



Community Based Research 2016: Summary Report

**Understanding the role and the uniqueness of the
EMC community animator model in empowering
ethno-cultural communities in Edmonton**

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Background

Over the last decade, the City of Edmonton has experienced exponential population growth as thousands of new immigrants and refugees have landed in Edmonton and still new people are coming to the City either from outside of Canada or from other provinces in Canada. In addition to international and inter-provincial migration, rural to urban migration has accelerated the rapid population growth in Edmonton. However, unlike Canadian-born population, newcomers—who migrate to Canada from other parts of the world—face significant barriers to integrate into the Canadian economy and society. Some of the not-for-profit and community-based organizations are working for newcomers in Edmonton to provide support and opportunities for fostering their settlement, integration and citizenship processes through various community development models and facilitation programs. However, little is known about the impacts of these community animation or community facilitation works on the emerging communities in Edmonton.

Objectives

A community-based research was undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness and to understand the uniqueness of the community animator model of Edmonton Multicultural Coalition (EMC). This study was intended to assess the effectiveness of community animator model by making a systematic comparison between the theoretical basis of EMC's community animator model and the changes experienced by the community animators and community members. It also aimed at differentiating the EMC community animator model from similar community facilitation programs of other community-based organizations in Edmonton.

Methods

This research was conducted by the Research Facilitator and was supervised by the Community Research Advisory Committee (CRAC) of EMC. A series of semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 30 research participants to collect qualitative data. These research participants were: community animators, community members, EMC organizational staff, CRAC members and EMC Board members, and program managers of Action for Healthy Communities (AHC) and REACH Edmonton. The study followed purposive sampling procedure to recruit these research participants.

Key Findings

Findings show that the EMC community animator model is working effectively to support, to enable, and to empower the citizens of different ethno-cultural communities in Edmonton. The model has been useful for community animators and for community members especially newcomers in many different ways: a) understanding local cultural and legal system in Edmonton, b) building new capacity, c) validating the embodied knowledge, experience, and capacity that they have brought from their back home, and d) harnessing their existing skills and capacities to navigate various opportunities in Edmonton. Animators and community members have also achieved the ability to interact with people in complex social environments, to break social isolation and to extend social networks. EMC community animator model has helped newcomers to a great extent to remove various cultural, linguistic or social, economic and structural barriers in their earlier phase of the transition and integration process.

Evidences of the Effectiveness of EMC Community Animator Model

EMC community animator model is based on the idea that community animators and members possess inherent knowledge that can be used to identify problems and to solve practical problems through the quality community animation work. Animators are a number of people coming together: they are trained in community animation and are expected to go into their community to actually energize the community in terms of project, ideas and to bring forward some cultural exchanges, and try to expand, open-up whatever projects or ideas they have got. Based on this core idea of community animation, the EMC set the three important roles of a community animator: (1) conceptual roles, (2) operational roles, and (3) organizational roles (see Figure 1).

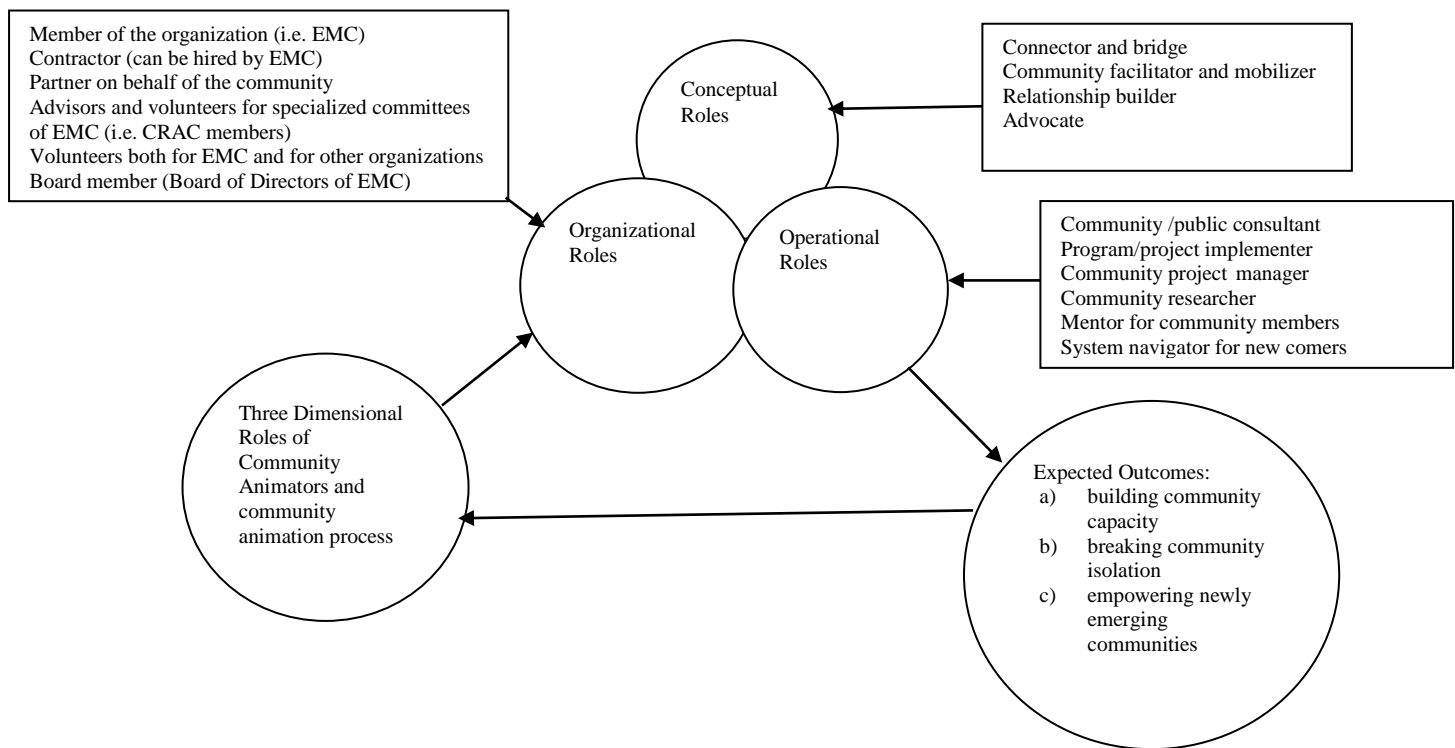


Figure 1: Intersection of theoretical basis of EMC community animator model, community animators' roles, and expected outcomes.

In Figure 1, the first three circles show interactions of three sets of roles of community animators, which are the underlying features of the EMC community animator model (Edmonton Multicultural Coalition 2014). All these three well-defined roles of the community animators are part of the “processes” of community animation and earlier this research assumed that these processes should produce practical “outcomes” both for community animators and community members, shown in the left-bottom and right-bottom circles. This model of community animation was systematically evaluated below following both process and outcome evaluations and this community-based research findings show that the model is working effectively for making many positive impacts both on the animators and community members (please see Figure 2 below).

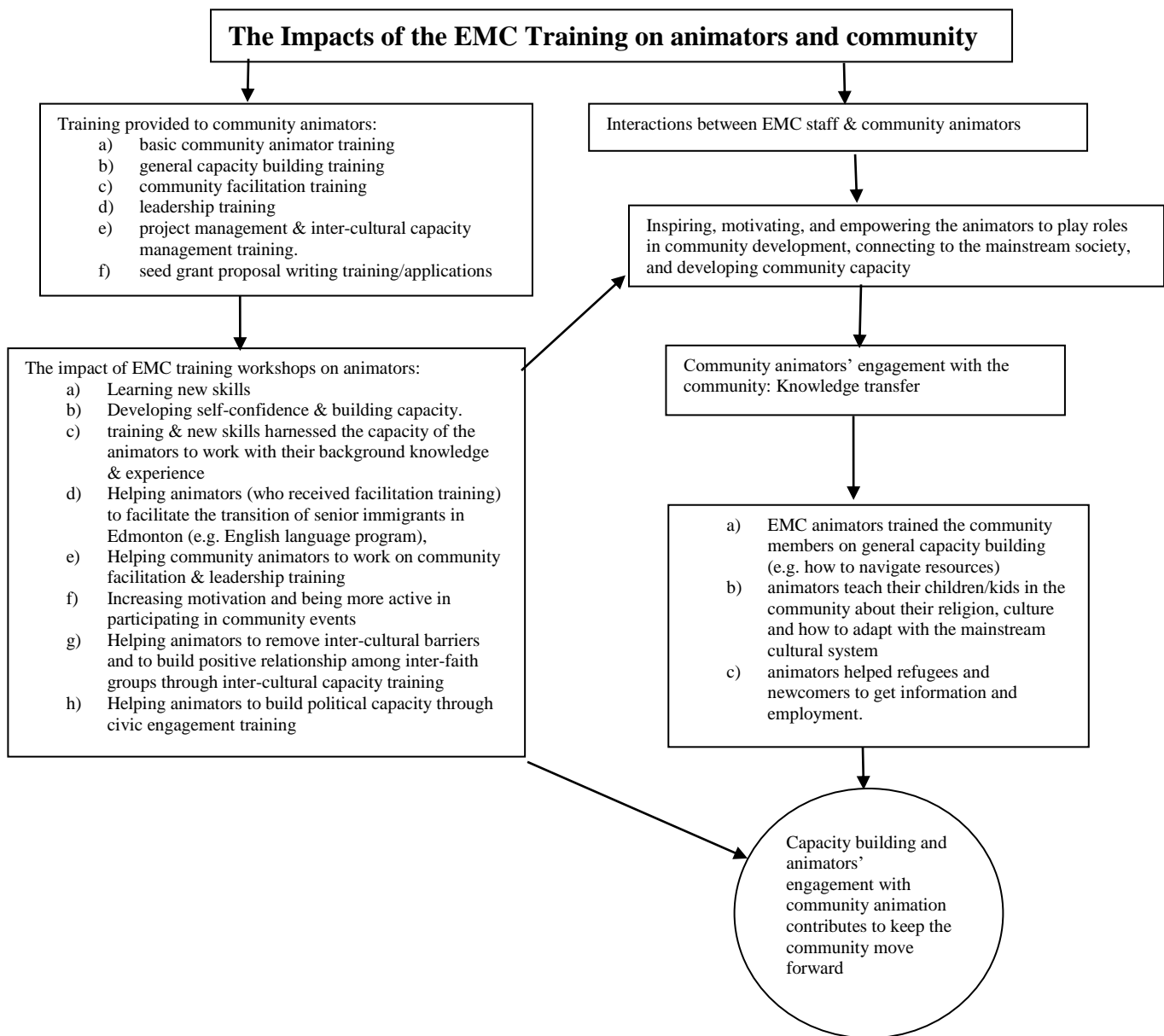


Figure 2: The Impact of EMC training and supports on the community animators and their community.

Figure 2 shows an important connection with Figure 1 (see above) in terms of understanding process and outcome evaluations. Clearly, animators’ participation in EMC training, English language program and seed grants writing projects, community development programs, and participation in the events of the City of Edmonton (public engagement event, for example) contributed to the development of their capacity to act independently and effectively in different complex social environments. Animators’ active engagement in the community animation work such as transferring knowledge or helping newcomers to navigate the mainstream system or helping community members to

solve various practical problems in the community indicate that EMC community animator model is working following its fundamental theoretical framework.

Impacts of EMC Training and Supports on Community Animators & Members

A total of four EMC staff members were interviewed and they were asked to describe the training and workshop or supports that they had provided to community animators and how they had selected training and workshop topics. Findings confirm that EMC staff followed various democratic and collaborative processes (e.g. conversations, dialogues) to identify the types of training animators like to have. The research facilitator's direct observation and interviews with staff and community animators reveal that EMC training involves two processes: (1) introducing the theoretical concept on a certain topic to the animators and (2) each participant was being asked to do some activities, for example, engaging in discussions or interactions with his or her peer about a particular concept or topic. Participants' active engagement in discussions about an issue gives them an opportunity to reflect on whether a certain concept is matched to their preexisting knowledge or they have just learned the concept as something new. Overall, EMC provided several different types of trainings:

- Basic community animator training and general capacity building training.
- Community facilitation and program development training.
- Leadership training.
- Project management and inter-cultural capacity management.
- Seed grant proposal writing training (helping developing the ability to get funding).

Examples of the Effectiveness of EMC Training:

Focus group interviews with community animators show that they had participated in most of these training sessions and had found those trainings useful for them and their ethno-cultural communities. EMC community facilitator training, leadership building training, language program and seed grant projects were popular among animators. EMC community animators took their skills and knowledge to their community and worked with them to connect to the mainstream system. EMC training contributed to empower the community animators and community members in terms of building capacity, solving practical problems, and integrating into the Canadian mainstream. As one community animator said:

I have two training with the coalition here as a community animator. First one is community facilitator skill training and the second one was leadership training. Another training I have received through coordinator who had connected me to training and activities related to community garden. These trainings helped me to learn how to facilitate community and community garden program...I think it is connecting to resources, to provide training and bringing it back to the people that you want to empower. It is all about empowering; to me it is building connections. [EMC community animator, 2016]

Typical roles and activities of the EMC Community Animators

► **Knowledge Transfer:** Information that was passed from animators to community members included:

- how to navigate various resources and information to connect with the mainstream system.
- how to facilitate community development and to play a leadership role.
- how to raise children in bicultural families and how to teach kids and young children immigrants' religious values, language and their traditional cultural values.
- how to manage financial life in Canada (i.e. information on financial literacy).

► *Establishing connections between communities:* EMC community animators have played many important roles in connecting members from different ethno-cultural communities, strengthening unity among these members, and through this process they have contributed to extend social networks.

► *Connecting communities with organizations/service providers:* EMC community animators have opened the doors for each of their ethno-cultural communities by establishing connections between themselves and various organizations, agencies or service providers—connecting communities to various resources and services.

Solving practical problems by the EMC Community Animators

► *Helped getting access to education:*

- EMC community animators helped members of new immigrant families in upgrading back-home education to get a job (e.g. nursing degree certificates), getting access English language program (e.g. ESL or training).
- Animators helped school students to solve educational problems (e.g. solving mathematics, physics, chemistry or other science subjects free of cost).

► *Helped newcomers and community to navigate the Canadian system and to get access to resources:*

- Community animators helped newcomers or new immigrants to navigate the Canadian system by connecting to appropriate services and opportunities.
- Helped senior citizens get access to an appropriate transportation.
- Helped community to get access to community space or a recreation center (needed for the celebration of community program, sports or games).
- Animators acted as interpreters for newcomers, especially those community animators who know two different languages or more including either of the official languages of Canada.

► *Solving economic problems:* Community animators helped community members to solve economic problems in several different ways: engaging members of different ethno-cultural communities in the community gardening and food insecurity projects¹, helping communities to solve practical problems by identifying the problems and strengths/resources in the community. The EMC community gardening project, for example, helped the community to grow culturally appropriate foods, which helped community members to gain economic benefits and to lead a healthy life.

¹ EMC community gardening in the Kilkenny community provides resources and opportunities for newcomers and mainstream community members to grow culturally appropriate foods and to build social networks among members coming from different cultural backgrounds. EMC food security project provides for members of different ethno-cultural communities to meet their food security needs. Accessed on December 29, 2016. <http://www.emcoalition.ca/food-security/>

We have a community garden that helps us to solve our economic problem because we are contributing to our own food, though not like everything but so much stuff we get from our garden that we like. Sometime people can find other stuff they buy from super store that like that we have. So, it saves money and helps us financially. This project also helps the community to address malnutrition and to eat healthy food. So, it has health component as well. [EMC community animator, 2016]

- ▶ *Helped managing familial or social matters:* Animators helped families in emerging communities to address family issues (e.g. managing family conflict, divorce, etc.), parenting in bicultural families, information on youth and teenage activities.
- ▶ *Helped conducting community-based research:* ECM community animators often worked as a gateway for community-based researchers, for establishing connection of the researchers [outsiders] to the community. The ability of the community animators to connect such researchers to the community members and to help doing research implies that these community animators are well-connected to their community members, have earned their trust and confidence and thus they have been able to develop multidimensional skills and capacities valuable in the Canadian context.

The impact of EMC community animation work

- ▶ *Created a space for togetherness and a sense of community belonging:* The work of community animation gave the community animators an opportunity to meet, interact, and share stories, experience and foods with other members in the community. It also allowed animators and members to create new friends, keep connected and to create a space for togetherness and sense of community belonging.
- ▶ *Increased levels of individual confidence and capacity:* EMC community animator model has significant role in enhancing confidence and capacity of both community animators and community members (see interview extracts below, for example).

What I love with animation process is that it gives me the power to directly deal with my people because I don't have intermediary and people understand me and I understand their issues. [EMC community animator, 2016].

I think capacity building is a bigger one because initially I was not like a group leader. I came here at the time when my community was completely broken. There was a big division, there was a big fight and then what the knowledge I had I decided to take a lead. I was not eager to be in a committee or become a leader, but it was a time that I needed to take this position to unite my community, I had to bring the community together. So, there is a big change for my community. [EMC community animator, 2016]

- ▶ *Empower marginalized communities:* Community became empowered through the process of sharing and exchanging information with each other about the common problem in the community and knowing about how to solve the problem.
- ▶ *Building political capacity of the community animators and communities:* Animators' participation in the public events of the City of Edmonton and doing activities (e.g. designing what kinds of questions should be asked, giving a speech, moderating the meeting, writing meeting minutes and reports) had a great impact on

them. These processes enhanced their self-confidence, helped develop their capacity to talk in public space, and encouraged them to engage in dialogues with delegates and participants from high rank political office.

► *Breaking community isolation*: Social capacity gives animators and community members the ability to connect them with other community, to flourish, to expand and to prove valuable and effective. Various processes of training, interactions of community animators with members of other ethno-cultural communities, with EMC staff, trainers, or with people from different public service and non-governmental offices significantly helped community animators to build their capacity, to break community isolation and to be connected to the mainstream system (see Figure 3).

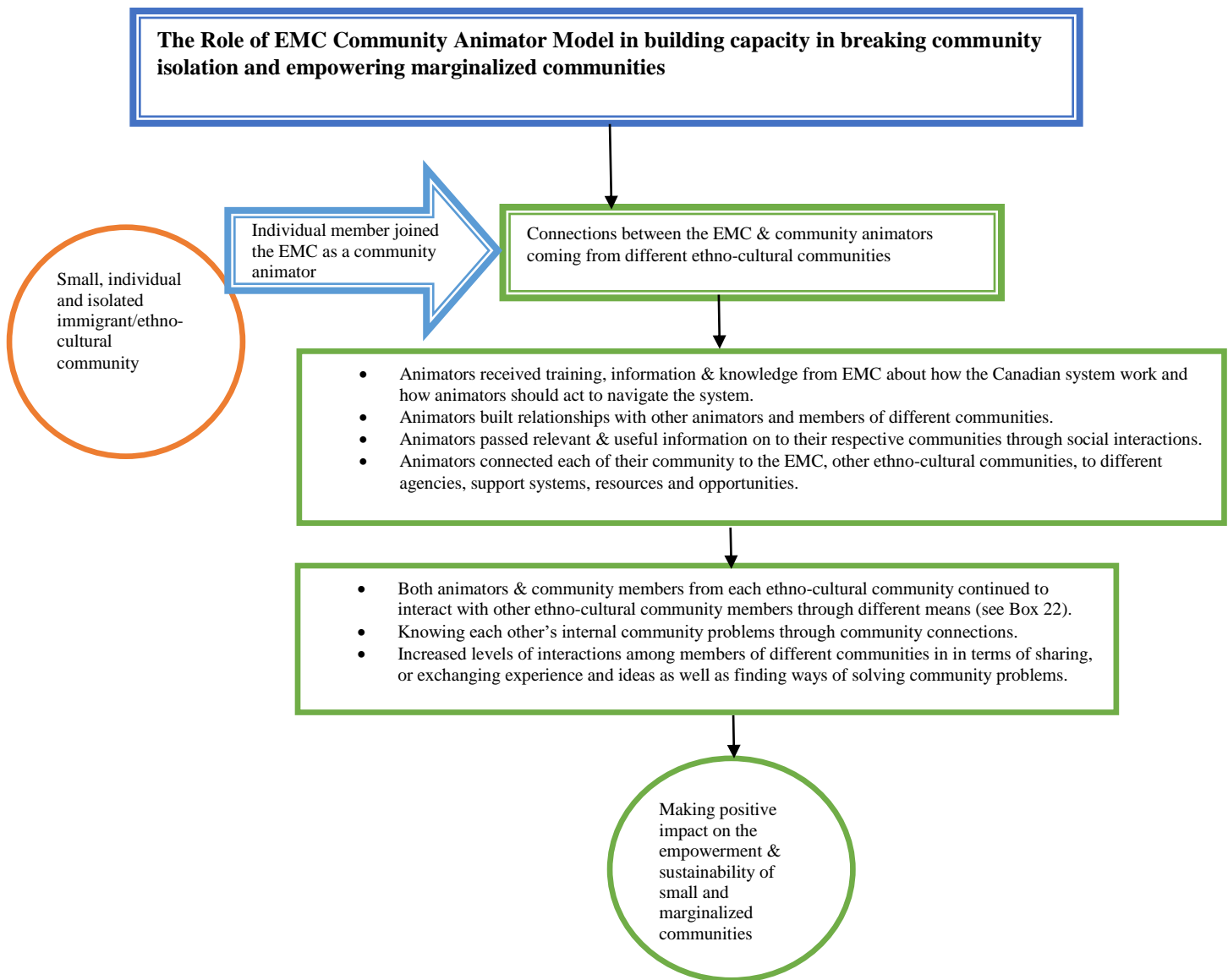


Figure 3: The role of EMC community animator model in building capacity, breaking community isolation, and empowering marginalized communities.

As one community animator, for example, said how the community animator model contributes to break community isolation:

We get some supports from the coalition and I think it works like this kind of project [community garden] is not so big but still makes people move and to get out of their houses. So, that is a part of breaking the isolation, right? So, the coalition helps us in building the project and getting us to know other people or making us know the people from other communities and to enlarge our approach.

Differentiating EMC Community Animator Model from AHC and REACH Edmonton Community Facilitation Programs

Like EMC, several different other not-for-profit organizations use community animation programs to build capacity of newcomers and members of marginalized communities and to connect them to the mainstream system in Edmonton. Organizations such as AHC, MCHB, EMCN, and REACH Edmonton all have community facilitation programs for members of new immigrants, refugees or for the newly emerging communities. Each organization engages a group of people as community facilitators to help newcomers or members of different ethno-cultural communities in terms of their settlement, integration or solution of a particular community problem. As described earlier, EMC has a well-defined community animator model (see Figure 1 above) and EMC calls its community facilitators “community animators.” AHC has two types of community facilitators who are known as: (1) community facilitator animators and (2) settlement animators. REACH Edmonton prefers to call their community facilitators “cultural navigators” or “frontline workers.” While AHC and REACH Edmonton community facilitators have some roles and functions similar to EMC community animators EMC community animator model is different from that of AHC and REACH Edmonton from several different perspectives and contexts. All these similarities and differences are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Differentiating the EMC community animator model from similar community facilitation programs.

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EMC, AHC and REACH Edmonton all organizations work with animators and members of ethno-cultural communities to build their capacity and to connect them to the mainstream system in Edmonton. • All community animators, community facilitator and settlement animators and cultural navigators of EMC, AHC, and REACH Edmonton need to have some sorts of community connections and knowledge about both their own ethno-cultural communities and about the mainstream Canadian system. • There are some significant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlike AHC and REACH Edmonton, EMC has a well-defined and theoretically informed community animator model (see Figure 1) and the roles and relationships of the community animators with the organization are clearly defined in the model. • Except community animators working on community garden and food security projects all the EMC community animators are volunteers. None of the EMC animator is treated as staff. On the other hand, all the AHC animators and all cultural navigators of REACH Edmonton are paid staff. • EMC follows a more flexible (e.g. words of mouths, referred by other animators or community leaders) approach and policy to recruit its community animators than AHC and REACH Edmonton. AHC animators and REACH Edmonton cultural navigators are typically recruited as paid staff following all the formal employment recruitment procedures and processes (e.g. job advertisement, job applications, interviews, a particular skill set to work on a particular issue).

<p>similarities of roles and functions between EMC community animators and AHC community facilitator animators.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All three organizations provide some common training to their animators and cultural navigators such as community facilitation training, leadership training, capacity building training, and cultural capacity building training. • None of the organization has evaluated or developed any concrete process, solid measuring tool or criteria to assess the effectiveness of the work of community animators, community facilitators or cultural navigators respectively. However, the EMC has recently started to develop an evaluation framework to determine the effectiveness of seed grants project whether the community can achieve any outcome. And this research is done for assessing the effectiveness of the EMC community animator model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlike AHC, EMC animators are not usually terminated or excluded from their position or from the organization unless they are being inactive, discontinued or left the organization. • While AHC evaluates their animators as staff on a regular basis, EMC and REACH Edmonton do not evaluate their community animators and cultural navigators respectively. However, both EMC and REACH Edmonton keep track record of who are community animators and cultural navigators (Spanish, African, Muslim, etc.), how many community animators and cultural navigators they have and what they are doing. • EMC community model is more about process and is aimed at achieving long term positive impact through relationship and capacity building. Unlike EMC, AHC and REACH Edmonton usually look for the immediate change to the community or groups of people they work with. EMC community animators work on the overall development process that works slowly—it brings changes to community over a long period of time (i.e. grounded in community development approach). Conversely, REACH Edmonton cultural navigators work to bring an immediate change. For example, keeping individuals away from having serious family conflict or from having their children apprehended or from having assaulted one of the central objectives of cultural navigators. • Unlike AHC settlement animators and REACH Edmonton cultural navigators EMC community animators do not provide any direct services to community or to a particular group of people. • While AHC treats its community animators as professional, REACH Edmonton does not view that cultural animators are necessarily professional. However, the EMC animators are not either professional, paid staff or engaged in a particular area of work requiring specialized training or expertise.
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Policy Recommendations

EMC as a capacity building organization has already achieved some important successes through the use of its community animator model. In order to achieve further enhancement of the model and to provide more effective supports and opportunities for newcomers and marginalized communities in Edmonton this study recommends the following policy reforms for EMC:

- Recruitment of more full-time staff to reach out more communities and to keep connected with animators effectively.
- Providing more training and supports for community animators on seed grant projects.
- Providing training to EMC staff to help them understand the cultural context of community animators and community.
- Maintaining positive and effective relationship between EMC staff and the mainstream agencies for creating more space for the organization, animators and communities to access resources and opportunities.
- Having an effective follow-up about the progress of the organization and the work of community animators.

- Having more community animator appreciation programs to keep animators active and connected.
- Providing transportation and childcare supports for animators and members.
- Reaching out more diverse communities and establishing connections between established and marginalized communities to make more positive impacts on the marginalized communities.
- Adopting and implementing the inter-cultural capacity building approach to bring animators and members of different communities under one umbrella.