CCRN EVALUATION REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Coordinated Community Response Network (CCRN) was born of a need to quickly develop a made-in-the-DTES pandemic response. Initiated by Steve Johnston and supported by CIRES, the CCRN has brought together a diverse range of organizations in an unprecedented way, and has successfully responded to a number of challenges. It has overcome many issues that have previously hindered inter-organizational collaboration in the DTES. It also offers important insights for how to capitalize on these successes and momentum to move forward collectively. Notable achievements include:

‣ COVID Response Partnerships forged in the CCRN led to collaborative organizing around food security, PPE distribution, physical-distancing strategies and respite sites, and funding collaboration. For example, frontline organizations worked with social enterprises to prepare, package, and deliver 2,200 meals per day; members built a comprehensive list of available shelter spaces and developed a community sharing and distribution hub for PPE; and collaborative funding allowed for additional women-only and co-ed respite sites and harm reduction services.

‣ Peer Funds Distribution The CCRN facilitated allocation and distribution of emergency COVID response funds provided by the City for peer initiatives. These funds provided 30,000 hours of peer-employment through 15 different groups and responded to a wide range of community needs. Funds provided income security and stability in the community. This model is a radical departure from how funding is typically distributed in the community. This regionalized hub model allowed for an effective community-led response, equitable access to funding for organizations of all types, reduced competition between organizations, and increased coordination. This funding distribution model was a pivotal force that engendered trust between organizations and likely in the broader community as well.

The achievements of the CCRN are notable because there has been a historic lack of coordination and trust between organizations in the DTES. Three contributing factors helped overcome these obstacles. First, the community-led peer fund distribution model incentivizes organizations to come together, communicate, and respond in collaborative ways, which has built trust between organizations. Second, the CCRN is unique in the diversity of organizational type it has brought together. This leverages complementary skillsets and knowledge and has helped bring about mutual respect and trust between organizations. Third, managing relationships within a group made up of diverse organization types requires a particular type of leadership that treats this diversity as a resource, and makes space for constructive conflict and collaborative resolution. The CCRN benefits from a leader that has a transformational leadership style that is instrumental in achieving these objectives.

Based on the research conducted for this report, it is my recommendation that the CCRN continues in its current form with the same leadership for the duration of the

pandemic. The peer funding model has been particularly effective in overcoming previous issues with equity and competition amongst organizations. I recommend that this funding model remain in place and continue as a primary function. Finally, it is my observation that the CCRN has achieved a level of collaboration and has engendered inter-organizational trust that has not been realized in this community before. Although it will require a more sustainable organizational home and funding, I recommend the CCRN should be preserved as a collaborative network organization beyond the pandemic.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

312 Main
A Better Life Foundation
Atira Women's Resource Society
Binners' Project
Bloom Community Services
Central City Foundation
CleanStartBC
Community Impact Real Estate
EMBERS
Exchange Inner City
Four Directions Trading Post
Hastings Crossing Business Improvement Association
Hope Action Values Ethics Culinary Training Society
Limage Media Group
Mission Possible
Overdose Prevention Society
Potluck Café Society
Strathcona Community Centre Association
Strathcona Community Policing Centre
The WePress Collective
UBC Learning Exchange
Union Gospel Mission
Vancouver Women's Health Collective
West Coast Foundation
WISH Drop-In Centre Society

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early spring of 2020, before COVID-19 had been declared a pandemic, the DTES was already in the midst of a crisis. In 2016, British Columbia's Provincial Health Officer declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency. Opioid-overdose related deaths in BC have been on a steady climb for the past 5 years, and the DTES has been particularly hard hit[1]. By March 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, there were 114 overdose-related deaths in BC. This is to say, the DTES is a community that has been in the throes of a health emergency for some time.

In mid-March, governments and public health authorities advised a near complete shut-down and shelter-in-place protocols in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a community where many residents struggle with housing instability, food insecurity, and various essential services needs, which are largely provided by on-the-ground, front-facing community providers, it was infeasible for many residents to shelter in place or have these much-needed services shut down. CCRN members that I spoke with often described a rising level of alarm at this realization. The complex and specific needs germane to this community meant a tailored-for-the-DTES response to the pandemic was not just preferable, but essential.

Various organizations and groups in the DTES recognized the potentially devastating effects that the pandemic could have in a community that already faced compounding health crises and vulnerabilities. Shutting down on-the-ground services that so many depended on was not a viable option. In the absence of government guidance for how a community like the DTES could alternatively respond, the COVID Coordinated Community Response Network (CCRN) was born. Steve Johnston, the Executive Director of CIRES, began asking other groups and organizations if they wanted to band together to coordinate their responses and pool information. Over the course of its first three months, membership grew to over 50 organizations of all kinds. Relationships forged through the CCRN culminated in a number of successful community-led initiatives including a collaborative food security response, a network of physically-distanced respite sites, an efficient allocation of funds for important peer-supported work, and novel funding relationships that were unlikely to have come into fruition otherwise.

CIRES has been instrumental in providing the resources and leadership necessary to support the CCRN. It became clear when interviewing CCRN members that it would not have been a sustainable initiative without the time and resources that CIRES invested in its operation. It also became clear that this dedicated response likely meant that CIRES had to adjust its own operations to respond to these emerging community needs.

"I had complete faith in my team to meet the needs of the organization. That gave me the confidence and capacity to step a little bit further outside our traditional community economic development work and support the community differently. I can't emphasize this contribution enough. It was the work of the CIRES staff that allowed me to devote time to the CCRN and broader community leadership."
(Steve Johnston, CIRES)

During the early days of the pandemic, many market tenants were forced to close. Shaugn Schwartz, CIRES' Director of Portfolio Management and Capacity Building, worked with Social Purpose Real Estate stakeholders and other commercial property managers to advocate for and monitor government supports. He also worked with CIRES' property management company to ensure that all market tenants received the federal funds and support they were eligible for, describing this work as being like "*a social worker for the for-profit businesses*". Shaugn and Steve Johnston met with the commercial tenants to assess their needs, and provide much-needed support and reassurance of CIRES' commitment to their continued success. Other CIRES staff were integral to the response. Eileen Wang, CIRES' financial officer, has worked to ensure that CIRES obtains any available federal support it is eligible for and these efforts no doubt minimized damage to CIRES' financial sustainability during the pandemic. Yazmin Machuca, CIRES Operations Manager, helped the CCRN run smoothly. She set up file-sharing for the CCRN network and sent out meeting invitations. She also helped take minutes at the meetings and distributed them to all members, which was an important resource for organizations that could not attend in-person.

CIRES' role in building and sustaining the CCRN meant crucial resources were made available at a critical time. Beyond the pandemic response, it has provided a glimpse at what is possible when the organizational community in the DTES sets aside differences, and works together collaboratively to respond to common challenges. Most importantly, it provides a template for how this might be achieved over the long-term. In a community that faces many compounding crises, the impact of a successful community collaborative response network cannot be overstated.

For various reasons outlined in this report, many members of the CCRN reported that they had had not previously communicated or collaborated with other organizations as successfully as they were now doing. In the beginning months of the pandemic, the CCRN met through virtual meetings first once, then twice, and eventually three times a week. The CCRN provided mooring at a time of potential disorder; it provided a host of tangible benefits to the community through their collaborative work; but it also offered important information of what factors could help to build a healthier and more collaborative network of organizations in the DTES community.

Many members reported that the CCRN was the first time they recalled working so successfully with such a diverse range of community leaders, service providers, and activists. 86% of the respondents said they felt more connected to other organizations in the DTES since joining the CCRN and described the group as a success. 89% of respondents reported they want to see the CCRN continue through the duration of the pandemic and 82% wanted such a group to continue beyond the pandemic.

While the pandemic provided the impetus for the CCRN, its positive outcomes have provided the momentum to identify what factors led to this success. This report seeks to detail the successful CCRN-initiated responses to the pandemic, identify the factors that led to that success, and make a series of evidence-based recommendations for moving forward. It begins with an explanation of research methods before turning to an overview of the outcomes of the CCRNs collective efforts over the last eight months, both tangible and organizational, and offers evidence to explain what factors led to this success. Finally, I conclude with a series of recommendations for how to capitalize on these successes and momentum, and move forward collectively.

2. METHODS

This report was commissioned to 1) document the process and successes of the CCRN initiative, 2) identify the factors that have made the CCRN successful in its goals of coordinated and collective action in response to DTES-specific concerns; and 3) identify evidence-based best practices that have been learned from the first-wave COVID response. I have also been asked to make a series of recommendations based on the above criteria.

This report uses a mixed-methods research approach. I attended and observed weekly CCRN meetings from August to November, I reviewed minutes from all CCRN meetings that had been held between March and August, I interviewed representatives from 9

different CCRN organizations, and I administered a survey that was distributed to all organizations that had participated in the CCRN.

Observation and Meeting Evaluation

Prior to attending meetings, I reviewed minutes from the first 5 months of CCRN meetings to get an understanding of how the group grew, interacted, and to understand what challenges that it had faced. I then attended a total of 9 CCRN meetings. The average active group attendance from August to November was 28 members. I took notes on inter-organizational communication, leadership style, and made note of collaborative projects and funding initiatives. I used these observations to develop preliminary themes present in the interactions, and to develop the interview guide and survey.

Interviews

An interview guide was developed based on thematic development from analysis of CCRN meetings and minutes, and identification of relevant issues the CCRN was tackling. Steve Johnston facilitated introductions with representatives from 9 different CCRN organizations. This included representatives from 2 non-profit organizations, 2 on-the-ground-service providers, 2 charity organizations, and 3 social enterprises. Interviews were recorded and conducted online over a period of 3 weeks in September and October 2020, and lasted between 60-90 minutes. Thematic analysis was conducted after each interview and recordings were reviewed again prior to writing this report, to cross-reference and verify evidence for later-developed themes.

Survey

I developed an online survey to gauge support for the initial conclusions I reached through interviewing members. The survey link was distributed to the population of CCRN organizations that had participated at any point in time.

A total of 32 surveys were completed, which resulted in a response rate of 62%, which is considered high in organizational survey research[2]. I merged responses from any organization where more than one member completed the survey. At the height of the CCRN, there were approximately 50 organizations that attended. I used this figure as the population to determine the response rate.

Limitations

The survey was sent to all organizations that had participated in the CCRN at any point. However, the main limitation of this study is the potential for under-

representation of organizations that either left the group or did not respond to the survey. It is possible that these members could provide additional insights that could affect the conclusions. When possible, I asked interview participants to speak to this issue on behalf of other organizations, and when relevant, this is noted in the report.

A note on quotes used in this report
Throughout this report I have relied on the direct words from the interviews and survey responses of CCRN members to illustrate the main conclusions and themes. I have anonymized some responses at the request of members, and have attributed others when granted permission.

3. OUTCOMES

3.1. Tangible Outcomes

The CCRN meetings meant organizations that hadn't worked together before began communicating and coordinating in ways that resulted in many benefits. Tangible outcomes include enhanced food security, peer fund allocation and distribution, physically-distanced respite sites, PPE distribution, and collaborative funding opportunities. Some partnership examples include:

Food Security
Partnerships forged in the CCRN led to collaborative organizing around food security. Between March and July, on-the-ground front-facing service providers worked with a group of social enterprises, the Teamsters union, and members of the film-industry to amplify their complementary skillsets and address food security concerns. They ultimately prepared, packaged, and delivered 2,200 meals per day to SRO residents and residents who were unsheltered.

Peer Funds
The CCRN acted as a hub for allocation and distribution of emergency peer funds provided by the City. This funding distribution model meant more equitable funding distribution for community-led projects. These funds provided an estimated 30,000 hours of peer-employment distributed through over 15 community partners. These funds provided stability at a time of heightened crisis, both in terms of much-needed income security for individual community members, and in resourcing a community-led COVID response.

Peers worked to distribute information, provide important community-led services, and gave a sense of continuity and stability during a destabilizing time. Atira employed peers to resource a very successful phone response line for women who required assistance with food resources and personal safety planning. They also hired peers to clean in their own buildings and staffed a 24 hour a day women-only respite site. SPRIT peers provided front line health care to the unsheltered homeless on the streets and in the alleys. WISH Drop-in Centre was able to double the operation hours of their mobile outreach services and introduce an outdoor safe respite site equipped with peer-staffed harm reduction services. To prevent physical lines from forming at the bank on cheque day, peers employed through the Four Directions Trading Post worked with residents to set up direct-deposit accounts at Pigeon Park savings and continue to provide line management for the branch. With the support of peer funds, the Overdose Prevention Society was able to continue its operation and expand its services to provide sanitation, PPE, and distribute food. Various grass roots organizations like Aboriginal Front Door used funds to distribute meals as well as employ peers to clean and sanitize the streets in front of their locations and inside their premises. In short, the peer funds allowed for the community to be meaningfully involved in the design and implementation of the COVID response.

Physically-Distanced Respite Sites
As respite spaces shut down or reduced capacity due to physical distance concerns, CCRN members worked together to identify and build a comprehensive reference list of available shelter spaces and respite sites. Central City Foundation also worked with Atira's Women Society to fund Sisters Square, a 24 hour-a-day outdoor respite site that included harm reduction services, meal programs, and peer support workers. WISH Drop-In Centre also opened a physically-distanced outdoor respite site equipped with peer-staffed harm reduction services.

PPE Resources
Atira established a community hub for items like masks, hand sanitizer and PPE, and other organizations contributed and depended upon this space and these resources. EMBERS, Save-On-Meats, and other organizations helped procure and distribute scarce PPE supplies to the community.

Collaborative Funding Opportunities
Organizations that had not previously worked together forged relationships through the CCRN that led to important funding partnerships. For years, organizations like WISH had been trying to work with funders to raise the minimum wage in their supportive

employment program. Because the CCRN peer funds were distributed with a wage expectation of at least $20 per hour, this helped make the case for other funding bodies to match these expectations. Potluck Catering and WePress Collective worked together to fundraise $250,000 that went towards food-security efforts. CleanStart, a social enterprise that provides low-barrier employment opportunities, was looking to pivot its services to support COVID sanitizing efforts. They doubled their organizational capacity in four days through the CCRN network, working with EMBERS Staffing Solutions and the Central City Foundation to hire peers who were looking for work after having been laid off due to COVID. Central City Foundation, a public foundation that usually supports community-led solutions through capital funding, interrupted their funding cycle to work with members of the CCRN on COVID response projects, such as Sisters' Square, resulting in a $100,000 investment in their women's only respite site.

"Members of the CCRN group are also well-connected beyond the CCRN, and members don't hesitate to draw on these connections for additional information and/or supports (financial or in-kind)."
(Heather Holroyd, UBC Learning Exchange)

3.2 Organizational Successes

The tangible benefits of the CCRNs work are impressive, but this is especially the case because members often described a prior lack of widespread collaboration. The DTES may be geographically small, but the organizational ecosystem is dense. There are a variety of different types of organizations and groups that serve this community; from grassroots activists, to education partners, to on-the-ground service providers, not-for-profit groups, charities, and social enterprises. The diversity in expertise and skillsets in these organizations are the community's strength, but its achilles is a lack of coordination between them.

It became apparent that while the CCRN has managed to instill a spirit of collectivism and successful coordination of services between its members, this is an exception and not the norm. However, the CCRN seems able to sidestep some of the common barriers to collaboration. 86% of respondents agreed their participation in the CCRN has led them to be more optimistic about the potential for inter-organizational collaboration moving forward.

"What needs to happen right now, at a time when siloes have been broken down, is that somebody needs to step in and capitalize on what's happened thus far to ensure these things continue and to ensure that all those voices are welcome at the table"
(Johanna Li, EMBERS)

Before discussing the factors that contributed to the success of the CCRN, it is important to review the challenges to coordination that members identified.

3.2a. Challenges to Collaboration

Members attributed the historical lack of collaboration between organizations in the DTES to a variety of factors. Most often, members brought up a long-standing siloed organizational culture, a lack of inter-organizational trust, and competitive and divisive funding structures.

A Siloed Response

One of the most consistent responses to what factors have led a lack of collaborative responses was that most organizations worked parallel to one another, rather than in tandem.

A culture of siloed action can be a symptom of many underlying issues, including time scarcity, conflicting values, competitiveness, and feelings of distrust[3]. There is little doubt that most organizations in the DTES have a deeply rooted commitment and dedication to the work they do, and while values may differ, most share common goals. The pandemic rallied diverse organizations around one such shared goal: to safeguard, advocate, and serve the DTES community from an unprecedented circumstance. As outlined in section 3.1b, a number of factors contributed to a breaking down of that siloed culture.

Funding Structures

One barrier to coordination that multiple members raised was the presence of complicated and competitive funding opportunities. 43% of survey respondents felt that competitive funding structures made it difficult for organizations to work together.

One member described these issues:

"I think that the way our funding structures are set up, from private to government to donations; it is set up to be very competitive but also, funders want to see partnerships. It makes it very challenging and a real struggle to figure out that balance between partnership and this competitiveness […] it's easy to fall into that trap of saying "ours is

better" […] and I think that creates a real distrust and a real divide between organizations".
(CCRN Member)

One member described the difficulty some frontline service organizations have finding the time to navigate the funding landscape, and what it meant for them to have access to the CCRN distributed peer funds:

"It is hard to put into words how invaluable [the peer funds] have been to folks on the ground. It's so great that [the CCRN] got the funding, that they've been able to keep it going, however that's done,[…] it would have been a real organizational burden to take on all those things otherwise".
(CCRN Member)

A centralized funds distribution model like the one developed through CCRN with peer funds seems an effective antidote to the complexity and scarcity of resource opportunities. It likely has other benefits: leveraging the complementary skillsets of small and large organizations, and incentivizing diverse groups to come together in collaborative ways. Because small organizations can lack the capacity or "right" organizational structure to access larger funding opportunities, larger organizations might be better positioned to do this work. In turn, smaller, frontline groups can help create community-responsive programming and share and direct those resources effectively.

"[It's important] to get funding to the organizations that can be most effective in a way that recognizes each organization's ability to contribute meaningful in their work. Meaning, get the work done, don't waste time on everyone having to navigate systems of funding on their own, just be able to distribute the funds, information, etc. where it needs to go."
(Michelle Lackie, Exchange Inner City)

A Lack of Trust
There is a good diversity of organizational types in the DTES, including grassroots activists, education partners, on-the-ground frontline workers, service providers and programmers, not-for-profit groups, charities, and social enterprises, among others. Different types of organizations bring the diverse skillsets, perspectives, and lived experience that are necessary to comprehensively address complex community needs.

Speaking with members, it became apparent that some tension exists between more formally-structured organizations (like social enterprises and some charities and non-profits) and smaller frontline organizations (including some non-profits and grassroots groups). These tensions also became apparent during some of the CCRN meetings, when conflicting approaches to problem-solving were raised.

"Everyone came to the table during COVID because they didn't have a choice. I've learned in working in this community that we tend to design things in the way that [larger organizations] are comfortable with, and that is exclusionary in and of itself."
(CCRN Member)

Larger organizations often have more resources and institutional legitimacy than smaller organizations because their formalized structure and governance more closely match that of other formal institutions like government and funding bodies[4]. There are many benefits to having large organizations involved in a community organizational landscape. They bring professional skills and training, have the capacity to engage in large grant-writing and advocating efforts, and are often well-connected in ways that allow them to identify and pursue large partnerships and funding opportunities. The other side of this coin, however, is that in collaborative community governance models, this can shape power imbalances in ways that can unintentionally produce inequities. It can lead to an exclusivity around resource sharing, and can shape processes and agendas in ways that marginalize smaller, less formal organizations. These organizations can also lack a connection with more marginalized members of the communities they serve, and can struggle to tailor initiatives in ways that are responsive to the realities of their lived-experience.

"There is trust developed in this process. You might be a tiny grassroots organization and I recognize the expertise you have and that is as valuable as [any large service provider]…"
(CCRN Member)

Front-line service providers and community organizers have valuable skills and knowledge, both of on-the-ground realities and the challenges and feasibility of proposed programs and services. They are also important conduits for building trust in the community[5]. By excluding these groups, unintentionally or otherwise, opportunities are missed to guide the policy agenda, better inform decision-making, and build trust at all levels of the community[6]. Secondly, this exclusion can exacerbate inequities in the community. When discussing entrenched organizational relationships, one CCRN member said:

"…People who are easier to help are covered by the big organizations that have lots of capacity and money and more staff. Little groups on the ground who have no capacity, staff, or money are helping all the people on the streets and alleys […] who are in the intersectional areas, with multiple needs and barriers. These issues are [mirrored in] the inequities of the funding structures […] so those small groups also fall through - they are part of the same inequities on the whole funding and organizational side as well… There is education needed both ways".
(CCRN member)

Networking groups that balance diverse types of organizations are rare precisely because of there are many challenges to overcome for them to work together effectively. A quarter of participating organizations felt excluded from other networking groups prior to joining the CCRN. Some members felt that the CCRN has lost members at its outset due specifically to these reasons. However, while not perfect, the CCRN is an organically produced model that offers an example of what can be achieved through the leveraging of diverse types of organizations and skillsets. This is especially the case when participants are committed to working together, and trying to learn, understand, and respect one another. It seems that the CCRN provided an opportunity that helped bridge some of the mistrust that exists. 75% of respondents said they had increased trust in other organizations since joining.

"Success requires the DTES community to leverage the trust built out of the CCRN and continue collaborating across organizations and sectors."
(Michelle Lackie, Exchange Inner City)

By addressing potential stumbling blocks in an informed and deliberate way, it is possible to build bridges and trust between a diverse range of organizations.

3.2b. CCRN Success Factors
Members frequently expressed their surprise and appreciation being part of a network that worked together to advocate, act as a collective voice, and offer a tailored-for-the-DTES COVID response. Four key factors allowed the CCRN to overcome the challenges noted in section 3.2a: the circumstances of the moment, the meaningful inclusion and collaboration between diverse kinds of organizations, the cultivation of reciprocity and trust, and effective leadership.

Circumstances

The pandemic provided an impetus for organizations to come together in a new way.

"I think that CCRN brought an extreme amount of value in a time of emergency, and at the same time also gave us a look into what was possible."
(CCRN member)

It goes without saying that the pandemic is an unprecedented, destabilizing event. Destabilizing events are disorienting because they throw our taken-for-granted norms and institutions (the ways we organize doing things together) into flux. Our embedded ways of doing things and our habitual relationships may no longer be the best way to act. In fact, it is possible that they were never the best way, but we can be reluctant to abandon known strategies because they are habitual and comfortable and often work well enough[7].

Institutions and culture have inertia, and destabilizing events can present the impetus to formulate, try out, and practice new habits and ways of doing things[8]. It is a break from how we used to do things, and offers the potential for innovation and even cultural transformation. In times of flux the ways we do things can be more conscious and deliberate because they are less familiar. Systemic change can happen more easily during periods of instability, and needs to happen before our institutions re-solidify and become entrenched once more[9].

In this way, the CCRN offers a rare opportunity to consciously and deliberately consider how to innovate the management of relationships in the DTES to facilitate better inter-organizational collaboration. The pandemic will one day be over, but the ongoing realities of the opioid and homelessness crises in this community mean there is an ongoing urgency and need for organizations to continue working together.

"The DTES has many issues that are better heard when spoken about with a collective voice. The role of the CCRN beyond the pandemic should be to coordinate key issues, support communication with governments, and build collaboration. […] My hope is that we continue to collaborate and communicate."
(Naved Noorani, Potluck Café Society)

82% of respondents think it is important for a group like the CCRN to continue beyond the pandemic. CCRN members often voiced their desire to find a way to build on the successes this group has realized.

"The isolation doesn't end with the pandemic. I believe we're all better the more we know about what others are doing."
(CCRN Member)

The emergency of the pandemic is certainly a huge factor in catalyzing the CCRN, but its successes are due to more than circumstance. The rest of this section focusses on what lessons the CCRN has taught that can be built on to continue to move forward collectively.

Diversity as a Resource

"Success of the CCRN for me means that our organization has a trusted central place for information and connection that is representative of the diverse group of leaders in the DTES."
(CCRN Member)

Decisions that are informed by groups with diverse perspectives, skill sets, and opinions tend to have better outcomes[10]. In a collaborative organization setting, diversity refers to the variety of size, structure, purpose and focus of member organizations. It should be noted, that while compositional diversity is not alone enough to realize positive outcomes, evidence suggests that it is important that traditionally less-represented groups make up between 30 to 50% of overall membership to avoid the downfalls of token representation[11]. That said, diversity is more than the sum of its parts. The presence of diverse parties at the same table does not guarantee collaboration between groups[12]. In other words, a seat at the table is not enough. The collective orientation towards diversity affects group functioning and is a key mediating factor in whether compositional diversity positively influences outcomes[13].

To realize the benefits of a diverse group of organizations, the most effective strategy is to employ an orientation that recognizes and treats diversity as a <u>resource</u>, and directs collaborative action in the spirit of this orientation. Diversity is a resource because it brings together an exchange of different knowledge and assets, leveraging different information and strategies. When groups are made up of members of similar organizational types, they tend to have overlapping networks and experiences, and therefore have roughly the same knowledge and resources as each other. Bringing different types of organizations together means there is a greater chance of bridging

gaps in networks and knowledge in a way that results in more informed decision-making and better planned responses[14]. We can see this in the successful collaboration of different kinds of organizational members in the CCRN and how they worked together to combine their skillsets to tackle issues like food security in the community. Diverse organizations bring different experiences, knowledge, and insights to the table. When these are brought together in a context that recognizes that as core to its functioning and success, it results in opportunities for knowledge and resource exchange, and ultimately, increases the chances for better outcomes[15].

To be sure, it is not an easy achievement to bring diverse groups to sit at the same table and engage in a meaningful exchange in a way that prioritizes and preserves diversity as a resource. By design, this process disrupts existing power hierarchies in the service of better outcomes. However, because the DTES has existing power hierarchies that exist along factions of organizational type, a disruption of this hierarchy is necessary to collaborate more effectively. Alternative perspectives can help inform novel approaches to problems, but in practice, this means group members need to voice different points of views and this can cause conflict. Embracing diversity as a resource means that these points of contention are crucial learning opportunities for all members and ultimately they can enhance a groups problem-solving capacity. This can take more time and might mean there is more immediate friction, but it also means that team members learn from each another. Evidence suggests this process ultimately leads to more nuanced and effective strategies[16]. Leadership is an important component in effectively managing diverse community groups, which is discussed below.

In interviews and survey responses, some members mentioned other networking groups that exist and some questioned why the CCRN did not find an organizational home in one of these. Most of these groups were described as having little overlap between organizational type membership. While it is outside the scope of this report to do a survey of existing network groups in the DTES or speculate why existing groups might not have brought together diverse types of organizations, it seems that the CCRN was unique in its composition and collaborative achievements.

In the midst of a destabilizing event, when institutions and structures are in flux, the CCRN brought together a diverse group of organizations in a way that was both collaborative and responsive. The CCRN offers an important and needed balance of diversity, agility, flexibility, and structure in the organizational landscape of the DTES.

Cultivation of Trust

Trust in a diverse organizational landscape is difficult to cultivate and nurture[17]. Peer funds are an important conduit that can forge trust between organizations and throughout the broader community.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the City of Vancouver established an emergency $600,000 COVID-related peer fund with broad parameters. The CCRN acted as a regionalized distribution hub for these funds. The allocation and distribution was collaboratively led by a team of community leaders (Steve Johnston, Jennifer Johnstone, and David Lee) and supported administratively by CIRES staff and David Lee. CCRN members could access these funds for COVID-related peer responses and were entrusted to deploy resources where they were most needed. Once funds were allocated, the CCRN peer fund group would meet weekly to discuss and manage their oversight.

Over 30,000 hours of peer work was funded through distribution to 16 organizations of all sizes. The peer hours helped in important and practical ways. It funded peers to aid in COVID-information sharing, food security efforts, PPE distribution, and respite sites, among many other initiatives.

Creating a regionalized hub funding model was described as a radical departure from typical fundings models in the DTES. Distributing these funds through the CCRN allowed for greater efficiency in time and administration, and organizations weren't bogged down with the burden of a complicated funding application process. However, it also meant that groups that were best positioned to know where funds would have the most impact were empowered to allocate their distribution. Organizations weren't divided by competitive funding structures, and in some cases even gave up some of their funding to help meet the needs of another organization. In short, the regionalized hub funding meant the community was empowered to solve the issues they were facing.

"The solutions in the community have to come from the community. The more that directly affected folks are meaningfully involved in the design of the solution, and those community organizations that are able to meaningfully engage those folks are involved, the better. They are the ones that should be leading things. I know community led solutions work, for thirty years I've watched those work."
(Jennifer Johnstone, Central City Foundation)

Building social solidarity and engendering trust in community networks requires an interdependence of its members[18]. The way that peer funds were distributed through the CCRN regionalized hub likely helped build solidarity and engender trust among member organizations. Its distribution meant that diverse interests, values, and approaches were respected and members were entrusted to carry out different functions.

Peer funds also had the benefit of providing stability to community members, both in terms of income and in available resources. There is evidence to suggest that citizen participation in everyday activities and community-led decision-making increases feelings of self-efficacy and provides a greater sense of community, purpose, and place[19]. Investing in economic bridging opportunities like peer work may also create more social cohesion, civic participation, and trust in the broader community[20].

"The way that we administer our programs and provide that low-barrier access and have all of our programs led and informed by peers, that is really the magic that actually makes it work and really builds trust."
(Landon Hoyt, Binners Project)

Leadership

Leadership is a critical component in managing diverse inter-organizational relationships. The CCRN benefitted from having a strong leadership team involved in the regionalized funding hub, including Steve Johnston, Jennifer Johnstone, and David Lee. Many members also extended their appreciation for Steve for taking on the primary leadership in the CCRN and for his ability to manage and lead the group effectively. Members described his leadership as democratic, non-confrontational, responsive, and effective.

"Steve has done an amazing job. This movement demands a lot of effort […] [Leadership requires] creating an environment where issues are voiced comfortably, solutions are found through teamwork, challenges that cannot be resolved are escalated for resolution to agencies that have the capacity to do so. Following up and responding to pending issues; delegating where needed, communicating information to and from the team in a timely fashion, sensing conflict and de-escalating in a respectful manner."
(Naved Noorani, Potluck Café Society)

" [Groups like the CCRN need] someone who can manage beyond existing dynamics and politics, to stay focused on the commonalities of members and areas where there are shared elements and interests[…] Steve [has] consistently offered the balance between structure and flexibility. He has done a great job."
(CCRN Member)

I noted similar traits in his leadership style. He narrowed in on and emphasized common goals; engaged in consensus building, and was respectful of diverse perspectives in conflict. He also advocated for members who did not have time or access to the same networks and contacts that he did.

Effective leadership is important for establishing collective group norms, engendering trust, and building and sustaining an inclusive and respectful culture. Of particular importance in a group like the CCRN is a leader that encourages a diversity of opinions, constructively manages group conflict, and instills a sense of collectivism. While there are many types of leadership, evidence suggests that a transformational leadership style offers the most promise for managing and leading diverse groups[21],[22]. Transformational leaders are typified by 1) demonstrating strong values, principles, and convictions that match the collective goals of the group they lead; 2) their capacity to motivate others to reach collective goals; 3) having a high level of respect for group members, demonstrated by soliciting critical thinking and depending on members to innovate and problem-solve; and 4) recognizing and respecting the diverse skill sets and motivations of individual members[23]. Fundamental to all of these characteristics is the transformational leaders' desire to engage members in vision-building and goal-setting.

Practical Considerations
There are some miscellaneous but notable factors that likely contributed to the success of the CCRN. First, at its outset and in its current form, the CCRN is not a self-sustaining organization. It has no paid staff and no formalized organizational support. It does not have a funding source for the administrative or leadership resources that were taken on by CIRES, Steve, Jennifer Johnstone, David Lee, Yazmin Machuca, Alisha Masongsong, and others. Many members either work part-time or are volunteers. This is a remarkable achievement and a testament to the level of dedication that members of this group have.

The groups lack of pre-established structure may also have lent itself to some of its success. This looseness might have been an important contributing factor, especially

at the outset when negotiation of roles, goals, and communication styles were in flux. Some members thought this looseness meant that trickier political issues could be held at bay, and that allowed the group to focus on common goals.

Because of the pandemic, while the first few meetings met in person, meetings soon shifted to the virtual world. The CCRN, like many others in these strange times, has done the vast majority of this work together from different locations. I hypothesize that the fact that members could meet literally and figuratively where each other were might have contributed to some of its success. There were no boardrooms or travelling or established seating arrangements to contend with. The meetings were able to be run smoothly with muted microphones and hand-raising, which may have reduced some barriers to participation. That being said, a virtual meeting environment may also have been a barrier to some groups that might not have been able to attend. It is interesting to consider what effect this virtual environment might have had on the way the group functioned and communicated.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by the insights generated from respondents in this study, and grounded in evidence-informed solutions, I make 3 core recommendations:

1. The CCRN should continue in its current form, with the same leadership, for the duration of the pandemic.

The CCRN has managed to bring together a diverse range of organizations to mount a comprehensive and effective community-led COVID response. As this report is written, British Columbia is in the midst of a second-wave of the pandemic. The DTES is being hit much harder than the first-wave, and the risks of transmission are far higher. The CCRN already has established networks, expertise, and seems best positioned to offer a community-led collaborative response.

Expanding its current response, there is a desire from many CCRN members for a community-engaged contact tracing program that is tailored for the particular needs of the DTES community. While privacy must be balanced with public safety, it seems a peer-driven contact tracing initiative could play an important role in a DTES COVID response. A helpful example of a peer-based contact tracing model might be found in the Social Networking Approach (SNA) that was developed by the street nurse programme at the BC Centre for Disease Control. In this program, peer outreach workers were hired to assist in accessing hard-to-reach community members in the DTES during an STI epidemic in the late 1990s. While not an exact match in circumstance, it may offer important insights. Details and methods of the SNA model can be found in the peer-reviewed article cited here[24].

2. The CCRN should continue to act as a regionalized, community-led funding hub for peer programs.

The peer funding has played an integral role in the community's ability to respond to the specific challenges that the DTES faces during the pandemic. It is difficult to imagine what would have happened if the programs that were implemented during the first-wave that depended on those funds had not been able to operate. It has also meant peers themselves benefit from the financial stability these funds provide, and their instrumental role in the COVID response no doubt provided an invaluable service and stability to the community. It played a crucial role in building and bridging trust between organizational members and helped facilitate a collaborative inter-

organizational response. The regionalized CCRN funding hub offers a viable alternative to existing competitive and divisive funding models.

3. The CCRN should continue as a collaborative network organization in some form beyond the pandemic.

The CCRN has managed to bring together a diverse range of organizations in the DTES and mount a coordinated community-led response to a variety of challenges. Many members have expressed the uniqueness of this feat. Although other networking organizations exist, members have said that they cater to organizations that are similar to one another, and lack the same organizational diversity. There is concern from some members that another collective of organizations would reproduce a siloed response. In a community that faces compounded crises that are unlikely to end soon, it seems that an organizational collective that can work collaboratively to leverage their diverse strengths is important to preserve. While I understand the reasoning of some members to re-home the CCRN in an existing networking organization, I would caution that because the CCRN has grown organically and without the preexisting weight of an entrenched organizational culture or structure, its strengths might be best preserved as a separate entity.

If there is a will for the CCRN to continue beyond the pandemic, it would require an organizational home that could offer it funding for the associated administrative and leadership costs. While the existing leadership is effective, it is not a sustainable arrangement in the long-term. I recommend that a replacement with a similar transformational leadership style is chosen to ensure the particular needs of managing diverse organizational types are met. It is also recommended that the CCRN continues to prioritize its diversity in an authentic and meaningful way. This is one of the main strengths of this network. Diversity-as-a-resource should be instilled as a core value and belief, and should animate its collective actions.

The role of the CCRN beyond the pandemic would be a continued collaborative response, but many members also expressed that they would also like it to function as a collective communication and funding hub. The value of a regionalized funding hub has already been discussed.

A collective communication hub would act as a unified body and voice of a rich and diverse membership, and would likely be well suited as an intermediary body to channel incoming and outgoing messaging and resources, and advocate for collective

goals. The CCRN has operated as a communication hub during the pandemic, acting as a collective voice and advocate for the specific needs of the DTES community. In the future, a collective communication hub would similarly facilitate ongoing dialogue between community partners and government bodies. It would also help shape responses in actionable and impactful ways.

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