

# Evaluating Hamilton's Neighbourhood Action Strategy: A collaborative, multi-method approach

## CONTEXT

The City of Hamilton is an industrial city of 500,000 in Southern Ontario, whose labour market also includes health care, education and the arts. In April 2010, a local newspaper, the Hamilton Spectator, published a series which documented the neighbourhood-level disparities in health outcomes, income and education level.

These media reports were a catalyst for addressing these inequalities, city-wide. The result was the creation of the Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS) in November 2010, a partnership of the City of Hamilton, Hamilton Community Foundation and other organizations.

The NAS is working towards improving social, economic and health outcomes in targeted neighbourhoods. The aim is to support residents, community partners and neighbourhood groups to develop neighbourhood Action Plans.

This multi-year strategy includes process and outcome evaluations in order to learn more about: residents' views and priorities; how well the planning and neighbourhood projects are going; what might need to be changed along the way; and the impact the strategy has on residents. Lessons learned from the Hamilton NAS evaluation may be relevant for other communities that are engaged in resident-led community development.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY (NAS)

The Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS) is a multi-million dollar initiative which works with communities to help them define, then build on, their assets and strengths. This is in contrast to a deficit-based approach, or one which has external "experts" tell a community what it needs. Local planning teams define a vision for each neighbourhood and decide on tangible actions to achieve that vision. This community-oriented, strengths-based approach involves the following steps:

### Neighbourhood Planning Process



Image adapted from Brown, S. (2012). Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Planning Toolkit.

The Neighbourhood Action Strategy is being piloted in eleven neighbourhoods:



Each NAS neighbourhood has:

- a Neighbourhood Planning Team, made up of residents, business owners, and other stakeholders
- a Community Developer, who supports the planning team



Image adapted from Cahua, M., Wakefield, S., Peng, A.Y., & Agbeyaka, S. (2014). An Evaluation of Hamilton's Asset-based Community Development Approach Report.

## EVALUATION

The NAS stakeholders are committed to a thorough evaluation of the process and outcomes. The multi-method, multi-faceted evaluation brought together local government and nonprofit stakeholders and researchers from two universities. The evaluation team formed a working group which meets regularly to plan, consult, and share updates on projects.

The evaluation was designed to be conducted in the same collaborative spirit as the NAS itself. Residents have the opportunity to see early evaluation results, and request information that can inform their Action Plan.

There are four components to the evaluation, two of which are process-focused, and two that are outcome-focused. The evaluations are:

	PROCESS	OUTCOMES		
FOCUS	<b>1. Assessment of Community Development Approach to Neighbourhood Planning</b> <b>WHAT:</b> Interviews with stakeholders examining the community development process. <b>WHO:</b> Dr. Sarah Wakefield, University of Toronto	<b>2. Evaluation of Plan Implementation</b> <b>WHAT:</b> Tracking tool used to assess progress on Neighbourhood Plans during the implementation phase; interviews and focus groups with stakeholders. <b>WHO:</b> Dr. Sarah Wakefield, University of Toronto & the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton	<b>3. Longitudinal survey</b> <b>WHAT:</b> Surveys that ask residents at two-year intervals about their neighbourhood's health and well-being. <b>WHO:</b> Dr. James Dunn, McMaster University	<b>4. Neighbourhood-level indicators</b> <b>WHAT:</b> Secondary data analysis on 16 indicators of community well-being to assess changes over time. <b>WHO:</b> Jeff Wingard, Independent Researcher

**NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY EVALUATION TEAM**

- City of Hamilton
- Hamilton Community Foundation
- McMaster University
- Social Planning and Research Council
- University of Toronto

## LESSONS LEARNED:

### Community Engagement

- Survey recruitment & data collection were community engagement opportunities, as they reached people who may not have otherwise known about the NAS in their neighbourhood.
- Branded materials were developed to promote the NAS & planning teams. These were distributed during the survey and at community events.
- Social media: many of the neighbourhoods have a strong social media presence. By interacting online, there was two-ways communication between the Evaluation team and residents.

### Political Support

- Build municipal-level support for the evaluation through regular reports & presentations to City Council & neighbourhoods.
- Show evidence of tangible improvements while keeping expectations reasonable.
- Highlight civic engagement and that resources have been responsibly spent.

### Relationship Building and Repair

- There has been a deficit focus to studies in some neighbourhoods, undertaken by researchers with little commitment to the neighbourhood & residents ("fly-by" research).
- Being a regular presence, over time, at many community events, has improved buy-in.
- Communicating with residents, and soliciting their feedback and thoughts, early and often, has improved uptake of the findings.

