



CASE STUDY | COMMUNITY WISDOM AND SOCIAL LABS LEAD TO CHANGE IN POINT DOUGLAS

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How does a community lead change on its own terms? The Winnipeg Boldness Project, a research and development initiative in Winnipeg's North End, is working to do just that. Guided by community wisdom and inspired by Social Lab approaches, their story is an example of what is possible for communities that are inspired to lead change.

POINT DOUGLAS AND ITS BOLD APPROACH

Communities across the world are used to having change thrust upon them. Governments, social services, and institutional systems are often the driving force behind the major changes experienced by communities today. There is an emphasis on professionals on the outside 'fixing' the problems that individual communities are facing. However, communities are increasingly seeking to effect change from the bottom-up; using their own assets to create the changes that they want to see on their terms.

One of these communities is the Point Douglas neighbourhood, in Winnipeg's North End. Outsiders often view Point Douglas as a 'high needs' neighbourhood, focusing on issues related to crime, education, poverty, and addictions as evidence that the community needs to be helped. Instead, the leaders of this community have chosen to focus on Point Douglas' assets and strengths as pathways to building its future, and to highlight the ways in which outside systems and organizations block residents from achieving their potential, rather than supporting them. This case study demonstrates how communities like Point Douglas can champion change.

About the Project

The Winnipeg Boldness Project ("the Project") is a research and development initiative working alongside the North End community to identify effective mechanisms that will improve outcomes for young children in the Point Douglas area. The Project is working towards a Bold Goal:

Children and families in Point Douglas will experience dramatically improved wellbeing in all aspects of self: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

The project has the following objectives:

1. Design a six-year Early Childhood Development (ECD) intervention strategy for future implementation that will help young children in Point Douglas develop the tools they need to succeed in life.
2. Create a strength-based narrative that highlights the positive and spirited aspects of Winnipeg's North End through community perspectives.
3. Build a child-centred model focusing on best practices for raising children through the deep community wisdom that exists within

THE WINNIPEG BOLDNESS PROJECT: COMMUNITY-LED CHANGE

The Winnipeg Boldness Project was born out of the belief that every child deserves equitable opportunities for success. Current data shows that about 50% of children in Point Douglas are doing well and are starting school at a point where they are ready to learn and thrive. The goal of the Project is to increase this number, not through outside intervention but through a community-led approach. The Project has tapped into community wisdom and is testing many different prototypes to help improve outcomes for children across Point Douglas under the guidance of families and community leaders. Currently, in the fifth year of a seven-year mandate, the Project identified early on two components of their approach that have been critical to their success: community wisdom and a Social Lab structure. These may serve as starting points for other communities hoping to lead their own change.

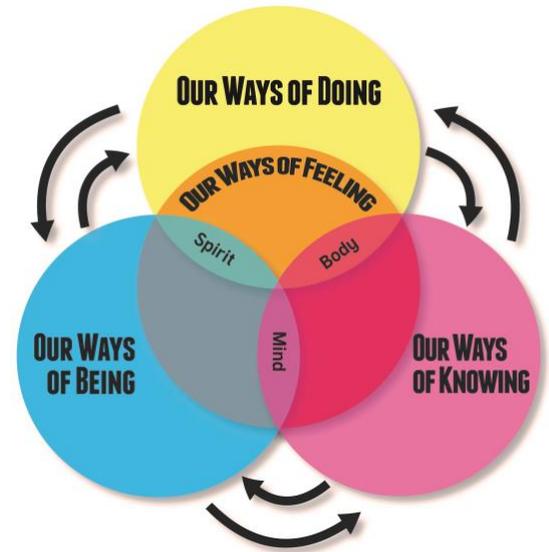
Community Wisdom

Unlike many other approaches to social change, the Project did not begin with a problem, a solution, or a sense of what was best for the community. Instead, they spent their first year building relationships and learning from the community itself – learning about the types of change the community wanted to see and how they believed positive change could occur.

Through this work, the Project created the Child-Centred Model; a Theory of Change that represented the community’s wisdom. This model, informed by Indigenous perspectives, articulated a very different type of pathway for change – one that focuses on wholistic approaches, community strengths, and individual self-determination as the values that would lead to positive change if incorporated into all approaches.

This model is the blueprint for the Project’s ways of working, as well as for others who are hoping to work with the community for positive change. It includes core values to guide all efforts, a call to action for those working with the community, and a framework that captures the community’s perspective. To learn more about the Child Centred Model and its development, visit The [Winnipeg Boldness Project website](#).

One noteworthy aspect of The Winnipeg Boldness Project’s approach is the focus on residents’ strengths and wisdom. Rather than rely on outside theories or assume that it is people themselves that need to change, the Project sought to understand the perspective of their community members, the changes that they wanted to see, and their wisdom on how to make those changes possible – an important lesson for all who



The connections between ways of knowing, being, feeling, and doing provide the foundation for the Child Centred Model.



The Child Centred Model shows the child at the centre of an interconnected community. All elements of the community need to be supported to support the child.

are hoping to support community change that empowers, rather than marginalizes, people.

Social Labs: Experimentation and Innovation

The founders of The Winnipeg Boldness Project recognized that the challenges facing their community are systemic in nature and that any approach would need to find ways to disrupt the systems that perpetuate marginalization in their community. They also realized that their approach would need to be highly experimental and iterative to better understand barriers and identify ways to overcome them. Though the community owned and directed the initiative, they sought a project structure that would resonate with diverse stakeholders to help secure additional resources. They opted to design the Project as a Social Lab.

Social Labs are rapidly being adopted across Canada as a pathway to creating social change. Though there are many different types of Social Labs, what unites them are three core characteristics:

1. **They are social.** Social Labs start by bringing together diverse participants (not consultants) to work in a team that acts collectively. They are ideally drawn from different sectors of society, such as government, civil society, and the business community.
2. **They are experimental.** Social Labs are not one-off experiences. They are ongoing and sustained efforts. The team doing the work takes an iterative approach to the challenges it wants to address, prototyping interventions and managing a portfolio of promising solutions.
3. **They are systemic.** This means trying to come up with solutions that go beyond dealing with a part of the whole or symptoms and address the root cause of why things are not working in the first place (Hassan, 2014).

Its set-up as a Social Lab has enabled the Project to collaborate deeply with diverse stakeholders including community leaders, businesses, and area residents, and challenge the systems that impact their community. As well, this structure has allowed the Project to work in the experimental, iterative way that they sought. Working with the community, the Project identified several promising ideas to support children and families in Point Douglas that could be prototyped and tested rapidly for scaling potential. They have used these prototypes, which they call Proofs of Possibility (POPs), to explore what can and should change for families through practice and reflection, rather than theory. Examples of

Proof of Possibility (POP) In Action

An early POP focused on growing school-bound identity, using the Canada Learning Bond (CLB) to help families access grants for children's educational savings. The CLB was seen as a tool that could help build families' hope and belief that educational success is possible, by helping them to get started saving for post-secondary education. The prototyping process consisted of mapping the barriers families were experiencing while attempting to access the CLB, and then finding pathways to systems change through scaling efforts in order to improve uptake rates. Key learnings include:

- Local, flexible support staff are needed
- Supports help, such as training staff to answer questions, building a family support budget and advocating for additional funding sources
- Governments, non-profits and businesses all have a role in breaking down systemic barriers around basic needs, crises, literacy and obtaining I.D.
- Celebrating kids' educational milestones builds hope

POPs tested include seeking ways to build school-bound identity and increase the use of the Canada Learning Bond, training and supporting Indigenous doulas to provide culturally safe supports to pregnant women and supporting families' participation in arts-based activities.

For those who also see the Social Lab model as a potential structure for their neighbourhood-development work, the Project offers some lessons learned:

Practice first, then use theory to support practice – not the other way around. Just as you can't learn to ride a horse by reading a book, there's something to be said for starting work on the ground before consulting the research on Social Labs to support and refine your approach.

Reframe failure. At the very centre of a Social Lab's DNA is imperative to experiment to find realistic and scalable solutions to complex social challenges. Sometimes these experiments can end in failure, but as Diane Roussin, Director of The Winnipeg Boldness Project puts it, "Failure is really learning." Each attempt to create change gives you new insights to guide your next approach.

CHALLENGES

Although this approach has helped the community create tangible changes for children and families, the Project has also encountered a few key challenges to the Social Lab approach – limitations that are beyond their ability to address alone.

Challenge #1: What Happens When Prototypes End?

While funding structures behind the Social Lab model have made it possible to invest in prototypes and experiments, the unintended consequence is that families must search for alternative resources when the experiment is complete. Ideally, successful prototypes are supported to become permanent models for support in the community, but this is not always the case. Continuing these prototypes requires a different kind of commitment from funders and supporters - commitment that is not inherently part of the Social Lab model. As Roussin puts it, "Families don't care that it was a test. They see that they were getting something useful and then it was taken away."

Challenge #2: Burden on Community Organizations

While community organizations were excited to run prototypes, their existing organizational structures often made the work extremely challenging. Many organizations were asked to rigorously track how individual time and salaries are being spent. Or, they were limited in the types of initiatives they could be involved with based upon restrictions in the use of their existing funding. These situations make it difficult for community organizations to support and run a flexible and adaptable experiment.

Challenge #3: Capacity to Change Systems

One goal of the Project has always been to change the systems that create conditions of marginalization for those in Point Douglas, whether those are medical systems that traumatize and stigmatize Indigenous women, or social systems that require low-income families to fill out paperwork and make time to meet with caseworkers. However, The Winnipeg Boldness Project does not have the authority to force those systems to change. Rather, they can only build relationships, make recommendations, and hope that their perspective is heard. This is both challenging and frustrating, as their prototypes

have revealed many ways in which broader systems create marginal conditions for the residents of Point Douglas, but not necessarily the pathways through which systems change can happen.

These challenges are important for both community change organizations and funders to be aware of. For funders, they highlight the need to plan for longer-term implementation and supports at the outset, as well as to turn more power over to the community to decide what gets funded and what does not. They also need to listen and support the voices of community to effect systems change, as community members cannot do this work alone. When families are a part of a prototype that they see high value in that is then not scalable due to roadblocks or a broken system's unwillingness to change, it maintains an uneven power imbalance and adds to the community's distrust in large systems.

RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Four years in, the Project is keen to continue testing scalable solutions to improve outcomes for children in Point Douglas, and to work with others for systems change. They are using research and development as the vehicle to open dialogue, uncover innovative tools and forge partnerships that will help them to achieve their goals. But beyond all the models and approaches, one thing permeates everything they do: **building relationships**.

“You have to stand right in the storm with your people.”
Diane Roussin, Project Director

Investing the time to build deeply loyal, trustful and interdependent relationships has made the Project an authentic, committed and trusted part of the community. By creating time and space for conversations with community members and engaging in meaningful consultations with diverse stakeholders, the Project has found the best relationships are reciprocal, authentic, and grounded in mutual respect. But building those relationships takes time. For anyone who is seeking to create change in their community, Roussin believes that relationships are most critical. What's required is not just a commitment to building relationships but standing by your team through any challenge. Relationships that support community change are not transactional – they are personal.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

In the coming years, the Project will continue to implement a community-driven healthy baby strategy that is collaborative, incorporates community wisdom, and enacts the Child Centred Model. Recognizing the need to support children from pregnancy through to school age, this strategy will include opportunities for strengthening and accessing training and skill development, programs and services for parents and children, and helping families meet their basic needs. The vision forward will remain grounded in the components that have proved foundational to the Project so far: the knowledge mobilization framework, diverse guide groups, and community engagement strategy which ensures that children and families in Point Douglas remain at the centre, as those whose perspectives matter most in seeking positive change.

LEARN MORE

- [The Winnipeg Boldness Project's Website](#)
- [The Winnipeg Boldness Project Year 2 Review](#)
- ['Ways of Knowing, Being, Doing, and Feeling: A Wholistic Early Childhood Development Model'](#)
- [An overview of Community Innovation Trends: Design-Based Methods](#)

REFERENCES

Hassan, Zaid. "The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges (SSIR)." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, ssir.org/articles/entry/the_social_labs_revolution_a_new_approach_to_solving_our_most_complex_chall. 2014

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