



Institute for **Community** Engaged **Scholarship** (ICES)

The **Research** Shop



**The Community Researcher Project:  
Exploring Economic Hardship in Guelph and Wellington**

**September 2010**



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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Community based research is a collaborative process in which all participants are active contributors to the research process. This report outlines a community based research process that took place in Guelph and Wellington County during the winter, spring and summer of 2010. For this project, community members with lived experience of poverty were trained to work as community researchers in order to identify gaps in services and programs and issues with accessing services and programs for those living in poverty. The community researchers contributed in each stage of the research, from deciding to conduct focus groups, designing a focus group guide, facilitating the focus groups and analysing the results. This report provides a brief description of the training provided for community researcher, outlines the research methods used and discusses the project findings as analysed collaboratively by the community researchers and this researcher. The findings and discussion sections of this report reflect the statements and opinions of the focus group participants and community researchers who were involved with this project. All of the quotes present in this report were made during the focus groups by either the participants or the community researchers. This was not research conducted for a community, but with and by a community, highlighting the lived experiences, strengths and challenges of those facing economic hardship in the Guelph and Wellington County area.



## 2.0 COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS

With the goal to empower members of the community to be active participants in the research process, key informants who either self identified as living in poverty or as having lived experience of poverty within the Guelph and Wellington area were trained as community researchers. Individuals who were identified as leaders within their community by community development workers and those working front line in a variety of community programs and services were offered the opportunity to attend the community researcher training. A total of eleven community researchers were trained with six from the city of Guelph and five from Wellington County. All of the community researchers are female with ages ranging from mid 20s to senior citizens. The purpose of this training was to engage members of the community in the research process with the goal of identifying gaps in services and programs and issues with accessing services and programs for those living in poverty in Guelph and Wellington.

The community researchers attended a two day training session during which they learned research skills such as conducting focus groups and/or interviews and confidentiality. The training facilitator and this researcher worked collaboratively with the community researchers to develop the research design and methods of the community based research project. During the training, participants identified the term “poverty” as being viewed negatively by potential focus group participants due to the associated feelings of stigmatization. As a result the term “economic hardship” was used throughout the remainder of the project. The training was facilitated by Sarah Flicker who is a faculty member at York University and has facilitated multiple peer research training sessions and research projects as well as implemented many community based research initiatives. She also designed the peer researcher program for the Wellesley Institute.



### 3.0 METHODS

At the community researcher training it was decided that four focus groups would be conducted, one in North Wellington (Mount Forest), one in Center Wellington (Fergus), one in East Guelph and one in West Guelph. Unfortunately due to low participant numbers in Fergus, this focus group did not take place. Some reasons for this may be difficulty finding transportation, the fact that the focus groups were scheduled in the evening and difficulty distributing information throughout the county. With the Fergus group needing to be cancelled and the Mount Forest group having the lowest numbers of the 3 remaining focus groups, interviews may be a more effective research method to gather information from the county. In order to obtain a more complete picture of the experiences and challenges of those facing economic hardship in the county of Wellington, additional interviews will be conducted. Unfortunately due to time constraints the information from these follow up interviews is not included in this report.

A total of three focus groups were held with 4 to 12 participants in each. All of the focus group participants were identified as female. For each of the focus groups two community researchers acted as the co-focus group facilitators. In two of the focus groups an additional community researcher was also present as an active participant and note taker. This researcher was present at each focus group to assist in the organization and facilitation of the focus groups. The community researchers followed the focus group guide developed collaboratively during the community researcher training (see attached focus group guide). Each focus group was audio recorded with responses transcribed verbatim. General observations and themes were also noted by the community researchers as well as this researcher during each focus group.

After the focus groups were completed and transcribed, an analysis meeting was held. Five of the community researchers and this researcher met to analyse the focus group transcripts, discuss themes and identify impactful quotes and shared experiences. The findings discussed at this meeting are outlined in the “findings” section of this report.



## 4.0 ETHICS and CONFIDENTIALITY

Both the community researcher training and the subsequent focus groups were reviewed and received ethics clearance from the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. Participants were asked to sign a consent form which informed them that any personal information shared during the training or a focus group must remain confidential and should not be discussed by participants outside of the research setting. Participants were also notified that they may discontinue participation without penalty and personal access to programs and services would not be impacted by this research. Any identifying information has been removed from all current reports and will be removed from all future reports and discussions.



## 5.0 FINDINGS

This section outlines the services and programs discussed in the three focus groups, highlighting the positive aspects and areas for improvement discussed for each. There are many direct quotes included from both the participants and community researchers, grounding the results of this report in the lived experiences of those facing economic hardship.

### 5.1 Transportation

*“I don’t mean to say anything but you have a vehicle. You’re fortunate to have that, there’s so many of us that we have no vehicle so basically we’re trapped.”*

#### 5.1.1 Public Transit

Accessing public transit as ones’ main source of transportation poses several challenges for transit users. The bus routes can change making it difficult for riders to reach their destination, particularly if one does not know about these changes beforehand. Specific buses are sometimes cancelled or the times may be changed which can also create complications for riders. This community researcher was negatively impacted by limited bus service availability during certain hours.

*If I didn’t have a lift to get into work Sunday nights, I had to take a cab and I’m a single mom making this money so why is it they can cater to the University students, but they can’t cater to the rest of us? The community that can’t afford vehicles and need the transit system, you know?*

The cancelling of buses on Sundays this August has posed a particular challenge for individuals who work on Sundays or have irregular work hours. One of the community researchers expressed frustration with the loss of Sunday transit service this summer:

*People that buy a pass, they’re not getting any discount even though there’s no buses on Sunday, they buy the pass for the whole month.*

For those on a limited income, the cost of public transportation can be a barrier to access. Several of the city of Guelph participants expressed they had been unable to afford a bus pass and were challenged to secure bus tickets for necessary appointments. Accessing available



community programs can be a challenge if bus tickets are not available, as this participant expressed:

*They give you 12 swim tickets, and (daughter) and I we have no money for bus fair. You've got to take your money to go down and swim that is \$5.50 each way for my daughter and I, so it's really kind of counterproductive isn't it? They're giving with one hand and taking away with the other. You can't really enjoy services offered, and that's a big problem, and they wouldn't give us bus tickets to go.*

Having access to discount bus passes for those on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) was listed as a great asset by several focus group participants. Some of the participants felt they were unclear about the eligibility requirements for discount passes and where to access them. Some expressed concern that the availability of discount passes was not well known, as stated by this community researcher:

*They do have bus passes for people that are on disability. The only problem with it is that the city doesn't, it's not well known. They don't let people know about it. You have to basically by word of mouth by someone, yeah that's the, the good thing is that they have it, but the bad part is that they don't inform people of it.*

There was also some frustration expressed with access to bus passes through Ontario Works (OW) and ODSP. This participant experienced difficulty access a bus pass through ODSP:

*See that's the one thing I've noticed, you can get a bus pass like that from Ontario Works. You have to fight with disability. Unless you're in like psychotherapy and like heavy aggressive therapy or like huge medical appoints, then they'll supply you with a bus pass but other than that, you do not qualify.*

### **5.1.2 Transporting Food**

For those without access to a vehicle, bringing food home from the grocery store can be difficult. Several focus group participants expressed they either had to pay for a cab which they could not afford or make several trips by bus.



*So the greatest need I think right now is transportation... Grocery shopping, you can't possibly lug all that on the bus and walk from like, you could right or you have to break it down into several. It would be wonderful to have some kind of transport service or car sharing for those who have licenses.*

Some of the participants used delivery services provided by certain grocery stores, however for some, the cost of these delivery services was too great. Being able to transport food from the food bank was another challenge expressed, as it can be difficult to carry all of the food provided at one time. This is a particular hardship for those coping with illness as this participant expressed:

*I couldn't afford groceries and it was in the dead of winter...and I'm pretty laid up in the winter and they would not even deliver it, I says "well I can't drive"..."You have to pick it up", well I'm not able to drive right now.*

### **5.1.3. The County**

Not having access to a public transit system, those living in the county face additional transportation challenges. Participants felt that some services were difficult to access due to being spread out or not within walking distance. Even services within walking distance could be inaccessible to those with small children. The community researcher describes the challenges faced when living with limited vehicle access:

*It's nice to be able to just walk to places because my car leaves with my husband every morning to go to work, so it doesn't, unless I can walk there I'm usually not going.*

Though there was some confusion over eligibility, several participants felt that the county transportation services provided by VON and CRC were very helpful and accessed these services on a regular basis. One participant did not know about these services prior to the focus group and felt information about these services needed to be more widely distributed:

*I'm waiting on hip replacement to be done and I'm out in the country...I need to get a ride once and a while because my Dr's in Kitchener and that's where I have to go for all the hip X-rays...This number should be advertised is what I'm trying to get you to know.*



## **5.2 Recreation**

Families and children were the overwhelming focus of topics discussed related to recreation. Some of the participants felt there were a lot of great programs available for children and young mothers in Guelph. However, several participants expressed frustration over the limited activities and resources available for families, particularly for those facing economic hardship. The cost of accessing programs, activities and transportation can be a barrier to access as this women expressed:

*Recreation because honestly it costs to do anything with your children out here, like to go anywhere it costs. It costs to go to a pool. It costs to take them to certain splash pads, to you know programs and stuff like that. There should be more available free for your children.*

Several recreational programs and activities were highlighted during the focus groups and will be outlined in this section.

### **5.2.1 Swimming**

Several focus group participants reported accessing free swim passes that were available through FAIR and “Kids Can Play” as well as the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) and ODSP, though some experienced difficulty accessing this service due to transportation limitations. There was some confusion over eligibility for these passes, and in some cases participants were refused a pass due to a particular program’s funding being limited or used up.

*I think it’s called the FAIR program, the city does the swim passes and things. Ok I enquired a couple of months in April if I could apply to that program and there’s no more funding left. They ran out like last October or something.*

Some participants who had been unable to acquire free swim passes reported they were often unable to access the pools due to the cost for admission as well as transportation.

### **5.2.2 Community Gardens**

In addition to being a source of healthy food in the community, these gardens are viewed as a positive activity for children, providing the opportunity to learn life skills and healthy eating habits.



*We have a garden, which involves the children. Its teaches about healthy eating, natural working with the earth and we haven't harvested anything yet but we are looking forward to it, and the garden is linking us to many different other projects, and we're having native leaders, native elders come and teach us a little bit about that stuff.*

### **5.2.3 Parks and Playgrounds**

An issue that was expressed in both the city of Guelph focus groups was the cleanliness and safety of the parks and playgrounds. Several participants reported finding broken glass, drug paraphernalia and other waste products littered through the playgrounds making them unsafe for children, as reported by this focus group participant:

*They're finding condoms, needles, beer bottles, broken glass, smoke pipes, drugs, like how safe is that to take your kids to the park with all that stuff there?*

In some cases, older kids who attend the parks unsupervised are misusing the playground equipment and acting out inappropriately which impacts the younger children, as this woman has experienced:

*To be honest no, city of Guelph has absolutely nothing for the family to do. All we do is we sit at home, we play in the backyard or we go to parks where the older kids are being rude and vulgar, they're writing in marker or screaming rude, obscene things into the play equipment for the children and ruining it for the smaller children.*

Some of the parks in Guelph have facilities for which you are required to pay a fee to access, such as splash pads, rides and refreshment stands. For individuals with a limited income, this additional cost limits access, such as has been this community researcher's experience:

*You can take them to Riverside and take them on the merry-go-round but then they want an ice-cream and you have to say, ah...too much.*

### **5.2.4 Guelph Lake**

A few of the focus group participants reported enjoying taking their families to Guelph Lake. However, limited bus service availability and the cost of transportation, as well as the cost of admission make this an outing many cannot afford.



*P1 - You can't even go to the Lake because it's kind of far too.*

*P2 – And it's \$4.50 a pop. \$4.50 a person, we just found that out a couple of weeks ago.*

*P2 – No family rates*

*P3 – And we wonder why our kids are doing the kind of things that they're doing.*

*P2– And there's no transport to the Lake. Maybe that's something that can be looked into.*

### **5.2.5 40 Baker Street Art Program**

Several of the city of Guelph focus group participants had attended this program and reported it was a positive experience. They enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and interact with others in the community.

*You can go in there, there's canvases, there's clay, any kind of paint you want, there's 4 computers...I go there almost every weekend, and I have so much fun and you get to take home all your art work.*

One of the participants expressed concern over possible drug use by some individuals who access this program. Though it was acknowledged that drug use did occur by some who attend this activity, this focus group participant still felt comfortable accessing the service and that overall it was a positive experience.

*Ok there are youth there and they do use drugs that's not a lie, but I don't choose to do drugs, my daughter doesn't and I think it's a personal choice, like there are people, not everybody's bad, and that's what I'm saying, you get out of it what you make it. Ok? So if you get 4-5 people in there that are there for the pure enjoyment of the art, that's wonderful, you don't have to worry about the rest of the crap going on over here.*

### **5.3 Clothing and Basic Needs**

*You can't afford to be scared to ask everybody you know if you're like embarrassed to say anything you're not going to get anywhere. You have to ask somebody so you have to have some I don't know, guts, is that the word? You can't be embarrassed.*



Many of the focus group participants from all three groups identified access to second hand clothing stores, clothing swaps and free clothing programs as an important resource in the community. This section will outline the programs and resources discussed specific to clothing and household items.

### **5.3.1 Thrift Shops**

Several of the focus group participants shared they had positive experiences at second hand stores in both the county and the city. During the analysis meeting one of the community researchers shared she has witnessed an increase in the cost of clothing in thrifts shops, in some cases making second hand clothing prices comparable to regular discount clothing locations.

### **5.3.2 Clothing Closets/Swaps**

Being able to obtain clothing for free at these programs was identified as being very helpful when facing economic hardship. For those with children, these programs were particularly useful as their children grew and needed additional clothing. Several church programs as well as the neighbourhood groups were highlighted as being excellent sources of free and/or low cost clothing. The food bank also has a clothing program that some of the focus group participants had used, though some felt this program was difficult to access (please see the “food” section of this report). Another asset that was mentioned regarding some of these programs was the availability of household items such as second hand furniture.

*The clothing closet on Woodlawn when my kids were growing I would go there like for jeans. You’ve got a 12, 13, 14 year old who changes his mind and I’m not wearing them and yeah it was really helpful. They’re a really helpful group for growing kids.*

### **5.3.3 Guelph Community Health Center (Running Shoe Program)**

A few of the focus group participants in the West Guelph focus group identified this program as being extremely beneficial. One participant shared that she would not be able to have running shoes right now at all if it wasn’t for this program. This participant described in detail her experience with this program:



*Marathon runners donate their shoes to the Guelph Community Health Center to a lady down there that runs this program...she takes the running shoes and she washes them, and you can say "hey I need a size whatever" and she'll put out the word and then a week or two later a pair will come in, so if she doesn't have them you just put in a request. And every running shoe if you notice you go in any store, every running shoe has an insert. You take that insert out, throw it in the washing machine and let it air dry in 20 minutes and you'll have a nice clean insert, so you don't have to worry about bad germs and stuff, but she washes the entire shoe before she hands it over. She's a really nice lady.*

#### **5.3.4 Christmas Hampers**

These hampers were listed by a few participants as being a very helpful resource for their families. Though there was a lot of positive support for this program, during the analysis meeting one of the community researchers shared that a family member had experienced some difficulties accessing this program and as a result felt this program could be more effectively facilitated.

#### **5.4 Legal Issues**

Some of the focus group participants had experienced difficulty accessing legal aid. There was a lot of confusion over eligibility for assistance with different types of legal issues and with different levels of income. Most felt that legal aid was difficult to access, particularly for the working poor, and that you could only get help if you were facing jail time. Some of the challenges in access legal assistance included the location of the office and the length of wait times. The legal clinic was also listed as a positive resource in the community, however it was stated that this service only covers certain legal issues such as housing, OW and ODSP. Some of the West Guelph focus group participants felt it was helpful when representatives from the legal clinic came to their community rather than having to go downtown to access the service. Many of the participants felt more information about legal aid options and eligibility was needed.



## **5.5 Income**

The majority of focus group participants identified as receiving income from Ontario Works the Ontario Disability Support Program and/or Employment Insurance. This section will focus on these programs and the experience of those who have used them.

### **5.5.1 Amount of Financial Support**

Many of the focus group participants stated they were unable to meet their basic needs on the assistance provided by these programs, as this participant describes:

*The money that you get on OW is clearly not enough. No human being can survive month to month on that. You can't survive without going to the food bank or food shelf. It's a ridiculous thing, it's inhuman. It's disgraceful and I blame the McGuinty government and Mike Harris.*

Several participants expressed frustration that money they earned would be deducted dollar for dollar from their Employment Insurance (EI) or OW monthly amounts, making it very difficult to overcome economic hardship.

### **5.5.2 Eligibility**

Being able to effectively navigate the system was identified as a challenge by many participants. Several of the participants reported having had negative encounters with workers from income assistance programs, and found that the information they needed to be able to access these programs was difficult to access and understand. Some felt there was a lack of communication between workers and that their ability to get accurate information was dependant on the knowledge, patience and attitude of each specific worker. The current process one must go through to access these benefits was experienced as lengthy, involving a lot of paperwork and requiring the applicant to provide many different types of reports, records and identification. Feelings of frustration and fear over the possibility of losing access to financial support as well as dental and medical coverage due to making a mistake with the paperwork or accidentally breaking an eligibility rule were paramount. Having an advocate to help individuals with this process was viewed as essential for many of the participants.



### **5.5.3 Difficulty Finding Employment**

*A job. That would be great. We just came out of a really awful recession, wouldn't it be great if we all had jobs? Then we could live normal lives like all the other people do.*

Being able to access support when looking for a job was identified as being extremely important for those seeking employment. The basic resources required for a job hunt such as a computer and internet access, photocopiers for printing resumes, fax machines and transportation to job interviews can be unaffordable expenses for those facing economic hardship. Increasing the availability of these resources at the neighbourhood level was viewed as an essential need, as expressed by this participant:

*Through the city, they should supply the neighbourhood groups with the things people need to get jobs, like printers, and fax machines and access to the internet, and that way people that don't have jobs at least would have a place to look for a job.*

### **5.6 Housing**

Finding affordable housing can be extremely challenging while on a limited income. It can be difficult to gain information about low income housing options and access to affordable rental units. For individuals who find themselves newly unemployed or facing increased economic hardship, entering the rental market can be challenging, as this community researcher shared:

*I talked to a girlfriend recently who had to move from the area, and the same thing, we owned our house. We ended up having to move and find a new residence to rent and how do you get references? We had a mortgage, we didn't have a rental unit, so we had no references, we had nothing basically, and that's what we found because she was looking out in the area where no one knew her and knew the family and their like all, "we need references", well what kind of reference would you like? Do you want to talk to the mortgage I can't pay? You know, which was her situation too.*

Many participants feel it is impossible to afford market rent while receiving OW or ODSP. Accessing information about affordable housing options can be difficult, as this participant has witnessed:



*I know a lot of women that were in crisis, whether it be marriage break ups or whatever or they've lost their homes and a lot of people these days are losing their homes, who do you call to get a place to live?*

Several issues were discussed regarding access to government housing programs. Difficulty gaining information about and understanding the eligibility requirements to apply for government housing were shared. Many felt it was important to have a good housing worker or an advocate to help navigate this process. Concerns were expressed about changes to priority lists and access to housing in emergency situations, particularly regarding the need for a person or family to be in a shelter or living on the street before being considered a priority. This participant shared her thoughts on the current priority housing process:

*I don't think it's fair that they've taken priority housing. I really don't because there are families out there that need housing a lot more than some families that are in it and I mean these women, there's women out there that are battered and they have children and they can't even get into housing because there's no priority anymore.*

The different types of government housing programs available as well as the quality of certain housing areas were highlighted. It was identified that some government housing required you to provide your own stove and/or fridge while in other housing complexes they were provided. Having to pay utilities on top of rent was also experienced as a financial burden. In some cases, the general upkeep and maintenance of housing areas, as well as fixing individual issues with housing units can be lacking, as this participant describes:

*I find when you call housing to get anything fixed it takes them forever. They never help. They say oh we'll be out here no problem and then it's like oh it doesn't cost you anything and then they bill you for crap that's not even your fault.*

The experience of living in government housing varied greatly within the focus groups. Some of the participants had lived in housing programs for several years and felt their housing needs were being met and they enjoyed their communities. This participant felt it was important to take an active role within the housing community:



*We live in housing and we do not have to accept unacceptable behaviour, and we should just stand up against that. Just because we live there we don't have to be treated like lower class citizens.*

For some the stigma of living in housing can be a deterrent to seeking assistance. One of the community researchers was concerned that potential employers had discriminated against her based on her address. Some of the participants worried they would have issues with their neighbours in housing programs, and that they may witness higher incidents of criminal activity within the community. For some, the potential negative aspects of living in government housing complexes outweigh the benefits, as this participant describes:

*I refuse to live in housing. I really truly do, it's nothing but trouble. It's either the people within your community or dealing with the people that run the community. It's just it's too much of a headache. Way too much.*

## **5.7 Health Care/Mental Health**

*When you're not well it's almost as if the government is making it so it's too difficult to function. The world is closing in on you.*

### **5.7.1 Dental care**

*It is a health issue, because 5 years, it's been 5 years (since last dental cleaning) and like you know what, I'd have to sit in that dentist's chair and they'd go, "why didn't you come back sooner?", "well because I couldn't afford it", so they can save a lot of money helping us at least every 2 years.*

Being able to access affordable dental care on a regular basis was a common challenge faced by focus group participants. Though participants were able to access basic dental coverage for their children through public health, it was reported that only emergency extractions and in some cases, dentures, are covered for adults. Some found the eligibility rules for those accessing OW and ODSP confusing, with extremely limited coverage providing no preventative care.



*It's a really hard thing to find out about, right? The information isn't out there...sometimes it's covered, sometimes it's not, this is covered and sometimes it's really hard to know.*

Those without private dental insurance are unable to get regular dental checkups and cleanings, resulting in dental issues becoming severe before assistance can be accessed. This focus group participant has been unable to get needed dental treatment due to limited dental coverage:

*I have to get my teeth all done too and OW will cover the dentures...because I have heart problems and I'm on blood thinner, so there's going to be Dr's, all kinds of people there right? They said that they would cover to knock me out, but I have to cover the upper tissue, which is not covered and it's like \$360 dollars, because a lot of them broke off...once they extract them it is going to be rough so they have to smooth it. That's the upper tissue and I can't afford it.*

It can also be difficult to find a dentist who is willing to work with someone on ODSP or OW. Because so few dentists will work with individuals on OW or ODSP, transportation can be an issue depending on availability and location. In some cases, individuals have to change dentists in order to access coverage. This can be an issue if offices are not willing to share patient information, as this participant experienced:

*One session I went just to get a bite impression and all the X-rays...I asked them to transfer my files to a different dentist and they knew I was going for my upper. They sent X-rays of my lower teeth to the dentist, and nothing else...I'm going to call them back and say "listen I had everything done." I had the plates I had the impressions, I picked the God damn colour and they're not going to share that with another dentist so I'm sure I'll use all my insurance coverage to do that again.*

Having to have teeth removed or living with dental issues can create personal hardship, both in terms of self-esteem and employment opportunities. This participant outlined the impact that dental issues can have on one's life chances:



*No one is going to hire you if you have bad teeth, right?...and it also plays on your self esteem issues, because if you don't feel comfortable with the way you look, what makes you want to go out in the community and make something of yourself?*

### **5.7.2 Vision Care**

Overall, participants felt their basic vision care needs were being met through the current programs available. It was reported that low income individuals were able to have eye checkups covered by OHIP every two years and eye glasses if needed approximately every 3 years. The need to establish a similar level of coverage for dental issues for low income individuals was shared by several focus group participants.

### **5.7.3 Prescription Medication**

Many of those receiving ODSP or in some cases other government assistance reported being covered for medication costs under a basic drug plan, though not all drugs are included. If a Dr. prescribes a drug that is not covered under this plan, patients must either pay out of pocket, or take it upon themselves to have an alternate medication prescribed. These two participants discussed their experiences with the limited drug plans:

*P1 - You get these Dr's that give you the medication that's not even covered, and then you've got to wait to get a hold of your worker to say "Hey, he gave me the wrong thing"...once you've gone home and you don't know that. I don't know until I get to the pharmacy.*

*P2 – Yeah a lot of people don't know that but that's why I started asking my Dr's and they send me prescriptions, and I tell them to make sure this is covered because if it's not, I can't get it.*

Another issue discussed regarding medications involved the cost of dispensing fees at certain pharmacies. Even an additional charge of a few dollars can have an impact for those facing economic hardship, particularly if you are filling several prescriptions at once, as this participant experienced:

*When you're filling like 8 prescriptions a month and you times that by 2, I just put out quite a load of money there to Shoppers Drug Mart.*



#### **5.7.4 Physiotherapy**

Issues with accessing physiotherapy, particularly after surgery, were discussed in the two city focus groups. Treatment may only be covered for short term care, or in some cases physiotherapy is not covered at all. Though access to physiotherapy at reduced cost may be available, gaining information about these services can be difficult. Having to wait to receive physiotherapy can be detrimental to one's health, as this participant describes:

*For physiotherapy I thought to myself OK I went there as soon as I had my surgery and I had to wait another 4 weeks, like I said, and there was nobody to advocate on my behalf and I thought to myself I'm one individual, I wonder how many people go through this and so I started talking to a few people, and we're talking about elderly people and I said there are services for you however I don't even know where to go for myself. Where do I go?*

#### **5.7.5 Mental Health**

Several focus group participants reported having difficulty accessing help when experiencing mental health challenges. For those who had been able to access assistance through Trellis, all reported this service had been very helpful. However, the concern was expressed that preventative care was not available and in order to receive assistance for a mental health issue the situation would have to progress to a severe stage, as this participant has experienced:

*If you're in the beginning stages of your mental health problems and you're just finding out, you don't have the proper referral that you need to get the help, I mean it's hard to even get Trellis involved. I've been trying to apply to get Trellis involved for myself, I have them involved for each of my children, but I didn't do that, children's aid did, but I've tried to get children's aid to push the issue that I need help with my mental health issues, Ok my children are dealt with, and you want me to fix me but there's not enough resources out there for me to be able to get the mental health that I need.*

#### **5.7.6 Navigating the System**

Following the proper channels to access services can be particularly difficult when one is physically or mentally ill. Several participants felt that during a time of crisis, having an advocate to help them navigate the system was essential.



*Yes, you have all these forms and things to fill out. Try and imagine what it's like for somebody that's got bi-polar. I've been there. I'm fortunate I'm stable now, but when I wasn't I had eviction notices facing me. I had, they cut my hydro off, they cut my gas off, I couldn't handle it, I couldn't deal with that. And they want you to do this, they want it dropped off on a certain day, this that and the other thing. I couldn't focus and I couldn't get it done. I almost lost my housing and my services you know, but if you're stable and stuff like that then you can focus and get things done, but how unfortunate for the others. They slip through the cracks. They're out there wondering around homeless you know starving.*

Many participants expressed confusion over what services were available for physical and mental health needs, as well as the eligibility requirements for those services. Some of the participants felt that the services available as well as the rules regarding access changed often making it difficult to know what is available at any given time. This uncertainty about how to access services and programs can cause a snowball effect leading to further and increased health complications. In addition, the long waitlists for certain services can pose additional hardship for those in need of care. This participant had difficulty accessing assistance after undergoing a major surgery:

*They say "just ask just ask" but there are so many things that I need, like when I was at the hospital having surgery "call call, just call and ask" and I'm like "no I can't it hurts to breath I'm not going to call you right now", but that's what they want.*

### **5.7.7 Location of Services**

The location of a service or program can be a barrier to access for those facing economic hardship. The cost of transportation and the lack of familiarity with a certain part of the city can result in a person not getting the treatment and/or assistance needed. Most of the city of Guelph focus group participants identified they were more comfortable accessing services within their own neighbourhoods whenever possible. This participant shared her feelings around having to go to a location that had negative associations for her:

*It's scary to go downtown...because you know I am an ex-drug addict and you come across it all the time.*



## 5.8 Food

### 5.8.1 Guelph Food Bank

Many of the Guelph focus group participants shared they had contact with the Guelph Food Bank at least once, with some accessing this service on a monthly basis. The importance of being able to access healthy food from a food bank for those facing economic hardship was discussed throughout the focus groups. There were many personal stories shared about the Guelph Food Bank as well as some suggested areas for improvement.

Several participants felt the food available from the food bank was often of poor quality featuring many unhealthy options such as candy and other “junk food” items. Concern was also expressed over the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and dairy as well as the limited availability of meat products. With limited food products available it can be difficult for families to maintain a balanced healthy diet. This participant outlined her experience to date with the food bank:

*Not to mention the food bank again but you know like when I went there they don't give any fresh milk, no fresh cheese, no dairy basically and no fruits and vegetables...I went there about 20 times at least and I've never received milk or cheese or fruits or vegetables.*

Some of the participants reported receiving expired canned food as well as dented and/or unlabelled containers. A few participants stated they had received food in a container that was not the original product packaging and were worried about possible contamination. Concerns over food allergies not being accounted for in which participants had received food items they had reported they were allergic too, were also shared.

The eligibility requirements to receive food were viewed by several participants as being unreasonable. Some of the participants who were on ODSP reported they had been turned away from the food bank being told their incomes were too high to receive assistance. Being able to access food only once a month was also a challenge for participants due to difficulty transporting large amounts of food at one time as well as being able to make the food last for



an entire month. For those without access to a car, being able to pay to have food delivered from the food bank can add additional financial strain.

Seeking assistance from a food bank can be an emotionally distressing experience for those in need. Several of the participants felt that having a negative interaction with a front line worker increased feelings of stigmatization making it difficult for them to access this service. For this participant, her experience at the food bank became a barrier to her accessing the help she needed:

*I have a comment about the food bank. Back in November of last year...we were literally starving and I went to the food bank to get help and I have a son which is in school, so when I phoned they told me I had to bring 3 pieces of ID so I brought my driver's license, my boyfriend's drivers license and I didn't have any ID of (son's) except his birth certificate. When I got there and got into the office the women, she was so rude, telling me that I didn't have the proper ID and how did they know that my son lives with me because I had nothing with his address on it and meanwhile I had my ODSP statement right in front of me and they still argued with me...and I just got so fed up and finally she said to me "well we'll let you have food this time but the next time you come back you have your proper ID" and I just looked at her and I said, "you know, thanks but no thanks." I said "I don't need your food that bad to stand here and be so humiliated by people like you" and I just walked out the door, "I says I don't want your food. Thanks but no thanks."*

Concerns were expressed that the politics taking place around the food bank were clouding the real issue at hand, taking the focus away from feeding those in need, as this participant outlines:

*It seems to me like they have a monopoly on things in town, like they think they're the only game in town and they've got the power and you dance how they want or you don't get it...you're forgetting the point: you want to feed people. It's not about politics. This little thing has just gotten so political that they've forgotten about the problem and the real solution.*



### **5.8.2 Food Cupboards/Shelves/Pantries/Churches**

Many of the participants had also used other food sources in the community such as food cupboards, shelves, pantries and churches. Being able to access food within ones neighbourhood was seen as extremely helpful, decreasing issues with transportation. As well, these programs are often available on a bi-weekly basis, which was reported as being more functional for individuals and families. In some cases, fresh produce, milk, eggs, meat and cheese were also available at these programs providing a more balanced diet. The eligibility requirements for neighbourhood programs were viewed as more reasonable, usually focused on location rather than personal information and providing proof of need. Some of the participants reported they volunteered at a neighbourhood food program for which they could receive additional food items as well as gain skills and self-confidence through being able to help others in the community. The hot suppers available at some churches were also listed as being a positive resource in the community.

One of the drawbacks participants experienced regarding neighbourhood food sources was difficulty accessing information about these programs. Most of the participants found out about the availability of food through word of mouth. Also, the amount and type of food available varies from week to week and at each location, so in some cases individuals must “hunt and gather” (Community Researcher) all over the city in order to receive enough food for themselves and their families.

### **5.8.3 County Food Banks**

It was reported that the eligibility rules for food banks in the county varied greatly and it was difficult to keep track of and understand these rules. Some of the same concerns expressed about the Guelph food bank were also shared about food banks in the county, such as intrusive eligibility processes, difficulty transporting food due to distance of location and access being available only once a month. Irregular hours of operation were also a challenge, particularly for the working poor. Also, the requirement to call first can be a barrier for those without access to a phone. Some of the participants also reported negative interactions with county food bank workers further contributing to feelings of stigmatization.



#### **5.8.4 Community Gardens**

Providing an opportunity for community members to grow their own healthy food in a community garden was viewed positively throughout the focus groups. The importance of utilizing community gardens to teach children about healthy eating was also discussed. Some participants felt they did not have the skills or knowledge to participate in a community garden project, and would require more information and/or instruction on how to get involved and successfully grow their own food. Some of the identified barriers to creating and sustaining community gardens include: lack of interest in the community, issues with a specific location such as soil contamination and inability for some to participate due to the level of physical activity required.

#### **5.8.5 Community Kitchens**

The idea of creating community kitchens received mixed support from participants. Some felt community kitchens could be used to create healthy, cost effective meals for families. Some of the identified barriers to creating and sustaining a community kitchen include: food allergy issues, the availability of a sanctioned kitchen and a potential lack of interest and community involvement.

#### **5.8.6 Garden Fresh**

The Garden Fresh program in Guelph, as well as similar programs available in the county, were identified as being very good resources. Many participants felt they were able to get more for their money, as well as better quality food through these programs. The only suggestions provided for the Garden Fresh program was to make it available twice a month instead of just once as well as having free boxes available for those in need.



## 6.0 DISCUSSION

This section will highlight some of the major themes that were discussed in the focus group relating to issues faced by programs and services in general, with a focus on how to improve the overall lived experience of those facing economic hardship.

### 6.1 Staff and Volunteers

The limited number of staff and volunteers available was expressed as a challenge shared by many different programs and services, as this participant describes:

*There's not enough volunteers. I volunteer for our neighbourhood group but we still struggle every month finding food cupboard volunteers. We'd love to keep it open but 2 people have to work on it, but there's just a lack of it. A lack of volunteers.*

Several participants felt that in increasing the number of staff at a given program would not only make programs function for effectively, it would take some of the pressure off of those currently working frontline decreasing levels of worker stress and burnout. Concern over possibly losing the support of the neighbourhood community development workers was also shared in the city of Guelph groups.

The focus group participants who had been active within their communities for many years identified that it is becoming more difficult to get volunteers to help out with community programs. Some of the reasons for this included less interaction between individuals in the community, as well as increased financial and work strains on the volunteers themselves. Being able to reach out to those in the community and encourage volunteer participation was viewed as a way to improve the current programs and services available. One participant shared an idea on how to encourage volunteer participation in her community:

*I don't know if you guys have tried it before, I'm new to this community but actually going door to door and introducing yourself, that's something I wouldn't mind doing, saying "hi I'm with the Brant Avenue Neighbourhood group, these are the services that are provided in our community and we need people to help us with this" and you know sometimes its personal contact because*



*you know a piece of paper, right? But if someone comes and maybe brings you a keychain or a magnet or something like that, it would be in here and you'll see it kind of thing.*

## **6.2 Information and Communication**

Throughout all three focus groups, a lack available information or knowledge of how to find information was experienced as a barrier to accessing services and programs, as this participant describes:

*You get a lot of run around, you know well we don't deal with it so call so and so and then you call so and so and you get, that's not our department, we don't deal with that, and then you get another number and another number and then by the time you're done you just don't want to deal with it.*

Difficulty gaining information about programs and services was a dominant topic of discussion in the Mount Forest focus group in particular. Many participants felt there needed to be a more centralized way to access this information. This participant discussed some of the difficulties one can experience when seeking out information:

*There should be a book for people in need...because if you're in crisis or you're in pain, you're not thinking straight, or you've gone hungry for a week, you're not thinking straight. It needs to be simplified. A crisis center. Like, call the crisis center.*

Posting notices on bulletin boards in public spaces was outlined as a possible way to get information about services and programs, however issues with bulletin board upkeep could limit the availability of information. This participant highlights some of the concerns discussed regarding community bulletin boards:

*People come in and just take it off, because if somebody comes in they don't bother taking off the phone number, they just pull the whole bulletin down, because they're greedy you know they don't stop and think about all the other people who need the information.*

Concerns were expressed about the loss of community bulletin board space in the county and the resulting impact on information sharing, as this participant highlights:



*Like Mount Forest here, years ago, you used to have right by the community center, right when you come into town, they used to have a bulletin board. You could be driving by and see bulletins right on the board. If you wanted to find anything out you just stopped and read the board, where as they don't have that board anymore.*

Uncertainty about the eligibility requirements for programs and services was another theme present throughout the focus groups. In most cases, individuals were unsure of where to access information about eligibility rules or who to speak to for information. For some, the information gained by talking to a front line worker was incorrect or contrary to other information they had received either from web sites or other workers. In addition, the rules for eligibility as well as the programs themselves often change making it difficult to know about and access services. A lack of communication between programs and services added additional frustration for those seeking assistance as this participant experienced:

*One thing right now is that I am physically, my physicality is being battered systematically and there are a lot of demands. I have right now 30 pages of forms I have to fill out and I think that's really ridiculous and they're the same things and OK, does this organization not communicate with that organization?*

The role of front line workers in effectively accessing and administering services was discussed regarding a wide range of programs. In general, the applicable knowledge of individual workers as well as their willingness to help and attitude toward those seeking assistance was a crucial component effecting access to any program or service.

### **6.3 Community Interaction and Support**

Many of the focus group participants reported enjoying the community they lived in overall and felt supported by their friends and neighbours. Providing opportunities for people to interact, share and work together to achieve common goals was viewed as essential to community and personal well-being. This participant listed some of the activities she enjoys in her community:



*People are very friendly and there seems to be a lot of things going on in the community really I find, even business courses and horticultural meetings and a lot of things that don't have to cost a lot of money, which is helpful in this situation...karaoke and different things going on.*

In the city of Guelph focus groups, the neighbourhood groups were highlighted several times as being an important resource providing services and programs to support those facing economic hardship, as well as a community space to meet and share information. Several participants spoke of the potential for growth within the neighbourhood group programs, seeing opportunity to make positive change within their communities, as this participant describes:

*I like my community pretty well and in our complex area we have a food cupboard, run by the Grange Hill East Neighbourhood group and they do that twice a week. If we do need support we can go there as far as food, supplies and stuff. A fair amount is offered, but there could be more.*

One of the most common ways that participants reported gaining information about programs and services was through word of mouth. Within the focus groups themselves a space was provided for participants to share information about resources available, with many participants leaving the focus groups with knowledge gained about community programs. The Guelph East focus group openly discussed meeting on a regular basis after the focus group to share ideas, skills and provide support, with participants exchanging contact information. Providing spaces for community members to meet and share resources can be an excellent support for those facing economic hardship as well as provide the opportunity to learn new skills, as this participant outlines:

*Bartering is exchanging a skill, say for instance I have childcare I used to barter with my neighbour once a week, she had 2 boys and we shared childcare and I would childcare on the weekend, one evening, once a month for her while she took care of my son when I went to a class.*



## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Living in poverty can negatively impact one's personal and emotional well-being in many ways. It is difficult to face the stigma our society places on those facing economic hardship. Trying to maintain a well-balanced healthy lifestyle and optimistic outlook is daunting when you are unable to meet the basic needs of yourself and your family. In order to help make positive change for those facing economic hardship, it is important to consider the impact of poverty on one's entire life experience, as this participant describes:

*To me poverty is the outcome of emotional and spiritual poverty, so that's the symptom. So my greatest need is what I'm trying, when I'm put down and kicked around I need to rebuild my self-confidence and my self-esteem and my self-love that can do with that kind of service whether it's counselling or getting a beautiful haircut or getting to see a beautiful sunset somewhere that's beautiful. Somewhere where it can take me out of the rut and show me that there is a different world out there that is beautiful and great and that cares.*

One of the major shortcomings of this project is the limited diversity of both the focus group participants and the community researchers. The overwhelming majority of focus group participants and all of the community researchers were white women, as noted by this participant:

*What does poverty actually look like for women in Canada? It is women with children predominantly. I don't see women of colour here and I'm really sad to see that they're not willingly open to participating but they see things a little differently and I'm struggling with the word poverty, and child poverty.*

The issues and challenges faced by those represented in these focus groups may not be reflective of other ethnic origins and culturally diverse backgrounds in the community. Conducting focus groups with men facing economic hardship would also likely yield some different outcomes. As well, the working poor and those with precarious work conditions were underrepresented in these groups. Conducting additional community researcher projects that include a more diverse range of participants would be an asset in gaining further insight into



the lived experience of poverty in Guelph and Wellington County. The experiences shared by this focus group participant of Aboriginal descent highlight issues not shared by the non-Aboriginal participants:

*I am extremely cynical. I come here because I am a cynic and I cannot believe that out of the goodness because I went to a residential school and those people were spiritual people and I have seen what they can do. I have seen and have been a part of that and I worked all my life to say you cannot do that to me. No more. It's not acceptable, and I see other people accept it. Until it happens to you, then you know how abusive this Canadian government is, and people will not educate themselves to know their own government.*

The participants and community researchers in this study highlighted several programs and services that they had been able to access during times of economic hardship and had greatly benefited from many of the resources available. This study also provided a candid view of some of the programs and services that participants felt needed to be improved, providing a foundation from which to begin to address the gaps in services and programs as well as limitations to accessing services and programs. It is the hope of those involved in this community researcher project that the knowledge and experience gained will result in further community based research initiatives and create positive change for those facing economic hardship in Guelph and Wellington.

*I guess my only concern about this focus group, I just hope it's not another brick wall, like you come, you say what you've got to say, and then it's the same old thing. 6 months later you're at another focus group and nothing's really been solved.*