

Wellbeing Waterloo Region Community Survey
Engagement of Low-income Voices
Feedback and Recommendations
August 2018

What Worked Well & Recommendations Based on the Poverty Elimination Framework
Criterion: Meaningful and Accessible Ways to Participate in Decision Making

From April 16 to August 3, 2018, the Wellbeing Waterloo Region collected responses to the survey supported by all the municipal governments to inform future priorities and strategic planning for the next four years. The survey was created by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing team with the input of all the municipalities in order to collect a uniform set of data, based on perceptions of residents regarding a range of indicators of *community vitality, health, democratic engagement, environment, leisure and culture, education, living standards and time use*, to be able to plan for services and improve the quality of life for all the residents in Waterloo Region.

The purpose was to assess the satisfaction within the domains of wellbeing for different demographic groups in the population. The results would support municipal governments and community agencies to develop and monitor strategies and programs to improve wellbeing outcomes for all the groups.

There were two extensions of the initial deadline as both the general response and the demographic representation needed to be increased.

The Social Development Centre Waterloo Region promoted the survey in its bi-monthly e-newsletter in June, invited its staff, associates and volunteer to fill it in, and reached out to the mailing lists of the lived-experience groups such as the Disabilities and Human Rights and ALIV(e), or mailing lists connected to its initiatives such as the provincial Meet the Candidates and the Civic Hub.

In July 2018, the follow up and conversations with the community connectors and some of the frontline staff from social service agencies revealed that the awareness about the survey was low and confirmed that most of the low-income members of the community, most living with disabilities are not motivated or cannot fill in the survey without dedicated supports. Everyone agreed though that the voices of the residents of the region that would need the supports the most were underrepresented.

To support the frontline staff and the community connectors from the lived-experience groups, Social Development Centre Waterloo Region explored incentives for engagement. There was no compensated for the organization; however, once the small incentive was offered to the participants (Tim Hortons gift cards), the community connectors were on board to distribute surveys in their networks and a series of drop-ins were organized to assist persons with

disabilities or mental health challenges, persons living on low or no income, homeless, etc. Social Development Centre dedicated hours of the summer students and its volunteers to support the drop-ins. Organizations In Kitchener and Waterloo who opened doors of their programs to the outreach team were Ray of Hope Community Centre, Emmanuel United Church, St. John Kitchen, St. Mark's Church. The four community connectors succeeded in distributing 500 surveys on their own in the last two weeks before the deadline.

Social Development Centre WR outreach team composed of staff, stummer students and community connectors, helped residents fill in 144 surveys. The objective was twofold:

- Supporting residents to fill in the survey and
- Have meaningful conversations to collect feedback from residents, team members, frontline staff and volunteers about the process.

Below is the summary of the feedback and recommendations regarding both the survey itself and the process of administering the survey to underrepresented subgroups.

Criteria for Meaningful Participation - Poverty Elimination Framework

1) Issue, Topic or System Change Identified with Those Directly Impacted

What Worked Well

The Social Development Centre (SDC) and community connectors, who are persons with experience living in poverty and with different abilities, had a clear vision that the survey must include more voices of low-income/marginalised individuals and that meaningful conversations about the survey and the process overall needed to be recorded.

Shared understanding with the Region of Waterloo Wellbeing WR staff that the representation of low-income residents and those living with disabilities has to be increased in the survey sample and that the overall feedback on the survey and the process are important to support similar initiatives in the future.

What Social Development Centre Did

SDC established communication between the community connectors and the Region of Waterloo staff, while providing logistical support to drop-in times in programs offered at the social agencies and the SDC.

The importance of inclusion of low-income voices was recognized by all involved in the process. There was also agreement that the conversations that would happen by everyone involved would have to be collected.

Recommendations

- Engagement of persons with lived experience is needed in creation of surveys to make sure that the questions reflect their activities and experience.
- Adequate budgeting of similar initiatives to compensate the collaborators for dedicated supports and coordination of activities, as well as, for compensation of persons with lived experience who dedicate their expertise and time to the process.

2) Information & Education Provided to All the Impacted Groups so They Can Fully Participate

What Worked Well

The community connectors and the Disability and Human Rights group members were crucial in sharing information and mobilizing persons in their networks in Kitchener and Waterloo based on trust, respect, common language and experience. At this point, without them sharing their understanding of the whole purpose and process that mobilized participation. It was also an important piece that made it possible for the summer staff to tailor the assistance to individuals in a range of settings.

What Social Development Centre Did

SDC staff built on its community engagement approach and experience in engaging vulnerable populations in meaningful collaboration. They explained the consent, answered questions, helped in collecting ballots for prizes and collected all the feedback.

Recommendations

- Engagement of persons with lived experience is needed in the design of the engagement process from the beginning.
- Experienced and trained staff/facilitators could be consulted in the planning process and hired to ensure questions are explained adequately and responses recorded in a uniform manner. This could improve reliability of responses and capture more recommendations for both future survey question formulation process and subsequent analysis.
- More information was needed to be conveyed to participants regarding how the feedback from surveys will be processed and used.

3) Diverse Participation of All Impacted Groups Ensured through Shared Promotion

What Worked Well

The calls for participation were published in English and French and made available in multiple formats (print, online) and media types (print media, social media, email lists,

networking meetings). Diverse stakeholders, including some low-income and marginalised stakeholders were supported at events and programs to fill in the survey by the Region of Waterloo staff. Needed paper copies and promotional materials were provided by the Wellbeing WR.

What Social Development Centre Did

The SDC collaborated with both the Region of Waterloo to make sure the process and roles were clear for everyone involved. It also supported community connectors to directly communicate with the Region of Waterloo staff in negotiating the steps in the distribution of surveys and delivery of gift cards.

Recommendations

- Substantial time for promotional activities in the community need to be built in and can start ahead of the administration of the survey.
- Translation of the surveys is required, or the work of ethno-cultural interpreters needs to be budgeted.
- Survey promotion materials/surveys could be mailed by the Region to community members; this would expand inclusion to those who do not gather at community centres or have a lack of connections within the community.

4) Accessible Format & Structure for All Impacted Groups to Participate

What Worked Well

The RoW staff responded positively and provided both the requested paper copies of the surveys and the gift cards, which was incentive for the SDC, the community connectors and the participants to contribute. The staff was also responsive to a different dynamics of work with community connectors and to ongoing adaptations to the strategies and needs of the team.

Region of Waterloo staff was flexible in delivery and pick up of materials and in covering the costs of additional expenses, such as refreshments or additional gift cards, that created lines of mutual support.

The locations chosen for outreach were those where participants would be gathering regularly and where they felt comfortable being in a role of a 'host'. There were high participation rates at all the drop-in locations (Social Development Centre WR, Bridgeport Cafe, Ray of Hope Community Centre, St. John's Kitchen, St. Mark's Church) as the Social Development Centre was able to leverage its relationships with the members of its lived-experience groups, community connectors and frontline staff. Many participants said that they would not have completed the surveys without the assistance at drop-ins.

What Social Development Centre Did

SDC hosted a drop-in at the office at St. John Church, oriented its summer students who already worked with Disabilities and Human Rights lived experience groups and dedicated the hours of the summer students to help with survey filling as well as with recording comments and feedback. SDC also communicated with a number of community connectors and staff at a number of locations to ensure that the teams of summer students and connectors were welcome and supported in their work.

The summer staff provided personal assistance in reading, explaining, and filling-in of surveys to participants as required. They sat through the survey process with individuals requiring special assistance to connect the survey questions to their daily activities and lived experience through storytelling to ensure proper responses were recorded. Many of the answers had to be captured alternatively, as the survey did not allow for it.

SDC additionally collaborated with a number of contacts and community connectors who distributed paper surveys to their networks. It supported the community connectors in keeping track of the gift cards given out.

Recommendations

- Strategic choice for drop-in locations across the communities in the region.
- Strategic planning with community connectors and frontline staff in identifying challenges in the process of filling in the surveys. For example, privacy can be improved for participants in public locations, especially if they require assistance on reading out sensitive questions and answer options.
- Adequate compensation is needed for social agencies to ensure that the surveys are introduced, shared and filled in by persons with different abilities who use their services and programs.

5) Shared Leadership and Power with Those Directly Impacted by Decisions

What Worked Well

Leadership and power were shared with community connectors who utilised their connections and individual resources to reach other marginalized members of the community. The connectors were consulted every step of the way and the information was shared with the Region of Waterloo staff.

What Social Development Centre Did

The advice of the community connectors was valued. The conversations held with everyone involved were stressed as being equally important as the survey. Alignment of the 'ways of working' was negotiated between different players involved. The feedback from participants, connectors and frontline staff shapes the report to the Region of Waterloo and will be shared with everyone.

Follow up and discussion regarding the recommendations continues within the SDC groups and networks as it is a part of the ongoing learning for everyone working on engagement and social inclusion.

Recommendations

- Ongoing collaboration needed to allow continuous feedback on the planning, executing, and evaluation process of the survey project.
- A debriefing session will allow community connectors, SDC staff, and ROW staff to share their experience and understanding of the process.

6) Clear Future Action Stated with All Impacted Groups

What Worked Well

The Region of Waterloo staff collected feedback throughout the engagement process they did and expressed interest of receiving additional feedback from this process.

What Social Development Centre Did

Feedback was collected by SDC staffs and community connectors after every participant's completion of survey. The comments included participants' thoughts on the effectiveness of the survey to measure their wellbeing; the design of the survey; incentives for participation; engagement strategies, etc.

The SDC staff and community connectors added their own observations of the engagement process. The SDC staff consequently formulated the report to suggest recommendations for future collaboration on engagement strategies.

Recommendations

- The approach "Nothing about us, without us" to be implemented and budgeted in all the phases of subsequent work through Wellbeing WR, where persons with lived experience are a part of the action planning, implementation and evaluation from beginning to end, not only in the data gathering phase

- Specific mechanisms and procedures to be defined for involvement of persons with lived experience in Wellbeing WR work groups, where appropriate relying on the contributors in this process.
- Wellbeing WR team sharing the engagement process learnings with all the municipalities and partners.

Additional Feedback

Participants' Feedback

About the survey

The survey was too long.

While most participants at the SDC's drop-in said the survey's broad range of questions covered important activities and experiences, a lot of participants in other drop-ins said that questions reflected privileged, middle-class experience.

There was cynicism towards the survey as many did not feel the questions were relevant to them, or that it would actually help make a difference in their lives. For instance, a question asking about how frequent the participant visited the park did not take into account that many individuals sleep at parks. This undermines reliability of the survey as the assumptions built in the questions did not allow for a diverse array of perspectives and realities to be captured.

Other assumptions were that people had a permanent dwelling and associated postal code. And while some participants did have a postal code, they were reluctant to fill it in without additional explanation of its importance.

Some did not understand the meaning of the word 'leisure' as it is not a part of their experience. Difficulties were also experienced in understanding terms such as 'gender', and 'sexual orientation' as these are not part of the vocabulary used in everyday life.

Many do not have attachments to relatively permanent neighbourhood geographies. Many deal with important issues by talking to frontline staff and a large number of loose, sometime random, connections that cannot be defined as family or friends.

As well, a participant expressed that the questions were too ambiguous and the survey should have explained how each question/ section will translate into strategic action or improvement of service delivery helping low-income and marginalized individuals. They also thought that results will likely be skewed to show that wellbeing is fine, services will continue to benefit middle-income/higher income earners, and low-income/ marginalised groups' voices will continue to be underrepresented/neglected.

It was suggested that collaboration with lived experienced groups is necessary when designing research to recognise the wide array of circumstances that are different from the 'mainstream' or considered as the 'norm'.

About the process

The gift card value was at the same time an accepted reward and considered as not adequate. With the lack of adequate incentive and understanding about what would happen to their responses, some were reluctant to participate and this impacted the quality of their responses.

Residents and frontline staff that had no previous knowledge of the survey said that they would have been excluded from the process if SDC did not hold drop-ins. The promotion of the survey, despite efforts made, did not reach groups often marginalised and their support workers who are the most impacted by the decisions.

Some expressed a lack of trust in governments, academics and decision-makers. Some wondered why researchers and Regional staff never took the time to come out and listen to their lived experiences first-hand.

SDC Team Feedback (summer students and volunteers)

About the Process

Turnout rate was high not because of participants' genuine trust or interest in improving services but due to a \$5 Tim Hortons gift card and invitation made by trusted peers. In some instances, when people gather daily before the meals are being served for coffee and to socialize, the presence of a new team led to curiosity and turned out to be a way to pass the time waiting for the meal.

It was hard for participants with attention challenges or cognitive processing difficulties to fill-in an 18-page survey, one expressed "I wouldn't have completed the whole thing without you", and another participant was able to fill in half, but said "can we stop here? My back hurts and my eyes are tired. This is too long".

Privacy was a big issue, an SDC summer staff recalled how a participant who had the survey read to him raised his finger to signal "be quiet" and said "shh" during the part asking about his substance use.

Difficulties were experienced by participants with attention or cognitive processing challenges to comprehend what the questions were saying and reflect on how it applies to their own life despite explanation provided by staffs. One SDC summer staff recalled that "no matter how clear I tried to explain what seemed to me as a simple question, different people had a different understanding to what it meant. Or when there were questions asking respondents to select from a range or a scale, it was often difficult for them to make a specific choice or know "what is

right”. People may be comfortable by simply talking about their experiences but are not able to articulate or quantify their subjective experiences in the way the survey asks for.

A number of respondents were confused by the question asking how much they agree with ‘I feel discriminated due to my age, identity, ethnicity etc., many picked ‘do not agree’ but from the stories they’ve told us you know they are treated differently everyday. One of the frontline staff said: “Discrimination probably happen so often and so dispersively that they have taken it as the norm and don’t realise it”.

While individual assistance was important to many participants who were unable to read the questions, needed some company and a new person to talk to, the process was time consuming, and often frustrating. One SDC summer staff recalled that “whenever they had a chance, they would tell us a lengthy excerpt from their lives related to what the question was asking. I didn’t want to make the process too official and rigid and cut them off half way but it was very tiring to have to do this for every couple of questions, they really needed someone to listen and to share their lives with but probably don’t, so we became their outlet and the survey was their tool to do that”.

Trained staff with the skills to both tailor the assistance to participants and to manage the conversation flow and pace would be of greater service. Other ways of collecting feedback from the most vulnerable residents has to be incorporated in similar initiatives.

SDC’s support was appreciated by the community connectors, in part because of the negotiating role in communication with the RoW at specific points in time. At the same time, this support was intentionally *comfortable* and *uncomfortable*, as SDC was perceived as introducing an institutional framework/values into the grassroots activities, or on the other hand, as introducing informal approaches to a more structured process. This ‘translational’ role has been a core of the community engagement approach of the organization, building the foundation for mutual understanding and collaboration among different players in the long term.

Community Connectors’ Feedback (lived-experience and frontline staff)

A community connector took the time to write the following comments:

“We need free transit (passes) for everyone on social assistance to get around and to get to programs and services. We need \$100 extra per month for food for everyone on Ontario Works to make up for the amount which is currently going to rent. We need transitional (temporary) housing other than shelters for everyone on the street until they get properly homed (e.g. set up more Working Centre ‘Bunkies’ in various locations, or give rooming house vouchers). We need affordable/ subsidised housing for all low income people, or a subsidy for those living in market rent housing if there is no

affordable housing. We need advocates to help people do paperwork, e.g. to help disabled people apply for ODSP and other services and to write complaint letters and be properly supported in complaint processes, e.g. to landlords, service providers, public officials, and agencies.”

They also expressed that “five dollars (as incentive) is not enough, as some had a perception that “the Region is asking these people to do them a favour and should make the effort to appreciate their time and effort”.

Community connectors and frontline staff explained that top down promotion of similar requests in their respective organizations is not effective. The information does not flow from the top to the frontlines in a predictable manner. Also, doing this type of extensive and time consuming work is in nobody’s job description. Adding it to the already stretched resources is not feasible.

Community connectors have also strongly expressed the need for a working session with the Canadian Index of Wellbeing team and the Wellbeing WR staff. This would allow the staff to hear first-hand what the lived experiences are, difficulties, and barriers faced by community members and collaboratively brainstorm proper designs for inclusive measurement and monitoring of wellbeing.

Community connectors dedicated their personal, unpaid time, connections and trust to connect marginalised individuals to the greater conversation through the survey; their important work must be recognised and considered in the future.