

Case Study #2: Closing the Distance for Homeless People in Kingston

“A Room of One’s Own”

“Last weekend, O’Neil and his friend Mark Stone spent the days in parking lots, drinking to keep warm, he said. ...Both men look tired and unkempt, but they laugh easily and bond over their shared experiences. It’s important to partner with someone when the weather gets cold, O’Neil said. ‘You have to try to take care of each other,’ he said. ... Having someone with you on the streets in the winter can mean the difference between life and death. Stone has died three times on the street. Twice last year and once already this year, Stone’s heart stopped during a cold night. Each time, he was found and revived, he said, despite having ice crystals in his lungs.”

(The Kingston Whig-Standard, January 20, 2004)

On the evening of January 19, 2004, John Gerretsen, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Kingston MPP, city bureaucrats and several Kingston City Councillors hear this story first-hand, and the stories of many other poor and homeless people in Kingston. These politicians and city staff join community agency workers and homeless people for a bus tour of shelters, hospitals, hang-outs and sleeping places used by homeless people in Kingston.

This bus tour is organized by Kingston’s Health and Housing Coalition to follow a meeting held earlier that same evening by the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project. The *Closing the Distance* Project, known in Kingston as “A Room of One’s Own” (ROOO), has arranged to meet with their local MPP and Municipal Affairs Minister, John Gerretsen. Over 50 people fill the meeting room of a downtown church while homeless people, tenants and landlords from the ROOO group speak honestly with their MPP, sharing harsh experiences of poverty and homelessness, naming key issues in the community, and presenting possible solutions to these problems.

Minister Gerretsen and the City Councillors are surprised by some of the issues raised at the meeting. They are also impressed by how tenants, homeless people and landlords are able to work together to articulate their concerns and present possible solutions in a constructive way.

Just over a year before, on December 5 2002, a group of community leaders from the health, housing, education and social sectors had come together for a community visioning meeting about the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project. They realized that many different people in Kingston face the threat – or the reality – of homelessness. They decided that, in order to close the distance for homeless people in Kingston, it would be important to involve not only homeless people, but also landlords. From here A Room of One’s Own began its journey to “close the distance”.



Mural, Community Visioning Session, Kingston, December 5, 2002

Preparing for the Journey:
Searching for a Focus

“Social inclusion is having a meaningful voice.”
“Social inclusion brings about positive social and economic change.”
“Everyone has something to give...social inclusion is about the power of relationships in our society.”
(Kingston Roundtable, March 13, 2002)

Preparation for the *Closing the Distance* Project in Kingston starts off slowly. Twelve community leaders working in health and social services first come together for a “roundtable” discussion on March 13, 2002 with a Project Consultant of the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO), who presents the Social and Economic Inclusion Initiative (SEII) being proposed by Health Canada. They come up with many strong ideas about what “social and economic inclusion” means to them, and brainstorm some issues facing many excluded and disadvantaged groups in Kingston. At the end of this meeting, there is no real agreement on a potential focus for a *Closing the Distance* Project in Kingston, or whom it would address. The roundtable participants do not seem energized. There is much more to do in preparation for this journey.

The Social Planning Council of Kingston and Area (SPCKA) tries to set up a second roundtable in August 2002, but very few people say they will attend. Finally, a second roundtable is held on September 23, 2002. Some people from the first Roundtable and some new people come together to contribute ideas about what a *Closing the Distance* Project in Kingston might look like. Roundtable participants talk about a number of important groups that could be a focus for the Project but cannot decide.

They do agree, however, that homelessness is an important issue that many groups of people face, and that a focus on homelessness and housing may allow for diverse groups of disadvantaged people to connect and discover common concerns about a shared issue. The meeting participants agree that no matter who the Project works with, it is essential that those who are disadvantaged have a active voice in it. They express interest in building public awareness and changing public perceptions about excluded people.

Some meeting participants also bring up something very important – that a lot of research on homelessness has already been done by SPCKA about needs in the Kingston community. A *“Community Plan on Housing and Homelessness”* completed in May 2002 identified 20 gaps in meeting the housing needs of people in Kingston. The *“Quality of Life Index”*, another SPCKA research report, named three priorities for social action; two of them are homelessness and youth.

Some common themes are emerging. People at the meeting say it would make sense to focus a Project to “close the distance” on some of these recommendations.

The SPNO Consultant, who facilitates both of the roundtables, offers to summarize all of the ideas raised at this meeting in order to help the group to gain more focus and direction. Soon after the meeting, he sends detailed notes to all participants, so that they can decide on a Project focus at their next meeting.

Phase 1 of the Journey:

Closing the Distance between Tenants and Landlords

“Even the most basic of units of housing, a room, can make a huge difference in beginning to close the gaps that exist in the lives of people who have become homeless, no matter what the reason.”

**(Kingston Community Visioning Narrative,
December 5, 2002)**

On October 15, 2002, the SPCKA convenes a meeting of community leaders. Health and social agency people attend, as well as a local business person, a Chamber of Commerce representative, municipal government representatives from housing, and a Kingston City Councillor. The SPNO Consultant is present as the SPNO Project Coordinator for all of the *Closing the Distance* Projects across the province and he facilitates this meeting. He informs the group of community leaders that Health Canada has approved funding for a Social and Economic Inclusion Initiative in Kingston. He outlines the conditions and structure of the Project. Now that the funding is approved, it is crucial that they determine the focus of the Project.

The group reviews how the ideas brainstormed in previous meetings fit with the goals of “closing the distance”. The group discusses how Kingston municipal government and some local business interests want to collaborate to address housing and homelessness issues:

“The opportunity presents itself to develop local solutions and action through a strong three-way partnership made up of the city (political leadership and civic officials), the private sector (starting with five or six engaged local business leaders) and the health and social sector agencies. Also, a united public-private-community voice of this kind could have more impact on policy and funding changes needed at senior government levels (e.g. National Housing Strategy).”

(Minutes, Follow-up meeting,
October 15 2002)

The group names some objectives that they think the Kingston Project should focus on:

- *“To promote and facilitate public-private partnerships for local models and socially inclusive solutions;*
- *“To reach out to create broader public awareness and support for affordable housing and related services; and*
- *“To create a united inter-sectoral voice for supportive policy and funding from senior governments to ensure affordable and safe housing for everyone in Kingston.”*

(Minutes, Follow-up meeting,
October 15 2002)

Although these goals are broad, they are an important first step. They are chosen because they can support and build on existing energy coming from government and business in Kingston, and can respond to existing research on social conditions and needs in the community.

Now the SPCKA takes the Project to its Board for approval. A leadership group is formed composed community agency representatives, city government representatives, and the SPCKA Executive Director, is formed. The Project leadership group meets again on October 29, 2002, where they agree that the *Closing the Distance* Project in Kingston should focus on single room housing because:

“A room is a basic unit of housing. It can be a safe place for oneself and one’s belongings, with access to services and a social safety net. It can also be an unsafe, overpriced accommodation, which serves to isolate the tenant from people and services. ‘Outside of social housing, rooming houses and single room occupancy units are the least expensive form of permanent housing, and essential for very low-income single people’ (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation).”

(Outreach Flyer for Community Visioning Session,
November 2002)

The Project is named “A Room of One’s Own” and the short form of “ROOO” is adopted to refer to the Project.

Community Visioning

On December 5, 2002, a team of three SPNO resource people facilitates a day of “Community Visioning” with 15 community leaders from the City of Kingston, the health, housing and social sectors, Queen’s University, and the local Chamber of Commerce. Participants are asked: *“Among the diversity of people on the streets and in inadequate and insecure shelter, which homeless people do you care about?”*. Community leaders describe a cycle of distancing that happens when a person has no place to call home, a cycle that affects a person’s money, job, and relationships. They talk about many different groups of community members who find themselves without a home, and the circumstances that can lead to homelessness:

“Kingston is a city that finds many people on the edge of homelessness. There are people who are exiting one of the many correctional facilities; youth who have left home; or middle aged men separated from family and out of work; people battling mental illness who have been discharged from the psychiatric hospital; women who escape violent relationships, with or without children; older women who survive the death of a spouse. Whatever the reason, having no place can exacerbate an already difficult situation.”

(Kingston Community Visioning Narrative,
December 5 2002)

The group discusses some of the common barriers, challenges and interests shared by diverse people lacking adequate homes. A colourful wall mural and a narrative are created to record the stories of exclusion in the Kingston community.



Mural on Diversity of Housing/Homelessness in Kingston, Community Visioning Session, December 5, 2002

Participants then go on to imagine how Kingston would look if homeless people's concerns were addressed. They talk about ways to increase public awareness about homelessness, and the need to open up private rental housing for low-income tenants. It becomes clear to all present that to close the distance for homeless people in Kingston, a social inclusion project needs to focus on the relationship between homeless people and landlords.

The day after the Community Visioning session, the SPNO Project Coordinator and an SPNO Consultant with expertise in housing stay in Kingston to help the SPCKA Executive Director to make some concrete plans for developing a *Closing the Distance* Project. They try to picture how community mobilizing with landlords, homeless people and low-income tenants could look. They decide that outreach to both homeless people and landlords is the way to go. They come up with the idea of participatory research, where homeless people do research about homeless people, and landlords about landlords. Trying to engage both landlords and homeless people will be extremely challenging. They decide that the SPNO resource person with housing expertise and strong facilitation skills will be assigned on a consulting basis to support the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project.

Framing a Proposal for Funding

At the same time, another important challenge emerges. The Project leadership group needs to create a proposal for Health Canada to fund Phase 2 of the Project, which will take place from April 2003-April 2004. From December to early January, the Kingston leadership group works on putting this proposal together. On January 9-10, 2003, the SPCKA Project staff join other *Closing the Distance* Projects in Burlington, where a team of SPNO resource people help all to improve their proposals.

On January 20, 2003, a proposal is submitted to Health Canada, entitled: *“Closing the Distance for Homeless People in Kingston: A Room of One’s Own”*. Four clear objectives are outlined for Phase 2 of the Kingston Project. Two objectives relate to community mobilization and two additional objectives refer to creating healthy public policy:

1. *“To create new links between the general community members and members of the marginalized population in need of rooms; and*
2. *“To create a support system for potential landlords and the marginalized populations.”*
3. *“To narrow the distance between decision-makers and consumers of basic housing”; and*
4. *“To work towards increasing the supply of housing through inclusive planning.”*

(Kingston Phase 2 Proposal,
January 20, 2003)

Proposed Project activities include administering two surveys, one directed at landlords and potential landlords who could rent single rooms to low-income tenants; and another for homeless people and low-income tenants seeking single rooms to rent. The surveys will be used to find out more about each group’s needs, concerns, barriers and suggested solutions for renting single rooms. A series of community workshops will be planned based on the survey findings, where potential landlords, service providers and those seeking single rooms can come together to get information and support. These activities could lead to the creation of community-based services and activities that help landlords and tenants, including support groups, a rent bank, a landlord-tenant referral and matching service, and inter-agency partnerships to provide housing and support. It is hoped that the work of these activities will lead to policy change at various levels of government and in community agencies that will improve housing and community services to homeless people.

Outreach to Homeless People

Once the proposal has been submitted, two SPNO resource people meet with the Kingston leadership group to plan the first step in reaching out to the homeless community in Kingston. On February 17, 2003, the Kingston Project team invites homeless and marginally housed people to come out to the “Tell Us Your Story” event. This day-long story-telling event launches the Room of One’s Own Project in Kingston.

Ten people come out to the morning session. Then a huge group – about forty people – turn up to participate in the afternoon. Homeless people and tenants attend alongside community agency representatives, city government staff, a businessperson working in housing developments, and a Chamber of Commerce representative. The event is set up so that homeless people and tenants have

the opportunity to share their stories and be heard, while people from the community and business sectors mainly listen.

Many stories are told. Ideas and possible solutions are brainstormed. Connections between diverse people are made.

One homeless person talks about how he got kicked out of his apartment before the month was up, and needs to go to small claims court to try to get the two months' rent his landlord owes him. A housing developer volunteers to go with him and provide support.

A man representing a national organization for seniors realizes that while many tenants need affordable single rooms, there are many seniors with low incomes who are struggling to keep their houses. If reliable tenants could be matched up with seniors who want to rent out a room, tenants might get the housing they need while seniors might supplement their income and avoid losing their homes.

A single man who had lost his job and then became homeless explains how he got connected with a church in his community. As he became involved with the congregation, he also started to volunteer, doing maintenance and odd jobs at the church. When a family at the church learned that he had no home, they offered to rent out their basement for the first time, and he had a place to stay. This is a great example of how individual people can form relationships to close the distance.

At the Tell Us Your Story event, people also talk about how difficult it is to rent rooms and affordable apartments when landlords prefer to rent to the many university students in Kingston. If homeless people could take training classes on a part-time basis and get a student identification card, they would be on an even playing field with the university students. It becomes clear that by listening to someone else's story, then having an opportunity to share opinions and ideas, people can imagine creative solutions that make sense.

The homeless people who share their stories and the people who listen to these stories say this is the first time that they have seen such an event in Kingston. Government and private sector representatives, and some health and social service people, learn about things they did not know were happening in the community. The event initiates a dialogue. Several young homeless people at the event go on to become leaders in the ROOO.

Key Leadership Change in SPCKA

In early March 2003, the SPCKA's Executive Director announces that she is leaving the agency and ROOO. Her pending departure causes the SPCKA Board to question the future of the organization. The SPNO Project Coordinator intervenes and contacts people he thinks could be strong leaders for the SPCKA and the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project. He connects with a local contact

whom he knows has been active in community inclusion work with disabled people. Subsequently, the SPCKA Board interviews this person for the position of Senior Project Manager for the *Closing the Distance* Project. At the invitation of the SPNO Project Coordinator, the Senior Project Manager candidate attends the SPNO All-Region Design Studio event in March 2003, where he gets a hands-on orientation to all of the *Closing the Distance* Projects, including ROOO.

The All-Region Design Studio takes place on March 29-30, 2003 in Toronto. People from *Closing the Distance* Projects in five Ontario communities come together to reflect on their projects so far, and to plan for the future. A strong group of Project staff and volunteer leaders attend from the Kingston Project.

At the end of the Design Studio, the Kingston group has a more focused plan. They decide to focus on reducing the stigma and alienation of homeless people, and on homeless people's relationships with others in the community. The group decides that "homeless" people should be called *tenants* in relation to landlords. Labeling people as "homeless" makes them seem too vulnerable and powerless. If they refer to themselves as *tenants*, they may be in a fairer position to negotiate with landlords. The Kingston ROOO participants also challenge themselves to make sure that tenants are there with them at the All-Region event that will happen a year from now. The second part of the journey is about to begin.



Jim Stevens, volunteer leader involved in the Kingston project since Phase 1

Phase 2 of the Journey:

Tenants and Landlords Move from Dialogue to Joint Action

“About 20 members of the city's homeless population appealed to city council to respond to their plight by giving more money to drop-in centres and changing a welfare policy they say encourages people to sleep on the street. ‘Help us get these people off the streets,’ Nancy McLean, a member of the landlord and tenants group A Room of One's Own, begged councillors Tuesday night during a presentation to city. ‘It's terrible what they go through.’”

**(Kingston Whig-Standard,
February 5 2004)**

As Phase 2 begins, two parallel journeys are underway in Kingston. ROOO continues to move into its second phase. At the same time, the SPCKA is undergoing an important leadership change, and is working out and planning for its future as an organization.

Organizational Reflection

In early April 2003, the SPNO Project Coordinator meets with the SPCKA Board of Directors, to talk about their plans for the future. He reinforces the idea that the SPCKA has a valuable role to play in the community. He points out that the *Closing the Distance* Project has made significant headway, and has the potential to have a positive impact on housing and homelessness in Kingston.

The Board decides to continue the *Closing the Distance* Project. Rather than hire a new executive director, it decides to hire a Senior Project Manager. They hire the candidate who had attended the SPNO All-Region Design Studio in March. The *Closing the Distance* Project has a leader on staff at the SPC again.

All is not settled, however, for the SPCKA as an organization. There remains a long organizational journey to travel.

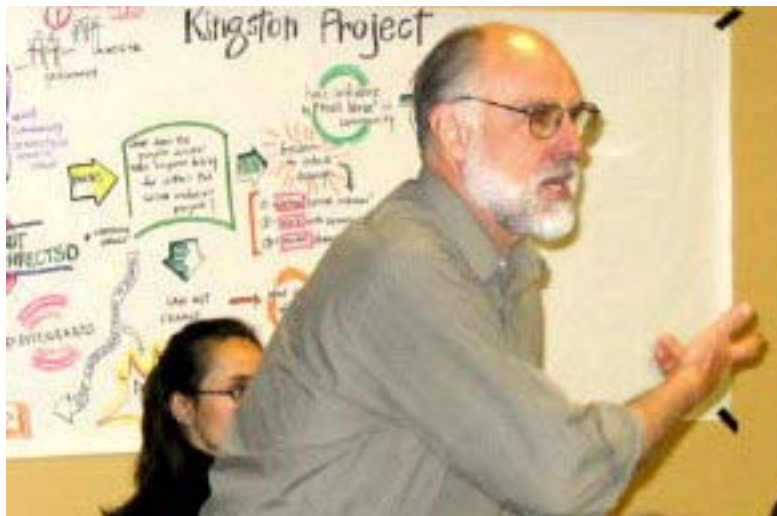
Connecting Tenants and Landlords

On the ROOO journey, things are going well as Phase 2 of the Project begins in April 2003. The Tell Us Your Story event had been a great way to launch the Project, but now there is a need to grow and strengthen the leadership group, and to engage landlords and tenants by implementing the action research project. Project staff and leaders work on two surveys to be used as action research tools, exploring the needs of tenants and landlords. Outreach is done to community leaders, and a workshop is held to involve new leaders and further define the role of the leadership committee. Meetings are organized to involve local landlords in the Project.

In mid-June, a meeting with landlords is held. Five landlords show up, including the head of a regional landlords' association. The landlords speak openly with

Project leaders and SPNO resource people about the concerns and difficulties they face. They express strong opinions about their needs as landlords for having the rent paid and their property respected by tenants. Several, however, also show their understanding and concern about the housing situation for homeless people and people facing mental health challenges.

Throughout the summer, ROOO continues to reach out to landlords and hold meetings with them about their concerns, and their interest in being involved in the Project. One of the SPCKA staff people makes this a main focus of her work. Participation from landlords and other community members is quite strong.



John Osborne was appointed Senior Project Manager with SPCKA in April 2003

SPCKA Commits to Direction-Setting Process

On the organizational journey, the SPCKA Board asks two SPNO resource people to meet with them in early July 2003. This meeting focuses on the Board's perspective of the current state of the SPCKA, possible future directions for the SPCKA, and ways in which the SPCKA might collaborate with the SPNO for mutual benefit.

This meeting is timely because:

"Given staff changes in the Kingston SPC in the last few months and some internal reflection by the Board on the state of the organization and its role in the community (including reaching out for community perceptions about the SPC), the Kingston SPC is at a crossroads. The SPNO may be able to help with a process that assists the Board to make important choices on the future direction, structure and operations of the organization."

(SPNO memo to SPCKA Board,
July 18 2003)

The Board members identify questions and needs that have to be addressed to move from the problems faced now to a positive future. Following this meeting, the SPNO Project Coordinator summarizes the discussion that took place and outlines a proposal to facilitate a planning process that would:

1. *“Formulate some viable options for the future strategic direction, structure and operation of independent, community-based social planning in Kingston;*
2. *Develop some criteria for selection and decision-making on the best course of action by the Kingston SPC Board of Directors; and*
3. *Engage the community in the above process of defining the shape of social planning needed in Kingston.”*

(SPNO memo to SPCKA Board,
July 18 2003)

ROOO Project Momentum Builds

On July 21, 2003, ROOO gets some important public attention. The Kingston *Whig Standard*, the local daily newspaper, publishes a front-page article about the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project. The article discusses the rise of homelessness in Kingston, the low rental vacancy rate, barriers faced by people needing rooms, and concerns that landlords have. It goes on to explain how Kingston's *Closing the Distance* Project conducts research and tries to come up with solutions such as a matching service between tenants and landlords.

The newspaper article sparks further community discussion. The Kingston *Whig-Standard* publishes an editorial the next day strongly supporting the ROOO initiative, calling it *“a sensible program . . . [which] has the potential to offer longer-term solutions on a case-by-case basis.”* Letters to the editor continue the public discussion about homelessness in Kingston into August 2003.

The head of the local Landlords' Association is interviewed. He is well-known and respected among landlords and has important information to bring to the issue. Sometimes, his comments and perspectives about homeless people are controversial and provocative, and he challenges the SPCKA and ROOO leaders. Yet, the Association is becoming engaged with ROOO under his leadership.

The Project team realizes that they need to hire a new Project staff person who can devote more time to engaging tenants and homeless people in the Room of One's Own Project. A community activist who has had strong experience doing organizing with youth and homeless people in Kingston begins as a Community Facilitator in early July 2003.



Matt Silburn, hired by SPCKA to be Community Facilitator and to mobilize tenants and homeless people for leadership in A Room of One's Own Project

The first task is to get more tenants and homeless people actively involved in ROOO. The Community Facilitator makes posters and flyers, and then walks around Kingston and talks to people about becoming part of the Project. He already knows some people from previous work he has done in the community – these past connections help. Meetings are set up in locations where people already hang out, so that it is easy to round them up for meetings. It is also helpful that the Project can offer participants a small stipend to recognize their contributions to the Project.

By August, the tenants' group is in full swing, meeting every week. ROOO members get together to talk about their concerns and problems as homeless people and as tenants. Many people in the homeless community become engaged in these meetings. They come to the meetings because they want to be listened to, and they know that there will be action and follow-up to their discussions. Several people become strong leaders in the group. These leaders know the issues well, and can clearly articulate their concerns and experiences. Facilitated by Project staff, group members brainstorm ideas that might help their situations, and action they could take to make those ideas a reality. Due to the realities of people's lives, many only participate for a month or so, then move on, possibly because they get work or a place to live. Still, with the continuity provided by the Community Facilitators, the group is able to continue and

progress. Membership and participation, despite many changes, remains strong throughout Phase 2 of the Project.

One idea that tenants come up with in one of their first meetings is a matching service, which would match tenants seeking a single room or apartment to rent with home-owners and landlords who have suitable housing available. It would also offer mediation services between landlords and tenants when there is conflict. Such a service could be run through a local community organization, easy to access by tenants and landlords alike.

SPCKA Frames Its Community Role

On the organizational journey, the SPCKA Board decides that an in-depth planning process, involving staff and Board members, would be helpful for setting future directions for the organization. On September 29-30 2003, three SPNO resource people facilitate a two-day planning process, and the Board-staff group comes up with new directions for the organization and a plan for developing a revitalized SPCKA.

At the first session, 12 leaders from community organizations in Kingston and Area join Board members and staff. It becomes apparent that the SPCKA has lost its sense of direction, its connection with people in the community, and its ability to act on important community issues. It is also clear, however, that the SPCKA has produced strong and valuable research, and that the community sees the SPCKA as having an important role that could become more valuable through this planning process.

In the next planning session, Board and staff members envision a desired future for social well-being in Kingston. This vision for Kingston is:

“...a place for all to live...[that] celebrates its diversity and ensure[s] space for all to make their contribution...[that is] flexible and adaptive to the needs of individuals and families...[and] a more participatory and engaged citizenry...in which all parts of the community can become involved in identifying priorities and deliberating on strategies and solutions to Kingston’s issues.”

(SPC of Kingston and Area...*Setting a Direction*,
October 2003)

This is also captured in a colourful mural by an SPNO resource person.



Cathy Cleary, SPCKA Project staff, takes the lead in outreach to landlords and community agency leadership

One prominent landlord and local business person talks about the need to be “humanitarian” as well as business-oriented, and offers to help create a proposal for policy and practice that works for both landlords and tenants. Several landlords are interested in a direct rent payment strategy, a mediation system for when landlords and tenants have conflict, life skills training for tenants, and advocating for policy change.

Engaging in the Political Election Process

At the same time, the ROOO leadership has realized that new opportunities for action are emerging with the pending municipal and provincial elections in October and November 2003. Although a slight detour from their original plans, they decide to use the upcoming elections as a way to draw attention to their concerns. In September, several ROOO participants attend a provincial All-Candidates’ Meeting. One tenant stands up and asks the candidates to look outside the window. *“That’s where I’ll be sleeping tonight,”* he says. He then tells candidates about A Room of One’s Own, and asks if they would support *“the creation of a business that would be made up of homeless people who would offer to work with landlords to fix up vacant properties or rental units that needed repair in [exchange for] reduced rent or other forms of compensation’.* *All candidates were extremely impressed, and the audience gave an ovation...*” (Email about All-Candidates’ Meeting, October 22 2003).

Joining a local coalition on social issues, the SPCKA helps organize a “homelessness maze” where twenty-six of the forty-two candidates running for City Council role-play some tough situations that homeless people might find themselves in:

“The Workshop...simulated the labyrinth of bureaucracy many homeless people go through to secure social services and available

housing. ... Candidates took on the personas of one of five homeless people – some without even a birth certificate, health card or bank account to their name – as they visit social workers, shelters, food banks and government offices. There was Tara Doe, an abused 28-year-old single mother, or Harold Doe, a 62-year-old pensioner who had been evicted. MPP John Gerretsen showed up to play Joe Doe, a former \$80,000 a year Hydro worker with a wife and children who has been laid off. The situations aren't far from real life, [said the] event coordinator. ... The workshop was a real eye-opener for many of the candidates."

(The Kingston *Whig-Standard*,
October 21 2003)

The tenants and Community Facilitators put together a survey for all municipal candidates, asking where they stand on issues related to homelessness. The questionnaire "...[brings] *housing concerns to seniors, homeless people, landlords and tenants to light...* [it] asks candidates about their support for community-initiated solutions and their strategies for getting much needed funding and support from other levels of government" (A Room of One's Own Press Release, October 23 2003).

On October 22, 2003, ROOO holds an event and press conference where many candidates for City Council fill out the survey. The survey results are reported to various groups and individuals in the Kingston area so that they can consider the candidates' comments on homelessness and housing issues before voting in the city election.

Working on Shared Solutions

By November, in addition to the weekly ROOO meetings, the *Closing the Distance* Project is also holding "general" monthly meetings where tenants, landlords and health and social service providers all come together. At these meetings, the different interest groups talk about their concerns, and try to find common ground. The groups also discuss solutions that could benefit both groups.

At a general meeting on November 19, 2003, over 25 people participate, including more than ten tenants, seven landlords and four service providers, as well as two newly elected City Councillors, and one unsuccessful municipal candidate who rents out rooms to people in his house. The group has a great discussion. Together they identify solutions that could benefit both landlords and tenants.

One possible solution is a voluntary direct payment strategy, where Ontario Works would pay rent directly to private landlords for people on social assistance, if the tenant agrees. The city government could administer this direct rent payment program. There is strong consensus that tenants would like to

have this option, and landlords feel it will decrease their risk of loss. The group talks about how such a policy should look, and tenants stress that such a strategy must be *optional*. The group then plans to create a proposal for the city government. They create a committee consisting of tenants, landlords and service providers to work on this.

The group also discusses the tenants' idea of a matching service for tenants and landlords. The group further defines how such a service should look and about how to make it happen. Another committee to work on this idea is formed, and next steps are planned.

Updates on other ROOO activities are also discussed. The action research survey for tenants has been completed, and the data is being analyzed at SPCKA. Results of a survey of landlords by the Landlords' Association are also being tabulated. The group discusses inviting the newly elected Kingston MPP, the Honourable John Gerretson to meet with ROOO. Tenants and landlords show that they are ready to join their voices to express common concerns and solutions. As one City Councillor says after this planning meeting,

"It is common for Council to receive submissions and reactions from separate and usually opposed groups, but very seldom, if ever, does Municipal Council hear proposals from groups made up of traditionally opposing viewpoints."

(Email about Room of One's Own meeting,
November 21 2003).

Joint Presentation to the Minister

Building on this momentum, ROOO members and SPCKA staff organize for the next milestone in the Project: a meeting with the newly re-elected Kingston MPP and Minister of Municipal Affairs, John Gerretsen. After much preparation and planning, on January 19, 2003, Minister Gerretsen enters a local church meeting room packed with over 50 homeless people, tenants, landlords, community agency staff, and city officials.

Many homeless people and tenants address the MPP and city politicians and bureaucrats, who are:

"...treated to a no-holds-barred critique of the welfare and housing system by those who best know its flaws. Those flaws range from an inadequate housing allowance for people on welfare that could not possibly pay for a decent apartment in Kingston, to difficulty getting prescription drugs, the problems people on social assistance have getting apartments, and the punitive aspects of the welfare system. The speakers demanded the shortcomings be fixed. ..."

"Penny Koenders, who spoke eloquently and passionately about people not having enough food to feed their children, said it was one of the few times that the poor had a chance to address the people who"

administer the system. 'Someone needs to do something, and we hope you're that person,' she told Gerretsen."

(The Kingston *Whig-Standard*,
January 20 2004)

A head of the regional landlords' association also speaks. He raises some of the challenges faced by landlords, and presents one of the solutions shared by tenants and landlords: the direct payment strategy, noting that a similar system in Cornwall successfully reduced evictions.

Near the end of the meeting, the Minister Gerretson congratulates a Room of One's Own and the SPCKA for holding such a productive and constructive meeting.

"Gerretsen...admitted it was...disturbing to see people who had to live on the streets or rely on shelters and charity to get by. 'We need to be making sure that everybody has a place to stay at night and enough to eat,' he said. 'It's what we owe one another.' He made no promises...but said the housing issue, both in Kingston and around the province, may be the area where he and his government could have the most impact. 'It's primarily the housing issue that I can do something about.'"

(The Kingston *Whig-Standard*,
January 20 2004)

Although he makes no concrete promises, Gerretsen says he will look into several of the ideas raised at the meeting, such as making old provincial property available as housing. He also encourages ROOO to continue to put pressure on different levels of government, stressing that it is the only way to make change happen. The SPCKA Senior Project Manager asks the Minister if ROOO can have input into decision and policy making in the future. Although Gerretsen does not clearly say how this could happen, he answers in a positive way, and shows interest in continuing this dialogue.

The meeting gets front-page coverage in the Kingston *Whig-Standard* the next morning, as does the bus tour, organized by Kingston's Health and Housing Coalition. On the bus tour, homeless people and representatives of health and social service agencies gave politicians a tour of shelters, hospitals, resource centres and hang-outs where homeless people go, live and sleep. Time constraints meant that some key stops had to be cancelled – the parking garage where some homeless people sleep and the garbage dumpster behind a restaurant where homeless people "dumpster dive" for food. Still, tour participants got a glimpse into the lives of homeless people in Kingston, including a heated stairwell beside a garbage room where people hang-out and sleep. The dialogue between homeless people, community agency people and government representatives continues.

Project leaders and staff feel that the meeting and tour are successful, and many people who attended the meeting express similar opinions. Not everyone is happy with the outcome, however. Time constraints prevented some ROOO participants from saying what they had hoped to say, both in the meeting and on the tour. No promises were made about the concrete changes needed for homeless people, despite the urgency of their needs in the height of winter. Nonetheless, many feel that ROOO has made important progress. By focusing on creating a safe and constructive environment where shared landlord-tenant issues and solutions are presented, the group has begun an important trust-based relationship with provincial and city politicians that will continue in the future.

Returning to Tenant Survey Information

Meanwhile, a member of the ROOO leadership committee puts her time and expertise into analyzing the data from the action research survey. Over 100 tenants have filled out the survey, and the analysis shows some important findings about tenants' perceptions of why landlords refuse to rent them a room, and reasons why they have lost previous rental housing. The survey results *"highlight communication barriers, social isolation and economic barriers in renting accommodation...demonstrat[ing] that besides social isolation, economic factors must be addressed"* (Room of One's Own Housing Survey Results, February 2004).

There is interesting information about homeless peoples' knowledge of abandoned buildings and their locations. The surveys show that homeless people have the time to contribute to fixing up existing unused buildings for housing projects. Some homeless people and tenants have skills that could be used for this purpose and there is keen interest among others to learn skills, and to renovate apartments to make more housing units available. The SPCKA Senior Project Manager suggests that a ROOO may be able to use the survey results as evidence to support efforts to bring about policy and practice change.

Impatience and Tension in the Community

As January turns into February 2004, ROOO tenants feel that it is necessary to continue to put political pressure on provincial and city governments to address their needs and concerns. In particular, tenants and homeless people want timely responses to two pressing issues regarding their immediate needs, both of which were discussed in depth at the January meeting with the Minister. In the same period, there is a Project staff change as the more experienced Community Worker leaves for another job and is replaced by another young university student activist, who now joins the Community Facilitator as Project field staff under the SPCKA Senior Project Manager's supervision.

With the encouragement and support of the new Project staff person, ROOO members take their immediate issues to the City of Kingston on February 3, 2004:

“About 20 members of the city's homeless population appealed to city council to respond to their plight by giving more money to drop-in centres and changing a welfare policy they say encourages people to sleep on the street.

“‘Help us get these people off the streets,’ Nancy McLean, a member of the landlord and tenants group A Room of One's Own, begged councillors Tuesday night during a presentation to city. ‘It's terrible what they go through.’ McLean asked the city to fund more drop-in centres to protect the homeless from the cold temperatures. On some days, the homeless must contend with up to four hours when there's no warm place for them to be, McLean said.

“Lyle McDonough, who used to be homeless, asked that the city pay an allowance for personal needs to all homeless people, regardless of whether they live on the streets or stay in shelters. According to provincial rules, people on the streets can get \$195 a month in emergency assistance. But homeless people lose those benefits when they stay in shelters, which, the province argues, provide adequate lodging and food to satisfy the personal needs of their residents.

*(The Kingston Whig-Standard,
February 5 2004)*

ROOO also presents a package to all city representatives at the meeting, providing background information about ROOO and housing statistics in Kingston, and outlining the issues that ROOO hopes the city will address. These issues include funding for extending the hours of a drop-in into the evenings and the weekend; paying a personal needs allowance to homeless people whether they are in emergency shelters or not; implementing an effective voluntary direct rent system for social assistance payments; and using the City's Reserve Fund to meet other basic health needs of homeless people in Kingston.

There are mixed opinions following the meeting about its success. ROOO community worker staff are happy with how the meeting went, feeling that the combination of the written materials and the presentations by two ROOO group members made for a clear message to city politicians and administrators. Although it was an emotionally charged presentation, they felt it was important for City Councillors and City staff to understand how these issues profoundly affected the lives of people living on Kingston's streets.

Other Project leaders and community agency representatives think it would have been more effective if an SPCKA or ROOO staff person had summarized the group's points and presented a clear plan of what steps the city should take. They also expressed concern about ROOO criticism of the existing shelter

system, which was struggling with limited resources to provide emergency shelter to homeless people.

The tension is heightened when the new ROOO Project staff person makes public statements that are more critical of the City staff and shelter providers. Several shelter provider officials who have been supportive and even leaders in the Project express their concern to the SPCKA Senior Project Manager about the turn of the Project and they start to withdraw.

The Senior Project Manager begins some fence mending with City staff and shelter providers. He asks the SPNO Coordinator to come to Kingston in late February for a day to work with him and his Project staff on how to reduce the community tension. Meetings with Project staff seem to clarify the role of the Project and of the SPCKA in the community. The careful balance between taking assertive advocacy positions and maintaining constructive working relationships with the system is discussed. In the end, the recently hired Community Worker decides to leave the job after thinking about the requirements of the Project and the SPCKA for this kind of work.

Regaining Positive Momentum for Closing the Distance

One important result of the whole issue is that senior city administrators are directed to submit a report to City Council in early March 2004 about the concerns raised by ROOO. The Kingston Commissioner of Community Services delivers a detailed report to City Council on March 9 addressing all the areas of concern expressed by ROOO and concluding:

“While we can take steps locally to ease the symptoms of the problem, and a stronger community network of agencies working towards this goal is a great step forward, the root causes and the sustainable solutions lie in a coordinated effort between community partners and all levels of Government

“The Social Planning Council, through its initiative called A Room of One’s Own has requested the City to initiate more extensive, comprehensive and integrated activities to address the issues of homelessness. City staff concurs that the solutions to the challenges we face as a community lie in a collaborative, inclusive strategy.”

(Report of the Commissioner of Community Services, Kingston,
March 9, 2004)

SPCKA congratulates the Commissioner and City for careful consideration of ROOO’s issues. It proposes that the City co-sponsor with SPCKA a “Community Learning Symposium” in April to further develop an *“inclusionary response to Kingston’s desperate housing situation.”*

The Next Steps in The Journey:

Pushing for Transformative Change

By the end of Phase 2 in the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project in April 2004, there is a strong sense of accomplishment but with much more yet to do.

Tenants and homeless people are clearly engaged and supported in ROOO. A year earlier in March 2003, one explicit measure of success proposed was for homeless people to be representing the Kingston Project at the *Closing the Distance* Provincial Conference in Toronto instead of just community agency representatives. On March 23 2004, an eleven-person delegation from ROOO attend the Provincial Conference in Toronto. Six tenants/homeless people and the head of the local Landlord Association join the SPCKA staff and two other Project leaders at the event. Two tenants and the landlord representative join in the presentation on the Kingston *Closing the Distance* initiative to more than 160 Conference participants from across Ontario.



(Left to right) Former SPCKA Project staff Cathy Cleary and current staff Matt Silburn join ROOO tenant leaders Brad Heaslip and Lenny Landry and ROOO landlord leader Steve Manders in presenting to the *Closing the Distance* Provincial Conference in Toronto, March 23, 2004



Brad Heaslip, ROO tenant leader, talks with Provincial Conference participant about the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project

Upon returning to Kingston, tenants and landlords continue to work together as the Landlords Association asks SPCKA to join a presentation to Kingston City Council on reducing the property tax rate on apartment buildings to the same rate as single family residences. The Commitment of the Landlords Association is that tax savings in this way would be transferred to tenants in reduced rents. The Landlords Association also writes a letter to the Ontario Minister of Housing requesting an increase in the shelter allowance to people on social assistance from \$325 to \$500. These actions are seen as additional examples of closing the distance between landlords and tenants.

The Community Learning Symposium on April 21 in Kingston is a tremendous success. Eighty people attend to hear Sudbury Mayor David Courtemanche and Sudbury City Councillor Janet Gasparini, who are involved in the Sudbury *Closing the Distance* Project, talk about how social and economic inclusion must involve all parts of the community working together.

Since ROOO and the SPCKA initiated outreach to the downtown business community to get its support for more shelter and housing that would keep people off of the streets, Health Canada provides extended SEII summer funding to support this activity.



ROOO poster to publicize a community education event for the promotion of higher shelter allowances

ROOO with the support of SPCKA prefer the route of community education, bridge building and negotiation to advance the inclusion agenda for homeless people and tenants. Poster and pamphlet material is produced and distributed to this end. Public events are organized to deliver the ROOO message in imaginative ways. In June, community members are invited to join ROOO in a public park to “*Deliver John Gerretsen an Uplifting Message*” by releasing into the sky helium-filled balloons with the message “*Raise the Rates*”.

Some ROOO members are less patient and choose to be more assertive in their advocacy. A sub-group of ROOO breaks off in June to form the Kingston Coalition Against Poverty. In early July, this Coalition creates a “Tent City” by settling in tents on a vacant, privately owned waterfront site scheduled for hotel and condominium development. They protest government inaction on the shelter and expense allowances. The former ROOO Community Worker who left the Project is a leading activist and spokesperson for this group.

The Tent City development is covered daily in the local press. Notably, Tent City inhabitants keep a well-maintained, orderly and non-disruptive presence on the site. One member comments to the media,

“The action is peaceful – a lot of times political rallies turn violent and we really don’t want that. That’s not our way and I personally

hope we never get there . . . It's not the kind of attention that you need to make a point." (Kingston Whig-Standard, July 9, 2004).

Although the SPCKA recommends against this action, it supports ROOO in trying to help get a meeting of representatives of all three levels of government to deal with the issues being raised by the Coalition. Ironically, the Kingston Coalition Against Poverty would not likely have formed to take this action if the SPCKA and ROOO had not organized and mobilized homeless people and tenants through the *Closing the Distance* Project over the last year. Still, the influence of the ROOO on the Coalition's action may be evident, as the SPCKA Senior Manager suggests,

"Positives that seem to be coming out of this to date are that because the group is strongly self disciplining itself . . ., they are intentionally trying to be 'High impact, high visibility with low disruption, low negative imaging.' I think this is the result of SEII influence. . . . They are very strategic and leadership for the most part is coming from individuals whom have been attending ROOO and have personally grown because of it."

(E-mail communication to SPNO Project Coordinator, July 9, 2004)

As Tent City becomes more known to the community through the media, local residents start dropping by, bringing food, water, and portable toilets. Members of a church group visit every day to talk to the people at Tent City and see how they are doing.

On July 13, City staff make recommendations to City Council for a number of short-term responses to the homelessness situation in Kingston. They include action on voluntary direct rent payment, re-opening a winter shelter with 25 beds for the summer, and authorization of agreements with the Ontario Government for programs to help low income households.

In making these recommendations to Council, the Kingston Commissioner of Community Services says,

"The real solution here lies with the provincial and federal governments in terms of changing some of their programs . . . and freeing up some cash to deal with some of these issues. . . . If they could have more affordable housing built, it would have a tremendous trickle-down effect in the communities Everything takes so much longer that you would like to. It's hard to try and work within the system to defend the system."

(The Kingston Whig-Standard, July 13, 2004)

Reflections on Closing the Distance
between People who are Homeless and Landlords in Kingston:
A Capacity-Building Analysis

Context for the Analysis

There are three things that are important to the context of the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project:

- The relationship between the Social Planning Council of Kingston and Area and the community was in transition. SPCKA had lost its core operational funding, and the organization was just getting by on modest project funding. The staff complement was small, and had been reduced to part-time.
- The historical role of the council was research, and key service providers and allies in the community felt this role was less relevant to the community's needs. Community engagement and community mobilization were seen as more relevant activities for the council to engage in.
- The staff that planned the *Closing the Distance* Project and recruited the initial community leadership left SPCKA for other jobs just before the implementation phase. A new staff team was gradually assembled over the first few months of the implementation phase. This brought changes to the focus of the Project from a participatory action research initiative to a Project focused on community engagement and empowerment.

The result is that both the Project and SPCKA as the sponsoring organization were both in transition, and this dynamic influences the following analysis using the Kaplan Capacity-building Framework.

The following chart gives an overview assessment applying Alan Kaplan's Capacity Analysis Framework to the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project.

Hierarchy of Elements that Build Capacity	Capacity Assessment of the Kingston <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project
<p>1. <u>Conceptual Framework:</u> <i>The organization's understanding of its world (context).</i></p>	<p>The conceptual framework of the Project was adequate enough initially to: (1) attract a core leadership group; (2) launch the Project; and (3) guide the community mobilizing strategy of outreach to people who are homeless and to landlords in the first six months. The staff leading the Project originally left in the first phase before there had been time to develop agreement among the community leadership group about: (1) how to use the information from the participatory action research; (2) giving direction on how issues arising from the homeless and landlords would be addressed; and (3) the role to ask the municipality to play to 'close the distance' between people who are homeless and landlords. The leadership of the Kingston <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project had an adequate shared understanding, which enabled them to develop a clear statement of the gap that they wanted to close – between people who were homeless and landlords who are renting to people on very low incomes.</p>
<p>2. <u>Organizational Attitude:</u> <i>Confidence and responsibility to act in its world rather than be a passive victim of external conditions.</i></p>	<p>The organizational attitude was strong for the Project, but weak for the organization. The Project leadership saw itself as having the capacity to reach out to and mobilize the community around the issue of homelessness. The SPCKA Board was less certain about the organization's capacity to play this mobilizing role in the broad community.</p>
<p>3. <u>Vision, Strategy & Culture:</u> <i>Sense of purpose and ability to plan, implement and adapt a</i></p>	<p>There were competing visions at the organizational and Project level. The Board wanted to re-structure the organization so that social planning functions were distributed among other agencies in the community. The Project staff wanted to have a direct role in mobilizing community and building collaborative partnerships around the issue of homelessness, and to use this as an opportunity to renew and re-develop the larger role of the organization in the community.</p>

<i>course of action.</i>	
<p>4. <u>Structures and Procedures:</u> <i>Organized and operationalized</i> in a way that <i>enables</i> fulfilment of purpose, realization of vision, and effectiveness of strategy.</p>	<p>The disconnect between the conceptual framework and vision of the Board and the Project translated into a disconnect between the structure and procedures of the organization and the Project.</p>
<p>5. <u>Skills and Competencies:</u> <i>Leadership and staff relevant and appropriate</i> to the organization's mission and work.</p>	<p>The Project staff group was strong. The Project Manager and the community staff had the skill base appropriate to the work of the <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project. The Project was a blend of advocacy, service co-ordination and the organizing and empowerment of target population strategies. These are not always compatible functions and there was conflict among Project activities. The Project Manager had the competencies to manage these tensions and keep the Project together and on track.</p>
<p>6. <u>Resources:</u> <i>Financial means and physical assets.</i></p>	<p>The organization did not have core funding during the Project, and does not have core funding now. Short-term renewal of the project funding has occurred and an extension of funding throughout the year is likely. The end of the project funding for the Kingston <i>Closing the Distance</i> Project will have a severe impact on organizational and staff capacity. The success of the Project, however, has developed the opportunity for partnership with the municipality and others that may renew the funding base of the organization.</p>

Conceptual Framework

Summary:

The conceptual framework was adequate enough initially to:

- attract a core leadership group;
- launch the Project; and
- guide the community mobilizing strategy of outreach to people who are homeless and to landlords in the first six months.

The staff leading the Project originally left in the first phase before there had been time to develop agreement among the community leadership group about:

- how to use the information from the participatory action research;
- giving direction on how issues arising from the homeless and landlords would be addressed; and
- the role to ask the municipality to play to ‘close the distance’ between people who are homeless and landlords.

Discussion:

The Kingston Project leadership group was clear from the beginning on its purpose, which was to close the gap between people who are homeless and looking for accommodation and landlords. There was also agreement that an important reason for the gap was that the people who are homeless are socially isolated, without much economic power, and generally their situation is a result of ‘individual’ circumstances. There was agreement therefore that any strategy to close the distance would first require breaking down this isolation and finding some way to re-frame the individual circumstances into a collective picture. For all these reasons the mobilizing strategy of participatory action research was selected.

There was also agreement that the collective experience of landlords is not well understood and that reaching out to them to hear their experiences would be important. There was a shared belief that if landlords and people who are homeless could ‘hear’ each other, common ground might be identified and the barriers between the business and street cultures might start to break down.

The opportunities created by the Project to meet face to face and learn how to hear each other could potentially forge new relationships in the community. The research generated through the survey would be the information base for the intended partnership of people who are homeless and landlords to use to advocate together for community solutions. According to the Project Manager, the Kingston *Closing the Distance* Project could provide opportunities for:

“...the mainstream community [to] learn that homeless people have good ideas and can have a voice. The SEII approach is a good way to...bring both marginalized and mainstream groups together, so that both groups have to move, listen to each other, and so that those who are marginalized talk to government, community

organizations, etc. There is so much power in bringing these two groups together...because usually many different groups are lobbying for different things. In the end, so many compromises have to be made that no one is happy, but if you can be a common front, that has lots of potential...

There had been a hope at the very beginning of the Project that service providers would form part of the leadership committee of this Project. Many service leaders felt that there should be priority given to creating shelter beds or more direct service workers. Therefore, many housing service providers did not share this conceptual framework and the community leadership was less diverse and less broadly based because of that.

Still, there was agreement on all of these key conceptual issues among Project staff and leaders at the beginning. There was not any particular agreement about what might be the strategy to move forward on common ground items, but a belief that this would 'emerge' from the process.

There was a delay in moving into action on the shared conceptual framework because the staff leadership that initiated the Project left the SPCKA for other jobs early in its implementation. The departure of the initial staff team was an advantage and a disadvantage. It created the opportunity to change the image of the organization as the staff associated with the 'research' focus of the social planning council had left. The disadvantage was that the relationships that the original staff team had with service providers, which could have been used to negotiate a new understanding of the organization, were lost. The new staff had to spend time getting to know and establish relationships with existing service providers. This increased the time spent developing understanding about the conceptual framework of the Project over the first six months. The Board of Directors endorsed this approach as an intentional change of direction to regain community confidence. It took time to build an understanding among community partners about this different conceptual framework.

It was not until almost the mid-way point of the Project that the new staff was hired and completely in place. The participatory action research process that they inherited provided direction to the outreach process. But, the new Project staff brought a different skill set in the area of community engagement and empowerment. Consequently, the arrival of the municipal and provincial elections in the fall of 2003, not contemplated in the original Project plan, diverted the Project from its participatory action research strategy to community organizing for political advocacy and more immediate impact on the homelessness issue. One Project leader explained that:

"...work was done on the municipal election – it took the project on a tangent, but maybe not in the wrong direction. It was a good thing to do, it was important – bringing the perspectives of landlords and tenants to municipal candidates. This slowed down other

processes, but was very important – this election work has provided the set-up for how to approach and bring things to the new municipal government now.”

These opportunities were exploited to good effect. There had not been agreement, however, within the group about the role of the municipality in closing the distance between landlords and tenants, and the improvisation of strategy in response to these opportunities created some stress within the organisation and with its community partners.

The participatory action research strategy set the context for the Project and the outreach work. Not sharing the research analysis nor facilitating discussion of the findings with the tenant and landlord groups and the municipality may have been a missed opportunity to broaden the awareness of the circumstances of homelessness in Kingston.

Organizational Attitude

Summary:

The organizational attitude was strong for the Project, but weak for the organization. The Project leadership saw itself as having the capacity to reach out to and mobilize the community around the issue of homelessness. The SPCKA Board was less certain about the organization’s capacity to play this mobilizing role in the broad community.

Discussion

The Project leadership had confidence that change was possible and that the Project could be an influential agent in that process. The Project leadership believed it was positioned to be an independent mediator between the disadvantaged groups in the community, the general community, the service providing organizations and the municipality. The leaders believed that they could bring representatives of these groups into a collaborative leadership process around closing the distance between people who are homeless and landlords.

The Project leadership also had complete confidence that they would be able to reach out to the people who are homeless and give them a voice in the Project, The Project Manager was confident that people’s involvement could be *“empowering...lead[ing] to lots of personal growth”*.

However, the leadership of the organization – the Board of Directors – was in a very different place. They had become very doubtful about the relevance of the role of the SPCKA and were actively contemplating allocating its social planning functions to other organizations in the community.

Vision, Strategy and Culture

Summary:

There were competing visions at the organizational and Project level. The Board wanted to re-structure the organization so that social planning functions were distributed among other agencies in the community. The Project staff wanted to have a direct role in mobilizing community and building collaborative partnerships around the issue of homelessness, and to use this as an opportunity to renew and re-develop the larger role of the organization in the community. The Project leadership's strategy was in response to the difficulties they were encountering in getting involvement and participation in the Project from service providers who felt the social planning council had had lost its relevance. They were also concerned about the apparent fragility of the organization and were reluctant to commit resources to a Project that might not continue beyond its one-year funding.

Discussion:

Organizational Level

The vision of the organization was weak at the beginning of the Project. There was tension within the Board and between the Executive Director and the Board about the direction of the organization. The Executive Director envisioned an organization that conducted community-based research and mobilized community and non-profit groups to become active around community issues. This Project fit within that vision and was seen as a strategic opportunity to re-vitalize the organization's connections with important constituencies. This opportunity was important because years of funding cutbacks had eroded the core base of the organization and only Project funding was available. This *Closing the Distance* Project was seen as an opportunity to reach out and build working relationships with the municipality and other funders that would lead to sustainable core funding.

The Board of Directors questioned the ongoing role of autonomous social planning in the community. The Board's strategy was to get out of the business of direct delivery of social planning and distribute the social planning function among several organizations and either disband the organization, or have a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of agencies who had assumed the social planning functions.

It was against this backdrop that the Project was conceived. The struggle between the vision of the Board and Executive Director contributed to the resignation of the Executive Director just as the Project moved from Phase 1 (planning and development) into Phase 2 (implementation). The Board hired a replacement staff person to be a Senior Project Manager rather than the Executive Director of the organization. The strategy of the Board was for the Project to continue, because it felt a commitment to the Project funders to fulfil

the objectives of the Project. The Board separated the Project responsibility from executive/governance responsibility and saw the two as separate entities.

For all intents and purposes, the Board left the direction of the Project to the staff, and did not see it as a vehicle for renewing the organization. The Board did not see the Project as an organizational change mechanism. The Board did see the resources of the Project – staff, SPNO consultant support – as a useful support to some organizational planning tasks. While this internal dynamic may not seem directly related to the SEII initiative, the commitment of the social planning council to be an independent, community based organization became very important to the community stakeholders engaged in the SEII initiative. These organizations wanted to know if the social planning council had the capacity to sustain this initiative and facilitate their ongoing participation as meaningful and equal partners.

Project Level

At the Project level, Project staff and leadership held the vision that this was an opportunity to build:

A strong three-way partnership made up of the city (political leadership and civic officials), the private sector (starting with five or six engaged local business leaders) and the health and social sector agencies. Also, a united public-private-community voice of this kind could have more impact on policy and funding changes needed at senior government levels (e.g. National Housing Strategy).

Central to the Project strategy was that people who were homeless would have a voice in the Project. The strategy therefore included:

- A Project leadership team made up of representatives of the three constituencies – municipal, private and health and social sector agencies.
- An ongoing outreach process to people who were homeless and to landlords. Initially this was pursued through a participatory action research process, and then through a community organizing process.
- Homeless people and landlords being brought into the Project leadership as the outreach work progressed.

A city councillor and a planning staff person represented the municipality throughout the Project. Private sector representation was strong in the beginning but faded over the course of the Project (i.e. the involvement of the Kingston Chamber of Commerce and private property developers). The representatives from this sector came through relationships associated with the Executive Director who had initiated the Project. When the SPCKA staff turned over, these relationships with the business community were lost. The new Project staff had too many other responsibilities to spend time re-developing these relationships.

Many mainstream agencies in the housing segment of the social service sector rejected the vision of the Project. Their opinion was that funding allocated to social and economic inclusion was too indirect to be of value – the funding instead should be allocated directly to housing services or the creation of shelter beds.

At the beginning of the Project, the original Project leadership pursued their community mobilization strategy using the action-research process. It was an effective vehicle for doing outreach to homeless people and to landlords. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the conceptual framework, the participatory action research process was not working for the new Project staff and a 'direct community organizing' approach became the process of engagement. There was an eventual conflict over tactics - between Alinsky style confrontational tactics and consensus building tactics – between the Project staff and the Project partners. This conflict led to threats of resignation by community Project partners. One staff person did leave and formal apologies were made to several partners to retain their participation. Clearly, a conflict in vision and strategy was almost fatal to the Project at this point.

The outreach to landlords became a pathway to the business community. Although there was not strong consistent follow through with the participatory research approach, the process did engage several landlords, including the influential head of the major regional landlord's association. Interestingly enough, while approaching the rental housing issue from opposite perspectives, landlords and people without homes discovered a shared vision in the intersection of their different interests – homeless people wanted affordable and safe housing; landlords wanted good tenants who paid the rent and respected their property. There was enough of a shared vision here to make joint representation to City Council and to the Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs. The Project Manager described the strategy the Project often used in discussions with politicians and government officials:

“...An important strategy has been... to say ‘here are the issues, and here’s some of the common ground we have and possible solutions’. In this way, the project provides strong direction for how policy and practice can happen and change – the [politician] is now listening to people at the grassroots. This is an amazing strong of diverse people coming together.”

The Project's commitment to building relationships that closed the distance extended by the end of the Project to outreach to the downtown business association and the community economic development organization, which is led by local business people, including one of the landlords that the Project had engaged. In addition, the success of the Project enabled local service providers to see the benefits of social inclusion and was bringing them into partnership with the Project. One Project leader described the Kingston SEII project as *“show[ing] a new way of doing business, where research and community*

development can work together to affect policy change – community organizations previously saw these as mutually exclusive”.

The Project Manager used the Project as a means to inform community partners about the potential change of direction at the organizational level and to build a base of support for a community based vision, mission and evolving roles for the organization. This eventually led to additions to the Board from among Project participants.

Structures and Procedures

Summary:

The disconnect between the conceptual framework and vision of the Board and the Project translated into a disconnect between the structure and procedures of the organization and the Project.

Discussion:

The weakness of structures was reflected in the separation between the Board and the Project as described above. The Board membership had declined to a handful of people. The formal position of Executive Director had been eliminated. Hence, there was not a formal authoritative co-ordinating role - only a voluntary one - between the strategic and executive functions of the organization at the Board level and the operational functions of the organization at the Project level. The differing visions between the Board and the Project was reflected in a disconnect in the organization's structures between the Board and the Project.

Skills and Competencies

Summary:

The Project staff group was strong. The Project Manager and the Project staff had the skill base appropriate to the work of the *Closing the Distance* Project. The Project was a blend of advocacy, service co-ordination and the organizing and empowerment of target population strategies. These are not always compatible functions and there was conflict among Project activities. The Project Manager had the competencies to manage these tensions and to keep the Project together and on track.

Discussion:

The Project Manager had the competencies to use the Project to nurture developmental change within the organization, even though he did not have an explicit mandate to affect organizational development.

The Project also demonstrated a capacity to recruit and employ field staff suitable to the delicate balance necessary for a project building relationships among parties in the community that do not typically dialogue, let alone work

together. One Project staff hired in Phase 2 was connected to people on the street and had the confidence of people without homes and tenants to facilitate good community process with them. Another staff from the public health field was hired for her connections with the community service world and her skill in reaching out to landlords. These two staff worked exceptionally well together. The Project Manager saw the benefits of involving staff with different skills and perspectives, despite the challenges this can entail:

“...different staff bring different strengths and challenges to the project. Where one community facilitator had strong skills in community mobilizing and working at the grassroots level...the other knew the community agency side of things very well...certainly some tensions and difficulties have arisen between the activist orientation of one facilitator and the [Social Planning Council] which has historically been more focused on...activities such as research, however, they have had to figure out how to work with one another.”

When the Project staff person with strong connections and skills in reaching out to community agencies and landlords left for another job, there was a noticeable vacuum left in the role she had played. One Project leader described how that Project staff person *“had a strong role in the community, and played a strong role in getting landlords involved...we’ve seen declined participation and influence of landlords since [that staff person] left, and this hasn’t been filled. Some [landlords] still came, but not as many.”*

Material Resources

Summary:

The organization did not have core funding during the Project, and does not have core funding now. Short-term renewal of the project funding has occurred and an extension of funding throughout the year is likely. The end of the project funding for the Kingston SEII Project will have a severe impact on organizational and staff capacity. The success of the Project, however, has developed the opportunity for partnership with the municipality and others that may renew the funding base of the organization.

Conclusion:

Organizational Capacity and Potential for Sustainability of SEII Initiative

Kaplan sees the process of developing sustainability as being a progression from dependence to independence to interdependence.

The phases of development, in an ideal process, will be from dependence to independence to interdependence. It is critical that these phases are recognized as developmental and one is not

judged as being superior to any other. The full and positive experience of each phase provides learning and capabilities, which are vital to the ability to engage in the next phase. Each phase is essential to the next and each subsequent phase carries within it the experiences of the phases, which preceded it – it is not possible to skip phases. It is also necessary to recognize that these phases are continually recurring and overlapping in the course of the life of an individual, organization or community – as one develops, one encounters new areas in which these sequenced phases must be experienced afresh. Although skilled and sensitive interventions can help to avoid even remote hindrances and blockages to the process, development does have a pace of its own. There is an absolute limit to the extent to which it can be speeded up through the application of increased resources and developmental interventions.¹

The Kingston Project was very dependent on external support for the initial phase. The SEII Project funding came at a crucial time for the organization. It bridged the organization through a funding shortfall. In hindsight, it is likely that the staff of the time would have resigned anyway – leaving the organization very vulnerable. The new Project leader was recruited with the assistance of the SPNO. The Project relied heavily on external support from the SPNO consultants in the first few months of the implementation phase.

The Project developed capacity and independence over the subsequent months. The focus shifted from the externally initiated participatory action research process to a community based engagement and empowerment strategy, evidence of the capacity to develop a locally supported strategy that responded to local needs and circumstances.

The new local staff team are skilled and developed credibility with people on the street, with local landlords, with service providers and with the municipality. One Project staff person felt that “...*the Kingston Social Planning Council has a lot more credibility than they did a year ago – a change was desperately needed. These changes are partly a result of the SEII project*”. Another staff person had the impression that community members found it “...*nice to see the Social Planning Council of Kingston involving more grassroots organizations as a result of the SEII. Lots of people in the community are surprised and happy to see this change of direction.*”

There is an ongoing working relationship with the municipality. This developed initially out of Project’s skilful raising of issues of the homelessness during the municipal and provincial elections. The SPCKA also has developed the capacity and credibility to bid on a proposal to develop a model for affordable housing.

¹ P. 10, Allan Kaplan.

Negotiations are underway with the municipality and United Way for core operational funding.

The Project influenced the direction of the Board of Directors about the future of the organization and prevented its decentralization of social planning roles to other organizations in the community. A strategic alliance is being developed with the Kingston Information Centre and Volunteer Kingston, which has resulted in co-location.

The Project itself was successful in attracting bridge funding from Health Canada for the summer and a renewal of project funding for an additional year is likely.

The capacity of the organization has significantly increased from almost two years ago when the Project was conceived. Relationships have been developed with a diverse range of community partners to continue the SEII initiative. External project funding is still required. Inter-dependence with community partners has not been sufficiently developed to ensure that the initiative will continue without external funding.