

COMMUNITY FIRST HEALTH CO-OP HISTORY

The Community First Health Co-op has been in existence since 2003. The extent and scope of the accomplishments that have been achieved by this group are extraordinary, all the more so considering that most of the work has been done by volunteers. The brief history of the Co-op speaks volumes about its capacity to perform and the intelligence and drive that motivate the organization.

2002 was a year of tremendous change and upheaval in the health care sector in BC. Many communities, Nelson among them, found themselves confronted with a new alignment of service delivery, the removal of some services from the community and a sense of disengagement from the decision making process surrounding health care.

In response to this situation a significant number of Nelson and Area residents formed a coalition designed to protect the services that had existed here for many years. This organization, called Save Our Services, generated broad support from the community and embarked on a number of initiatives. One of these initiatives was the development of a "Community Initiatives, Alternative Funding Committee." This committee's mandate was to explore creative, proactive approaches to the provision of health care services in the community.

This small committee reached out to the community and succeeded in bringing together a remarkable and tenacious group of individuals with backgrounds and proven leadership in health, business, local and regional politics, finance, labour, education, community development, social advocacy and economic development. The mandate of the group was clear: to find a workable, positive, and proactive community based approach to health care. The central concern was to develop a long term wellness oriented blueprint that would see a healthier community taking responsibility for its health and well being.

Nelson has a long history of developing innovative, cost effective community based programs with excellent outcomes. It also has a history of delivering services through local authorities that traditionally are delivered through provincial or national organizations. For example Nelson has its own municipal police force, its own Hydro service and its own transit service. It was therefore felt by this group of community leaders that we have the capacity, motivation, expertise and historic precedent to develop a community based system of health care delivery.

In evaluating health care delivery models the group selected the health care co-operative as the most appropriate one for the community. The groups extensive research indicated that at both national and international levels Health Care Co-ops are significantly more cost effective and have significantly better health outcomes than traditional delivery models. In Canada Health Care Co-ops have hospitalization rates that are 20% lower and a pharmaceutical usage rate that is 17% lower than in standard care. These positive outcomes are achieved as a result of Health Co-ops' extensive focus on wellness and prevention. In addition Health Co-ops have "buy in" from both health care providers and users who feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for outcomes. Health care is not seen as something that is "done to you" but rather as something that one participates in, in the context of community.

In August 2002 the Nelson and Area Health Co-op Planning committee was formed

The viability of a Health Co-op had previously been explored. In December of 2001 the Nelson and District Credit Union, Community Futures and The Nelson and Area Health Council partnered together to bring Alison Heath of the BC Branch of the Canadian Cooperative Associative to Nelson. Ms. Heath presented a two day forum on the principles and development of Health Care Coops. This forum was attended by Municipal Leaders, Regional District Directors, and interested community groups and individuals from the West Kootenay-Boundary region. Many of those on the Planning Committee had attended the forum.

It should also be noted that Nelson and area has a long history of financially viable and successful co-ops beginning with the fruit tree growers co-op many years ago. Currently there are 123 successful co-ops in Nelson some with annual incomes of over \$5,000,000.00

The planning committee worked intensively during the next months to bring form and vision to the Co-op. Information and support were generously provided by the National and BC Co-op Associations as well as local groups such as the Credit Union and Community Futures. Space for meetings was provided by the Chamber of Commerce. A sense of momentum and a clarity of vision was developing.

In October the BC Coop Association sent three experts (James Leslie, Tim Beachy and John Restakis) from the health and co-op fields to do a two day workshop with the Planning Committee. Prior to the workshop two public presentations were offered: one to business leaders which was attended by 25 people, and one to the general public which was attended by a standing room only crowd of over 150 people.

The workshop itself had 18 participants and involved an intense exploration of health care concepts (especially primary health care) cooperative concepts, visioning and goal setting. Working committees were formed to pursue the work of governance and incorporation, the configuration of the service mix, communication and finance. The name of the Co-op, Community First Health Co-op, was chosen.

It became clear at the workshop that the vision of the Co-op would be broad. It was a vision of a healthy community which went beyond the provision of health services and reached deeply into the fundamental determinants of health. The Co-op would seek to be a unifying and driving force in the community efficiently maximizing the resources already here and creating new ones where needed. It was also clear that this Co-op would serve as a model for the rural delivery of health services in the province and in the nation.

It was decided that the first focus of the Co-op's activities would be seniors health and well being, as seniors were particularly effected by service reductions. In order to concretize the vision the committee decided to hire James Leslie to assist in the development of a feasibility study. Mr. Leslie's extensive experience in health care service delivery, especially primary care, was seen to be of particular relevance.

On February 27 2003 Community First Health Co-op was officially incorporated thanks to the tireless work of the Incorporation and Governance Committee.

Also on February 27 the membership drive was started with an opening event attended by a standing room only crowd. Through the media and individual presentations by members of the Committee the community was informed of the work of the Co-op. Support for its efforts continues to pour in from a broad cross section of the community.

On May 20, 2003 the first Annual General Membership meeting of Community First Health Co-op was held with over 200 people in attendance. The first Board of Directors was elected. The membership directed the Board to submit a proposal to build and operate the complex care and assisted living facilities to replace Mt. St Francis.

From that date to the present the Board in partnership with local and other experts developed the Expression of Interest for submission to the IHA. This proposal has the endorsement of such groups as The Sisters of St. Anne (who built and ran the original Mt. St. Francis), the City of Nelson, The Chamber of Commerce, local physicians, the Health Employees Union, and many other community groups and service clubs.

This proposal represents the culmination of the efforts of many many people with a tremendous wealth of experience in the provision of health care and housing for seniors. These people share deep roots in and commitment to this community. It is our belief that Community First Health Co-op will deliver a complex care/assisted living program that will be a hallmark in the provision of seniors care.

Community First Health Co-op's proposal was not accepted.

In October of 2005, Community First Health Co-op submitted their application to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to begin the conversion of the Tenth Street Campus Dormitories into residential apartments. We are waiting for the response.

The Health Co-op has also been working with a local family to develop a 60 unit retirement centre and health centre. We look to make some formal announcements in the very near future.

Community First Health Co-op is also involved in discussion for the establishment of a rehabilitation centre. We will be announcing the details once they are more firmly established.

Following several years of consultation with a wide range of community members and organizations and two years of discussions to purchase the Old Forestry Building, Community First Health Co-op is pleased to be supporting community with the establishment of The Nelson and Area Wellness Centre. The Wellness Centre will see a broad range of health practitioners involved in supporting the health of individuals and families in our community, co-located and working together.