

## ***The Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution***

### ***Introduction***

Conflict is part of life in any community and knowing how to deal with it is vital to its health. Unresolved conflicts within or between families, between neighbours or between groups of community members can contribute to mistrust and even escalate into violence. These problems can be particularly acute in high-density, low-income communities where residents face considerable daily stress. In diverse communities, cultural misunderstandings also may contribute to discord.

Residents of a culturally diverse low-income public housing community in Ottawa, Ontario, have been working to resolve conflicts in their community through the Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution (NCCR). This partnership between the community and various local organizations has successfully promoted a multicultural, collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

### ***A community in conflict***

Bellevue Manor is a low-income, multi-cultural community that includes residents of two highrise buildings and 152 townhouses administered by Ottawa-Carleton Housing, the region's public housing agency. For several years, it showed signs

of conflict: The number of calls to police was much higher than city norms, and many of these calls related to complicated disputes and non-criminal conflicts that could not easily be resolved by police officers.

In 1992, Jabril Abdulle was a student of sociology at Carleton University and a resident of Bellevue Manor. "I saw a lot of violence in the community," he says, "and a lack of proper response to conflict other than calling the police." He realized that the community had few options for dealing with conflict other than the legal system. Existing mediation services were available only through institutions such as universities, courts or schools, or through professional providers. These services were not readily accessible to low-income communities that needed a way to deal with intergroup and interpersonal conflict.

Jabril's daily experiences became the basis for his honours thesis in which he put forward the argument that in a diverse community with regular conflict, the best approach is not to call police but to train and empower community members to take responsibility for managing conflict. As part of his research, he investigated how differences in cultural backgrounds influenced community members' perceptions of conflict. In interviews with community members, he found that eye contact, gestures and comments might be interpreted as confrontational by members of some cultures, but not others. He hypothe-

sized that in a diverse community, this phenomenon led to a considerable amount of avoidable conflict, and that with proper mediation training, community members could resolve these disputes without involving police and the legal system.

### ***Finding the right balance***

In 1993, with the support of Cheryl Picard, Director of the Carleton University Mediation Centre and his thesis advisor, Jabril organized a meeting of representatives from local service organizations, police, lawyers, community members and Ottawa-Carleton Housing as well as Carleton University mediation experts. The initial reaction to his ideas for community-based conflict resolution was not encouraging. “People thought that this naive kid was telling them they weren’t doing their jobs properly,” he says. “The reaction was really negative.”

Cheryl encouraged Jabril to keep trying and he organized another meeting. This time, only two people showed up. “I realized that the real problem was that I was doing all the talking for the community,” he says, “when community members should have been talking for themselves.” So he organized a meeting of community members and service providers at which community members explained their point of view. A dialogue developed and this time there was more interest in the idea of community-based conflict resolution.

Community members wanted a mechanism for alternative dispute resolution, but lacked the necessary mediation skills. On the other hand, a number of organizations had expertise in conflict resolution or in organizational management, but were unsure about how to communicate this knowledge to a highly diverse community. The key was to bring these groups together in a way that enabled both sides to respect, trust and learn from each other.

The approach was to set up two separate committees. “We felt it would be too intimidating to bring experts and community members together on one

committee,” says Jabril. A Steering Committee of 12 people, including representatives of various cultural groups in the community, a staff member from Ottawa-Carleton Housing and a social worker, was set up to articulate the needs of the community and provide a vehicle to introduce the project. A separate Advisory Committee of volunteers was established to provide expertise in conflict resolution, management and policy.

The two committees set about researching and addressing problems of conflict in Bellevue Manor. Although the Steering Committee had the ultimate authority, the two committees exchanged minutes and no decision was made without the approval of both groups. The arrangement, which acknowledged and respected the skills brought to the table by all parties, worked well. “If communities are respected,” Jabril notes, “expertise is accepted with grace.”

### ***Partners build an organization***

The next step was to find funding to support the work of the fledgling coalition. Jabril wrote a successful proposal to the Trillium Foundation for \$40,000 to carry out a pilot project, and the Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution was established officially in April 1995. With the pilot funding and some support from the Department of Canadian Heritage, a community-based multicultural mediation model was developed, an office was established and volunteer mediators with capabilities in a number of languages were recruited and trained.

A deliberate effort was made to recruit volunteer mediators from the range of cultural groups in the Bellevue Manor community. In November 1995, nine volunteers participated in a four-day course that included sessions on conflict theory and resolution. Discussion focussed on how various cultural groups define and respond to conflict, and what is highly valued in different societies. Over the next year, they honed their skills through bi-weekly sessions that included simulation exercises. A second group of volunteer mediators began training in March 1997.

Originally, the coalition was intended to be a short-term pilot project. But as it delved into the sources of conflict in the community and as word of its activities spread, it became clear that there was a need for a longer-term effort. A three-year grant from the Trillium Foundation provided some financial continuity. This funding was awarded with the understanding that the coalition would become incorporated as a nonprofit organization with charitable status, further develop and refine its mediation services, and produce a detailed 'how to' manual for other groups interested in community-based conflict resolution projects.

A Board of Directors was established, essentially replacing the old advisory committee, and the Steering Committee became an Advisory Committee. The volunteer Board currently has seven members who determine policy and strategic directions. Members include representatives of the core partners in the coalition – the Carleton Mediation Centre, Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police, Ottawa-Carleton Housing and the Bellevue Manor community – as well as other volunteers. The Advisory Committee represents various interested constituencies, including residents of Bellevue Manor, community workers and professionals from a variety of fields. It provides feedback, input and advice to the Board. Volunteer Standing Committees deal with personnel matters, program development, evaluation, volunteer management, education, finance and fundraising, and nominations.

The efforts of the coalition are also supported by a variety of community organizations whose representatives attend coalition meetings, provide advice and inform community members of the services offered by the NCCR. Carlington Community and Health Services, for example, donated space for meetings and a number of community organizations help publicize the coalition.

Jabril Abdulle is the only paid staff member of the Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution which depends heavily on the efforts of volunteers. More than 60 volunteers contributed 1,600 hours in 1996-97. Volunteers who are not involved in mediation still receive some conflict resolution training so that they understand the coalition's work.

### *Conflict resolution activities*

The organization provides a range of conflict resolution services to the residents of Bellevue Manor. Jabril says: "We get involved in a full range of conflict situations – including problems with children, racism, business problems and parking." However, the coalition does not mediate cases involving custody disputes, divorce, individuals with psychiatric problems or major criminal activity. In the last two years, as resources permit, it has begun to accept conflict resolution cases from other communities and to provide conflict resolution assistance to service providers and other institutions.

The coalition also responds to requests to provide public education on conciliation skills and conflict resolution to various organizations ranging from English as a Second Language classrooms to the police department, and from businesses to community centres. The demand for public education is so high that the coalition cannot respond to all requests, and the Board has developed guidelines outlining the types of requests to which the coalition will respond.

Services offered by the coalition include:

- *De-escalation and information:* This is a service to one party in a conflict who is usually quite upset or anxious. The coordinator listens to the person's perspective and helps to reduce the state of high emotion, then suggests various options for dealing with the conflict.
- *Consultation and advice:* This is a further service to one party in a conflict. The coordinator suggests communication strategies to help the person solve the problem without third-party intervention.
- *Conciliation:* This is a service to two parties involved in a conflict, although the parties do not meet formally. With their permission, the coordinator contacts each party and facilitates problem-solving. Typically, several meetings take place. Jabril explains: "This approach is often used in cases of religious, value-driven conflict when there is too

much emotion involved to conduct face-to-face mediation.” Once the situation is defused, the parties often begin to communicate, either on the advice of the conciliator or on their own initiative.

- *Group facilitation:* This service is provided when a number of people are involved in a conflict. A preliminary session is held to sort out the key issues. Half-day or full-day sessions are typically needed to work through the conflict. Several group facilitations involving hundreds of people have been held.
- *Mediation:* After de-escalation and consultation, if both parties agree to mediation, the coordinator explains the process, sets up the session and encourages the parties to focus on negotiation of a solution. Mediation usually involves a three-hour session, an agreement by the parties regarding their subsequent behaviour and follow-up after a few weeks. If the arrangement is not working, another session may be held.

The coalition uses a co-mediation approach: Cases generally are mediated by two or more people. The mediators are all volunteers and are chosen with regard to the characteristics (e.g., culture and language, gender, age) of the parties in conflict. In addition to putting the parties in conflict at ease, co-mediation helps the mediators maintain their neutrality and objectivity, and facilitates the apprenticeship of new mediators, as those in training can be paired with more experienced individuals.

“The NCCR uses a transformative mediation approach,” says Gary Nelson, a staff sergeant with the regional police and Vice-President of the coalition. “This differs from problem-solving mediation, because it looks at the larger picture of solving issues in the community. We try to help participants in a mediation move towards a solution that is good for the community, not just a resolution of one situation between individuals.” In this way, the coalition tries to build better relationships in the community and reduce the likelihood of future conflict.

Towards the end of its first year of operation, the organization embarked on victim-offender mediations. These include cases referred by the police, or by the offender or victim, in which a crime has been committed. In some cases, mediation may resolve a situation so that it is not necessary to go to court. In many cases, mediation proceeds in parallel with the legal process. The legal process deals with the crime itself. The goal of the coalition’s mediation, by contrast, is to help resolve the longer-term conflict that contributed to the crime so that it will not be repeated. “We don’t want to see mediation as a step to escape liability,” says Gary Nelson. “We want it to be conflict-resolving and community-enhancing.”

The organization also receives referrals from police when charges cannot be laid but problems clearly exist, such as disputes between neighbours, or cases when, in the judgment of the authorities, laying a charge will not resolve the conflict.

In addition to referring cases for mediation, regional police have involved the coalition in the Cops & Kids program. This program – developed by Gary Nelson and Bicki Westerheide in partnership with the Canadian Institute for Conflict Resolution and the Ottawa Police Service – is part of the required professional development for Ottawa-Carleton Regional Police recruits. Its long-term goal is to strengthen relationships between police and youth. Equal numbers of police officers and at-risk young people, generally from low-income and multicultural neighbourhoods, are brought together in two-day workshops to learn cooperative and collaborative problem-solving through values clarification, communication skills and cultural sensitivity. Youths from Bellevue Manor have been involved in several Cops & Kids workshops, and both police and youths have reported finding the workshops helpful in opening the channels of communication and reducing stereotyping and cultural misunderstandings.

### *A positive impact*

The Neighbourhood Coalition responds to more than 200 cases a year, some of which involve

large numbers of people. A relatively small number of these cases proceed to mediation; most are resolved through other techniques such as conciliation or facilitation.

The organization appears to be having a positive impact in Bellevue Manor. From July 1995 to July 1996, for example, there were 605 calls to police – a significant reduction from the 720 of the previous year. Although it is not possible to attribute this reduction directly to the efforts of the coalition, the general consensus is that its activities are helping to improve the atmosphere in the community. Jabril Abdulle notes that in 93 percent of the cases accepted by the coalition, there is a positive outcome.

Elizabeth Chin, community support coordinator for Ottawa-Carleton Housing and a member of the board of the NCCR, believes that it has had an extremely positive effect on the Bellevue Manor community. She notes that serious conflicts involving the whole community may develop from a simple misunderstanding, which escalates as rumours spread and people take sides. “Within a few weeks,” she points out, “things can escalate to the point of violence.” Mediation can help calm situations and prevent future problems by helping those involved in a conflict understand each other’s point of view.

“To see people’s frame of mind changing during mediation, when you know how dreadful the situation was before, is just amazing,” Elizabeth says. She also stresses the savings to service providers that result from successful mediations. Without the coalition’s efforts, unresolved conflicts in the community would create a much heavier demand on the time of Ottawa-Carleton Housing staff, for example. By helping to resolve conflicts which otherwise would have proceeded through the legal system, the coalition also helps reduce demands on the police and the courts.

Major conflicts can arise from seemingly simple misunderstandings. One case that escalated from a cultural misunderstanding involved a senior citizen living in one of the highrise buildings in Bellevue Manor who regularly took his pet cat for walks in the hallways of the building. One neighbour, a recent immigrant from a country in which cats are not kept

as pets, could not understand why the man was doing this, and repeatedly insulted and harassed him. “Because cats were not kept as pets in his country of origin,” says Jabril Abdulle, “he thought the old man was sick to be doing this.” The widowed senior citizen, whose considered his cat to be like a family member, was distraught and frequently reduced to tears.

Eventually, the situation deteriorated to the point where the neighbour threatened the elderly man’s life. The man, in turn, was going to ask his children to resolve the issue forcibly, and the police became involved. The case was referred to the Neighbourhood Coalition and the two men were brought together in a mediation. Through mediation, the neighbour came to understand the importance of the pet cat to the lonely old man. Realizing how destructive his behaviour had become as a result of his unchecked assumptions, he apologized to the senior citizen. “He has really changed,” says Jabril. “In fact, now when he sees a cat or dog, he makes a point of playing with it.”

According to Jabril, this case highlights how the positive change stimulated by transformative mediation can reach beyond the original issue and individuals involved. A standard mediation may resolve the conflict between two individuals but leave untouched the assumptions and cultural misunderstandings that led to the conflict in the first place. Transformative mediation, as practised by the coalition, seeks to address these underlying assumptions. “Conflict incidents have more power to educate than if someone just tells you about another culture,” says Jabril. Having participated in mediation, a person whose cultural assumptions have been changed becomes, in Jabril’s words, “an ambassador of cultural understanding” who can help change negative assumptions among other members of the community.

Not all mediations involve cultural misunderstandings – in fact, the majority do not. Many involve disputes about parking, noise and other irritants that are common to any community. Others involve disputes between individuals and businesses or institutions, such as a garage owner and customer who cannot agree on a fair price for work done, or tenant-

landlord conflicts.

Coalition volunteers note that successful mediation can truly transform the participants. One of the most impressive examples involved a group of youths who had robbed a local store. Through mediation, the youths came to understand that the minor robbery – which they admitted to committing for no real reason – had significant financial and emotional consequences for the store owner. They agreed to do volunteer security work for the store owner who, realizing that they genuinely regretted the harm done to him, ended up offering them part-time jobs. Two of the youths involved went on to become honours students. It is cases like this, say the volunteers, that motivate them to continue.

The volunteer mediators who have been trained by the coalition also have benefitted from their involvement. Most live in Bellevue Manor or adjacent communities, and most were unemployed when they volunteered to be mediators. The skills they have learned are useful in their daily interactions with family, neighbours and colleagues, and have contributed to increased self-esteem.

“What we hadn’t perhaps articulated in our minds was the value that the training would give to these individuals,” says Cheryl Picard, who has been the President of the organization since its inception. “It was really wonderful, and it was something we hadn’t anticipated.” Like other volunteers and Board members, she also has experienced benefits from her participation in the NCCR: “I have had the opportunity to learn so much about how people from different ethnic groups view conflict.”

Paradoxically, the positive outcomes for many volunteers have caused some difficulties for the coalition. Many of the original volunteers are no longer available to mediate, having found jobs or gone back to school. Because of the high attrition rate, and because the coalition was uncertain about its continued funding after March 1999, a planned third training session for community volunteers was not held. Instead, mediations are being carried out by the coordinator, Board members with mediation training and volunteers from the Carleton Mediation Centre. An

arrangement has been made with the Carleton centre so that all the mediators trained by the centre do some mediation work for the coalition. This benefits both parties – the NCCR has access to a pool of mediators and the mediators have regular opportunities to exercise their skills.

### *Lessons learned*

The members of the coalition have learned many valuable lessons about community-based, multi-cultural conflict resolution. Many of these lessons will be reflected in a ‘how to’ manual being prepared for the Trillium Foundation.

#### *i. cultural considerations in conflict and mediation*

The organization has encountered challenges in developing a conflict service and a training program for mediators which are appropriate for both intra- and intercultural disputes. It soon became clear, for example, that not all cultural groups in the community were comfortable with anonymous, co-facilitated formal mediation sessions. Although people wanted their conflicts to be resolved, many were unwilling to sit down with the person with whom they were in conflict and discuss the situation face-to-face with the help of mediators.

Recognizing these concerns, the NCCR has responded flexibly to demands for services other than mediation. There has been considerable demand from many cultural groups within the community for de-escalation and consultation. Andrew Louis, one of the original volunteer mediators and a member of the Board, notes that these services can be as valuable as mediation. Community members often call simply because they need someone to listen “because they never get that from other people,” he says.

As the coalition’s founders anticipated, there have been many cases involving conflict between members of different cultural groups. However, there also have been many intracultural conflicts, often involving complex family or property issues. Some

of these have proved to be beyond the coalition's ability to resolve. "Intergenerational conflicts are probably the most difficult," notes Jabril, "especially in families where the parents are immigrants and the children have been raised here. We think we have negotiated a settlement, and then six months later the family is right back where it was."

Sometimes, family conflicts are exacerbated by language problems, as in cases where children have been having difficulty in school and their parents must rely on them to translate in discussions with school authorities. Jabril notes that some parents also face institutional problems that conflict resolution cannot address, and that the coalition refers these cases to youth workers or immigration workers. Those involved with the coalition are constantly learning and testing new approaches to deal with complex conflicts.

## *ii. organizational challenges*

The organizational development of the coalition took considerably more time during the first year of operation than its founders expected. Developing a constitution and by-laws, preparing policies and forms (e.g., confidentiality acknowledgments, referral sheets), setting up accounting systems, establishing systems for collection of statistics and reporting formats, preparing a brochure, developing a manual for Board members, negotiating an office lease and purchasing a security system all took time.

Maintaining the organization and finding resources is also a constant challenge. Cheryl Picard notes that not all neighbourhoods may wish to develop full-fledged organizations for conflict resolution. One of the areas the coalition hopes to explore is how communities might set up conflict resolution mechanisms within existing local organizations.

At first, staff and volunteers thought that most of their work would involve mediation, but much of the demand has been for other types of conflict resolution services. Many of the services (other than mediation) are provided by the coordinator and require considerable time. Victim-offender cases are the most time-consuming because of the need for lengthy

interviews with the victim, the offender(s), their families, the police, lawyers and court officials. Referral cases – relating to individual difficulties with situations or organizations concerning immigration, housing, welfare or other problems – have been found to take more of the coordinator's time than originally anticipated. The demands on the time of both the coordinator and key volunteers have been heavy.

In the longer term, Andrew Louis suggests that training a larger pool of volunteers may be the key. In addition, neighbourhoods considering similar initiatives must be prepared to be in it for the long haul. "Mediation training is meant to go on over a long period of time," notes Louis. "You don't become a good mediator in one year."

Taking a long-term perspective is a constant challenge in an environment of short-term funding. Although the work of the coalition has been acknowledged by groups as far away as South Africa and Denmark, it has had difficulty in securing long-term funding. Coalition members express frustration that although the coalition's activities generate savings by reducing demands on service providers, police and the legal system, it has been difficult to get funding agencies to recognize the benefits of providing longer-term support.

Despite the challenges, the partners in the Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution are committed to reducing community tensions. As Jabril Abdulle notes: "There are no short cuts. What happens is that every step a community takes in developing this process is a benefit. It might be frustrating sometimes – and it is – but in the longer term, you see real benefits."

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*For more information on the Neighbourhood Coalition for Conflict Resolution, contact coordinator Jabril Abdulle at (613) 724-6058, or visit the coalition's website at <http://www.web.net/~nccr>*

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