

# NORWEST CO-OP COMMUNITY HEALTH

Engaging the Community in  
Cooperative Health and Wellness



## Who is NorWest Co-op Community Health?

An Interview with Lila Knox and Corey Mohr

The Manitoba Cooperative Association had the pleasure of interviewing Lila Knox, the Director of the Community Food Centre Program and Corey Mohr, one of the Community Development Coordinators at NorWest Co-op. Both Lila and Corey touched upon how the co-op principles are executed in their organization. The directors of NorWest take the co-op principles very seriously and are always ensuring that the needs of the community always come first. NorWest allows for a space where employees are trusted and are given a fair amount of latitude to do their jobs based on the co-op model.

NorWest Co-op Community Health focuses on engaging their community in cooperative health and wellness. As the only healthcare cooperative in Manitoba, NorWest Co-op is committed to working with the individuals who access their programs and services, their neighbours, other healthcare providers and their partners to offer a variety of programs and services. Their dedicated team delivers community-based services and programs in: primary health care, community development, counselling and support services and early learning and childcare. These various services aim to address the diverse and broad health needs based on the understanding of how the determinants of health impact the health of clients and communities.

# Co-op Formation

## A Brief Historic Background

The information described below is taken from the 'Story Of NorWest Co-op Community Health' document that was provided by the co-op to MCA which discusses the historical beginnings of the co-op.

*"Once upon a time there were a couple of botanists teaching at the University of Manitoba. They had lived in a housing cooperative in Sweden and wanted to arrange for one here. They tried to purchase some land near the University of Manitoba to build such a structure, but were unsuccessful. Cooperative housing is a total way of living. There is group ownership of the entire project and all members have an equal voice. The idea of cooperative housing continued and the Co-operative Housing Association of Manitoba Inc. (CHAM) was formed on January 1, 1960. Their objective was to build and promote cooperative housing projects. They began negotiations with the City of Winnipeg. Only one alderman was in favour of the co-op plan, all the others voted against it. After seven years Willow Park Housing Development was born. It was Canada's first major cooperative housing venture.*



*The cooperative movement in Manitoba had, for many years, been interested in the health care system. Under a grant from the Dept. of Health and Social Development, CHAM did a study of the availability and accessibility of health services in the North Winnipeg area. The study in 1972 called 'Health through Cooperation' said: The mainstay of our philosophy has been a desire to provide the best possible health care to the community at the most realistic cost. However, the simple bringing together under one roof of a wide range of varying health services personnel does not mean that a totally integrated and co-ordinated system of health services delivery will somehow magically evolve. Teamwork is the key. Lastly, the study said: A system of social development services must take cognizance of these facts: 1) That the needs of one individual may differ radically from those of another, in terms of the strength of the support required; and 2) that the needs of any individual may change. In our terms, a system which does so provides 'progressive care', that is, care which changes in emphasis or supportive strength with the changes in the needs of the individual.*

# Democratic Functions

## Giving back to Members and the Community

NorWest Co-op is currently the only health co-op in the province and has been around for almost 50 years.

NorWest delivers services from 8 community sites, including the NorWest Access Centre where they share space and provide a broad range of health and social services along with the WRHA and the Department of Families. Lila explained to MCA what it means to be a member in their co-op. "Our membership is optional.

You do not need to be a member to receive services. However, because we are a health co-op, our board of directors is made up of community members unlike many other boards. Anyone with a membership, which is a lifetime fee of 10 dollars, can vote at our AGM and help appoint people to the board." In order to reach the community at a participatory level, the co-op frequently surveys and asks the community questions on what they require. "Our mission is for everyone to be looking after their own health care - to be engaged and involved. We are not a top down organization in any way, we really value the input from our community. We always look at the make up of our community and offer numerous ways for people to interact with us."

Their membership is based on one vote one voice. It used to be \$1 for a lifetime and now it's \$10 for a lifetime. "We try to add value to that membership for \$10. When you buy a membership, you ultimately have a say in your Health Centre" says Corey. If you're a member of the co-op you can vote at their AGM and if you're really eager, you can try to run for a board of directors position. "We have many people who live in the community and are really passionate, so they run for the board. It's that simple and that's how we try to engage our members. In addition, our newsletter goes out to everyone in our community as well as to members. From time to time, we have staff who firm up our member list. Because we have roots since 1972, many of our members have passed on."

"Whenever I hear of the word co-op," says Corey, "I always think of the seven principles - concern for community in particular. That's something we've done throughout our lifetime in this co-op, to empower people around health, mental health, relationships, education, employment, food and food insecurity. Concern for Community is included in many of our programs - our trauma team, men's domestic violence supports and youth hubs. We do a lot of things here that we just look at and ask how it would benefit the community. General education is another way we support our staff and members. As an organization, we do an incredible job in supporting staff. NorWest does a ton to invest in trainings and workshops for their staff to grow. It's a good asset when you're trying to recruit staff, and that's what we can offer you."



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# Essential Partnerships

## Food Centre Program

"We are very good at creating and maintaining partnerships here at NorWest," explains Lila. "We get way more done in partnerships than we could ever do alone. We belong to the Manitoba Cooperative Association and meet regularly with the heads of other co-ops to look for ways to help each other. We are currently investigating another co-op to work with that has huge purchasing power. Because of what they do, they have offered to look into whether they could purchase on our behalf so we could also get their good pricing."

"We follow a model here in our food program, it's not a co-op model, but we approach it like one. We follow the Community Food Centres Canada model, that is a model with 3 goals - to provide access to good food for everyone. It's a very pleasant environment where it's safe. You get to watch your meal being prepared and it's served at your table. The meals are absolutely fantastic - we hire professional chefs to make them. We buy more than 95% of our food so we can control what produce is coming in. We do accept some small donations, but only if they are of high quality. That's our first goal. In addition, we provide affordable fruit and veggie markets. We do fun things like smoothie bikes where kids get on a bike with a blender attached but they have to exercise to get it."



"Because we're a co-op and operate slightly differently than another health access centres, I believe that gives us quite a bit of autonomy to do what we feel is right for the community." Lila explained how there is a direct correlation between people being employed and having better health. There is a direct connection between the two that you can't just have one without the other.

Corey is currently running a youth employment service program to bridge those two together. "We know that's going to improve the health of the community. We don't have massive barriers as to what falls in health care and what doesn't. If we can help people do their taxes, that's health care, as far as we're concerned. A lot of people say that food insecurity is not really about health, but about hunger. We know its about health because we know people can't afford healthier nutritious produce which ultimately affects their overall mental and physical health." The Norwest board decided that when they moved out of their old building into their new one that the building should be retained and turned into a food centre. "I'm the lucky one who gets to run it now!" says Lila.