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ACORN INSTITUTE CANADA

*YEAR END REPORT 2016*



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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 2016 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, Quebec, and the GTA 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.

## **2016 HIGHLIGHTS**

- In April, community leaders from our leadership development program across Canada came together to at our National Leadership School in Ottawa. Community leaders from BC, Ontario, Nova Scotia and Quebec gathered to share knowledge on identifying community concerns and building capacity to address them.
- With the support of our community partners and institutional funders (including the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ottawa Community Foundation), we continued to grow the Financial Literacy program this year. We ran free income tax sites and benefits centres, and financial literacy programs in BC and Ontario, helping hundreds of low income families to file their taxes, connecting them to unrealized benefits, and providing financial management skills.
- In 2016 we have expanded our Canada Learning Bond program, connecting eligible low-income families to this free RESP benefit for low-income parents of young children. This year we expanded outreach on the program from coast to coast, and enrolled over 250 children.
- With the support of the Metcalf Foundation and through community union partnerships, AIC established a city-wide working group of precariously employed and unemployed workers in Toronto, in order to build capacity through leadership development to engage in the policy debate around improving federal EI policy.
- In Nova Scotia, we were able to expand our main leadership development focus of health outcomes related to housing, and began to address a wider range of housing concerns within our tenant working groups in Halifax, Dartmouth and Spryfield.

## **INSTITUTIONAL FUNDERS 2016**

### **NEW PROJECTS**

Flemming Foundation (Nova Scotia)  
Housing as a Determinant of Health - \$2,000

Maytree Foundation (National)  
Research - \$28,000

Metcalf Foundation (Toronto)  
EI Working Groups - \$47,250

Omega Foundation (National)  
Canada Learning Bond Outreach - \$3,225

Ontario Trillium Foundation (Ottawa)  
Financial Benefits Centres - \$29,600

### **ONGOING PROJECTS**

Atkinson Charitable Foundation (Ontario)  
Leadership Development - \$216,650

Ottawa Community Foundation (Ottawa)  
Financial Benefits Centres - \$9,500

Sisters of Charity Halifax (Nova Scotia)  
Housing as a Determinant of Health - \$2,500