

ACORN Institute Canada

Year End Report 2015



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About AIC

ACORN Institute Canada (AIC) is a charitable organization that uses research and training to address the problems in low-income communities. We believe that the poverty, discrimination, and community deterioration that exists in low-income communities is a result of a lack civic engagement, community leadership and financial literacy.

In 2015 ACORN Institute Canada (AIC) continued to work within low income communities across Canada. Participants in our leadership development program have taken on many pressing issues, from housing to internet access, while building skills and forging strong bonds with their neighbours. We are expanding our reach across Canada, and are especially proud of the continued development of programs in Nova Scotia this year.



Community Leadership Development

AIC works in low income communities as part of our mandate, and a happy side-effect of this work is the collection of knowledge and understanding both of leadership development, and how to apply leadership development processes to specific communities and groups of people. Many of the participants in our programs are facing not only financial challenges, but social exclusion because of race, age, ability, etc. We use our decade of experience in reaching marginalized groups in our Leadership Schools. These trainings – ranging from two hours to full day workshops - are for community members from low income neighbourhoods, including a variety of backgrounds and abilities, to gain essential skills and facilitate working with neighbours and building community to create positive change. Our leadership training program also includes a range of delivery tools to accommodate community members' needs, from one-on-one house visits to large weekend leadership summits.



The innovative and proven aspect of our Leadership Schools is the “train the trainer” approach; as leaders build skills through the Leadership Schools, they build the capacity to facilitate leadership development in their neighbours. This approach is inherently

sustainable, as the program grows from within and benefits from the range of experience embodied by participants, as they grow not only their own knowledge, but the skills to encourage growth and pass on knowledge to other people in their community.



The Community Leadership School program addresses poverty and inequality at its roots by empowering local community members to take leadership roles, and acknowledging their position as being best equipped to address the socio-economic challenges that affect them and their neighbours directly. Leadership Schools include

practical skills development – outreach and communication, planning, facilitation – combined with knowledge of civic processes, current issues, and multiliteracy. This approach maximizes low income community members' potential to address common issues, together.

Tenant Working Groups

The Tenant Working Groups are made up of participants in the Leadership Schools specifically interested in working on landlord and tenant issues. The groups are organized by neighbourhood, and focus on identifying common issues and finding root causes.

This model involves more direct civic engagement than the Leadership Schools. The groups are supported in building partnerships with other community stakeholders in order to reach a larger audience for their concerns. The groups are largely locally focused, but are not limited in joining forces with other tenant working groups in order to problem solve on a larger scale.

The tenant working group model allows participants to learn about specific civic processes on multiple levels, and how to successfully engage with government processes to improve conditions in their neighbourhoods.



Financial Literacy

A key area of leadership development that our program participants have identified is understanding personal finances and how to access and maintain financial resources. This is a pressing issue for many of our participants. AIC has partnered with banks, credit unions, and other financial institutions in order to run a variety of

programs for low income families around financial literacy. These programs continue to be among of our most asked-for and well attended undertakings.

Through financial literacy classes, we have provided guidance on how to avoid predatory lending practices, understanding tax benefits, and various other concerns as identified by participants. We are continuing to expand our ongoing projects and developing new partnerships in this area to meet the needs of our communities.

2015 Highlights

- In June 2015, community leaders from across Canada came together to attend our National Leadership Summit. Graduates of our Leadership Schools planned and facilitated workshops centered on pressing issues of concern to low income families. The National Leadership Summit afforded our participants the opportunity to meet and share stories with other community members from across the country, to learn from different approaches to issues and to leadership development as a whole.
- With the support of our community partners and institutional funders, we continued to grow the Financial Literacy program this year. We ran free income tax sites and financial literacy programs in BC, Ontario, Nova Scotia and Quebec, helping hundreds of low income families to file their taxes, connecting them to unrealized benefits, and providing financial management skills. This year we have also launched a program to connect eligible families to the Canada Learning Bond, and RESP program for low-income parents of young children.
- Thanks to new funders in Nova Scotia, we were able to expand our leadership development focus, specifically around health outcomes related to housing. We ran leadership development schools and established new tenant working groups in Halifax, Dartmouth and Spryfield in 2015, and continue to grow and expand our work throughout the Halifax Regional Municipality.



Institutional Funders 2015

**Atkinson Charitable Foundation * Campbell Webster Foundation *
Community Foundation of Ottawa * Maytree Foundation * Omega Foundation
* Sisters of Charity – Halifax * Vancouver Foundation**