

FOR COMMUNITY

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# ACORN INSTITUTE CANADA

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FOR LEADERSHIP

## Year End Report 2017

### **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 2017 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 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.

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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.

## **COMMUNITY WORKING GROUPS**

Community Working Groups are made up of participants in the Leadership Schools specifically interested in working on landlord and tenant issues, as well as other policies and issues affecting low-income families. The groups are focused 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 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.

Our city-wide EI working group consists of individuals who are on EI, were denied EI, or vulnerable because of the current EI system’s shortcomings. Working on a similar model as the tenant working groups, participants developed a list of barriers to accessing EI in order to address the root causes of these issues.

Similarly, we were able to use this model to develop a Newcomer Parent Action Group to develop solutions for affordable and accessible childcare.

## **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

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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.

## **DIGITAL LITERACY**

Digital literacy is an increasing concern for the communities we work with. This year with the support of funders we were able to run leadership development workshops specifically around digital literacy and building and sharing digital skills.

Participants in these workshops are able to develop digital literacy skills, to aid their children with success in school, find tools for economic relief, and build their capacity to get out of poverty.

## **2017 HIGHLIGHTS**

- In June, community leaders from our leadership development program across Canada came together to at our National Leadership Summit in Ottawa. 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 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 2017 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 were able to improve outreach across the country, and enrolled over 400 children in the program.

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## ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDERS 2017

### **City of Toronto** (Toronto) - \$27,500

Development of a Newcomer Parent Action Group to develop solutions for affordable and accessible childcare.

### **EFTO Humanities Fund** (Ottawa) - \$8,000

Pilot project training low-income parents digital literacy skills, through six workshops in low-income neighbourhoods in Ottawa.

### **Hamilton Community Foundation** (Hamilton) - \$9,500

Connecting low-income families in the Hamilton Centre tenant community to locally-g geared civics workshops.

### **Maytree Foundation** (National) - \$97,600

- Policy research to support issues impacting people living in poverty, including employment, housing, financial services, and access to the Internet; and designing and producing materials for the ACORN National Leadership Summit.
- Support the creation of a communications infrastructure that most effectively connects ACORN Canada's low income members to policy makers, public policy and civic engagement through technology

### **Vancouver Foundation** (BC) - \$10,000

Digital Economy research around improving the health outcomes for low income earners in Canada related to telecommunications policy architecture.

### **Metcalf Foundation** (Toronto) - \$47,250

Building a city wide working group to leverage the capacity of workers denied or vulnerable to needing EI to engage in the policy debate around improving federal EI policy.

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**Omega Foundation** (National) - \$10,275

Conducting outreach and connecting low-income families nationwide with the Canada Learning Bond.

**Ontario Trillium Foundation** (Ottawa) - \$29,600

Developing Financial Benefits Centres and establishing a free clinic helping people with disabilities prepare their taxes and connect with other benefits and economic opportunities.

**Sisters of Charity Halifax** (Nova Scotia) - \$3,000

Pilot project to connect low- and moderate-income families in Nova Scotia with unrealized benefits, specifically the Canada Learning Bond.