

It took children to raise a village

How a kids' cricket game brought life and a community to an underused recreation centre

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LAURIE MONSEBRAATEN

STAFF REPORTER

For residents of Scarborough Village, children playing cricket in the park are an important sign of change.

Last summer's twice-weekly informal cricket sessions saw local volunteers teaching the game to area kids in a Toronto neighbourhood that's starved for community and social services. It grew out of a two-year federally funded project to help ailing neighbourhoods help themselves.

But impromptu cricket has done more for Scarborough Village than give 20 to 30 kids something to do for three or four hours.

Through the games, members of the village's large South Asian community discovered the underused recreation centre, which agreed to store the cricket equipment. Now the Bengali Social club and the Urdu Women's club both meet in the building near Eglinton Ave. E. and Markham Rd.

As a result of community requests for more youth programs, the centre, which was primarily geared to serving seniors, has introduced martial arts classes and a youth drop-in. And plans are underway to designate a permanent space in the centre that youth can call their own.

"The recreation centre is now doing more with more people – not because their budget got dramatically increased, but because they got to know more people in the community," says Sean Meagher, project manager for the area's Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative.

It's what Meagher and others on the social service frontlines call "community engagement" or "community empowerment." That's connecting residents to each other and to the services in their midst.

It's also about residents identifying the services they need and learning how to mobilize to get them.

In two short years, Meagher's team has helped Scarborough Village launch indoor soccer, basketball and badminton programs in the local hockey arena during the off-season; a youth leadership program; theatre and film clubs for kids; \$80,000 in playground equipment and a new residents' association.

But \$4 million in federal funding for the two-year project, which included sites in four Canadian cities, ran out last month and isn't being renewed.

And new subsidized child-care centres slated for Scarborough Village and other underserved Toronto neighbourhoods are at risk due to the Ottawa's decision to kill the previous Liberal government's \$5 billion national childcare plan.

Toronto's United Way, which administered the project, has stepped in with \$100,000 in annual funding to ensure ongoing support in Scarborough Village. And the city hopes Queen's Park will fill the funding gap on the child-care front.

But beyond some of the embryonic changes in Scarborough Village, progress is still hard to see in the rest of the city's most challenged neighbourhoods.

"The nature of this work is that ... it takes a long time," says United Way research director Susan MacDonnell, who has headed the agency's neighbourhoods strategy since 2005.

"It is the cumulative power of a whole lot of little changes so that in several years you look around and suddenly people are saying, 'You know what? This is a better neighbourhood.' This is what you hope for."

Scarborough Village is one of 13 "priority neighbourhoods" in the former cities of Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke identified by the United Way and the City of Toronto for special attention to address high concentrations of poverty and a lack of community services.

These post-World War II suburbs with their mix of modest single-family homes, townhouses and apartment towers were designed to serve middle class, car-oriented commuters.

But as the middle class moved on, low-income families and newcomers drawn by relatively affordable housing moved in, often with several families sharing a single unit.

And with few services to help them find employment, learn English or even come together to get to know one another, they have struggled,

says MacDonnell, author of the United Way's groundbreaking Poverty by Postal Code report in 2004 that identified a staggering 120 high-poverty areas in the city – mostly in the inner suburbs.

Older downtown neighbourhoods have well-established agencies with long histories of service in the community such as Dixon Hall in Regent Park and St. Christopher House in the west end, she says. "But some of the inner suburbs have nothing."

The Scarborough Village project provided an early road map for four other Action for Neighbourhood Change sites in the city. They got off the ground last summer, each with \$500,000 in United Way funding. They include Eglinton East-Kennedy Park, Weston-Mount Dennis, Lawrence Heights and Steeles-L'Amoureux.

Four more – in Westminster-Branson, Dorset Park, Flemington Park-Victoria Village and Jane-Finch – were announced earlier this year. And initiatives will begin early next year in the remaining four priority neighbourhoods of Kingston-Galloway, Malvern, Jamestown and Crescent Town.

Meanwhile, Toronto City Hall, is forming "neighbourhood action" teams to help co-ordinate city investments in public health, recreation, libraries, transit, social services, beautification grants and child care in these communities.

Evening programs for youth, staffed by city recreation workers, are already running in at least one school in each of the priority neighbourhoods.

And an innovative city-run "after-four" program that began last fall is providing affordable recreation and child care for 780 school-aged kids in the 13 communities.

For its part, Queen's Park is setting up community health centre satellites in the priority neighbourhoods that the city and social service agencies will use to build multi-purpose community hubs.