



HNC PARTNER FEATURE:

Who is in your emergency kit?

The pandemic and reactions to it have highlighted for many people the value of knowing your neighbours – and ideally knowing them *before* emergencies occur.



The pandemic is teaching all of us about the value of social connections in virtually every aspect of our lives, and especially during times of crisis. Yet those who work and volunteer in community-based resilience and emergency preparedness and response have also been as disarmed by the pandemic as everyone else: How can neighbours safely help each other, when reaching out to help could heighten risk?

The key issue is that for neighbour-based mutual aid to work, neighbours (and ideally landlords too) need to know each other well enough to understand what each other's needs are and how best to offer and safely deliver support.

Building Resilient Neighbourhoods and Victoria Ready, the City of Victoria's Emergency Management Division, have held several online meetings of volunteer street and building leaders from their *Connect & Prepare* program for neighbour groups to explore this very question. One overarching theme emerged from these discussions with "resident champions": It's vital to know your neighbours and build trust with them before crises hit.

"Even more than 'what' is in your emergency kit, the question that should be asked is, 'Who is going to be in your emergency kit?'" said one resident-champion.

As she and other champions explained, neighbours who already knew each other and their respective lifestyles and needs have been able to support each other relatively easily and effectively – whereas neighbours who weren't already connected have scrambled to figure out how to build relationships and trust and determine what each other's needs are, while communications have been severely hampered by the pandemic.

Illustrative of this issue, all of the champions reported that many more neighbours were offering help than requesting help -- a phenomenon also reported by some United Way branches during the pandemic. "When volunteers came out of the pores of our communities trying to give back, we knew that what people really craved was a sense of collective, a sense of community," said Gabriel Avelar of United Way Lower Mainland. And offerers would probably be grateful for occasional assistance of some kind themselves, suggested the champions – if they weren't shy about asking for it.

Indeed, many studies have shown people are more likely to ask for assistance from someone they already know well than from a stranger. And this was punctuated by Sarah Hunn of Victoria Ready when she reported on discussions with a volunteering organization. “They had an influx of people who wanted to help when the pandemic hit,” said Hunn. “But sometimes volunteers showed up at people’s doors to help them, and the person wouldn’t know them and would feel uncomfortable and send them away.”

Building Resilient Neighbourhoods Executive Director Stacy Barter shared how pre-existing familiarity has been useful during the pandemic for relationships between residents and property managers, too. Barter described how Brightside Community Homes Foundation in Vancouver – another Hey Neighbour Collective partner – already knew many of their elderly and immigrant tenants were not active online and struggled with English, and so immediately boosted communications through paper, posters, and telephone, and translated critical updates for navigating the pandemic into multiple languages.

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This is especially crucial when people are experiencing the pandemic very differently. The champions – themselves from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances – highlighted this reality to each other. Some healthy, well-to-do seniors are carrying on largely as normal, they observed, while those with mobility challenges or who are health-compromised are feeling extremely challenged. People who live in single-detached home neighbourhoods

often have yards where they can easily sit outside and socialize, whereas many people in multi-unit buildings have no such opportunities. The pandemic is disproportionately affecting racialized and lower-income people, the champions agreed, and has been especially stressful for families with young children at home and no remote-working options, and for the homeless. As one champion summarized: “Same storm, different boats.”

“What this pandemic has made us realize,” concluded another *Connect & Prepare* champion, “is that the more people know each other, the better it is for everyone, regardless of the emergency.”

But many are spotting a silver lining. As one champion said, “We’re seeing people show much more care for each other. We need to hold onto this. How do we maintain this level of caring that has been uncovered through our shared vulnerability?”

Barter agreed, adding that investing in continuity and deepening of social connections can prove to be as invaluable at any time as during large-scale emergencies. “It’s like investing in health promotion and prevention rather than hospitals,” said Barter.