

My Hub, My Community

**Elevated Together: The Ripple Effects of
Collaborative Flying**

Rexdale Community Hub
2022-2023

Remarks from the Hub Director

2022-2023
Total Hub Visits:
216,398

The global community continues navigating the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, witnessing transformative shifts in nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Reflecting on our pre-pandemic work routines, the very thought of holding our meetings, services, and events online was barely conceivable. Yet here we are, driven by technological advances into unexplored domains, experiencing a mix of exhilaration and uncertainty as we sail through this evolving era.

The evolution of science and technology is consistently shaping our personal, work and social lives in our communities. At Rexdale Community Hub, we've felt these waves of change. They've manifested as new collaborations, innovative initiatives taking off the ground, strengthened connections, and newly forged relationships, primarily made possible by technology's power to transcend geographical constraints. Let's delve into the post-pandemic journey of Rexdale Community Hub and explore the transformative ripple impact of our work within the community.

This year, we joined our collaborative forces with partners like plazaPOPS, Albion Islington Square BIA, Catch the Fire, North Etobicoke Resident Council, Panorama Garden, and Hub partner agencies. Together with over 50 community partners and local businesses, we hosted more than 30 virtual and in-person events. These celebrations included Black History Month,

International Women's Day, Asian Heritage Month, Indigenous Cultural Awareness, Summer and Fall Festivals, Canada Day, Summer of Innovation: Back to School, All Candidates Event, and winter festivities. Our events and outreach, which attracted over 9,500 residents, celebrated post-pandemic interactions and strengthened our community's social, cultural, economic, and civic ties, emphasizing care and connection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rexdale Community Hub has played a pivotal role in coordinating emergency food response in North Etobicoke's most at-risk and racialized communities. Working alongside Hub partner agencies, North Etobicoke Cluster partners, local ethnic businesses, and restaurants, the Hub swiftly shifted its focus to procuring culturally appropriate food hampers, prepared meals, organizing and streamlining the distribution and delivery of these essential supports. This rapid response addressed food security for thousands of community members in dire need. This year, through our Days of Joy and Afterschool Meals Program, we provided over 10,000 nutritious meals and culturally tailored grocery hampers to children, youth, and vulnerable members of our community

Food insecurity remains widespread in North Etobicoke even as we transition from immediate crisis response.



Based on our firsthand experience in understanding the food insecurity challenge in our community, we've observed a vital need to enhance local capacity and infrastructure to ensure consistent, equitable access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food. We need a shift from short-term fixes to sustainable, community-driven, long-lasting public policy solutions.

In line with a broader vision of post-pandemic rebuilding, with United Way Greater Toronto support this year, we aimed to conduct a thorough, community-informed study to evaluate the feasibility of a Community Grocery Store model in enhancing access to affordable and culturally appropriate food. Our objective is to develop a post-pandemic 'Community Grocery Store' model utilizing existing local resources ranging from local small retail stores to local food growers in our community. In this initiative, we've engaged with over 30 diverse stakeholders spanning government, business, education, and community sectors. Together, we established the Food Action and Advisory Collaborative to study the viability of the Community Grocery Store model.

Since the inception of the Hub, our STEM Club, focusing on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, has actively supported hundreds of youth in Etobicoke North. Many of these young individuals are now on the path to pursuing STEM-related education and professions. This year, our Summer of Innovation camp collaborated with NACI Robotics, the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto, TRCA Community Learning, Arts Etobicoke, and other Hub partner organizations. This collaboration drew over 600 families from North Etobicoke, providing them with back-to-school supplies. Additionally, over 100 youth participated in the Summer of Innovation: Back to School event. A notable mention is Saheed Quadri from our STEM Planning Committee, who has been

accepted into the Mechatronics Engineering program at the University of Waterloo. We're incredibly proud of Saheed Quadri and celebrate his achievements.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted social connections in the community. However, our neighbourhood engagement initiatives with the North Etobicoke Resident Council and Pod Organizers consistently engaged the community, providing support and resources. The bi-weekly Solidarity Check-ins allowed 9 Pod Organizers to collaborate, share resources, and learn from one another. Despite facing unique challenges, they maintained a unified front, emphasizing the importance of interconnectivity. Due to their relentless community engagement efforts, they connected with over 3,000 residents from six neighbourhoods in North Etobicoke.

Our 50-plus North Etobicoke Resident Council members continued advocating for local needs and implementing changes, like adding bus shelters on Kipling Avenue. This proactive approach showcased how targeted interventions can lead to broader community change. Our partnership with plazaPOPS and Albion Islington Square BIA turned underutilized spaces into vibrant community hubs. Our Hub model ripple effect became evident as local businesses benefited from increased foot traffic, and the community got to appreciate and use these rejuvenated spaces. This initiative engaged over 3,000 residents in various events and activities throughout the summer and fall months and created employment opportunities for youth and residents in our community.



In partnership with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), we embarked on the “Growing Healthy Towers” project, understanding the social determinants of health for residents of high-rise towers in North Etobicoke. We engaged a dedicated group of 12 tower residents through our deep connections with the local community. These community leaders gathered feedback from 97 surveys, shedding light on the concerns, challenges, and potential solutions for residents’ health. This initiative underlined the Hub’s dedication to actively involving community members in pivotal roles and fostering a deeper community connection. It further showcased our commitment to advocating for the unique challenges faced by tower communities.

The welcoming community spaces of the Hub drew in over 30 organizations, grassroots groups, and local residents, bringing additional community programs to our doorstep. Moreover, throughout 2022-2023, the Hub witnessed over 216,000 resident visits for our services and programs, magnifying our shared impact in Etobicoke North. A heartfelt round of applause goes to our dedicated Hub staff for their invaluable contributions and unwavering commitment to our partners and the broader community. Their enthusiasm and love for their work shine through daily.

The progress we’ve made together this year is truly commendable. I want to express my profound gratitude to our 250 volunteers, community animators/ambassadors, and pod organizers. Their steadfast dedication, tireless efforts, and unwavering commitment to the Hub’s vision and mission are exemplary. They’re not just making a splash but setting off ripple effects of positive change throughout our community!

I am profoundly thankful to our residents, Hub and community partners, as well as our key funders, the City of Toronto and United Way Greater Toronto. My heartfelt appreciation extends to our Hub Board of Directors for their exceptional leadership and unwavering dedication to the Hub and the community. Working alongside such a diverse and exceptional team is a privilege. They have been our guiding light through these challenging times.

I sincerely appreciate our auditors, OASIS LLP, for bringing expertise and insights to our audit process. Additionally, I extend a special thank you to our graphic designer, Bettina Klug, for her elegant portrayal of the community’s narratives in our AGM reports.



Finally, my heartfelt thanks to the City of Toronto for honoring the Rexdale Community Hub, our partners, and the community with the Toronto Community Champion Award. This recognition not only celebrates our collaborative efforts during the pandemic in North Etobicoke but also serves as a reminder of our continued commitment and duty to nurture and sustain our collective endeavors within the community.

In the end, looking back on our decade-long journey here in North Etobicoke, we can clearly see the powerful ripple effect a single community hub can have on the lives of its residents. Let's continue joining hands and uplifting each other as a community, magnifying our collective aspirations and strengthening our resilience through the Hub - our haven for cultivating community visions!

Thank you!

Amra Munwar
Rexdale Community Hub Director



Post-Pandemic Flying: The Rexdale Community Hub Goes the Distance

By: Russ Mitchell



The ability to think innovatively outside of Rwanda's usual transportation modes to get supplies to rural areas in record time, has been the passion of the American-based health logistics company, Zipline. Through key partnerships with the Rwanda Ministry of Health and the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority, Zipline glider drones (better known as 'Zips') are literally being launched into the sky every 90 seconds from one of two distribution centres that supply the needs of district hospitals and rural community health centers around the country.

Back here in Etobicoke, our own kind of 'distribution centre' – the Rexdale Community Hub – has had a great year of post-pandemic recovery with our own mission again fully off the ground, and supplying the needs of our local communities. Take for example our civic engagement ...

Responsiveness

One of the Hub's goals has been to strengthen civic engagement in the community, especially as it pertains to voter education. This year we planted 'seeds' – community engagement tools – that helped grow local civic engagement as the Hub committed to using the 'good soil' of the community. Although the Hub is usually known as a centre for the delivery of programs and services, for many residents it also has increasingly become a resource base. Through the Hub's Collaborative Event Planning Committee we partnered with Toronto Metropolitan University's (TMU) Democratic Engagement Exchange, to put community engagement tools into the hands of local resident leaders. When

TMU offered the Hub a Voter Pop-Up Training event, the Event Planning Committee suggested that the North Etobicoke Resident Council host the event. Over 50 community leaders attended this train-the-trainer event, and at the end each attendee left with a Vote Pop-Up Kit to engage with people in their own sphere of influence. Moreover, a couple of community leaders later enthusiastically set up a Voter Pop-Up station in our gymnasium, as part of the meet-and-greet portion of our municipal election's All Candidates Event. This is the Hub sowing resource 'seeds' widely, causing a ripple effect where life-on-life opportunities spread out and are nurtured across the neighbourhoods we serve. Hidden in our work is the energy to advance what we do each year.

Networking

Networking is a bit like the energy that catapults Zips into the air, producing a forward motion of 0-65 mph in .33 seconds that sets the drone immediately at cruising speed. Like the drones, the Rexdale Hub has been reaching its own 'cruising speed' thanks in part, to the continuing collaborative work of the City of Toronto and United Way who facilitate the North Etobicoke (NE) Cluster. The Hub is part of this supportive work which aligns local agencies and organizations on a mission of collectively addressing community needs.

This year Hub staff collaboratively worked with Cluster partners on a variety of work groups (NE Mental Health Work Group, Food Security Table, Youth Leads Work Group, and the NE Website Development Work Group) to strengthen our focus on the different priority areas. The Hub also provided regular updates in the Cluster meetings, bringing back resources to residents while also sharing on-going feedback on programs that affect them. For example, there was a growing need for capacity building opportunities in the neighbourhood. As a response, the Cluster was able to arrange Food Handling Trainings, Mental Health First Aid, and personal development courses like ChangeItUp.



The Hub
connected with
4,500+ residents
via collaborative
events and activities

Serving

Speaking of capacity building, Zipline has increased their flight capacity over the past six years so that when an order for medical supplies is received, they can deliver extremely quickly. Here is how they do it in seven steps: 1. Order is received; 2. Order is packed; 3. Order is passed out for placing in the belly of the drone; 4. Packed drone placed on launcher; 5. Wings are attached, battery secured followed by nosecone; 6. Pre-flight safety check is done; 7. Drone is launched ... and all within 90 seconds!!

Last December, the Hub initiated a special holiday food hamper distribution called 'Days of Joy'. The theme built upon our successful 'Summer of Joy' plazaPOPS engagement activities. Like the launch of a drone, our 'Days of Joy' also involved a series of steps, from ordering to the packing of hampers, and finally their distribution over a 2-week period. When it comes to delivery, Zipline drops their parachute packages within the accuracy of two parking spaces. For us, you'll be glad to know that our 'Days of Joy' stayed on the ground ... where we worked alongside 13 participating organizations who filled cars and vans then distributed 700 hampers to the most vulnerable and needy residents ... right to their door! Over four days, approximately 60 volunteers from Catch the Fire Church, plus local residents, gathered together to pack and deliver multiple hampers for families and seniors. All of this was doable through a very generous donation by Catch the Fire Church topped up with additional funding from the Hub.

Modeling

Crucial to the success and safety of Zips is the communication between the control tower (at the Zipline distribution centre) with the Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority. This is to prevent mid-air collisions with other aircraft. Zips use a fixed-wing drone model, and generally use pre-determined flight paths uploaded ahead of takeoff. The model and system and fit together for great success.

Model/system ... it is the very the thing the Hub began exploring this year. Namely, how to, in our current environment, successfully address food insecurity in our communities. This resulted in the launching of our Community Grocery Store Model Project. Initially, this 3-year United Way funded project will involve undertaking an inclusive, locally informed feasibility study. The study will assess the potential impacts and viability of a community grocery store model in strengthening access to affordable, culturally appropriate food over the long term among food insecure populations in North Etobicoke. Key to this initiative is our partnering with existing local food system services structures, and the field-testing of a prototype model that seeks to meet local needs.

Our long-term goal is a food secure North Etobicoke, and our shorter-term goal focuses on the development of a community grocery store. In addition, our have focused on empowering local residents as some of our key stakeholders, who are both key informants and involved in the collection of relevant food data, as part of the newly formed Food Action and Advisory Collaborative (FAAC). This contributes to a sense of local ownership – one in which residents can feel that steps are being taken to address their needs, that they are being taken seriously, and that they have a decision-making role in shaping the kind of community they want to live in.

The FAAC also includes a wide range of other stakeholders who can provide advice, expertise, guidance, and support throughout the



The Hub engaged with **30+ diverse sector stakeholders**, establishing the FAAC to design the Community Grocery Store initiative and spearhead local solutions to combat food insecurity within the community



planning and delivery of the Community Grocery Store Model project. Together they will be responsible for overall planning, implementing, and evaluating the project activities, and provide useful oversight for the project.

In this first year, we have focused primarily on building relationships with our stakeholders, determining a feasibility study research framework and plan with the help of Toronto Metropolitan University staff, and with consultants been thinking through what a workable community grocery store model concept might look like. None of this would have been possible without the continued support of FoodShare, North York Harvest, Al-Meezan Grocery Store, local residents (re North Etobicoke Resident Council), City of Toronto, Toronto Metropolitan University research team members, our project consultants, Hub staff, and other stakeholders. Over the next couple of years, we'll be fleshing out through iterations of prototypes what works and what doesn't. We intend to culminate the project with stakeholders collaboratively designing an action plan, where we pilot a real grocery store experience for community residents.

Engaging

Like the constant launching of drones, so this year has been a constant buzz of activity as the Hub reached out across the neighbourhoods and engaged hundreds of local residents through our signature collaborative community events. From our International Women's Day through to an Indigenous Wellness event, there has been something for everyone and every interest!

It is worth noting that our first large in-person collaborative community event hosted together with our partners for 2023 was our Black History Month event. Unlike Zips that fly in any weather, inclement winter weather meant we were grounded! However, although the poor weather necessitated a change of date for the event and had an impact on both the program content (e.g. performers, vendors), it didn't hinder in any way the attendance by community members!



Between April 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023, Rexdale Community Hub delivered 1,395 grocery hampers to those in need and supplied 7,780 hot meals to afterschool initiatives run by RCH agency collaborators and diverse community organizations.

"Going to the after school programs at the Hub was my favorite part of my day. At school, I always sat in the corner of the lunch room to make sure no one saw me and my lunch, which was always just a juice bottle. I would always try to skip lunch to make sure my friends didn't see me. But coming to the Hub after school to play basketball was my favorite thing. I always got to sit down with my friends and have a warm meal. I didn't have to hide from anyone because I was eating what they all had. The staff at the Hub always shared any extra bread or fruits with me so that I could take it home and give it to my younger sister. I really want to say thank you for this program and I hope that I can come to the Hub all the time to sit with my friends and enjoy lunch with them." - F.S (Youth of Mount Olive-Silverstone-Jamestown)

"It is so heartwarming to see this program in Rexdale. Gaining access to food was difficult enough during the pandemic; however, finding culturally appropriate food was a bigger worry of mine as a single mother. Food banks and other resources often shared canned items or food that my family could not eat due to religious restrictions. However, the food items in the grocery hampers were not only fresh, but culturally relevant. I was able to sit down with my children and have a fresh meal all due to this Food Program and the efforts of the Rexdale Community Hub." - O.M. (Resident of Elms-Old Rexdale)

More than 600+ residents came to the event, with at least 230 completing the voluntary in-person registration process. Every person who used their skills, gifts, and talents on the day, like managing sound, serving food, or welcoming guests, joined the Hub in being a village for a moment in time, to flourish, and to show the best of community life!

Reaching

With a round trip reach of approximately 160 km, a Zip's mission isn't complete without being safely back at its base distribution centre. A sophisticated GPS tracks the drone's arrival and just at the right moment activates arms, snagging the drone and bringing it to a complete stop ready for collection by staff. Likewise, the Hub throughout this year has had its 'reach', characterised by our day-to-day responsiveness, networking, serving, modeling, and engaging - all within an ever-widening sphere of influence.

This year we celebrate a decade of the Rexdale Hub successfully going the distance and avoiding any major 'snag lines'. As someone once said, 'A *good* landing is one from which you can walk away. But a *great* landing is one after which they can use the plane again.' Thanks to the Rexdale Community Hub and our community members, we're ready to fly again. See you at the next launch!

Sources:

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Ripple Effects:

From Rexdale STEM member to Mechatronics Engineering at the University of Waterloo

By: Saheed Quadri

Growing up as a child in Nigeria, I had always been keen on math and sciences and curious as to how engineering allows to implement these concepts in innovating the world. However, being hindered by an avid lack of resources, it wasn't until schooling here in Canada that I got introduced to the field of engineering that has turned out to be my passion, Robotics and Mechatronics.

Hello fellow residents of North Etobicoke and beyond, I'm Saheed Quadri. Despite only being 18, I feel that I have already undergone many experiences that have changed me forever. The story you're about to read is one of overcoming challenges and finding success while pursuing my passion through the immense support of family, friends, and the Rexdale community. I'm incredibly honored to be able to share this story through the Rexdale Community Hub with you, the amazing reader.

Arriving at Pearson in November 2019, ill equipped for the Canadian winter, my first impression of Canada was less than sanguine. If you had asked me at that time what I thought the future held for me, I don't think my answer could be any more different from the reality that it is today. Fast-forward a couple years after immigrating into Canada as a refugee, my family moved to Rexdale, and I started high school at North Albion Collegiate Institute (NACI) in February 2021. With a keen interest already developed from middle school and my previous high school, I joined the NACI robotics team that was then starting back up after a 2-year hiatus caused by the COVID pandemic. I honestly consider this to be the single most important decision I made in high school.

Through robotics at NACI, I got to experience a lot in my field of interest, find a lot of opportunities, gain access to resources that allowed me to learn, express my passion, and make important connections. In fact, it was through robotics that I got introduced to the Rexdale Community Hub. The connection started after we got invited to hold a presentation booth as a local robotics team at the yearly Summer of Innovation event hosted by the Hub.

A short while after this exciting event, Amra Munawar, the Hub's Executive Director, invited the students on our team to become STEM Club members and introduced to us the plans for developing a Makerspace to help expand access to STEM education in our community. Little did I know how much more this new connection would turn out to be.

As a member (now Alumni) of the Rexdale Community Hub STEM Club, I was able to work on a few exciting projects aimed at making a positive educational impact on the community. We would hold weekly meetings to plan out and develop the details, space, and resources needed for our STEM nights, events, and Makerspace development plans. For me, it was interesting to see how we were able to strengthen and expand the existing relationship between NACI Robotics and the Hub. Notably to this point, I think back to how we were able to coordinate the development and production of 20 custom Mini-Robots (CAMRONS) by our team mentor Dave Barrat. These mini bots are now an incredible resource to the STEM Club for running and demonstrating a concise introduction to robotics series.

Furthermore, I vividly remember Amra introducing to me to the opportunity to take part in the Leading Social Justice Collective (LSJC) Program hosted by the University of Toronto's School of Cities. Being without any socio-political experience at that time, my response was an open-minded and resounding yes. Through the program, we embarked on our proposal for solving our community's food and job security crisis through a time-based reciprocity system - The Rexdale Timebank. Despite our graduation from the program in July 2023, I remain passionate as we continue to work on developing this incredibly ambitious initiative that is set to create a positive impact on the way people value each other's unique talents in our community.

Overall, these opportunities I experienced have unlocked new worlds for me, forever changing how I see and interact with it. My experiences with robotics at school, the Rexdale Community Hub STEM Club, and the LSJC program, have shown me how important the exposure and access to tools, mentors, and support can be to an individual's continued growth and understanding of technology, and their ability to make an impact. Exposure to resources and a space to create can be life changing, as I now know firsthand. Looking back at the initial passion projects I worked on to where I am now, I am truly able to recognize and sincerely appreciate the level of growth that these opportunities have granted me. As a high school graduate now attending my dream program - Mechatronics Engineering at the University of Waterloo, my goal is to act as a mentor for up and coming students in Rexdale, the same community that aided my growth despite the underprivileged conditions; to help them make the most out of STEM opportunities that present themselves in order to hone a chance at innovating new dreams and making HUGE impacts in our Rexdale community and beyond.

2022-2023

100+ youth involved
in the "Summer of
Innovation" camp and
activities related to
the STEM Planning
Committee

BACK TO SCHOOL EVENT
SUMMER OF INNOVATION
 FIRST 300 STUDENT GIVEAWAY
 Classes ranging from K-12
 Friday, September 16, 2022
 5:00PM to 8:00PM
 Located at: 950 Albion Rd, Etobicoke, ON M9V 1A7

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Summer of Innovation 2022

By: Nihar Seth

The Summer of Innovation was a transformative experience that significantly expanded my opportunities. Firstly, I had the privilege of contributing to the community by inspiring younger children to embrace STEM education. Sharing our hard work in developing robots was a source of immense pride, and witnessing the sheer joy it brought to children made the entire endeavor even more rewarding. Additionally, this experience honed my communication skills as I engaged with community members spanning all age groups. Moreover, it opened doors for me to join the STEM Planning committee, further broadening my horizons and creating numerous new prospects.





Creating Waves of Change: Hub's Ripple Effect on Our Community

By: Aiman Malhi

What is the ripple effect? Well one way to see it is a single act of kindness or effort leading to a broader-scale change. When a stone drops in a pond, concentric waves with both big and small drops are created that touch distant shores. In the same way, over the past year, Rexdale Community Hub engaged in several initiatives aimed at creating a ripple effect of transformation throughout North Etobicoke to foster positive change, resilience, resident empowerment and a sense of unity. Like the drops in a pond, we have been working to create a chain reaction of interconnectedness in our community. This year has served as a reminder that our actions, both big and small, not only create a lasting change on the lives of individuals but also the wider community.

Reach of Ripples

Over the past year, we have all faced unprecedented changes in our lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Much like dropping a stone in a calm pond, an initial small disturbance can set off a chain reaction leading to a wave that will extend far beyond the initial cause. Similarly, beyond the immediate health implications, one notable impact of the pandemic has been the issue of disconnection, increasing the risk of social isolation. In March 2020, when the nation grappled with a global lockdown, remote work and education, among other social distancing measures, traditional forms of engagement and disconnection emerged. The pandemic also exacerbated the digital divide and food insecurity issue in the community, leaving vulnerable populations further oppressed.

However, this year the Hub and Pod Organizers continued to work in partnership to build a healthy, informed, and connected community with a renewed sense of unity as we navigate these challenging times. Pod Organizers have maintained the connection with residents by providing material, social, and emotional support through daily check-ins via phone calls, WhatsApp, Facebook, and in person within their networks to provide consistent support, relay key community information, updates, and opportunities in an attempt to mitigate the risks of social isolation during COVID. Pod Organizers also focused their work on vaccine outreach, information sharing on ongoing issues in the community, like the Monkeypox crisis, while also connecting residents with virtual and in-person skill-building opportunities. Each organizer had over hundreds of residents in their pod network. As the material and social support were being shared within the networks, residents were being empowered to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, while also positively affecting the collective progress and well-being of the society as a whole-now that's a ripple effect!

Just like the water waves in the sea are connected while connecting distant regions through the universal language of motion, they are a reminder that our planet is an interconnected and dynamic system. Pod Organizers worked together and continued to participate in the bi-weekly Solidarity Check-ins to share information and resources with one another, give each other a chance to share their experiences and best practices as a Pod Organizer, and learn about various opportunities in the community. Although the organizers were dealing with different issues in their pods, they remained connected with one another to reach far-reaching effects in the wider community of North Etobicoke. Just like waves may be seemingly independent, they remain profoundly linked.

As the Neighbourhood Pods Pilot Project and Vaccine Engagement Initiative wrapped up this year in March, the Hub kept the communication forums for the Organizers – like WhatsApp – active, creating a positive feedback loop where experience and knowledge gained by one person can be shared with others, creating a chain reaction of growth and positive chain in the wider community and a culture of collaboration. This Hub also connected the nine Pod Organizers to a no-cost professional development program shared by the North Etobicoke Cluster, called ChangeItUp to connect the Organizers with capacity building and job opportunities, ultimately leading to more resilient and healthier communities.



**9 Pod
Organizers**
linked over **3,000**
North Etobicoke
residents with vital
support and services

Reflections from My Neighbourhood Pod

By: Adassa Boswell

Serving as a Neighbourhood Pod Organizer was an honour for me, offering invaluable support to Rexdale (North Etobicoke) residents during challenging times.

As a Pod Organizer, I had the opportunity to engage deeply with Rexdale residents. I assisted them based on their specific needs— from emergency food to wellness checks for isolated individuals and seniors. I even helped some connect with virtual programs and provided the necessary devices. During our Pod Organizers' group meetings, I shared my challenges and received feedback from my peers. Their insights helped me navigate the situations I confronted. The collaborative spirit among the organizers fostered an environment of mutual learning. Resources from the North Etobicoke Cluster also supported us. For instance, I recall a resident sharing whatever she received with her family, highlighting the immense challenges some face in these trying times.

Residents greatly appreciated our initiatives, from delivering food hampers and hot meals to disseminating informational flyers. Since many, especially older people, lacked technological devices, we had to resort to traditional word-of-mouth methods to spread essential updates and information. The gratitude expressed by the residents was heartwarming, and in many cases, lasting relationships were formed.

In addition to my Pod Organizer role, I participated in the "Growing Healthy Towers" project launched by Rexdale Community Hub and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). As a resident leader, I assisted in identifying the social determinants of health

in Rexdale's high-rise towers. Comprehensive surveys of these buildings were conducted which allowed us to gauge the community's priorities surrounding safety, health, well-being, mental and physical health, and the value of green spaces. This initiative highlighted high-rise dwellers' often-overlooked challenges, ensuring their feedback shaped actionable plans.

Furthermore, I serve as the chair of the North Etobicoke Resident Council (NERC), a body dedicated to representing and advocating for the community. My role as chair revolves around ensuring residents' voices are amplified and addressed, facilitating change and fostering positive community sentiment.

"One resident is able to share whatever she receives with her daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. It is very challenging for her, two of the children are of school age and shopping for their necessities is sometimes impossible"
-Grace S.

"A particular encounter with a visually impaired senior deeply affected me. When I arrived for a delivery, I found her in tears due to a delay in receiving her eye medication. Although I couldn't help directly with her medical needs, I tried to comfort and encourage her. Since then, our relationship has continued to grow." -
Gwen L.

"A senior once approached me for help with medication costs. I reached out to a Cluster Agent who provided a gift card. Despite numerous attempts to reach out and deliver the good news, I couldn't contact him, and the card had to be returned."
-Edwin J.

Connected Ponds

This year, when many folk around the country were settling in the ‘new normal,’ which in reality many of us still don’t know what the “normal is,” certain communities remained stuck in a state of ongoing crisis as they were disproportionately impacted throughout the pandemic. Although we all overcame the same pandemic, the pandemic left diverse consequences across different communities.

Many residents were left without employment, struggling with rising costs of living, and social isolation, all experiencing the ripples to a different extent. This year, the North Etobicoke Resident Council (NERC) created a pond of over 50 active residents that represent various communities and grassroots groups in North Etobicoke and reconvened monthly meetings to maintain connectivity and discuss issues affecting North Etobicoke and potential solutions. Throughout this year, NERC has been engaging in advocacy to address local concerns felt by their fellow community members.

Now remember that single stone in the water that we have been referring to throughout this story, here advocacy acts as the initial stone cast into the water which sets a motion of chain reactions leading to awareness, support, and engagement. Advocacy serves to be a key catalyst in the ripple effect of societal change. This year, residents shared the ongoing concern for a lack of bus shelters along Kipling Avenue which lead to accessibility issues, specifically during the Winter. Upon active advocacy efforts, NERC connected with the Constituency Assistant and Community Outreach from the local Councillor’s office, staff in the Transportation Services and Street Furniture, and the Community Development Officer to have this issue acknowledged and addressed.

Following regular discussions with these groups, NERC received a clear timeline of the installations and status of completion from a Senior Policy Advisor. The single stone led to a series of waves and connections, leading to meaningful change in the community.

Like many of us know, the arrival of the pandemic exacerbated many issues, one being job insecurity. Like a chain reaction, the lack of employment was leading to a series of other concerns including the inability to purchase groceries, medications, housing, and the generic human needs. In order to mobilize resources for the community, the Rexdale Hub connected with local partners including the Woodbine Entertainment to bring job and training opportunities in the community to help alleviate the financial burden on families. Likewise, the Hub connected the Toronto Community Housing Violence Reduction Program with our partner agency, Rexdale Women’s Centre to host a construction and skilled trades fair. These connections are like the ripples in a pond which extend far and wide, creating resources for residents and ultimately leading to policy changes that can positively impact our communities.

50+
NERC leaders
championed causes like
food insecurity, housing
issues, job prospects,
and other pressing
community needs

Unveiling the Ripple Effect Through the Human Eye

The human eye is an exceptional organ which carries the capacity to perceive a vast spectrum of shapes, distances, and colours; however, like everything else it also carries its limitations. In the speed of this world, naturally, our eyes are inclined to focus on the larger picture, while overlooking smaller details which, whether we like it or not, carry a deep role in the broader environment.

Although North Etobicoke carries a plethora of hidden gems and public spaces, these spaces are overlooked and underutilized. However, this year Rexdale Community Hub partnered with plazaPOPS (ERA Architects) and the Islington BIA in an effort to transform underutilized community spaces into vibrant gathering spaces.

During this reporting period, the Hub created a network of 20 residents representing the diverse community members of North Etobicoke and engaged them in a series of community design workshops to select a community space and reimagine it together with the guidance of design experts.

Moreover, this initiative leveraged community resources and partnerships to build on our neighbourhood's strengths and meet the needs of the community. By responding to the needs of the community we were able to inform project implementation by sharing insights and best practices while also developing these new partnerships, in this case, between non-for-profit and for-profit which would not have been possible if the Hub did not focus on revitalizing the smaller areas in the neighbourhood which beautify the community as a whole.

Through the plazaPOPS initiative, not only did the community get to enjoy local spaces and the infrastructure, local businesses, many of whom struggled deeply during the pandemic, received exposure and greater sales as a result of increased traffic near underutilized spaces emphasizing that when small actions, linked together, create a significant and lasting impact- now that's what you call a chain of positivity.

Through this successful initiative, the Hub:

- Engaged over 36 members during the community design process
- Held over 5 major events throughout the summer with over 3000 community members in attendance followed by weekly smaller events over the course of 16 weeks
- Engaged over 20 partner agencies and local artists throughout the installation





With the combined creativity and enthusiasm of the community, we conceived and realized plans to enhance this site and craft additional plazaPOPS installations in the Albion-Islington Square Business Improvement Area (BIA). Collaborating with the locally renowned artist “Art of Wong,” we fashioned captivating murals, incorporated vibrant seating zones, and adorned the space with an array of lush plants and flowers.

ThistlePOPS evolved into a central hub where community members and groups planned and hosted programs throughout the summer and fall seasons. As the Student Site Steward, my role encompassed ensuring the optimal upkeep of the ThistlePOPS site, which included tasks like watering plants, orchestrating setups for community events, and enlightening the local community about this transformative space. On July 30, 2022, our efforts culminated in the grand “Summer of Joy Festival” – an invigorating occasion that saw community members flocking to ThistlePOPS. The festival offered a plethora of attractions, from bouncy castles and face painting to henna sessions, vibrant dance and entertainment, delectable food, and exciting giveaways.

This event was brought to fruition thanks to the unwavering support of plazaPOPS, Albion-Islington Square BIA, Catch the Fire Church, Grow Fitness, and all Rexdale Community Hub partner agencies.

The pandemic’s sting was palpably felt in North Etobicoke, most notably through the blanket of social isolation it cast. Many, including myself, yearned for the community gatherings that forge bonds, foster social interactions, and introduce us to new acquaintances. The Summer of Joy Festival struck a chord with all attendees; its local and open-air setting made it both convenient and safe. ThistlePOPS, at its core, prompted the community to re-envision often-overlooked spaces, revealing their latent potential. Drawing inspiration from the welcoming space model of the Rexdale Community Hub, it highlighted the immense potential of repurposing spaces for the community to connect, value and enjoy.

The Summer of Joy at ThistlePOPS

By: Talal Ali

Last year, the Rexdale Community Hub joined forces with the plazaPOPS project, aiming to breathe new life into underutilized spaces within the Rexdale community.

Through in-depth consultations with local residents and stakeholders, we zeroed in on an ideal location at 950 Albion Road for the inaugural phase of the project. Dubbed “ThistlePOPS,” this site was nestled within the parking area of a local establishment, “Grow Fitness.”

Ripple Effect Solutions: Addressing Small Problems for Big Impact

As we move along in this story, it is also important to note that the impact of a single stone in a larger sea of water spreads across the surface of the pond with a lasting and profound impact. Oftentimes, specific issues concerning residents may get overshadowed by the urgency of configuring larger-scale community issues. However, the Rexdale Hub acknowledges that many issues are intertwined with one another and can collectively contribute to larger systemic problems.

As a result, to ensure that small stones of issue are also counted for, which can have a profound impact on the community, Rexdale Hub partnered with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) for the “Growing Healthy Towers” project to understand the social determinants of health for residents of high-rise towers in North Etobicoke, and use a multi-sectoral approach to developing solutions for the issues that impact these residents.

Through the Hub’s connections with local residents, we created a network of 12 active residents who lived in tower communities. Through the Hubs commitment to support the enhancement of community spaces we...

- Collaborated with the Resident Leaders to design and deliver the resident-led engagement activities to seek involvement and input from the other residents/community members around ongoing issues in high rise towers
- Encouraged resident leaders to take on leadership roles by actively participating in the development and compilation of data collection
- Compiled, organized, and analyzed over 97 surveys in partnership with resident leaders capturing tenant input on experiences, issues, interests, and potential solutions related to social determinants of health and healthy built environment

- Participated in a Cross-Sector workshop with resident leaders and key project stakeholders for knowledge sharing, and identify partnerships for future collaborative initiatives in the community
- Co-design one healthy built environment or initiative

Through this initiative, the Hub not only engaged residents in decision making roles for meaningful engagement fostering a sense of ownership in their community but also ensured that the issues faced by high rise tower residents were advocated for. Much like a stone’s ripples which create a series of expanding concentric circles in the wider sea of water, our smaller actions can have far-reaching consequences. This creates a series of interconnected links where one organization, like the Hub initiates a positive change, influencing other partners like other resident champions from the Knightsbridge, Brampton study areas who were also engaged, to do the same, resulting in collective efforts that address complex challenges effectively.

While going through our journey in the past year, we hope you explored the impact of a single stone in a pond which creates a chain of expanding ripples, and how this phenomenon mirrors the Hub’s efforts to support our community to strengthen community bonds for a resilient community. This year has been a reminder that a single support or action has the potential to have a far-reaching ripple effect and make a lasting impact on our community. We hope you continue this journey with us and continue to create waves that go far beyond their initial point of impact, influencing the lives of many.

In collaboration with 12 resident leaders, analyzed 97 surveys to gauge tenant perspectives on health and environment-related matters



TOTAL HUB VISITS IN 2022-2023

216,398

Connected with **4,500+ residents** via collaborative events and activities

Provided **10,080** culturally appropriate food hampers for vulnerable residents and hot meals for after school initiatives at the Hub

A team of **250 volunteers, ambassadors, and staff** backed events, outreach efforts, and food distribution

Distributed **1,654+** hygiene and household items in North Etobicoke

Reached out to **5,000+** community members

9 Pod Organizers linked over **3,000 North Etobicoke residents** with vital support and services

50+ North Etobicoke Resident Council leaders championed causes like food insecurity, housing issues, job prospects, and other pressing community needs

Engaged **30+ diverse sector stakeholders**, establishing a Food Access and Advisory Collaborative to design the Community Grocery Store initiative and spearhead local solutions to combat food insecurity within the community

Assisted **600 families** with school supplies at the Summer of Innovation Camp

Involved **100+ youth** in the “Summer of Innovation” camp and activities related to the STEM Planning Committee

30+ organizations and resident groups utilized the welcoming spaces at the Hub


50+ organizations engaged in the plazaPOPS initiative during the summer and fall, showcasing their services and programs to the community

36 community members were actively involved in shaping the plazaPOPS initiative

Equipped and empowered close to **500 residents** through train-the-trainer sessions, informational booths, all candidates events, and watch parties in preparation for the provincial and municipal elections

In collaboration with **12 resident leaders**, analyzed 97 surveys to gauge tenant perspectives on health and environment-related matters

Proactively participated in the North Etobicoke Cluster, comprising **30+ organizations**, with initiatives centered on Community Website, Mental Health, Vaccine Engagement, and Food Accessibility



"I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you and the Rexdale Hub for allotting our gymnasium time slot, as well as the Community Lounge space. Having worked within the community for over 17 years, I cannot express enough the importance of venues to interact positively with the community's youth. It's these small interactions and lessons taking place in the interactions which go miles to change perceptions, break down barriers, and ultimately teach the engaged youth how to productively contribute to the greater community. Without venues for these interactions we all lose."

PC James Martin, 23 Division –
Community Space User

"The gym space at the Rexdale Community Hub has been a delight to use. The equipment is new and probably one of the best volleyball net systems that I have used. The gym floors have also been well renovated and kept by the staff. Lastly, bookings quarterly over the 2022-23 season has been quite an easy process. Thank you to Vicki and the rest of the RCH team!"

Jim Phan –
Community Space User

"The Rexdale Hub is a second home to many of us. Under one roof or umbrella several needs of the community are met. Many living in the community are landed immigrants, refugees, or others. The needs of expecting mothers to senior citizen are available. The partners work in collaboration to assist the basic needs of the community. As we enhance socio-emotional, language, cognitive, and physical skills, the Hub is an ideal place with an awesome gym and spacious rooms. This certainly makes the Hub a unique place and a privilege in the neighborhood."

Yolanda Moraes, Staff – Delta Family
Resource Centre

"I have been using the Hub to host my peer support group for a year and a half now ... The staff are amazing and always willing help. Especially the booking the staff. The space is clean and allows me to run a safe peer support group. The hub is also one of our top locations for members coming out to groups and activities. As someone who grew up in Rexdale, I love to see what the hub does for the community."

Lea Joseph, Friend & Advocates –
Community Space User

Remarks from the Chair of the Board

Reflecting on the turbulent journey this past year, it's undeniable that COVID-19 deeply affected our community. We saw firsthand the intensification of structural inequities that have long shadowed North Etobicoke. Lives were tragically lost, jobs vanished, and many faced overwhelming challenges, from securing basic needs like shelter and food to accessing essential health services.

The Rexdale Community Hub stood at the forefront of these efforts, becoming a vital place for the community in coordinating resources and responses. Our collaboration with the North Etobicoke Cluster partners, donors, and a brigade of selfless volunteers ensured digital accessibility for seniors and youth, alleviating the burdens of isolation and ensuring the continuation of essential services during the pandemic.

Addressing food insecurity during the pandemic, our collective efforts delivered over 70,000 meals and hampers over the past three years to vulnerable populations in Etobicoke North. This endeavour addressed an immediate need and showcased the power of community collaboration.

Moreover, our staff and community ambassadors played an instrumental role in the emergency response to the pandemic. With their multilingual prowess, these dedicated individuals bridged vital communication gaps, ensuring accurate health information reached all corners of our community. Their commitment helped many overcome vaccine hesitancy and fears, reflecting our ethos of a client-centred and culturally sensitive approach.

To Amra Munawar, Executive Director, and her stellar team – your dedication and relentless pursuit of community betterment have not gone unnoticed. On behalf of the Board, our heartfelt gratitude extends to you for steering the ship during the stormiest times.

Our gratitude is also boundless for our donors, funders, and especially our volunteers. In the face of a pandemic, you stepped forward, embodying community spirit and resilience.

I'm also delighted to welcome our new board member, Natique Ahmed—a special mention to our departing board member, Shermeen Farooqi, for her invaluable contributions.

In the aftermath of such a challenging year, let's continue to harness the collective strength we discovered in each other, for this unity and commitment will lead our community into brighter days ahead.

Sincerely,

Safia Ahmed
Board Chair



"The Rexdale Hub is a colourful space that allows diverse groups to gather. Whether it be for special event celebrations, meetings, workshops, or even mental health and wellness, the hub provides us with a safe space to bring community members together under one roof."

Jessica Sudhir, RSSW, Youth Program Coordinator, Albion Neighbourhood Services | BGC Albion Club

RCH 2022-2023

Hub Partners

Albion Neighbourhood Services
Delta Family Resource Centre
Rexdale Community Health Centre
Rexdale Community Legal Clinic
Rexdale Women's Centre
Toronto Employment and Social Services

Board Members

Abraham Abbey
Costanza Allevalo
Desree Prince
Fatima Filippi
Hamzah Siddiqui
Safia Ahmed
Shermeen Farooqi
Yodit Edemariam

Funders

City of Toronto
United Way Greater Toronto

Supporters

Afghan Kebob Cuisine
Albion Islington Square Business Improvement Area
Al-Meezan Grocery and Halal Meat
Al-Meezan Spicy Grill
Ali Baba's Middle Eastern Cuisine
Bell Canada
BMO Financial Group
Bird Studies
Caribbean Cuisine Authentic Jamaican Jerk
Catch the Fire Church Toronto
Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toronto
Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto
Feed the Frontlines TO
Feed it Forward Inc.
FoodShare Toronto
Fortinos, 330 Queens Plate Drive
Google Kitchener, Waterloo
IBM Canada Ltd.
Home Depot Branch #7114
Lola's Catering
Maximum City
Mushkaki Restaurants Inc.
ONE Toronto GAMING
Parks Canada
Park People
PepsiCo Canada
Physics and Astronomy, York University
plazaPOPS
Repair Café Toronto
Roti Roti Family Restaurant
Royal Astronomical Society of Canada

Royal Bank of Canada
Ryerson University
(Department of Geography and Environmental Studies)
Seva Food Bank
Sheriff's No Frills
Sky's the Limit Youth Organization
Sprout Community
Subway #11321
Telus
The Salvation Army (Etobicoke Temple)
The STEPS Initiative
Toronto Community Benefits Network
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA)
Woodbine Entertainment
Xawaash

RCH Staff Members

Aiman Malhi
Amra Munawar
Hadeed Pall
Harry Persaud
Hassan Bokhari
Kavielle Blake
Lester Smith
Kizzy Price
Layth Jato
Mohammad Javed
Russel Mitchell
Saima Jawid
Talal Malhi
Vicki Crystal
Warda Sharmeen



Mural Credits

The Art of Wong Inc.

Our Vision

A healthy and sustainable community where residents are empowered and engaged.

Our Mission

Rexdale Community Hub's mission is to provide accessible, welcoming space with collaborative, integrated services and programs to enrich every aspect of the community's life.

Our Values

Accessibility – We are committed to ensuring that access to appropriate and acceptable services and resources within the Hub is promoted and ensure that inequities in health and well-being are addressed.

Accountability – We are accountable to the community for the actions and services of the Hub. We will ensure program and services reflect identified community needs, integrate community resources and as partners, we will effectively dedicate our collective resources to this end.

Community Engagement – We are committed to provide stakeholders in the community opportunities to participate in decision-making through processes designed to identify, understand, and address community needs on an ongoing basis.

Diversity – We are committed to inclusion and value and respect the differences found in our community. We demonstrate this understanding through sensitivity, culturally competent and inclusive practices and policies that include individuals from diverse groups in our decision making, information sharing, access to services, governance and employment.

Equity – We are committed to ensuring that all people reach their full potential and are not disadvantaged from attaining it because of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, social class, socio-economic status, or other socially determined circumstance.

Excellence – We strive to provide the best and most appropriate programs and services to the community. We listen carefully to the needs of the community, seek the resources to respond to these needs, and implement programs and services with the highest standards.

Sustainability – We will measure, improve, and be accountable for our environmental, financial, social, health and well-being results.



Serving the Community is Our Business

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