronto place-making and community engagement. Centering on the need to look after each other better was intentional; we know people are looking after one another in many different ways; we were aiming to enhance the capacity to do that, not replace it or suggest we had to start from scratch.

It was also critical to approach communities with eyes and ears open, recognizing that we were far from experts on the issues facing all neighbourhoods. We approached the [Centre for Connected Communities](#) for advice and attended to their 10 Keys to Unlock the Potential of a Connected Community. (pictured above)

The first step in our process of engagement was the drawing up of a Request to Participate (RTP), our version of an RFP, which was extended to community service organizations across Toronto.

To ensure fidelity to the 10 Keys, and especially to engage authentically, we had to partner with local community leaders who could reach residents in their neighbourhoods.

In the midst of extending the RTP, the COVID-19 pandemic reached the city. Community service organizations understandably turned their attention to crisis response. Our pool of potential partners was significantly reduced.

Despite this, we received applications from several organizations, with three shortlisted for deeper consideration. In the first iteration of our process, we actually believed we could engage three organizations and three neighbourhoods at the same time. Yet, after discussion with the Centre for Connected Communities, we decided that engagement in one neighbourhood would be intensive enough; spreading ourselves too thin across the city would overwhelm our capacity for meaningful collaboration.

The decision to invite Unison Health and Community Services and particularly their "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" Program, into the process was based on their years of engagement within the North York community, their contagious enthusiasm for participating in the Challenge and their geographical location, pulling us out of the downtown core.

Upon solidifying the partnership with Unison we were asked to wait four months while they tended to COVID-19 related activities. During that time, UpSocial Canada conducted community research where it quickly became apparent that in-person research was going to be sidelined. The need to keep community members safe prevented the kind of on-the-street conversation-based research we had originally planned. This safety-first approach would impact the project throughout the next 2 years.

At Balsam, we were interested in how participation in the UpSocial Challenge process could have a positive impact for community members – not just in reaching a solution but how by being engaged in the actual process created real social benefits like connection, learning, etc.

We were also curious to see what was possible at the neighbourhood level, largely based on volunteer participation. – Balsam Foundation

Following the emergency response work executed by Unison, UpSocial Canada began a process of on-boarding the team - introducing them to the UpSocial methodology. The first phase needed their considerable network knowledge, as we developed the community cohort that would guide all decision-making to come.

The desired elements in the generation of the community cohort were:

- Diversity of experience to see the Challenge invitation from multiple perspectives
- Resident representation
- Organizational representation: community groups, local council, local library, volunteer associations, business community, faith communities
- External subject matter expertise in areas of potential Challenge application eg. seniors, urban development

Once the cohort was identified, an invitation was extended and a first convening designed. The first convening in any UpSocial challenge determines the scope and focus of the work.

Taking the broad invitation: *How can we look after each other better in the places where we are* - the 2-session gathering established how the community of Bathurst and Finch would interpret the question for themselves. Due to the ongoing and widening pandemic, we convened the meeting by Zoom and entered in.

What did we learn?

Relationships Come First

Most of what we have described above took place before we reached the first phase of the methodology itself. All we have outlined is part of setting the table for a useful and collaborative process.

At minimum, our Challenge was expected to last 18 months, so it was most important to take the time to establish trust and set expectations across the board. The key to success was the foundational partnership with Unison's "Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch" program. UpSocial Canada and partners had to move at their pace. This established a strong base for moving forward together.

Open methodology

UpSocial's methodology has been proven across multiple projects in various jurisdictions worldwide. Yet it's not a closed process. Sharing the methodology and being open to adjustment and redesign is critical in creating a right-sized challenge. In preparatory discussions with challenge partners and the Centre for Connected Communities, we designed in the RTP process to find community partners. This approach has not been used in previous UpSocial projects, but provided critical connection to local residents.

10 Keys in practice

It was important to our project team and partners to adhere to the 10 Keys Principles as much as possible in the execution of our challenge. Reaching out to community organizations and inviting them to co-host the process was priority one. But adhering to the principles throughout meant designing a process that was inclusive along all lines: language, technology, decision-making; The residents in the cohort led decision-making regarding local needs, desired outcomes and innovation selection.

Dance of Intention and Emergence

The pandemic would do more than just force us all to learn Zoom and Jam Board quickly, it would require us to dance between setting intention and being open to emergence. The community research process we designed ahead of the first convening was too complex and too tied to design itself rather than utility. It was shelved in favour of establishing a "good-enough, min-specs" approach. And focusing on deepening relationships with resident leaders who had worked closely with the Bathurst Finch Hub, proved more meaningful and more reliable over time.

Balance local knowledge with supportive, provocative outsiders

The development of the Caring Community Cohort was very important. While the centrality of resident voices was paramount, the challenge also required the engagement of local organizations and institutions that could support operationalizing the outcomes. Additionally, some external expertise was thought useful to help guide the development of the key research question and inform the selection of innovations. The experts were selected based on the research conducted in the local community which revealed demographic and urban landscape considerations which would impact our process - for example: the high number of seniors living in high rise buildings, very large tower-based communities, poor access to retail and food options.

What surprised us The "Yes" Reception

While social innovation labs are discussed in the enabling ecosystem of nonprofits and philanthropy, they are a relatively new endeavour in wider circles. As such, launching a process of engagement and inviting community service agencies to partner for an 18-month project where the outcomes were unknown, was not a sure bet.

Despite this, the RTP received a strong list of respondents. The candidates were keen to get into a deeper engagement that could help them address systemic issues organizations generally ameliorate with their programs.

Once engaged, Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch program and UpSocial Canada were delighted that most of the organizations and residents asked into the process also said yes. There was a curiosity about the approach and a strong desire to tackle the challenge of social isolation.

What we couldn't do without

Years of resident relationship development

When partnering with organizations, fostering a spirit of collaboration is critical work. Setting agreed upon expectations and clear lines of communication should be part of any good relationship. Yet, the Caring Community Challenge needed more than that; it needed authentic engagement with residents.

In partnering with Unison we benefited from their United Way-supported Our Strong and Beautiful Bathurst-Finch program, which itself grew out of Action for Neighbourhood Change - a preliminary version also supported by United Way. Unison had been running resident programs for more than 15 years. UpSocial Canada did not take those relationships for granted, and certainly recognized it could not run a challenge without them

Foundation engagement and understanding

Beyond funding, the Balsam Foundation was an active partner throughout the full process, beginning with hosting the blue sky session that led to the challenge invitation: how can we look after each other better in the places where we are?

As mentioned above, the original RTP listed the possibility of hosting up to 3 neighbourhood organizations through the engagement. However, after receiving advice from the Centre for Connected Communities, UpSocial Canada changed tack. Despite this change, the foundation expressed understanding and continued their support. While this may seem a small adjustment, it was a significant shift in expectation and UpSocial Canada deeply appreciated their understanding.

UpSocial Canada

About the authors

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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.

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.