

Innovation Towards Smart Service Provision

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Introduction

Since 1980, the application of inappropriate neo-liberal policies has resulted in the widespread closure and downsizing of rural and small town services. Such services, however, are vital to supporting community and economic renewal.

In response to restructuring pressures, a range of 'one-stop' service delivery sites have emerged in an effort to enhance the efficient use of resources, and to help residents connect with supports in an increasingly complex and constantly changing service environment.

Outline of talk

This presentation explores three types of smart service delivery models that can provide a foundation for community development and sustainability. We begin by reviewing the impacts of rural restructuring, including the operational challenges faced by service providers in small places.

Drawing upon examples from northern BC, we explore opportunities and challenges linked to three types of 'one-stop' service delivery models. We then discuss recommendations that can inform future policy, infrastructure, and program changes.

Service Restructuring

Within the context of global economic restructuring, the resource dependent economies of many rural and small town places tend to make them more vulnerable than their urban counterparts. Large distances and low population densities already make it difficult for small places to retain services that have high delivery costs. Since 1980, neoliberal policy decisions aimed at reducing government expenditures are offloading, downsizing, regionalizing, and closing many forms of services and supports. Unfortunately, the application of such policies with urban-based service delivery models means that supports in small places are being re-organized against inappropriate benchmarks.

Challenges for Residents

From a resident's perspective, there are many general challenges connecting with services and supports. Living in a winter climate makes it difficult for residents to manoeuvre along icy sidewalks and roads.

Seniors or residents with disabilities must also cope with mobility challenges related to heavy doors, stairs, and other physical barriers in the built environment. Such residents may find it difficult to visit multiple service locations.

It can also be difficult for residents to navigate, and re-navigate, a constantly changing service environment where service providers have:

- Faced uncertainty surrounding financial resources that support operations,
- Reduced or changed hours and days of operations,
- Seasonal or temporary delivery of services,
- Consolidated operations, or even
- Temporary or permanent closures.

This requires residents to identify new locations, new hours of operation, new contact information for personnel, and learn about changing processes and criteria to access services. These challenges are exacerbated in small places as local services are closed and people now need to travel out of town to access services. As some small communities have limited broadband and other technology infrastructure and training in place, residents may also find it difficult to connect with supports that have been automated in distant urban locations.

Operational Challenges for Service Providers in Rural Places

At the same time, restructuring pressures have prompted an urgent need for service providers to address their operational challenges. Many rural and small town places have an aging infrastructure that needs to be replaced.

In addition to having fewer financial and human resources to deliver services, organizations may find it difficult to acquire funds to cover facility operating costs. With cuts to government funding programs, it is important that organizations work together to avoid duplication and create synergies in order to maximize the benefits attainable from limited resources.

One-Stop Service Delivery Models I

If rural and small town places wish to retain these services, they will have to find new ways to have them delivered. They need to marry economic efficiencies of their operations with the delivery of quality services.

In response, many one-stop service delivery models have emerged as a way to provide and maintain supports that might not otherwise exist. By pooling their resources together, one-stop service delivery models enable organizations to develop synergies, collaborate, and enhance the communication across service providers. It can also provide a more efficient portal for residents to access information about needed supports.

One-Stop Service Delivery Models II

Using examples from northern BC communities, we wish to explore three types of one-stop service models including portals of collated information, sites with expanded service mandates, and co-located services.

With an interest in supporting community development and renewal efforts, our goal is to develop a better understanding of the different types of one-stop service delivery models and what is needed to effectively support their development.

Portals of Collated Information

In a constantly changing service environment, portals of collated information help to ease residents' access to information about a range of supports. With limited financial resources and technical expertise, portals of collated information can help rural groups to make the most of their limited budgets by pooling their resources to deploy a comprehensive communication strategy.

South Peace Senior Citizens' Association: Dawson Creek, BC

The South Peace Senior Citizens' Association in Dawson Creek is an example of a portal that provides a wide range of information about community services for local seniors.

This portal is further supported by presentations and workshops that are given by health and financial professionals. These added opportunities for two-way dialogue are important to build client-service provider relationships and trust, and, especially for seniors, to facilitate learning about accessing services.

A key component to the success of this portal is that it is a natural gathering place for seniors who attend and participate in routine activities at the hall. Accessibility, however, is a key component that could enhance the success of this portal. Improved transportation links are needed so that isolated or home bound seniors can get to the hall more easily throughout the year. A number of physical barriers, such as stairs and heavy doors, also need to be addressed.

Canada Post: Mackenzie, BC

In Mackenzie, BC, the unemployment insurance office had been closed due to federal government cutbacks and there was no office in town to help workers cope with job losses in the forest sector.

In 2002, the local post office developed a partnership with Service Canada to become an access centre for the federal government. This office provided residents with a one-stop access point for federal government forms, such as unemployment insurance forms, as well as passport applications and a host of others. Residents could also access an on-line portal to federal programs.

After limited use by residents, however, the portal closed in 2004. This experience demonstrated that it is important to evaluate the need and functionality of such spaces. Investments in computer literacy training for residents, for example, may be needed in order to ensure the success of such initiatives.

Sites with Expanded Services

A second example involves sites with expanded services. This includes organizations that offer a core range of services and then expand according to local demands and needs. Residents

benefit from these sites by being able to access needed supports in one location. The flexibility of this model supports service expansion during times of particular need while still maintaining its base activities when that particular need falls away.

Nechako Valley Community Services: Vanderhoof, BC

Located in Vanderhoof, BC, the Nechako Valley Community Services is a non-profit multi-service agency that offers a broad range of supports such as counselling, life skill programs, support for people with developmental disabilities, parenting programs, and supports for seniors.

Nechako Valley Community Services: Vanderhoof, BC

A key part of its success has been the ability to draw upon a wide range of financial and in-kind support from provincial government agencies, foundations, industry, service providers, and non-profit groups.

The NVCS also operates three social enterprises including:

- A café called Beans on Burrard,
- The Nechako Valley Organics, a greenhouse located next to the café, and
- A mobile work crew that performs a range of duties, such as cleaning, yard work, and garbage runs.

The money raised from these social enterprises not only provides employment for clients with developmental disabilities, but it also enhances the resiliency of the organization as it provides another source of revenue to support their activities.

Native Friendship Centre: Prince Rupert, BC

The Prince Rupert Native Friendship Centre is another example of an expanded service model that provides a comprehensive, holistic approach to developing successful families. A wide range of services are offered including youth services, counselling, family services, and nutrition. Open to anyone in the community, the centre has also been working to bridge Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

Native Friendship Centre: Prince Rupert, BC

The success of this model is hampered, however, by distrust amongst other First Nations groups in the area. This has led to the duplication of services amongst different Aboriginal groups and the Native Friendship Centre. As these groups pursue the same resource pools with limited cooperation, there are fewer resources left over to do the job right.

Co-located Services

The last model that we wish to explore today is co-located services. In this example, multiple organizations address challenges associated with infrastructure and operational costs by co-locating and sharing space in one facility.

Multiplex Building: Port Clements, BC

Port Clements is a community that experienced a significant decline in the forest sector and the local population. With a limited tax base, it was also challenged to replace aging infrastructure, such as the community hall and the elementary school. At the same time, an aging population was creating the need for a seniors' centre. This prompted the local government to form a partnership with the school district and the regional library system to build a multiplex building.

Opened in 2008, the multiplex building consists of a new municipal hall, a community gym, an elementary school, a daycare, the public library, and multipurpose rooms that accommodate a community kitchen and a seniors' drop-in. Not only are more organizations sharing the costs of the facility and its operations and maintenance, but as a brand new building, it has very low energy and operating costs.

Multiplex Building: Port Clements, BC

A key lesson learned is that multipurpose facilities need to incorporate storage capacity to accommodate multiple groups. In particular, residents requested more storage for kitchen, recreation equipment, and computers. Accessibility also needs to be arranged for local groups through booking processes and after hours access.

Village Office / Tourism Centre: Valemount, BC

As part of its creative re-imagining of assets, the approach in Valemount was also to replace an aging municipal office and visitor information centre with flexible infrastructure. The main floor of the new facility consists of a new visitor information centre, as well as an arts and culture centre for local and regional artists. The basement of the facility is the new home of the municipal office.

Village Office / Tourism Centre: Valemount, BC

A wide range of funding sources was obtained for the project. The village also used to opportunity to incorporate new technology for land use and management planning, as well as interactive displays about cultural and environmental assets in the area. Space at the old village office continues to benefit local service providers.

Discussion

Neoliberal policies and ongoing service restructuring decisions have left many rural and small town places ill-equipped to cope with social and economic change. Residents are also struggling to navigate and re-navigate changing service supports.

To develop efficient, responsive infrastructure and services that address residents' needs in rapidly changing places, we need to support the development of smart, one-stop service delivery sites. In this context, six key areas need to be addressed.

Discussion I: Smart Policies for Smart Services

First, we need to develop policies to support smart services. Senior government policies need to create greater synergies in the development and delivery of supports, and need to recognize the different contexts of rural and small town places.

Senior government policies aimed at reducing financial support for services and infrastructure investments need to be reconsidered.

Local governments can play a greater role to support smart services and infrastructure through affordable, flexible lease arrangements. Establishing a community foundation could also provide a long-term, flexible source of support for local groups.

Discussion II: Partnerships

Second, we need to support more avenues to develop partnerships. It is only by coming together and pooling resources that these initiatives will be successful. In this context, local governments can provide meeting space and facilitate opportunities for networking. The key is to provide routine opportunities for local groups to work together and build trust. In developing partnerships, however, arrangements for sharing responsibilities, capital and operating costs, and providing secure storage space for all partners and users need to be considered.

Discussion III: Maximizing Resources

Organizations must also find ways to maximize and pool their resources and expertise in order to enhance their efficiency and resiliency. In this respect, local governments can help local initiatives by providing logistical and technical support, as well as access to equipment such as photocopying or teleconferencing. Broad cooperation and planning amongst organizations will also help to reduce duplication.

Organizations can also make the most of limited infrastructure funds by planning for future expansion needs, as well as seizing opportunities to incorporate innovative technology to support daily activities. All of this makes sense in rural and small town places with limited stores of human and community capacity.

Discussion IV: Leadership and Capacity Building

Many staff are trained to deliver specific services rather than run organizations. Policies and programs need to develop and renew the leadership and capacity of staff who are managing and delivering multiple complex supports.

Additional skill areas that need attention include logistical or organizational skills, business skills, information management, and communication skills. Furthermore, training in financial management needs to go beyond grant writing and include other areas of expertise, such as managing social enterprises or investments.

Discussion V: Information and Technology Management

Smart one-stop service portals will also require an effective information management strategy to be successful. In this context, information must be routinely updated in order to be relevant and useful.

Strategic planning must be done concerning the type of information that is communicated to residents. Contact information for personnel, details about available services, costs, benefits, qualifying criteria, and admission requirements are just some of the key pieces of information

that should be distributed. Information management also needs to become a formal staff responsibility that is supported with adequate human and financial resources.

Training, such as computer literacy programs, should also be delivered to enable residents to feel comfortable with using portal sites. Furthermore, the use and functionality of portal sites need to be evaluated on an ongoing basis in order to ensure they remain effective and relevant.

Discussion VI: Accessibility

A final key issue that needs to be addressed concerns accessibility. One-stop portals should be located at natural gathering places for residents. Physical barriers also need to be addressed in order to ensure broad accessibility.

Conclusion

In this presentation, we have explored some of the ways that local groups are pooling their resources together in order to develop smart services that address local needs.

Developing smart one-stop service delivery models is a key component to developing resilient, efficient infrastructure that can support long-term community development goals. By investing wisely and purposefully in our service infrastructure, communities can embark on a sustainable future.